

Bartleby the scrivener: the painful extraction of genuine compassion



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Though the title may be Bartleby the Scrivener, Herman Melville's short story is much more concerned with its nameless narrator than its title character.

Addressing one man's concept of himself and how that concept must be reevaluated when challenged by disruption, Bartleby depicts a man who misinterprets and rationalizes his own life so it is in accord with the ideals he aspires to. At his very core, the narrator is so terrified of confrontation that his reluctance limits his effectiveness as a leader. Nevertheless, he is able to convince himself his weakness is in fact a great quality he possesses, an enhancement upon his stellar leadership ability. The concept is explored throughout Bartleby via the narrator's description of himself, the bust of Cicero occupying space in his office, the narrator's handling of his regular employees, and, of course, his relationship with the troubled Bartleby. It is through the narrator's interpretation of that relationship that the full extent of his reluctance and rationalization is realized. More importantly, it is as a by-product of that rationalization that the otherwise absent concept of genuine concern for others is at last realized, its previous deficiency illuminating Melville's core theme of a society void of true compassion. In Bartleby, one theme—that of a man's power of self deception—advances the plot while intentionally leaving the back door open for another, more pressing theme—of a society void of compassion—to make its subtle yet searing entrance. The narrator declares early in his description of himself, "...the easiest way of life is the best." For him, easy can be equated with free from confrontation. He glibly acknowledges that he is "one of those unambitious lawyers who never addresses a jury." Instead, he is content to "do a snug business among rich men's bonds and mortgages and title-deeds."

For the narrator, the most apt word to describe him is "safe." He does not
<https://assignbuster.com/bartleby-the-scrivener-the-painful-extraction-of-genuine-compassion/>

take risks, does not try and reach beyond the readily attainable, does not expend valuable energy without urgent cause. Nevertheless, the narrator also views himself quite nobly, boastfully quoting John Jacob Astor's description of him as being a man of prudence and method. As clearly as he feels he understands himself, however, the narrator's self-description is at odds with the qualities to which he aspires and is in fact, as the story continues, quite crippling. The narrator proudly considers himself a transmigrator of Cicero but is in fact a pale, shallow imitation. The narrator's comparison to Cicero is invited various times throughout the text. The cherished plaster bust of Cicero that sets behind the narrator in his office is referred to twice during the story and the narrator's own assumed attributes, modeled upon the writings of Cicero, are also acknowledged. However, the similarities between the narrator and his idol are only superficial at best. The claim of method alluded to in the reference to Astor is ultimately a false one: instead of the careful itemization of a Ciceronian oration, the narrator's initially sequenced listings either break down absurdly or dissolve into magniloquence which serves only to damage any neoclassical pretenses he holds. Further, in addition to the rhetorical contrast with Cicero the narrator also has a dichotomous relationship with Cicero philosophically. Whereas the Roman lawyer was an advocate for the people, the narrator admittedly prefers to seek work among the wealthy rather than the poor. The narrator's world is based upon pride and the perception others have of him, rather than any deep, enduring personal philosophy he possesses. The only true trait he possesses is that of passivity, and that he possesses to an extreme and rationalizes as a good thing.

Ultimately, the parallels with Cicero, or lack thereof, serve to underscore the <https://assignbuster.com/bartleby-the-scrivener-the-painful-extraction-of-genuine-compassion/>

