GENERAL

bartleby the scrivener a story of wall street summary

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Introduction

When you think of 19th century American literature, names like **Mark Twain** and **Emily Brontë** often come to mind. Yet one novel that quietly sits beside the great classics and offers a haunting meditation on work, alienation, and passive resistance is Herman Melville's *Bartleby, the Scrivener, a Story of Wall Street*. This narrative, first published in 1853, has grown in stature over the decades, earning a place among the most studied works of American literature. For readers and scholars alike, a **bartleby the scrivener a story of wall street summary** is essential for grasping the novel's intricate plot, its thematic depth, and its enduring relevance.

In this article we'll provide a comprehensive, well structured overview of the novel. We'll explore the historical backdrop of Wall Street, the character dynamics, the plot's key turning points, and the major themes that resonate even today. Whether you're a student tackling a literature assignment, a casual reader curious about Melville's lesser known masterpiece, or a literary enthusiast looking to deepen your understanding, this guide will equip you with the insights you need.

The Classic Tale: Bartleby the Scrivener

Historical Context: Wall Street in the 19th Century

In the mid 1800s, New York's **Wall Street** was already emerging as the epicenter of American finance. The era was marked by rapid industrialization, speculative ventures, and the rise of the "moneyed class." However, the rapid growth of commerce also brought a new kind of laborer into the city's skyline: the *scrivener*, a clerk who transcribed legal documents, contracts, and other paperwork with painstaking precision.

These clerks were the backbone of the legal and financial industries, yet they often worked in cramped, dimly lit offices, surrounded by endless stacks of paper. Their work demanded meticulous attention to detail and an almost ritualistic repetition of tasks. The novel's setting—a small office on Wall Street—captures the claustrophobia of this environment and sets the stage for the psychological drama that follows.

The Author: Herman Melville

Herman Melville, best known for *Moby Dick*, had already established himself as a master of complex narrative and symbolic depth by the time he wrote *Bartleby*. Melville's own experiences as a sailor, his fascination with the human condition, and his literary experimentation are all evident in the novel's style and themes. Unlike his epic sea faring saga, *Bartleby* is a shorter, more intimate work that focuses on the psychological landscape of its characters.

Plot Overview: A Summary of Bartleby the Scrivener

Setting and Main Characters

The story opens with a first person narrator—an unnamed lawyer—who runs a small law firm on Wall Street. His office is a cramped, windowless room where a handful of clerks type legal documents. Among them is **Mr. Bartleby**, a quiet, unassuming scrivener who joins the firm in the spring.

The narrator is a pragmatic, detail oriented man who prides himself on efficiency and order. He is the antithesis of

Bartleby's passive demeanor. The office's other clerks—Hobart, Hovey, and others—serve as background characters who illustrate the monotony of clerical work.

The Inciting Incident

When the narrator receives a new case, he assigns Bartleby the task of transcribing a lengthy legal document. Bartleby begins the work, but after a few hours he stops and says, "I'll do it." This phrase becomes a recurring motif throughout the novel. The narrator, initially perplexed, allows Bartleby to continue.

Bartleby's Repeated "I'll do it" and "I'll do it"

As the days progress, Bartleby's behavior becomes increasingly enigmatic. He refuses to engage in any task that is not directly assigned to him. When the narrator asks him to type a new document, Bartleby replies, "I'll do it." When the narrator wants him to perform a routine administrative task, Bartleby again says, "I'll do it."

However, when the narrator asks Bartleby to type a different document—one he has not yet seen—Bartleby simply refuses. He says, "I'll not do it." This simple refusal marks the turning point in the story, as it signals Bartleby's growing detachment from the office's demands.

The Decline of Bartleby

Following the refusal, Bartleby's behavior deteriorates. He stops eating, refuses to leave the office, and begins to isolate himself in a corner of the room. The narrator attempts to intervene, offering Bartleby food and companionship, but Bartleby remains stubbornly passive. The office's other clerks grow uneasy, and the narrator eventually seeks legal counsel to address the situation.

