SOFTWARE & TECH

Bartleby The Scrivener A Story Of Wall Street Summary

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Introduction to a Wall Street Enigma

In the annals of American literature, few short stories have generated as much enduring intrigue and scholarly debate as Herman Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street." First published in 1853 in *Putnam's Monthly Magazine*, this haunting tale of a passive, enigmatic copyist who simply "prefers not to" participate in the demands of his profession and his world remains as relevant today as it was in the heart of the nineteenth century. For anyone seeking a **Bartleby the Scrivener a story of Wall Street summary**, the narrative is deceptively simple: a prosperous Wall Street lawyer hires a new scrivener (a human copyist of legal documents) who initially works with remarkable industry, only to gradually and inexplicably refuse every task requested of him.

Yet beneath this straightforward plot lies a dense tapestry of philosophical, psychological, and social commentary. Melville, writing at a time when Wall Street was transforming into the nerve center of American capitalism, crafted a story that examines the collision between the relentless drive for productivity and the quiet, bewildering rebellion of the human spirit. This article will provide a comprehensive **Bartleby the Scrivener a story of Wall Street summary**, exploring its plot, characters, themes, and the profound questions it raises about work, alienation, and the nature of passive resistance.

A Detailed Plot Summary of Bartleby the Scrivener

The Narrator and His Chambers

The story is told by an unnamed elderly Wall Street lawyer, a man who describes himself as "safe" and "prudent," having never been known to engage in litigation or take unnecessary risks. He is a practical man of business, comfortable in his routines and proud of his reputation. His legal chambers are located on Wall Street, the epicenter of American finance, and are divided by a ground-glass folding door. From his side of the office, he can observe the workings of his staff while enjoying a view of a lofty brick wall from his window—a detail that becomes symbolically significant.

The lawyer employs three copyists before Bartleby's arrival. There is Turkey, a fiery, efficient Englishman in the morning but a reckless, blotch-faced drunkard after noon. Then there is Nippers, a young, ambitious man with indigestion who is irritable in the morning but steadier in the afternoon. Together, they form a complementary but imperfect workforce. The third employee is Ginger Nut, a twelve-year-old office boy whose primary duties include fetching ginger cakes, apples, and other small items for the scriveners. This office dynamic is essential to any thorough **Bartleby the Scrivener a story of Wall Street summary**, as it establishes the normalcy that Bartleby will so utterly disrupt.

Bartleby's Arrival and Initial Diligence

In response to an increase in work, the lawyer advertises for an additional scrivener. Bartleby arrives in response to the advertisement, and the narrator describes him as "pallidly neat, pitiably respectable, incurably forlorn." He is hired and given a desk in the corner of the room, placed behind a high green folding screen that separates him from the others. The desk faces a small window that looks directly at the blank brick wall of an adjacent building—a view of nothingness.

Initially, Bartleby is a model employee. He copies documents with an astonishing speed and accuracy, working silently and continuously, "as if long famishing for something to copy." The narrator is delighted, feeling that he has secured a valuable asset. This initial phase of productivity makes the subsequent refusal all the more shocking and inexplicable, a key turning point in any **Bartleby the Scrivener a story of Wall Street summary**.

The First Refusal: "I Would Prefer Not To"

One day, the narrator asks Bartleby to join the others in examining a small document he has copied. To his astonishment, Bartleby replies, "I would prefer not to." The narrator is stunned and repeats the request, but Bartleby's response is the same. The phrase enters the story as a quiet but immovable force. The lawyer, a man accustomed to obedience and deference, finds himself inexplicably unable to command or dismiss Bartleby. Instead, he reasons, pleads, and even attempts to understand.

This moment marks the central conflict of the story and the cornerstone of any **Bartleby the Scrivener a story of Wall Street summary**. Bartleby does not shout, refuse violently, or resign. He simply states a preference. The preference is for non-compliance, for inaction. He continues to copy documents but refuses to proofread them or perform any errand. Over time, his preferences multiply: he prefers not to copy at all, then he prefers not to leave the office, and eventually, he prefers not to eat.

The Lawyer's Struggle and Attempts at Resolution

The narrator's response to Bartleby's passive resistance is complex and evolves throughout the story. He experiences frustration, anger, pity, and a strange, grudging respect. He considers dismissing Bartleby but cannot bring himself to do so. The scrivener's absolute passivity disarms his authority. The lawyer tries various strategies: he attempts to reason with Bartleby, he offers him money, he tries to learn about his past, and he even tries to convince Bartleby to leave the office for a change of air.

In one of the most poignant scenes, the narrator discovers that Bartleby has been living in the office all along. He has no other home. He sleeps in the office at night, eats sparingly, and has transformed his workplace into his entire existence. This revelation deepens the narrator's pity, but it also increases his discomfort. Eventually, the lawyer decides to move his entire practice to a different building, leaving Bartleby behind.

Bartleby's Removal and Final Days

After the lawyer moves out, the new tenants of the office find Bartleby still there. They complain to the landlord, who then comes to the lawyer for help. The lawyer visits Bartleby and offers him assistance—a place to stay, work in another capacity, anything. Bartleby responds only with his signature phrase: "I would prefer not to." The lawyer, feeling helpless and overwhelmed, washes his hands of the matter.