gap between the narrator's real existence and his own perception of that same existence^{2E} The narrator's very ideology and concept of humanity are vague and superficial at best and, when contrasted with Cicero's realization of such values, demonstrate the vast difference between greatness and pretentiousness, between a marble bust and the plaster imitation which seeks to duplicate it if only on the surface. Having thoroughly established his own perception of himself, the narrator proceeds in *Bartleby* to describe his employees. It is through that depiction that even more valuable insight into the narrator can be gained. Turkey and Nippers are essentially mirror reflections of one another in terms of behavior. One, Turkey, is effective in the morning. Come afternoon, however, his ability to perform the requisite duties of his job rapidly erode and he is no use. Nippers, conversely, is a waste in the mornings but by afternoon is completely competent. The two characters are essentially flat, static characters—their value is in the reaction they elicit from the narrator^{2E} Considering himself a skilled manager in his ability to withstand the idiosyncrasies of his eccentric, unreliable employees, the narrator observes that Turkey and Nippers are effective and ineffective at alternate times. Thus, it is possible for him to maintain efficiency in his office by considering and working around the particular quirks of his employees. While this lack of discipline and accountability would strike many as impractical and the product of a timid, ineffective manager, the narrator views the situation more as a testimonial to his great aptitude in working with unreliable employees, remaining unflustered, and achieving success nonetheless. Again, the gap between the narrator's reality and his perception of it is challenged. A more confident, realized manager would assert his authority and thus enhance the efficiency

<https://assignbuster.com/bartleby-the-scrivener-the-painful-extraction-of-genuine-compassion/>

of his office. The narrator, however, sits idly by, unable to muster the necessary courage such confrontation would necessitate. The narrator represents an extreme passivity to the extreme eccentricity of his employees—he is the base and they the acids. So long as that is the difference, confrontation can be avoided as the narrator simply works to extinguish the fire of his employees. It is not until the narrator, the base, encounters an even more extreme base, Bartleby, that the veil is pulled back from his inadequacies and he is challenged as a manager. Rather than extinguishing volatility, the narrator must now ignite what has already long been extinguished and it is in that pursuit that he falls woefully short. Turkey and Nippers, as aforementioned, are mirror reflections of each other. They share the same room and are of essentially the same species: one is volatile in the morning, the other in the afternoon. Similarly, the narrator and Bartleby are also cast of the same mold. Sharing the same space, like Turkey and Nippers, Bartleby represents the logical extreme of the narrator's passivity—so passive that he does nothing. Drawing in part, somewhat satirically, upon the writings of Jonathon Edwards and Joseph Priestley—alluded to as readings the narrator seeks in response to his newest employee—the philosophy can best be paraphrased to mean that whatever it is you are doing at a given time, that is what you prefer. If you are eating a slice of wheat bread, you are doing so because you prefer to. If you are sitting idly by, doing nothing, then that is exactly what you, like Bartleby, prefer to do. The narrator prefers to avoid confrontation, and so that is precisely what he does. The problem inherent to such philosophy occurs when two people have divergent preferences yet must somehow reconcile their differences in order to accomplish a needed task. Henry David Thoreau <https://assignbuster.com/bartleby-the-scrivener-the-painful-extraction-of-genuine-compassion/>

said that everyone cannot be a hero because there has to be someone to stand by the roadside and wave as the hero passes by. Similarly, everyone cannot always have his or her preference. In the case of Bartleby and the narrator, someone must concede if anything is to be accomplished. Either Bartleby must work, even though he prefers not to, or the narrator must force confrontation. Neither character, however, is willing to make such a concession and, consequently, nothing happens. Instead, the narrator rationalizes his own timidity and justifies Bartleby's behavior. When Bartleby first begins refusing to perform various parts of his job, the narrator tries to justify the refusal, attributing to Bartleby a vast array of qualities which would make the refusal more palatable; "It seemed to me that while I had been addressing him, he carefully revolved every statement that I made; fully comprehended the meaning;...but, at the same time, some paramount consideration prevailed with him to reply as he did." Bartleby inevitably must draw some comparison to the transcendentalist concept of passive resistance, of which in many ways he is a perfect model. As such, the narrator is all the more inclined to support him and bear with his eccentricities. The narrator is more than compliant in creating excuses for Bartleby if those excuses can procrastinate the seemingly inevitable confrontation. Further, the narrator views sympathy and compassion towards Bartleby as a method of serving his own self interest, declaring, "Here I can cheaply purchase a delicious self-approval. To befriend Bartleby; to humor him in his strange willfulness, will cost me little or nothing, while I lay up in my soul what will eventually prove a sweet morsel for my conscience." And so, in the stages of Bartleby's bizarre behavior, the narrator wallows in his superficiality, viewing a friendship with Bartleby as a method of enhancing

