



Bartleby, the Scrivener

Herman Melville

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Herman Melville is mainly known for Moby Dick, but this great short story is just as exhilarating, written with just as much skill. First published in 1853, the short story is still considered to be one of the best of the genre. Bartleby, the Scrivener is all about life choices. The protagonist decides that he will no longer do the things he is required to do in his job - he will no longer read, no longer copy texts, for the simple reason that he "prefers not to". The story starts gloomy and becomes more and more frustrating with each turn of page. Bartleby first refuses to carry out the tasks required by his employer, then he refuses to leave the office he works in and go home, then later on, when he gets evicted and imprisoned, he refuses to eat and dies of starvation, even though his former employee has bribed a prison guard to make sure Bartleby is fed well. Bartleby, the Scrivener is all about the absurdity of human existence, some critics finding resemblance to Beckett's Waiting for Godot as well as evidence of Melville's inspiration by Emerson's works, most notably his essay, The Transcendentalist. Bartleby's character is considered by some critics to be the double of the character of his employer, a lawyer, living in the impersonal world of law that he is forced to adjust to in a thoughtless and mechanical way. What really strikes the reader as strange is why Bartleby's passivity and unwillingness to conform and adjust is tolerated after all. The employer does everything he can to avoid confrontation and he is also fascinated by the freedom Bartleby acquires by not doing as he is expected to. Melville's short story is a strangely exciting read from beginning to end, full of subtle criticism at the address of humanity and full of philosophical aspects worth exploring and contemplating.

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