

Theme of choice in bartleby the scrivener novel

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In *Bartleby the Scrivener*, Bartleby is the antagonist who seeks a job, ruins his opportunity at the place of work, and negatively affects the people around him at work. He would, “prefer not to” and would get no work done throughout his time at the office. The protagonist, Bartleby’s employer, gives Bartleby many opportunities to right his wrongs and attempts to get Bartleby to make the right choices in his life. In *Bartleby the Scrivener*, by Herman Melville, a major theme that comes forth is the theme of choice. The choices that Bartleby made give him a job, took away that job, and ultimately brought Bartleby to his death.

One choice that Bartleby made was to get a job. In most other cases, this would be the right choice, but in Bartleby’s case, this choice proved to bring fatal repercussions. When Bartleby first entered the building, the employer of the office was delighted to have an extra man on the job as believed Bartleby, “might operate beneficially upon the flighty temper of Turkey, and the fiery one of Nippers.” (16). This proved to be the wrong choice by the employer, again going back to the theme of choices. In the beginning of Bartleby’s time as a scrivener, he, “did an extraordinary quantity of writing. As if long famishing for something to copy, he seemed to gorge himself on my documents.” (18). He was a great worker with a strong work ethic, but all that changed as time went on. This choice of acquiring the job as a scrivener was the start of series of negative choices made by Bartleby.

The way Bartleby lost his job was through his choice to “prefer not to.” He would get asked by the employer to do a task, and would politely refuse. The first time Bartleby “preferred not” to was “when he was called to to examine a small paper with me.”(21). (This story was written in the first

person, making 'me,' the employer). Bartleby stated "' I would prefer not to.'" (21). This was the first objection of work and Bartleby continued to do this time and time again. The objections began to become out of control and the employer decided to let Bartleby go. The employer told " Bartleby that in six days' time he must unconditionally leave the office." (136). Bartleby told the employer that he would " prefer not to." Since Bartleby would not leave, the employer decided to move the location of the office. Bartleby's choices not only affected his livelihood, but everybody around Bartleby became infected with the musk of his poor choices.

The choices that Bartleby made ultimately led him to his death at the end of the story. Bartleby's actions would compare to those of a deadman simply because he did not do anything he was supposed to. When the employer told Bartleby to leave the office, Bartleby would politely decline the order. This forced the employer to have Bartleby arrested. Bartleby went to prison but the employer still cared about Bartleby so he occasionally went to go check on him. When the employer went to go see Bartleby, he saw him, " strangely huddled at the base of the wall, his knees drawn up, and lying on his side, his head touching the cold stones..." (245). Bartle was a wasted soul. He had nothing to live for as he did have the motivation to do anything. Bartleby's death was of no shock as he would not eat while in prison and one cannot live without eating. Bartleby died in the prison with the employer near him. The employer felt bad for Bartleby as he described him as a, " man by nature and misfortune prone to a pallid hopelessness." (250). Bartleby had a hopeless life and because of the choices he made by not eating, working, or complying to anyone's orders. Bartleby wasted his life over bad choices.

In Melville's *Bartleby*, many interpretations of theme arise, but the most prominent theme has to be the theme of choice. Just as Bartleby made bad choices which affected his life negatively, anyone who makes bad choices will receive consequences for their actions. Bartleby's life in this short story can be taken as a lesson to all people who are lazy, inactive, and just rolling with the system. If the effort to achieve success is not given, success is inconceivable.