

bartleby the scrivener analysis

Bartleby the Scrivener Analysis is a profound exploration of themes such as isolation, free will, and the nature of work. Written by Herman Melville and first published in 1853, "Bartleby, the Scrivener" tells the story of a Wall Street lawyer and his unusual employee, Bartleby, who famously prefers not to engage in the tasks assigned to him. This brief yet impactful narrative raises questions about the human condition and the intricacies of modern life, making it a significant piece in American literature.

Background and Context

To fully appreciate the nuances of "Bartleby the Scrivener," it is essential to understand the historical and literary context in which Melville wrote. During the mid-19th century, America was undergoing significant social and economic changes due to the Industrial Revolution. The rise of capitalism and the growing emphasis on efficiency and productivity shaped the work culture of the time, which Melville critiques through his characters and their interactions.

Melville's Life and Influences

Herman Melville's own experiences as a sailor and a clerk informed his writing. Having spent years in various occupations, Melville witnessed the monotony and dehumanization that often accompanied work. His exposure to different social classes also enriched his perspective on human relationships, which is evident in "Bartleby the Scrivener."

Melville's literary contemporaries, such as Nathaniel Hawthorne and Walt Whitman, also grappled with themes of individuality and societal constraints, further shaping his work.

Plot Overview

"Bartleby the Scrivener" is narrated by an unnamed lawyer who runs a law office on Wall Street. He describes his practice and the various scriveners he employs, including Bartleby, who initially performs well but soon begins to refuse tasks with the phrase, "I would prefer not to."

As the story unfolds, the lawyer becomes increasingly perplexed by Bartleby's passive resistance. Despite the initial intrigue, Bartleby's behavior leads to a series of conflicts that culminate in his ultimate refusal to engage with the world around him.

Key Plot Points

1. Introduction to the Lawyer: The narrator describes his office and his employees, illustrating the mundane and mechanical nature of their work.
2. The Arrival of Bartleby: Bartleby is hired as a copyist and quickly proves to be an exceptional worker.
3. The Shift in Bartleby's Behavior: Bartleby gradually begins to refuse tasks, leading to tension in the workplace.
4. The Lawyer's Dilemma: The lawyer struggles with his feelings of frustration and compassion towards Bartleby.
5. The Climax and Resolution: After being evicted from the office, Bartleby is imprisoned, where he ultimately refuses to eat and dies.

Character Analysis

The characters in "Bartleby the Scrivener" are crucial in conveying Melville's themes. Each character represents different aspects of society and human experience.

Bartleby

Bartleby is the enigmatic protagonist of the story. His character embodies profound themes of isolation and passive resistance. Some key aspects of Bartleby include:

- Isolation: Bartleby lives in a world disconnected from others, even when physically present in the office. His refusal to engage signifies a deeper existential crisis.
- Free Will: Bartleby's repeated phrase, "I would prefer not to," emphasizes his desire for autonomy, challenging the expectations of the capitalist work environment.
- Symbolic Presence: Bartleby is often interpreted as a symbol of the modern individual struggling against societal pressures.

The Lawyer

The lawyer serves as both narrator and a representation of societal norms. His character highlights the following:

- Duality of Compassion and Frustration: The lawyer exhibits both a desire to help Bartleby and frustration at his refusal to conform.
- Conflict with Morality: The lawyer's struggle to reconcile his professional duties with his moral instincts reflects the broader ethical dilemmas faced in a capitalist society.

- The Role of Power: The lawyer's position as an employer places him in a position of authority, yet he feels powerless against Bartleby's nonconformity.

The Other Scriveners

The other scriveners, including Turkey and Nippers, represent the typical working class of the time, showcasing the mundane and often absurd nature of office work. They serve as foils to Bartleby, highlighting his unique and troubling demeanor.

Themes and Motifs

"Bartleby the Scrivener" is rich in themes and motifs that invite deep analysis.

Isolation

Isolation is a central theme in the story. Bartleby's physical presence in the office does not equate to emotional connection. His isolation reflects a broader commentary on the alienation individuals experience in modern society.

Free Will and Choice

Bartleby's repeated refusals serve as a powerful statement on individual choice. His insistence on preferring not to engage challenges the notion of work as an obligation and raises questions about personal freedom in the face of societal expectations.

The Nature of Work

Melville critiques the dehumanizing aspects of work in a capitalist society. The mechanical nature of the scriveners' tasks symbolizes the loss of individuality, creativity, and fulfillment in the workplace.

Moral Ambiguity

The lawyer's internal conflict reflects the moral ambiguity present in

professional relationships. He grapples with his responsibilities as an employer versus the ethical obligation to care for his employee, illustrating the complexities of human interaction in a commercial world.

Symbolism and Imagery

Melville employs various symbols and imagery to enhance the narrative's depth.

The Wall

The wall that separates Bartleby from the outside world serves as a metaphor for his emotional and social isolation. It represents both the barriers individuals face in connecting with others and the confinement of societal expectations.

The Office

The law office itself is symbolic of the capitalist system, reflecting both order and chaos. It represents the structured world of work that can become stifling and impersonal.

Food and Sustenance

The recurring imagery of food underscores Bartleby's refusal to nourish himself, symbolizing his rejection of societal norms and the essential human need for connection and sustenance.

Conclusion

In conclusion, "Bartleby the Scrivener" is a multifaceted narrative that delves into the complexities of human existence, particularly within the context of work and social interaction. Through the character of Bartleby and the perspectives of the lawyer, Herman Melville critiques the dehumanizing forces of capitalism and the isolation that accompanies modern life. The story's enduring relevance continues to resonate with readers, inviting ongoing reflection on the nature of free will, the meaning of work, and the importance of human connection. As readers engage with Bartleby's journey, they are prompted to consider their own experiences within the structures of society and the choices they make in navigating their paths.

Frequently Asked Questions

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

The central theme of 'Bartleby, the Scrivener' revolves around isolation and the struggle between individual will and societal expectations.

How does Bartleby's famous phrase 'I would prefer not to' reflect his character?

Bartleby's phrase 'I would prefer not to' embodies his passive resistance and highlights his rejection of societal norms and expectations.

What role does the narrator play in the story?

The narrator, a lawyer, serves as both a witness and a participant in Bartleby's life, reflecting the conflict between compassion and professional detachment.

How does Melville use setting to enhance the story's themes?

Melville uses the bleak, oppressive office setting to symbolize the dehumanizing nature of capitalism and the isolation experienced by individuals like Bartleby.

What does Bartleby's character represent in the context of American society?

Bartleby represents the struggle against the dehumanizing forces of modern capitalism and the quest for individuality in a conformist society.

What is the significance of Bartleby's refusal to work?

Bartleby's refusal to work symbolizes a broader commentary on the alienation of the individual in the workforce and the consequences of unchecked capitalism.

How does the concept of choice play a role in the story?

The concept of choice is central to the story, as Bartleby's preference for non-action raises questions about free will, autonomy, and the nature of personal agency.

What literary techniques does Melville employ in 'Bartleby, the Scrivener'?

Melville employs irony, symbolism, and a first-person narrative to deepen the complexity of themes related to isolation, identity, and social critique.

How does Bartleby's fate reflect on the narrator's character development?

Bartleby's fate forces the narrator to confront his own values and limitations, leading to a greater awareness of empathy and the human condition.

In what ways does 'Bartleby, the Scrivener' critique the legal profession?

The story critiques the legal profession by illustrating the cold, mechanical nature of office work and how it can strip individuals of their humanity and moral responsibility.

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