Bartleby, the Scrivener

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF HERMAN MELVILLE

Herman Melville was born to a well-off family in New York City in 1819, where he was schooled until his father's early death in 1832. In 1839 he became a sailor on a merchant ship, and by 1840 Melville made his way onto a whaling vessel, giving him valuable experience that he'd later write about in his first two novels, *Typee* (1845) and *Omoo* (1847), adventure stories which were massive commercial successes. Melville returned from the sea to the United States in 1844, docking in Boston. Around this time Melville married Elizabeth Shaw, and the couple had their first child in 1849, the same year that his third and fourth novels, *Mardi* and *Redburn*, were both released to little financial success (although *Redburn* did receive some critical acclaim). In 1850, Melville moved his family to Pittsfield, Massachusetts, where he struck up a friendship with author Nathaniel Hawthorne, to whom he eventually dedicated his massive novel *Moby-Dick*, released in 1851 to critically mixed reviews and financial failure. His next novel, *Pierre*, released in 1852, was another dud in terms of sales, and led to the end of Melville being considered a popular novelist during his lifetime. Melville then wrote short stories, which were published in magazines, including *Bartleby, the Scrivener*, *The Encantadas*, and *Benito Cereno*. Through the rest of his life, Melville wrote two more novels, and he also traveled to Europe and then East Asia before returning to the United States to take a post as a customs inspector in New York. Towards the end of his life Melville wrote poetry, including a collection focused on his concerns about the morality of the civil war called *Battle-Pieces and Aspects of War*, released in 1866. In 1867, Melville's oldest son died from a self-inflicted gun shot to the head. Melville's next published work was 1876's *Clarel: A Poem and Pilgrimage in the Holy Land*, which dealt with metaphysical and epic themes. In 1886 Melville's second son, Stanwix, died, causing Melville to retire from his post as a customs inspector. During his final years until his death of cardiovascular disease in 1891, Melville privately published two volumes of poetry and returned to writing prose (although he never published it). Melville's novella *Billy Budd*, unfinished at his death, was published posthumously in 1924.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The New York Stock Exchange was founded in March of 1817, and its popularity and importance quickly grew. A seat on the exchange cost 25 dollars in 1817, by 1827 it cost 100 dollars, and by 1848 the price grew to 400 dollars (which, in today's money, would be more than 11,000 dollars.) During this time, New York surpassed Philadelphia as the financial center of the United States. Whereas in 1827 the New York Stock Exchange traded about 100 shares per day, by 1834 the exchange traded as many as 5,000 shares per day. Also, as technology advanced with the advent of the telegraph in 1844, the scope of the New York Stock Exchange grew and became more powerful. This shift in the importance of Wall Street and the stock market led many people to switch careers, from more rural pursuits like farming and agriculture to desk jobs like clerking or, to use Melville's character of Bartleby as an example, becoming scriveners. This trend of work shifting from open spaces to enclosed domestic offices likely influenced Melville in the writing of *Bartleby, the Scrivener*, and it is the backdrop in which the story is set.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

On the surface, *Bartleby, The Scrivener* isn't similar in setting to most of Melville's other works, as the vast majority of his novels and stories are set in open spaces (typically on the sea), not in enclosed domestic offices. However, thematic echoes of *Moby-Dick* surface in *Bartleby*, as Bartleby's affliction of passive resistance could perhaps be called a kind of madness similar to Ahab's condition of obsession, and The Lawyer's waffling about whether Bartleby remains in his life thanks to predestination or because of his own free will is a theme that recurs continually in Ishmael's mind.An external influence on Bartleby might have been *The Anatomy of Melancholy* by Robert Burton, as some critics have argued that this book may have introduced Melville to the concept of the Humors, which was the idea that there are four basic elements at play in humans derived from the four elements of air, fire, earth and water. Correspondingly, it has been agued that in *Bartleby* the four main characters (the three scriveners plus The Lawyer) each correspond to a different humor: Turkey represents the sanguine, Nippers the choleric, The Lawyer the phlegmatic, and Bartleby the melancholic. *The New Testament*, which is often heavily alluded to in Melville's work, is also an undercurrent that flows through *Bartleby*, and there have been scholarly papers written arguing that Bartleby is positioned as a Christ-like figure in this story—his conflict begins after three days at the office, mirroring Christ's three days on the cross. However, unlike Jesus, no one puts an end to Bartleby's suffering, and, at least from The Lawyer's perspective, Bartleby is granted no salvation. Additionally, the ancient myth of Pygmalion, most famously written about in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, is considered by some critics to be a precursor to Bartleby, because there are many references in Melville's story to the bust of Cicero stationed behind The Lawyer's desk in his office. Just as Pygmalion can find no love in the real world and only falls in love with the statue he creates,

The Lawyer can find no connection with Bartleby until after he has died, the story itself serving as The Lawyer's (failed) attempt to connect.There are also many works written after 1851 related to *Bartleby*. Franz Kafka's novel *The Trial* deals with similar themes of disconnection in modern society, focusing on governmental bureaucracy rather than the office space. Kafka's short story *A Hunger Artist* is probably the author's most comparable story to *Bartleby*, as it follows the same arc of a worker flourishing, then slowly declining until a death caused by self-starvation. Albert Camus's novel *The Stranger* also deals with themes of alienation in modern society, including alienation from one's own self. Further, any comedy or tragedy set in a modern workplace, such as the TV comedy series *The Office* or the films *Office Space* or *Glengarry Glen Ross*, can be seen as variations on the themes presented in *Bartleby*.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall-Street
- **When Written:** 1853
- **Where Written:** Pittsfield, Massachusetts.
- **When Published:** November and December of 1853, in Putnam's Magazine
- **Literary Period:** American Romanticism
- **Genre:** Short Story, work-place drama/comedy/tragedy.
- **Setting:** 1850's, New York, in a Wall Street law office.
- **Climax:** After refusing to vacate the office, Bartleby is imprisoned, where he then "prefers not to" eat.
- **Antagonist:** Bartleby
- **Point of View:** The story is told from the first-person voice of an unnamed narrator we know little about aside from the fact that he is an elderly lawyer, (and therefore he can be referred to as The Lawyer.)

