

herman melville bartleby the scrivener a story of wall street

Herman Melville's *Bartleby the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street* is a profound exploration of individuality, isolation, and the complexities of human existence in the face of societal expectations. Written in 1853, this novella offers a unique glimpse into the life of a scrivener, Bartleby, who chooses to resist the demands of the capitalist world around him. Through the lens of a Wall Street law office, Melville delves into themes of alienation, work, and the nature of free will, making this work a timeless piece of literature that continues to resonate with readers today.

Context and Setting

Historical Background

The mid-19th century was a period of significant economic transformation in the United States. The rise of capitalism and the expansion of urban centers led to changes in societal structures and individual roles. Wall Street, as the financial hub of the nation, became synonymous with ambition, wealth, and the relentless pursuit of success. Melville's choice to set his story in this environment highlights the stark contrasts between economic prosperity and personal despair.

Melville's Life and Influences

Herman Melville was born in 1819 and experienced a tumultuous life, marked by both adventure and personal loss. Notably, he worked in various jobs, including as a clerk, sailor, and writer, which provided him with firsthand insight into the struggles of individuals in the workplace. His experiences influenced his writing style and themes, particularly in *Bartleby the Scrivener*, where the conflicts of the workplace mirror his own life challenges.

Plot Summary

Bartleby the Scrivener unfolds through the first-person narration of an unnamed lawyer who runs a small law office on Wall Street. The narrator describes his office as a place where he employs several scriveners, including the enigmatic Bartleby.

1. Introduction of Bartleby:

- Bartleby is initially portrayed as a diligent worker who is quiet and efficient.
- The narrator admires Bartleby's work ethic and hires him without hesitation.

2. Strange Behavior:

- Gradually, Bartleby begins to display signs of withdrawal.
- When asked to perform tasks beyond his usual duties, Bartleby famously responds with, "I would prefer not to."
- This phrase becomes a recurring motif, symbolizing his passive resistance to the demands of his job.

3. Conflict Escalation:

- Bartleby's refusal to comply with requests escalates tensions in the office.
- The narrator struggles to understand Bartleby's behavior, oscillating between frustration and sympathy.

4. Isolation and Decline:

- As Bartleby becomes increasingly isolated, the narrator attempts to help him, but Bartleby remains unresponsive.
- Ultimately, Bartleby is evicted from the office building, leading to his further decline.

5. Ending:

- The story concludes with Bartleby's imprisonment for vagrancy, where he starves himself to death.
- The narrator reflects on the tragedy of Bartleby's existence, haunted by his inability to save him.

Thematic Exploration

Isolation and Alienation

One of the central themes in *Bartleby the Scrivener* is the profound sense of isolation experienced by individuals in a capitalist society. Bartleby represents the ultimate outsider, detached from the world around him. His repeated phrase, "I would prefer not to," signifies not only his refusal to engage with work but also his refusal to engage with society itself. This theme is particularly poignant given the bustling environment of Wall Street, where individuals often sacrifice their identities for economic gain.

The Nature of Work

Melville also critiques the dehumanizing aspects of work in the capitalist system. The law office, a microcosm of society, is portrayed as a sterile environment where productivity takes precedence over human connection. Bartleby's passive rebellion serves as a commentary on the loss of individuality and the mechanization of labor. The narrator's initial admiration for Bartleby's work ethic ultimately turns to bewilderment as he realizes that the scrivener's existence has become defined by his work—and his refusal to participate in it.

Free Will and Choice

The concept of free will is central to Bartleby's character. His repeated refusals highlight a profound assertion of agency, albeit in a negative form. While most characters in the story are driven by the need to conform and succeed, Bartleby's choice to abstain from participation raises questions about the nature of freedom. Is true freedom the ability to say "no," even when it leads to one's demise? Melville forces readers to confront the uncomfortable reality of choice in a society that often values compliance over individuality.

Symbolism and Literary Devices

Bartleby as a Symbol

Bartleby can be interpreted as a symbol of the modern man, grappling with existential despair. His refusal to comply with societal expectations mirrors the struggles of individuals in a rapidly industrializing world. Melville's portrayal of Bartleby transcends the confines of the story, inviting readers to consider the broader implications of his character in the context of human existence and the quest for meaning.

Use of the Narrator

The first-person perspective of the narrator serves to enhance the complexity of the story. As a character who initially embodies the values of capitalism, his transformation throughout the narrative reflects Melville's critique of society. The narrator's internal conflict—his desire to help Bartleby versus his inability to understand him—mirrors the struggle many face in balancing personal ethics with societal demands.

Conclusion

Bartleby the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street remains a poignant exploration of the human condition in an increasingly impersonal world. Through the character of Bartleby, Herman Melville invites readers to reflect on the nature of individuality, the role of work in defining self-worth, and the delicate balance between societal expectations and personal freedom. As a timeless piece of literature, Melville's novella continues to resonate in contemporary discussions about work, identity, and the human experience, challenging us to consider the implications of our choices in a world that often prioritizes productivity over humanity.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the main theme of 'Bartleby, the Scrivener'?

The main theme revolves around isolation and the struggles of individuality in a conformist society.

Who is the narrator of 'Bartleby, the Scrivener'?

The narrator is an unnamed lawyer who employs Bartleby as a scrivener in his Wall Street office.

What does Bartleby famously say that encapsulates his character?

'I would prefer not to' is Bartleby's recurring phrase, illustrating his passive resistance and refusal to conform.

What does Bartleby do for a living?

Bartleby works as a scrivener, copying legal documents, but eventually stops working altogether.

How does the narrator react to Bartleby's behavior?

Initially, the narrator is perplexed and frustrated by Bartleby's refusal to work, but he ultimately feels sympathy and confusion.

What is the significance of Wall Street in the story?

Wall Street symbolizes the dehumanizing nature of capitalism and the relentless pursuit of profit, contrasting with Bartleby's passive resistance.

What happens to Bartleby at the end of the story?

Bartleby is arrested for vagrancy and later dies in prison, highlighting themes of neglect and alienation.

How does Melville use symbolism in 'Bartleby, the Scrivener'?

Melville uses symbolism through Bartleby's character to represent the struggle against societal expectations and the human condition.

What does the character of Bartleby represent in the context of 19th-century America?

Bartleby represents the disillusionment and existential crisis faced by individuals in an increasingly industrialized and impersonal society.

Why is 'Bartleby, the Scrivener' considered a precursor to modern existential literature?

The story explores themes of choice, free will, and the absurdity of existence, laying groundwork for future existential thought in literature.

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