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The Loss, The Alienation, The Scrivener

It is 2025, and we have begun to forget. As our rapidly evolving world propels us forward in time, history is rewritten. Some tragedies, like nuclear conflict, remain deeply ingrained in our collective consciousness, serving as warnings against repetition. Yet others, like the persistent exploitation of the working class, continue to exist as it goes unnoticed and unchallenged by too many. Ahead of his time, Herman Melville dared to address the injustices faced by the working-class community and their glaring lack of autonomy during the 19th century. Initially published anonymously in Putnam's Monthly Magazine in 1853, "Bartleby, The Scrivener" is a compelling example of Melville's willingness to confront taboo issues, where he highlights the detrimental effects of industrialization and unfair bureaucratization through his characters, Bartleby and the lawyer. When viewed through both a historical and biographical lens, the treatment and portrayal of Bartleby serve as a stark depiction of Wall Street as a ruthless and dehumanizing institution, emphasizing the implications of capitalism and consumerism that Melville despised because of his own life experiences.

In order to fully understand the socio-economic landscape within which "Bartleby, The Scrivener" takes place, it is essential to explain the historical context of the mid 19th century. This was a time period characterized by seismic shifts in the American commercial and industrial landscape, where labor exploitation grew on a global scale and according to David Kuebrich, Associate Professor of English at George Mason University, "multinational capital dominated"

(405). This exploitation included the grueling, repetitive nature of the scribes' work and encompassed "growing numbers of high-school and university students in part time-jobs," similar to Ginger Nut in Melville's narrative (Kuebrich 405). Gingenut's weekly earnings of just one dollar, at 12 years old, serve as an example of the economic challenges faced during this era. Melville's story reflects New York's "lightning transformation into an industrial, commercial, and financial center" during the mid nineteenth century. New York's population increased from 124,000 to 814,000 between 1820 and 1860, forcing workers to search for cheaper living quarters, which created "an urban work environment severed from friendly and familiar relationships" (Kuebrich 383-384). Rather than considering it strange that Bartleby resides in the office, this historical context lends the reader to consider that he might have been unable to afford a place of his own. His 'preference' to remain in the office, stationary and alone, was because of economic necessity. Melville likely chose to emphasize the economic struggles of the scribes, because of his own financial struggle and strife.

Melville moved back to New York, his birthplace, in 1847 with his family, after many years spent at sea. He grappled with financial stress and profound disappointment as his novel "The Whale," later recognized as "Moby Dick," was published in 1851 and garnered minimal attention, selling fewer than 4,000 copies (Busch 149). He would persistently try to sell his novels, but they failed to generate profit. He would increasingly depend on his wife's trust fund and eventually he would be forced to get a job as a customs inspector to sustain himself financially. Just a year before publishing "Bartleby" in 1951, Melville wrote in a letter to famous author Nathaniel Hawthorne, "Dollars damn me... I shall be worn out and perish... What I feel most moved to write, that is banned – it will not pay. Yet, altogether, write the *other* way I cannot... all my books are botches" (Busch 150). This correspondence reveals how Melville

resisted conforming to popular writing genres because it was not his preference, and it was not what inspired him. He refused to conform, and continued to write oceanic novels, even if it meant extreme financial hardship. Bartleby can be viewed as a reflection of this facet of Melville's character, repeating the phrase 'I prefer not to,' despite the dire consequences. Both Bartleby's refusal to comply with the lawyer's demands and Melville's resistance to alter the subjects of his work symbolize a shared desire for autonomy in an increasingly bureaucratic and rigid world. Melville and Bartleby both possess the capacity to change their actions, but it was neither of their 'preference', and doing so would have meant further subjugation to societal expectations and pressures.

Melville's own sense of isolation and alienation, which he experienced during his writing career, is reflected in Bartleby's isolation and his ultimate descent to hopelessness and finally, death. After hiring Bartleby, the narrator elects to give Bartleby a desk on his side of the office, but still places a "high green folding screen" between them, and blocks Bartleby from his view (Melville 6). Andrew Urie explains how this wall "essentially reifies the socioeconomic divide", and how the green color of the wall could represent both envy and money, which reinforces the "socioeconomic disjuncture that separates the disempowered Bartleby from the empowered, privileged socio economic sphere of the narrator (Urie 9). Only paying Bartleby "four cents a folio" one might find it ironic that the narrator is surprised at Bartleby's depression despite his minimal wage (Melville 11). Melville is emphasizing the detrimental hierarchical industrialization that has taken place in America. "Bartleby becomes the equivalent of a human automaton," a man whose humanity has been systematically eroded (Urie 21). He is a man who prefers "not to make any change," and after losing his job at the Dead Letter Office, his whole life is changed (Meville 7). The repetitiveness of his work and eventually the "banal labor

alienates him from his spiritual and emotional dimensions, thereby facilitating his alienation from society at large” (Urie 21). Simply put, the nature of Bartleby’s work breaks him down over time. We don’t know anything about him other than what the narrator tells us, but we do watch his slow progression to death. This begs readers to consider the failures of communication, the detrimental impacts of isolation, and the unforgiving nature of society.

Overall, analyzing “Bartleby the Scrivener” through historical biographical lenses reveals the dehumanizing effects of industrialization on individuals and portrays the character of Bartleby as both a symbol of resistance and a victim to the constraints of Wall Street. Considered in historical context, this story accentuates America’s failure to prevent further social stratification throughout the mid 19th century. If I were to inquire further into the historical context of “Bartleby, The Scrivener,” I would likely research into the downfall of scriveners and also deeper into Melville’s life in New York. Melville’s story helps to preserve the term ‘scrivener’, which is slowly becoming archaic. This story has been torn apart by critics, and so has Melville’s life. Despite this, there still remains many lingering mysteries about Bartleby and Melville himself; their acts continue to resonate with readers long past their deaths.

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