<https://assignbuster.com/bartleby-the-scrivener-the-painful-extraction-of-genuine-compassion/>

his own self, of accruing a greater self esteem. As aforementioned, the narrator diverges from Ciceronian ideals in his lack of true altruistic motive. Instead of genuinely caring, he is driven by his own self-interest and is able to extend the pretense of charity as a justification for his passivity with Bartleby. Furthering the theme of justification and rationalization, when Bartleby refuses to even perform his normal copying duties the narrator initially attributes the refusal to his eyesight suffering as a consequence of poor light, striving to excuse the actions of his employee and thus eliminate any risk of confrontation. As the actions become less excusable or justifiable, however, the narrator begins to seek other avenues to approach the issue. At first he tries to reason with Bartleby, but to no avail. Short of physical force, of which the narrator is entirely incapable, there is no way to expel Bartleby. Rather than be confronted by this failure, however, the narrator instead seeks to find a higher purpose for the events transpiring. That purpose is arrived at by reading the aforementioned sermons of Edwards and Priestley and surmising that Bartleby is sent with a purpose of teaching the narrator compassion. Interestingly, the narrator at last is able to break free from the pervasive self-interest and superficiality that consumes him earlier in the story. Rather than seeking to demonstrate compassion as a means of attaining a nobler vessel, of earning the equivalent of a humanitarian merit badge, the narrator is sufficiently rebuked that he at last seeks to demonstrate true, altruistic compassion. However, the philosophical transformation is only made possible as an artery for him to justify the more compelling of his weaknesses—his unyielding passivity. If the narrator can interpret Bartleby as a messenger to change his attitudes towards his fellow man then he can continue to evade the looming confrontation. Nevertheless,

<https://assignbuster.com/bartleby-the-scrivener-the-painful-extraction-of-genuine-compassion/>

the narrator is at last motivated by true, genuine compassion to try and help the odd Bartleby and his pathetic existence. His overtures of help to Bartleby, however, are futile. Even after vacating the office and offering Bartleby the opportunity to come home with the narrator, no break through occurs. Bartleby remains unchanged, still adhering to his preference of going nowhere and doing nothing. Alas, the true compassion and humanity of the narrator, when finally exercised, falls upon already deafened ears—alluding to the symbolism of Bartleby as a martyr in a society ravaged by self-interest and superficial values, a theme too expansive to be discussed within the scope of this paper. Still, the basic truth remains that for Bartleby, the compassion demonstrated by the narrator late in the story has come too late. Bartleby is the victim of society, fatally scarred by the pervasive lack of compassion that afflicts society. True compassion is finally revealed but the damage has already been done and Bartleby cannot be healed. Ultimately, Melville's commentary is in many ways centered squarely not upon the reluctance to participate in confrontation as exhibited by the narrator but rather, upon the concept that true humanity is so scarce it is only brought forth as part of the narrator's rationalization—a last ditch effort by the narrator to avoid the greater of two evils. To Melville, extracting true humanity from a society is akin to extracting vital organs—a painful, often insurmountable task. Had the characters that populate a culture, such as the narrator, always exhibited true virtue rather than superficial kindness and self-interest, vacant philosophizing serving only its speaker's own sense of grandeur, Bartleby may never have existed (thus, interpreting Bartleby as a product of the vacuous culture which created him). However, he did exist and for Melville that existence resonates as a testament to a bleak society so <https://assignbuster.com/bartleby-the-scrivener-the-painful-extraction-of-genuine-compassion/>

engulfed in its own self interest that it's oblivious to the souls left ravaged in its wake. Bleak indeed, but perhaps quite accurate.