

what is bartleby the scrivener about

what is bartleby the scrivener about is a question that delves into one of Herman Melville's most enigmatic and thought-provoking short stories. This literary work, first published in 1853, explores themes of isolation, passive resistance, and the dehumanizing effects of modern work environments. The story centers around Bartleby, a mysterious scrivener employed in a law office, whose peculiar behavior and repeated refusals to comply with tasks lead to profound consequences. Understanding what is bartleby the scrivener about requires examining the narrative structure, character development, and the broader social and philosophical implications embedded in the text. This article will provide an in-depth analysis of the story's plot, themes, characters, and its lasting significance in American literature. The exploration will also highlight Melville's critique of capitalism and the alienation of the individual in a bureaucratic society.

- Plot Overview
- Main Characters
- Themes and Symbolism
- Literary Significance and Interpretations
- Social and Historical Context

Plot Overview

The core narrative of *Bartleby, the Scrivener* unfolds within a Wall Street law office, where the unnamed narrator, a lawyer, hires Bartleby as a scrivener or copyist. Initially, Bartleby performs his duties diligently, but soon he begins to refuse tasks with the enigmatic phrase, "I would prefer not to." This passive form of resistance confounds the narrator and disrupts the office's routine. As Bartleby increasingly withdraws from work and social interaction, his behavior escalates to complete disengagement from life outside the office.

The plot captures the gradual shift from normalcy to an unsettling and tragic climax. Attempts by the narrator to understand and assist Bartleby ultimately fail, leading to Bartleby's isolation and demise. The story's brevity contrasts with the depth of its psychological and existential inquiry, making it a powerful narrative about human alienation and the limits of empathy.

Key Plot Points

- Bartleby's initial competent performance as a scrivener
- His refusal to proofread documents, followed by refusal to perform other tasks

- The narrator's growing concern and attempts to help Bartleby
- Bartleby's eventual eviction and imprisonment
- Bartleby's death and the narrator's reflection on the experience

Main Characters

The story's impact is largely driven by its characters, whose interactions reveal complex psychological and social dynamics. The main figures include the narrator, Bartleby, and other scriveners in the office, each representing different facets of society and human nature.

The Narrator

The narrator is a pragmatic lawyer who values order and efficiency, embodying the rational mindset of a capitalist society. His perspective shapes the story, as he narrates his experiences with Bartleby, oscillating between frustration, pity, and helplessness. The narrator's inability to fully comprehend Bartleby's behavior highlights the limits of rationality in facing existential questions.

Bartleby

Bartleby is the enigmatic protagonist whose passive resistance challenges conventional work ethics and social norms. His repetitive phrase "I would prefer not to" symbolizes a quiet rebellion against the mechanization of labor and the impersonal nature of bureaucratic systems. Bartleby's isolation and eventual demise evoke sympathy and raise questions about individuality and societal responsibility.

Supporting Characters

Other scriveners, such as Turkey, Nippers, and Ginger Nut, provide contrast to Bartleby's character. Turkey is an older man prone to irritability, Nippers is a young man with digestive issues and irritability, and Ginger Nut is a young errand boy. These characters represent the typical workers in the office environment and help frame the uniqueness of Bartleby's behavior.

Themes and Symbolism

Understanding what is Bartleby the Scrivener about involves exploring the rich thematic layers and symbolic elements that Melville weaves into the narrative. The story is renowned for its exploration of existential angst, social alienation, and the critique of modernity.

Alienation and Isolation

Bartleby's detachment from work and society symbolizes the alienation experienced by individuals in a rapidly industrializing and bureaucratized world. His refusal to engage with assigned tasks mirrors the estrangement of workers from the products of their labor and from human connection.

Passive Resistance

The phrase "I would prefer not to" epitomizes a form of nonviolent resistance that disrupts norms without confrontation. Bartleby's passive refusal raises questions about autonomy, free will, and the power of quiet dissent in oppressive systems.

The Mechanization of Labor

The setting of a law office filled with scribes copying documents by hand highlights the monotonous, repetitive nature of work. Bartleby's behavior challenges the dehumanizing effects of such mechanized labor and the loss of individuality that accompanies it.

Symbolism of Walls and Windows

Physical barriers in the story, such as the office walls and Bartleby's confinement, symbolize psychological and social isolation. Bartleby's location near a window, yet his detachment from the outside world, emphasizes the tension between visibility and invisibility in society.

Literary Significance and Interpretations

Bartleby, the Scrivener holds a significant place in American literature as an early exploration of existentialist themes and a critique of capitalist society. The story's ambiguous ending and enigmatic protagonist invite multiple interpretations.

Existential Interpretation

Many critics view Bartleby as an existential figure, embodying themes of absurdity, alienation, and the search for meaning in an indifferent world. His behavior reflects a rejection of societal expectations and the futility of human endeavor.

Social Critique

The story critiques the harsh realities of capitalism and the impact of industrialization on human dignity. Bartleby's plight highlights the dehumanizing conditions of labor and the failure of institutions to address individual suffering.

Psychological Analysis

From a psychological perspective, Bartleby's behavior can be interpreted as a manifestation of depression, trauma, or existential despair. The narrator's responses also reveal the limitations of empathy and understanding in human relationships.

