

# Bartleby (author: melville)



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Melville's *Bartleby: A Critical Analysis of the Lawyer* The character of Melville's lawyer in "Bartleby" cannot be categorized as a saintly human being, neither does he wholly conform to the cold, Wall street stereotype obsessed with money-making and devoid of human compassion. While his generosity towards his employees is limited to the extent of how useful they are to him, in *Bartleby's* case the lawyer is empathetic and tolerant because he pities the clerk. Through the character of the lawyer, Melville appears to be demonstrating the contradictions inherent in human nature, the varying shades of good and evil that is present in all of us. The character of the lawyer in Melville's *Bartleby* is neither a faceless, insensitive utilitarian nor a sympathizing sanctified model of Christian humanness but is rather an intriguing mix of all of these values, the grays of his character left to the reader to analyze and understand.

On the one hand, there are many indications of the lawyer's utilitarian tendencies, yet these also conflict with his compassion for Bartleby and his attempts to help his clerk. The lawyer describes himself as a man content in a snug business, dealing with rich men's bonds, convinced that "the easiest way of life is the best." (Melville 16). He believes that he must "push the clerks" who are already with him and extract as much work as possible out of them (Melville 23). The lawyer, who is firmly entrenched in mundane, mercantile and mercenary Wall Street, seems unable to comprehend Bartleby's seemingly transcendentalist attitude, but admits, "there was something about Bartleby that not only strangely disarmed me, but, in a wonderful manner, touched and disconcerted me." (Melville 26).

It could be argued that the lawyer has not lost his morals, since he helps Bartleby; but he is also an appendage to the wealthy, so he is not without

corruption. On the one hand, he sees Bartleby as a person deserving of compassion; by helping Bartleby he feels he can “ purchase a delicious self approval”.(Melville 28). On the other hand, when his virtuous acts of compassion do not lead to self-satisfaction,(Ayo, 1972) he is also somewhat repulsed by the total misery of Bartleby’s condition and states that “ common sense bids the soul be rid of it [pity].” (Melville 35)

Allegorically, there are many spiritual and social interpretations to Bartelby and the lawyer. Donald Fiene (1970) compares Bartelby to God, and suggests that the lawyer’s rejection of him represents his rejection of spirituality in favor of economic profit. Ayo (1972) offers the view that the lawyer fails to recognize the core vulnerability of all men, and the failure of law practices to relieve this misery. It is only on sporadic occasions that through the character of Bartleby, the lawyer glimpses the “ radical aloneness of all men before the wall”, where the wall represents the lack of true communication.(Ayo, 1972) These interpretations suggest that the lawyer’s attitude is primarily utilitarian; he is not inclined to be a selfless Christian, as can be noted from his behavior to his other employees. Yet, it may be argued that in Bartleby, the lawyer realizes “ the bond of a common humanity” (Melville 33) and his persistent attempts to help Bartleby, even when he is no longer Bartleby’s employer, suggest that the lawyer is not totally devoid of Christian compassion.

In conclusion therefore, the lawyer can neither be slotted into the category of a selfless Christian, nor a hardhearted mercenary. Rather he exhibits compassion and pity for the suffering of a fellow human being but struggles with his own inability to relieve such suffering, despite all his efforts. In this, he demonstrates the shades of gray that characterize human nature, the

inner conflicts and turmoil that every person struggles with in achieving personal goals and self satisfaction, while simultaneously empathizing with the plight of fellow human beings.

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