Despite the narrator's efforts, Bartleby's health continues to decline. He becomes emaciated, his eyes hollow, and his demeanor increasingly withdrawn. The narrator is forced to confront the limits of his authority and the moral implications of his actions.

The End and Its Significance

In the final chapters, the narrator learns that Bartleby has been living in a cramped, unsanitary cell in the basement of the office building. When the narrator finally brings Bartleby to the cell, the scrivener is found dead, having starved himself to death.

The ending is bleak, yet it forces the reader to question the nature of agency, the ethics of passive resistance, and the responsibilities of those in positions of power. The narrator's silence and inability to help Bartleby underscore a broader critique of the capitalist system that reduces human beings to cogs in an unfeeling machine.

Themes and Motifs

Alienation and Isolation

One of the most prominent themes in the novel is the sense of alienation that pervades the office environment. Bartleby's isolation is both physical—he remains in the corner of the room—and psychological—he refuses to engage with his coworkers. The narrator's own sense of isolation is evident in his solitary office and his inability to connect with those around him.

The Nature of Work and Labor

Melville examines the monotony of clerical labor and the dehumanizing effects of repetitive work. The novel suggests that work, when reduced to a series of tasks devoid of meaning, can strip individuals of their humanity. Bartleby's passive resistance can be read as a protest against this mechanized system.

Resistance and Passive Protest

Bartleby's repeated refusal to comply with the narrator's instructions is a form of passive protest. He does not shout or argue; he simply says, "I'll do it," or "I'll not do it." This subtle form of resistance highlights the power of silence and the limits of authority.

The Role of the Narrator

The narrator's perspective is crucial to the novel's moral complexity. He is both a participant in the system and an observer of its failings. His inability to help Bartleby reflects a broader critique of the legal and capitalist structures that perpetuate inequality.

Literary Style and Narrative Technique

First Person Perspective

The novel is told from the narrator's point of view, giving readers access to his internal thoughts and biases. This perspective allows Melville to explore the narrator's moral ambiguity and to create an intimate connection between the reader and the story's ethical dilemmas.

Use of Realism

Melville employs a realistic style that grounds the novel in the everyday realities of 19th century New York. The detailed descriptions of the office, the legal documents, and the city's atmosphere lend authenticity to the narrative.

Symbolism and Imagery

Key symbols—such as the "I'll do it" refrain, the office's cramped space, and Bartleby's eventual death—carry deep symbolic weight. These motifs help to underscore the novel's critique of the capitalist system and its dehumanizing effects.

Critical Reception Over Time

Initial Reception

At the time of its publication, *Bartleby*received mixed reviews. Some critics praised Melville's psychological insight, while others found the novel too bleak and its ending unsatisfying. The novel was largely overlooked until the early 20th century when literary scholars began to re evaluate Melville's work.

Modern Interpretations

Today, *Bartleby*is considered a classic of American literature. Scholars analyze it from various perspectives: psychological, sociological, and feminist. The novel's exploration of passive resistance and workplace alienation resonates with contemporary discussions about burnout, mental health, and the gig economy.

Bartleby in Popular Culture

Film Adaptations

Several film adaptations have been produced, ranging from short silent films to modern cinematic interpretations. While none have captured the novel's full depth, they provide visual representations of its key scenes and themes.

Television and Stage

Television adaptations and stage productions have also explored the novel's themes. Many productions emphasize the psychological tension between the narrator and Bartleby, bringing the novel's moral questions to life for

contemporary audiences.

How to Read Bartleby the Scrivener

Tips for Students and Scholars

- Pay Attention to Language: Melville's careful word choices and repetition are essential for understanding the novel's themes.
- Consider Historical Context: Understanding Wall Street's 19th century environment will deepen your appreciation of the novel's social critique.
- Analyze Symbolic Motifs: The refrain "I'll do it" and Bartleby's eventual death are symbolic of larger societal issues.
- Engage with Secondary Sources: Scholarly essays often provide valuable insights into the novel's complex themes.

Key Passages to Focus On

1. The first instance of "I'll do it" when Bartleby is assigned a task.
2. Bartleby's refusal to type a new document.

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