Social and Historical Context

To fully grasp what is *Bartleby the Scrivener* about, it is essential to consider the social and historical backdrop of mid-19th century America. The story reflects contemporary anxieties about industrialization, urbanization, and shifting labor dynamics.

Industrialization and Urban Life

The rise of industrial capitalism transformed American cities, creating new work environments characterized by routine and impersonality. The law office setting mirrors these changes, illustrating the mechanization of clerical labor and its psychological toll.

Legal Profession and Bureaucracy

The story's focus on a legal office underscores the growing bureaucracy in American society. The scriveners' repetitive tasks exemplify the expanding administrative systems that contributed to worker alienation and depersonalization.

Melville's Personal Context

Herman Melville wrote this story during a period of personal and professional uncertainty. His insights into the struggles of ordinary workers and the human condition are informed by his broader literary explorations of society and individuality.

Summary of Key Historical Factors

- Rapid industrial growth and urbanization in 19th-century America
- The rise of bureaucratic work and clerical labor
- Social concerns about alienation and mental health
- Emerging literary movements addressing existential and social themes

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the main plot of 'Bartleby the Scrivener'?

'Bartleby the Scrivener' is a short story by Herman Melville that revolves around a law copyist named Bartleby who progressively refuses to perform his work duties, famously responding with 'I would prefer not to.' The story explores themes of isolation, passive resistance, and the dehumanizing effects of modern work.

Who is Bartleby in 'Bartleby the Scrivener'?

Bartleby is the titular character in Herman Melville's story. He is a scrivener (a copyist) employed at a law office in New York City. Initially diligent, Bartleby gradually stops working and declines tasks with his catchphrase, leading to questions about his mental state and social alienation.

What themes does 'Bartleby the Scrivener' address?

The story addresses themes such as alienation, the monotony and dehumanization of office work, passive resistance, individualism versus societal expectations, and the nature of human compassion and responsibility.

Why does Bartleby keep saying 'I would prefer not to'?

Bartleby's repeated phrase 'I would prefer not to' symbolizes his passive resistance and refusal to conform to workplace demands. It reflects his quiet rebellion against the oppressive nature of his job and possibly his deeper existential despair or detachment from society.

What is the significance of the setting in 'Bartleby the Scrivener'?

The story is set in a law office on Wall Street, New York City, which represents the corporate, impersonal environment of modern capitalist society. This setting underscores the themes of isolation and the dehumanizing effects of bureaucratic work on individuals like Bartleby.

Additional Resources

1. *The Metamorphosis* by Franz Kafka

This novella tells the story of Gregor Samsa, a traveling salesman who wakes up one morning transformed into a gigantic insect. It explores themes of alienation, identity, and the absurdity of life. Much like Bartleby, Gregor's passive suffering and withdrawal highlight the human struggle against incomprehensible circumstances.

2. *Waiting for Godot* by Samuel Beckett

This play centers on two characters, Vladimir and Estragon, who wait endlessly and in vain

for someone named Godot. The work is a prime example of absurdist literature and delves into themes of existential uncertainty, inertia, and the search for meaning. The paralysis and passive waiting resonate with Bartleby's famous refrain, "I would prefer not to."

3. *Notes from Underground* by Fyodor Dostoevsky

A profound exploration of an isolated and embittered narrator who rejects societal norms and struggles with his own contradictions. The book delves into themes of free will, existential angst, and the complexities of human behavior. Its introspective and often passive protagonist shares similarities with Bartleby's enigmatic resistance.

4. *The Stranger* by Albert Camus

This existential novel follows Meursault, a detached and indifferent man who reacts to life's events with emotional indifference. It explores absurdism, the meaninglessness of life, and societal alienation. Like Bartleby, Meursault embodies a passive resistance to societal expectations and conventions.

5. *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Gabriel García Márquez

This landmark work of magical realism chronicles the rise and fall of the Buendía family in the isolated town of Macondo. Themes of solitude, fate, and the cyclical nature of history are deeply woven into the narrative. Bartleby's isolation and quiet withdrawal echo the solitude experienced by many characters in this novel.

6. *Crime and Punishment* by Fyodor Dostoevsky

This classic novel follows Raskolnikov, a conflicted former student who commits a murder and grapples with guilt and redemption. It explores morality, free will, and the psychological torment of isolation. The intense focus on the inner life and ethical dilemmas parallels the quiet yet profound resistance seen in Bartleby.

7. *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath

A semi-autobiographical novel depicting the mental deterioration of Esther Greenwood, a young woman struggling with depression and societal pressures. Themes of alienation, identity crisis, and the suffocating nature of conformity are central. Esther's gradual withdrawal from the world mirrors Bartleby's passive refusal to engage.

8. *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad

This novella follows Marlow's journey into the African Congo and his encounter with the enigmatic Kurtz. It explores themes of colonialism, the darkness within human nature, and alienation. Bartleby's inscrutability and passive resistance can be compared to Kurtz's mysterious and unsettling presence.

9. *Mrs. Dalloway* by Virginia Woolf

This modernist novel captures a single day in the life of Clarissa Dalloway as she prepares for a party while reflecting on her past and the world around her. It explores themes of mental health, social conventions, and the passage of time. The introspective narrative and subtle social critique resonate with the themes of isolation and conformity in Bartleby the Scrivener.

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