

# Societal intolerance of depression in "bartleby, the scrivener"



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Herman Melville's "Bartleby, The Scrivener: A Story of Wall-Street" presents the mentally troubled title character through the perspective of an ignorant narrator. Having only encountered visible, physical disabilities before, the narrator does not know how to respond to a man with depression. Driven mad by Bartleby's preferred phrase, "I would prefer not to" (Melville 8), the narrator fails to recognize this phrase as what Mitchell and Snyder's Narrative Prosthesis could label as a subconscious cry for help, and instead tries half-hearted attempts at curing Bartleby. When these fail, the narrator fluctuates between pity and intolerance, never truly understanding Bartleby's condition, and only accommodating him when believing him to have a physical disability. The inability of the narrator to empathize with Bartleby's invisible disability and desire to instantly cure him presents a critique on society's ignorance of depression and response to mental impairments.

Melville initially presents his narrator as an elderly man who sympathizes with his physically disabled employees. His copyists Nippers and Turkey both suffer from extremely visible disorders which occasionally hinder their productivity. Turkey, an elderly man like the narrator, experiences his "[face] blaz[ing] like a grate full of Christmas coals" (3) every day by noon until the evening, drastically impacting his temper and workmanship. Despite the "strange, inflamed, flurried, flighty recklessness of activity about [Turkey]" (3) that persists for half the day, the narrator considers him invaluable and excuses his disability due to the quality of work he produces in the morning. The narrator tries to accommodate Turkey's disability by proposing he go

home after noon, however, Turkey refuses and convinces his boss that his disorder does not hinder his ability to do his job.

Similarly, Turkey's coworker Nippers also suffers from a disorder visibly noticeable to the narrator. Nippers' indigestion manifests as "occasional nervous testiness and grinning irritability, causing the teeth to audibly grind together over mistakes committed in copying; unnecessary maledictions, hissed, rather than spoken... and especially by a continual discontent with the height of the table where he worked" (4-5). This irritability and restlessness, while annoying to the narrator, is balanced out by his "neat, swift hand; and...gentlemanly sort of deportment" (4) and only ails Nippers in the morning—allowing the narrator to empathize with Nippers' disability and not deem him unfit to work. The physicality of both Turkey's and Nippers' impairments helps the narrator understand what happens to them and accordingly try to accommodate his employees.

Despite the narrator's seemingly progressive view of disability, he does not afford Bartleby the same empathy and accommodation he does his other scribes due to the lack of visible evidence of the impairment. When Bartleby first reveals his ennui and disinterest in doing certain activities, the other members of his office are confused and unable to comprehend why. Although though the narrator eventually realizes Bartleby has depression, "the scrivener was the victim of innate and incurable disorder...it was his soul that suffered, and his soul I could not reach" (16), he does not understand Bartleby or adjust his work, instead pitying and resolving to fire him. Unlike Nippers and Turkey, whose disabilities are generally ignored due to their quality of work, Bartleby's depression is not considered offset by his

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excellent scribing. As Bartleby's depression possesses mostly invisible traits, the narrator does not know how to respond due to his unfamiliarity with mental disorders, causing him to become repulsed by Bartleby and deny him sympathy or helpful assistance.

This confusion and ignorance on how to deal with mental disorders causes the narrator to become intolerant of Bartleby. The lawyer and his employees become enraged by Bartleby's common phrase "I would prefer not to" (8) and view it as a symptom of lethargy and merely refusal to do work he dislikes. Yet, the phrase itself is not a refusal but merely a statement of his internal feelings both about the specific job and about his perspective of life. The wording of the phrase shows "the body...call[ing] attention to itself in the midst of its breakdown and disrepair" (Mitchell and Snyder 64). Unable to express his despondency in any other linguistic form, Bartleby's repetition of the phrase reveals his inability to find meaning or interest in any activity, yet his coworkers lack the understanding of his situation and mental state to offer support or tolerance.

Only when Bartleby displays signs of a physical impairment is he offered any aid or compassion, "his unexampled diligence in copying by his dim window for the first few weeks of his stay with me might have temporarily impaired his vision. I was touched. I said something in condolence with him. I hinted that of course he did wisely in abstaining from writing for a while" (Melville 18). Upon the hint of a physical impairment, the narrator withdraws his irritation and tries to help Bartleby. The belief that Bartleby may possess a visible disability instantly changes the narrator's perception of him,

showcasing how mental impairments are not considered as hindering or important as physical ones.

However, once the narrator begins to suspect Bartleby has recovered from whatever vision problem he may have experienced, he immediately loses all sympathy for his employee and tries to fire him. When Bartleby refuses to leave, the lawyer loses all patience and begins bombarding him with accusatory questions and considers physical assault (22)—once again revealing his intolerance. The narrator then drives himself mad trying to determine a way to “fix” his Bartleby problem, ultimately opting to run away from that which he could not understand nor tolerate.

Upon realizing he cannot escape this “demented man” (18), the narrator enlists several half-hearted attempts of helping Bartleby. He first tries to guilt Bartleby into submission by expressing how he is “the cause of great tribulation to [the narrator], by persisting in occupying the entry after being dismissed from the office” (25). Once this tactic fails, he then tries to bargain with Bartleby offering several other possible jobs, all which he refuses leading to an irritated outburst from the narrator who then immediately asked “in the kindest tone [he] could assume under such exciting circumstances, ‘will you go home with me now—not to my office, but my dwelling— and remain there till we can conclude upon some convenient arrangement for you at our leisure?’” (26). However, these tactics all fail due to the narrator’s lack of knowledge of how to help a depressed individual.

Once Bartleby is taken to prison, the narrator continues to demonstrate his confusion about Bartleby’s mental impairment, yet continues to try to help

him. Upon arrival at the jail, the narrator tells Bartleby “ nothing reproachful attaches to you by being here. And see, it is not so sad a place as one might think. Look, there is the sky, and here is the grass” (28), essentially telling him to “ be happy.” This fruitless attempt to aid Bartleby cements the idea that the narrator—while trying to be helpful and understanding—truly lacks any experience or knowledge in terms of depression or mental impairments. While he possesses the ability to pity Bartleby, he cannot fully relate to his dejection and thus can only employ tactics he knows to work with physical disabilities. The narrator’s unfamiliarity and misperceptions about how to help someone with invisible disabilities reflects how society treats those with mental impairments.

The lack of any character in Melville’s story offering legitimate support or empathy for Bartleby presents a critique of society and its handling of mental illness. Just how Bartleby’s colleagues perceive him as idle and do not recognize his dejection as a mental disability, society holds a similar ignorance for depression and similar mental debilities. While the recognition of a cognitive disorder may occur like the narrator did with Bartleby, the vapid belief that visible disabilities are more legitimate and manageable limits the amount of help a depressed individual may receive. Despite subtle expressions of despondency like Bartleby’s “ I would prefer not to” (8), those who do not fully understand the mental disability often fall onto a similar path as the narrator—a character who wishes to help but can only muster pity, resentment, and half-hearted aid for the mentally disabled individual. Through the narrator and other lawyers perceiving Bartleby as a burden and ostracizing him, Melville depicts how mentally impaired individuals can be

pushed further into reclusion and solitude. Bartleby's death so quickly after his incarceration displays how a smallminded and uninformed society worsens mental impairments and further isolates individuals. Melville's representation of depression in " Bartleby, The Scrivener: A Story of Wall-street" and how his characters react to it presents a critique on society's intolerance and ignorance of mental disorders.

## **Works Cited**

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