

Ah humanity!: the
evolution of attitude in
"bartelby, the
scrivener"



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"Bartleby, the Scrivener" by Herman Melville is the story of a scrivener (a copyist) who has an unusually bleak disposition. Eventually, he takes it upon himself to refuse his boss' (the narrator's) requests for completing the very work for which he was hired. The story, in and of itself, is of a very interesting premise, but arguably even more interesting is the narrator's attitude toward Bartleby and how it changes multiple times. The narrator's attitude about Bartleby in "Bartleby, the Scrivener" changes throughout the story from one of glad approval to one of intensely curious pity to one of bleak sorrow. Upon first meeting Bartleby, the narrator's opinion of him is that Bartleby is a tacit, though reliable young man; the narrator approves of him, albeit slightly grudgingly. The narrator notes that Bartleby not only does his work but does it without assistance: "At first Bartleby did an extraordinary quantity of writing. As if long famishing for something to copy, he seemed to gorge himself on my documents." As such, the narrator's business and its expediency are notably improved over before the presence of Bartleby, when the narrator had to deal with the fineries and in-and-outs of the personalities of Turkey and Nippers. Despite this, the narrator notes at one point: "I should have been quite delighted with his application, had been cheerfully industrious. But he wrote on silently, palely, mechanically." This excerpt serves as the first scrap of foreshadowing about Bartleby; the narrator has a hunch about him, even though he is functioning wondrously at first. Nonetheless, the narrator continues to grudgingly approve of Bartleby. Next, however, the narrator describes in detail what comes to be the last event of his first phase of attitude toward Bartleby: "In my haste and natural expectancy of instant compliance, I sat with my head bent over the original on my desk, and my right hand sideways... so that immediately upon <https://assignbuster.com/ah-humanity-the-evolution-of-attitude-in-bartelby-the-scrivener/>

emerging from his retreat, Bartleby might snatch it and proceed to business without the least delay." This evidences that, despite Bartleby's eccentricities, the narrator still sees him as a reliable young man. Though this will almost immediately shift to the new attitude. Throughout the middle section of the story, the narrator's attitude toward Bartleby is one of intensely curious pity. One day, Bartleby simply refuses to perform a standard work task, noting simply, " I would prefer not to". At first, the narrator attempts to shake this off; ignoring it and doing the work himself. After a few days, it happens again, leaving the narrator unable to ignore it. The narrator is also unable to deal with it in a traditional manner, though, stating, " With any other man I should have flown outright into a dreadful passion... But there was something about Bartleby that not only strangely disarmed me, but in a wonderful manner touched and disconcerted me." The narrator's feelings toward Bartleby are clearly different, but he is unable to identify them at this point. If not to the narrator, it is clear to the reader, clear that the narrator's attitude is one of intense curiosity. For example, observe the narrator's inquisitiveness in the following passage: " He lives, then, on ginger-nuts, thought I; never eats a dinner, properly speaking; he eats nothing but ginger-nuts. My mind then ran on in reveries concerning the probable effects upon the human constitution of living entirely on ginger-nuts." There is no explanation for the narrator's attitude here other than intense curiosity. However, there is another feeling as well that becomes obvious to the reader, pity: " Nevertheless, my mind was not pacified... I looked round anxiously, peeped behind his screen... I surmised that for an indefinite period Bartleby must have ate, dressed, and slept in my office...

What miserable friendlessness and loneliness are here revealed! His poverty
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is great; but his solitude, how horrible!" Just as soon as the reader and the narrator have both finally come to fully realizing the feelings that make up his second phase of attitude about Bartleby, curiosity and pity, it begins to lapse into a new attitude. During the latter part of the story, the narrator's attitude toward Bartleby becomes one of complete, bleak sorrow and reflectiveness. This feeling is first swept over the narrator after he realizes that Bartleby lives in his office, thus realizing Bartleby's loneliness: " For the first time in my life a feeling of overpowering stinging melancholy seized me. Before, I had never experienced aught but a not-unpleasing sadness." As seen here, in contrast to the second phase of the narrator's attitude toward Bartleby, in this final part the narrator comprehends his emotions immediately. That leads the narrator to make the following interesting statement: " What I saw that morning persuaded me that the scrivener was the victim of innate and incurable disorder... His body did not pain him; it was his soul that suffered, and his soul I could not reach." It is this observation that truly bothers the narrator and brings about a turning point; he can do nothing to help Bartleby as he wants to, nothing to resolve Bartleby's sorrow. As such, the narrator aims to resolve his own sorrow regarding Bartleby through another method: he runs. The subconscious reason that the narrator leaves his original office for a new one is not to escape Bartleby but to escape his own sorrow about Bartleby, to escape attempting to help Bartleby. Because, as the narrator admits: " So true it is, and so terrible too, that up to a certain point the thought or sight of misery enlists our best affections; but, in certain special cases, beyond that point it does not... This is owing to the inherent selfishness of the human heart. It rather proceeds from a certain hopelessness of remedying excessive and

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organic ill." Afterwards, the narrator is unable to remedy his sorrow about the situation due to continued run-ins with Bartleby, and this is cemented by Bartleby's death. He bemoans the fact that he was unable to help even one man: " Ah Bartleby! Ah humanity!" As implied here, how can the narrator alter the overall human condition if he could not help Bartleby? This ends the story and thus the third phase of the narrator's attitude toward Bartleby. The narrator's changes in attitude toward Bartleby in " Bartleby, the Scrivener" are meant to influence the reader's perception, and thus force the reader to the philosophical conclusion noted in the previous paragraph. In the beginning, the narrator regards Bartleby as an efficient worker, if only slightly off, causing the reader not to view Bartleby as a very outstanding character at first. Later, the narrator's attitude shifts to curiosity and pity as he begins to form many different ideas of Bartleby in his head, fueled by Bartleby's constant, " I would prefer not to". It is here that the audience's focus shifts solely onto Bartleby. Finally, the narrator discovers the full truth about Bartleby, leading to a sad but philosophical conclusion, as experienced by the audience. All in all, " Bartleby, the Scrivener" is a very well-put-together story that uses the narrator's emotions to bring about an impressive conclusion.