

# Refusal in melville's bartleby, the scrivener



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The apparently peculiar protagonist of Herman Melville's short story, *Bartleby, the Scrivener*, is a man whose attitude becomes marked by general refusal in the end. After being a diligent scrivener for the lawyer who narrates the story, Bartleby becomes increasingly reclusive and resistant, until his speech is almost reduced to a single phrase: " I would prefer not to. "

His refusal to perform at his job, to leave the office and finally to eat, seems, at first, extravagant and gratuitous. However, as it shall be seen, Bartleby embodies the idea of passive resistance against oppression.

The lawyer, who is here the narrator of the story as well, represents the pragmatic and materialistic life. Wall Street, which is the most famous street associated with the business world, becomes here a symbol of pragmatism. Significantly, the office where Bartleby is employed is enclosed within walls that obstruct the view at the window. Bartleby, who stares at the great wall incessantly, is the idealist whose metaphysical revolt crashes against the pragmatic world of business he is a part of. The story is told by a lawyer, who is obviously puzzled by Bartleby's unaccountable behavior.

Because he does not know how to react to Bartleby's refusals, the lawyer attempts to play a charitable role and let him stay on the premises, without asking him to work anymore. He gives up on his bizarre scrivener however, when he sees that his business has to suffer because of Bartleby's presence. As many other of Melville's characters, the copyist is a Transcendentalist, who tries to see life beyond the superficial. He refuses the lawyer's commands and offers because he believes that business makes man obliterate his own perception of a deeper reality.

Bartleby's thesis is that human action is useless, and he wraps his thesis in the form of negative preferences, giving to understand that he couldn't act otherwise precisely because it is not a simple matter of will. He seems absolutely paralyzed in inaction, gradually renouncing almost all occupation. As an explanation to the character's strange behavior, the narrator recalls that Bartleby's former employment had put him in charge of the 'dead letters' or the letters that have reached a dead man at their destination.

The former employment obviously added to Bartleby's belief in the vanity or uselessness of human action in the form of business or commercial employment. Bartleby's inaction clearly contrasts with the agitated world of business: "Sometimes an attorney having business with me, and calling at my office, and finding no one but the scrivener there, would undertake to obtain some sort of precise information from him touching my whereabouts; but without heeding his idle talk, Bartleby would remain standing immovable in the middle of the room" (Melville 38).

His clash with this pragmatic world is significant: he refuses to be involved in the superficial employments of those who do not nurture their own spirits and choose to live artificially. Melville's association with Transcendentalism is acknowledged. Bartleby's view on life can be therefore explained with the use of the Transcendentalists' philosophy. Thus, in *Life without Principle*, Thoreau remarks that the one element that is completely opposed to poetry and life itself is business: "I think that there is nothing, not even crime, more opposed to poetry, to philosophy, ay to life itself, than this incessant business" (Thoreau 1).

Thoreau continues his idea by giving example of men who were involved in businesses that are immoral, such as the “ gold rush” to California. According to Thoreau, a business which implies that one man will take advantage of another, without actually performing something useful, is offensive to religion and to the divinity: “ It makes God be a moneyed gentleman who scatters a handful of pennies in order to see mankind scramble for them” (Thoreau 1). In the same way, in his lecture Man the Reformer, Emerson criticizes the practice of business and commerce, when these surpass man's primary needs.

According to Emerson, to the extent that it is possible, man should depend on his own powers for at least a part of the manual labor, in order to have a direct relation to the world: “ But the doctrine of the Farm is merely this, that every man ought to stand in primary relations with the work of the world, ought to do it himself, and not to suffer the accident of his having a purse in his pocket, or his having been bred to some dishonorable and injurious craft, to sever him from those duties...” (Emerson 1).

Thoreau's and Emerson's ideas about business are illustrated by Bartleby's attitude towards his employer's profession and the world of Wall Street. Bartleby is sensitive to the fact that such an employment keeps men from enjoying life for its real value. His peculiar behavior and his absolute refusal of the lawyer's proposals show that he holds a different view of life, than that of the common people.

Bartleby's contemplative nature is a further hint that he is immersed in thoughts and meditations and refuses to take part in the shallow activities of the men who surround him. The main character is Melville's short story is

therefore a social misfit, who refuses to acknowledge the superficial world of business that the modern man has walled himself in. With the Transcendentalists, Bartleby is focused on contemplation and understanding of the deeper reality, refusing to become involved in a world of petty and purely materialistic concerns.

? Works Cited: Emerson, Ralph Waldo. "Man the Reformer." *The Transcendentalist*, 2001. Ed. J. Johnson Lewis. Retrieved at July 30, 2009. <http://www.emersoncentral.com/manreform.htm>. Melville, Hermann. *The Complete Shorter Fiction*. London: Everyman's Library, 1997. Thoreau, Henry David. "Life without principle." *The Transcendentalist*, 2001. Ed. J. Johnson Lewis. Retrieved at July 30, 2009. [http://www.transcendentalists.com/life\\_without\\_principle.htm](http://www.transcendentalists.com/life_without_principle.htm).