

The struggle between  
individuality and  
conformity in  
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In Lois Lowry's award winning novel "The Giver," the main character, Jonas, wonders incredulously, "How could someone not fit in? The community was so meticulously ordered, the choices so carefully made" (Lowry 48). Jonas is referring to the community in which he lives, a controlled society void of fear, pain, and burden. Conformity ensures security, yet, as Jonas will discover, it condemns individual thought and expression. This theme is resonant also in the short story "Bartleby, the Scrivener." Here, Herman Melville examines man's struggle to maintain individual identity in a world that demands conformity. When the story commences, the narrator, who presents himself as a man close to sixty and a lawyer of thirty years, basks in the comforts and securities provided by his conventional lifestyle. The tone is complacent as he celebrates the fact that he is an "eminently safe man" (Melville 85). Rejecting the dangers and uncertainties that come with ambition, the narrator confides, "I am one of those unambitious lawyers who never address a jury, or in any way draw down public applause; but, in the cool tranquility of a snug retreat, do a snug business among rich men's bonds, and mortgages, and title deeds" (85). The lawyer favors the comforts of conformity over the distinction of individual recognition. By contrast, the lawyer's employees value their individuality. The first copyist, Turkey, who is self-indulgent and obstreperous, rejects his employer's offer of a quality coat, refusing to conform to the dress code preferred by his boss at work. The narrator comments wryly, "I verily believe that buttoning himself up in so downy and blanket-like a coat had a pernicious effect on him - upon the same principle that too much oats are bad for horses. In fact, precisely as a rash, restive horse is said to feel his oats, so Turkey felt his coat. It made him insolent" (87). Like Turkey, the second copyist, Nippers, is comfortable with <https://assignbuster.com/the-struggle-between-individuality-and-conformity-in-melvilles-bartleby-the-scrivener/>

his own distinct identity. In fact, unlike his employer, Nippers has ambition and a desire to distinguish himself further. "The ambition was evinced by a certain impatience of the duties of a mere copyist, an unwarrantable usurpation of strictly professional affairs, such as the original drawing up of legal documents" (87). Turkey and Nipper's eccentricities make each unique: the former has a "strange, inflamed, flurried, flighty recklessness of activity about him" (86) in the afternoon, whereas the latter, particularly in the morning hours, displays a "nervous testiness and grinning irritability" (87) and a constant dissatisfaction with the height of his table. The fact that the narrator portrays them with warmth and humor suggests that he acknowledges and embraces their idiosyncrasies. He comments, "I never had to do with their eccentricities at one time. Their fits relieved each other, like guards. When Nipper's was on, Turkey's was off; and vice versa" (88). Through careful management, the lawyer produces compatibility between individuality and conformity. It is with this in mind that "the eminently safe man" (85) employs the scrivener, Bartleby, "a man of so singularly sedate an aspect...[that he] might operate beneficially upon the flighty temper of Turkey and the fiery one of Nippers" (88-89). Ironically, the scrivener is hired, in part, to provide coherence to the disparate personalities in the law chambers and create a calming atmosphere. The employer remarks how Bartleby's "steadiness...made him a valuable acquisition" (93). In contrast to the noise and motion that are constantly generated by Turkey and Nippers, "not a wrinkle of agitation rippled him" (90). Bartleby speaks "mildly" (91) and is described as having a "great stillness" (93) about him. Initially, the scrivener epitomizes the notion of conformity. Consequently, it is unsettling when Bartleby emerges as an independent spirit. By the third

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day of employment, he has begun to refuse the demands of his employer, who comments, "Imagine my surprise, nay, my consternation, when, without moving from his privacy, Bartleby, in a singularly mild, firm voice, replied, 'I would prefer not to.' I sat awhile in perfect silence, rallying my stunned faculties" (89). Bartleby's individuality is emphasized by his refusal to move from his privacy and his firm tone of voice. Over time, as the scrivener continually refuses to comply with even the most basic wishes of his employer, the lawyer becomes increasingly perplexed and unsettled. The "high green folding screen" (89) that physically separates Bartleby and his employer in the work room begins to take on symbolic value. Neither appears to see or understand the other. In fact, the scrivener's view is entirely blocked by the screen on one side and a brick wall immediately outside his window. His "hermitage" (91) personifies his isolation and individualism. This idea of Bartleby's isolation is strengthened with the knowledge that he is without a home, family, or friends. The discovery that the scrivener is living, as well as working at the law firm, deeply affects the narrator. He comments how "the thought came sweeping across me, what miserable friendliness and loneliness are here revealed! His poverty is great; but his solitude, how horrible!" (88). Bartleby's circumstances disturb his employer and draw him from the complacency of his "sung retreat" (85). His former feelings of anger and frustration give way to those of compassion and social conscience. Initially, these independent thoughts are held in check by his own need for social acceptance and conformity. First, the lawyer is forced to rid himself of Bartleby once he realizes that his own reputation is being tarnished by association. The reader is told, "I was made aware that all through the circle of my professional acquaintance, a whisper of wonder was

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running around, having reference to the strange creature I kept at my office. This worried me very much" (102). The need to conform to social expectation forces the lawyer to move his business to new premises and abandon Bartleby. Second, when confronted later by the angry landlord and his tenants regarding Bartleby's refusal to leave the former law chambers, the lawyer is quick to disown Bartleby for fear of social condemnation. "In vain I persisted that Bartleby was nothing to me" (104). The lawyer is torn between social acceptance and the need to act as an individual. While the lawyer continues to conform to the demands of society, he begins to stand apart by reaching out to Bartleby with kind offers of help and support: financial assistance, references, and even later, an invitation to share his home. It is Bartleby's stubborn refusal or inability to cooperate and conform that leads to his demise. As his isolation increases, his spirit weakens: he becomes more inactive, his eyes are "dim," (90) he is seen as "a very ghost," (93) and he is later discovered in "one of his profoundest dead-wall reveries" (102). Finally, Bartleby is imprisoned in the Tombs because of his failure to conform. Ironically, he is permitted "freely to wander," (106) yet still, he continues to be observed and judged, in this case, "from the narrow slits of the jail windows" (106). Clearly, there are parallels to be drawn between society and prison. Bartleby's "wasted" (108) body is discovered a few days later by his former employer, "huddled at the base of the wall...his dim eyes...open" (108). The word "wasted" (108) implies not only dead but a body carelessly used. His individual spirit could not survive. In "Bartleby, the Scrivener," Herman Melville confirms the difficulty of maintaining individual identity in a world that demands conformity. During the course of the story, the narrator shifts from the safe harbor of a conventional life and <https://assignbuster.com/the-struggle-between-individuality-and-conformity-in-melvilles-bartleby-the-scrivener/>

stands alone in his compassion, questioning society's indifference to the isolated. In contrast, Bartleby, in refusing to conform, is unable to sustain his individuality. Melville suggests that individuality cannot thrive in isolation but needs to be tolerated, even nurtured, by society. Individuality and conformity must indeed coexist. Works Cited Lowry, Lois. *The Giver*. New York: Laurel Leaf, 2002. Print. Melville, Herman. "Bartleby, the Scrivener." *American Short Stories, 7th Edition*. Eds. Bert Hitchcock, Virginia Koudis, and Eugene Current-Garcia. New York: Longman, 2002. 84-108. Print.