Bartleby is eventually removed from the premises by the police and taken to the Tombs, the infamous Manhattan prison known as the Halls of Justice. The narrator visits him there, finding him in the prison yard, patiently "preferring not to" engage with life. The lawyer arranges for Bartleby to receive better food and a comfortable cell, but Bartleby refuses to eat. In the final, heartbreaking image of the story, Bartleby is found dead in the prison yard, curled up at the base of a wall, having "preferred not to" live any longer.

Key Characters in the Story

Before we delve into **Bartleby the Scrivener a story of Wall Street summary**, understanding the characters is essential. Each figure in the story serves a specific function, representing different facets of the working world and human nature.

The Narrator (The Lawyer)

The unnamed lawyer is perhaps the most underappreciated character in the story. He is not a villain. He is a fundamentally decent, if conventional, man. He is a creature of the marketplace, a believer in reason, order, and productivity. His attempts to understand and help Bartleby, while ultimately failing, reveal a capacity for compassion that transcends his professional instincts. He represents the well-meaning but limited perspective of a society that cannot comprehend radical otherness. In many ways, the story is as much about his education and his limitations as it is about Bartleby's tragedy.

Bartleby

Bartleby is one of literature's most enigmatic figures. He is described as "pallid," "forlorn," and "mechanical." He has no known past, no family, no friends, and no interests outside of copying. His refusal is not active rebellion but a passive withdrawal from the entire system of exchange and demand. He does not ask for anything; he simply refuses to participate. Interpretations of Bartleby range from the clinical (depression or catatonia) to the political (a symbol of labor resistance or existential protest). He is a blank screen onto which readers can project their own anxieties about work, meaning, and isolation. Any serious **Bartleby the Scrivener a story of Wall Street summary** must grapple with his inscrutable nature.

Turkey and Nippers

These two scriveners serve as foils to Bartleby. They are flawed and eccentric, but they are functional. They perform their duties, however imperfectly. Turkey's morning efficiency and afternoon incompetence, along with Nippers's morning indigestion and afternoon calm, create a cycle of imperfect but acceptable productivity. They represent the compromises that ordinary people make with the demands of labor. They grumble, they complain, and they have their vices, but they show up and do their work. Bartleby's absolute refusal throws their relative compliance into sharp relief.

Ginger Nut

The young office boy is a symbol of the next generation, already learning the rules of the marketplace. He fetches ginger nuts and performs minor tasks, representing the entry-level worker being socialized into the system of commerce. His simple, uncomplicated acceptance of his role contrasts with Bartleby's profound rejection.

Major Themes and Symbols

A meaningful **Bartleby the Scrivener a story of Wall Street summary** would be incomplete without exploring the story's rich thematic landscape. Melville packed immense depth into this short narrative.

Alienation and Isolation in Modern Society

The most prominent theme is alienation. Bartleby is utterly disconnected from human connection and community. He works in a corner, behind a screen, facing a blank wall. His isolation is physical, social, and existential. The city of New York, with its teeming masses and relentless economic activity, provides no genuine human contact for him. He is a man utterly alone in the crowd, a precursor to the lonely office workers of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

The Nature of Passive Resistance

Bartleby's famous phrase, "I would prefer not to," is a masterclass in passive resistance. It is not a refusal in the active sense—it is a preference. He does not say "I will not" or "I refuse." He says he would prefer not to, leaving the door open, however faintly, for the possibility of compliance. This linguistic strategy is both polite and

impregnable. It gives the narrator nothing to push against. There is no anger, no rebellion, no confrontation. There is only a gentle, immovable wall of preference.

The Critique of Capitalism and the Workplace

The story can be read as a powerful critique of the dehumanizing nature of capitalist work. The scriveners are human copying machines, valued for their output, not their humanity. They have no job security, no benefits, and no dignity beyond their ability to produce. Bartleby's refusal is a quiet strike against the entire system. He will not be a machine. He will not exchange his labor for survival. He chooses, instead, to simply stop. This reading of the **Bartleby the Scrivener a story of Wall Street summary** has made the story a touchstone for labor movements and critics of modern work culture.

The Symbolism of Walls

Walls dominate the story. The office has a ground-glass partition. Bartleby's window faces a brick wall. The Tombs is a prison of stone walls. Even the walls of the office building separate the workers from the life of the city. Walls represent limitation, obstruction, and the barriers that separate people from one another and from meaning. Bartleby's final resting place is at the base of a wall in the prison yard. He is hemmed in by walls, literally and figuratively, from his first day at work to his last day on earth.

Literary Significance and Interpretations

Melville's Place in American Literature

Herman Melville is best known for his monumental novel *Moby-Dick*, but "Bartleby, the Scrivener" is arguably his most perfectly crafted work. Written in the period after *Moby-Dick* failed to gain commercial success, the story reflects Melville's own disillusionment with the literary marketplace. Like Bartleby, Melville had produced work of immense depth and originality, only to find that the public preferred more conventional fare. The story can be read in part as an allegory

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