EXTRA CREDIT

Reference to a murder. In 1842, John C. Colt (referenced in the narrative of Bartleby) was convicted of the murder of printer Samuel Adams, to whom Colt owed money from the publication of a bookkeeping textbook. Although The Lawyer never mentions the specifics of this case in Bartleby's narrative, this murder serves to underline Melville's theme about language (and the written word itself) sometimes serving to disconnect people rather than connect them.

Unexpected inspiration. The main character of the film *Accepted* (played by Justin Long) is named Bartleby Gaines, a reference to Melville's Bartleby.

PLOT SUMMARY

The story, set in a **Wall** Street law office in the mid-1800's, begins with the unnamed narrator, The Lawyer, stating that he would like to focus his tale on a group of humanity as of yet unwritten about: scriveners, or law-copyists, of whom he's known many. But, rather than focus on a group of them, he will tell the tale of the oddest one he's known: Bartleby.

After explaining that his office is occupied by himself, two other scrivener employees (Turkey, who is a drunk and therefore only useful before he starts drinking at lunch, and Nippers, who has some kind of habit that means he is only productive during the afternoon hours), and Ginger Nut, a twelve-year-old office boy, The Lawyer says that he has posted an ad to hire a new employee. Bartleby comes for an interview, and The Lawyer hires him.

While at first Bartleby proves an excellent employee, producing a huge quality of writing for his employer, his working habits are rigid and peculiar. When his boss asks him to examine a paper with him for errors, Bartleby replies that he "would prefer not to." At first The Lawyer thinks he has misheard his employee, but when he repeats himself and Bartleby again prefers not to help, a pattern emerges that The Lawyer must reckon with. He considers firing Bartleby, but decides to try to reason with him, telling him that it's common courtesy in this industry to go over copy for errors as a group. Bartleby listens, but again repeats that he'd "prefer not to" help. After considering firing Bartleby once more, The Lawyer decides not to, as he becomes busy with other matters and decides that Bartleby is useful for what he does provide—vast quantities of writing. And, in fact, The Lawyer justifies that keeping Bartleby on costs him little to nothing, but it makes him feel charitable and eases his Christian conscious.

One Sunday morning, The Lawyer is on his way to Church and decides to stop by the office. There, he finds the office door locked, and when the door is opened he finds Bartleby on the other side. Bartleby tells him that he needs a few moments alone inside, and after The Lawyer walks around the block and returns to the office, he finds himself alone. With Bartleby gone, The Lawyer snoops inside Bartleby's desk, finds a few belongings, and determines that Bartleby must be living in the office at night and on weekends. At first The Lawyer thinks of Bartleby's poverty and solitude, feeling a great pity for him, but soon that pity morphs into anger and repulsion, as The Lawyer believes Bartleby to have some incurable mental illness. He resolves to find out more about Bartleby's personal life, find one of Bartleby's relatives to take care of him, and fire Bartleby with generous severance pay as soon as possible.

The next day, The Lawyer calls Bartleby into his office. He asks Bartleby many questions about his family his personal history, but Bartleby prefers not to answer any of them. When he asks

Bartleby to be a little reasonable, Bartleby says he would prefer not to do that either.

A day later, Bartleby ceases doing any work at all—he spends his days staring at the wall, and The Lawyer decides it is time to rid the office of Bartleby. At the end of the week he gives Bartleby a 20-dollar bonus (a generous amount at the time), wishes him well, and tells him to leave the key when he departs. The Lawyer is happy with how he's handled the firing, but to his dismay Bartleby is still in the office when The Lawyer returns on Monday, and his 20-dollar bonus is sitting on his desk untouched. When The Lawyer confronts Bartleby that morning about why he has stayed, Bartleby simply says that he would prefer not to leave. The Lawyer knows he only has two options: call the police and have Bartleby removed, or simply keep him on as an employee. In what he deems a charitable gesture, The Lawyer decides to do the latter, and keeps Bartleby in his office as a valueless employee.

That is, until, other lawyers begin to discuss Bartleby's peculiar presence in The Lawyer's office. When The Lawyer believes these rumors might hurt his business, he decides to change offices and leave Bartleby behind for the next tenants or the landlord to deal with. However, the landlord soon tracks The Lawyer down and tells him that if The Lawyer doesn't intervene, the police will be called and Bartleby will be forcibly taken away.

The Lawyer returns to his former office, talks to Bartleby, but despite many charitable offers, including a new job and even to come stay at The Lawyer's home, Bartleby refuses all and The Lawyer leaves in a huff.

A while later, The Lawyer learns that Bartleby has been taken to prison. Out of pity, The Lawyer visits him, and pays another inmate to provide Bartleby with good-quality food. Alas, Bartleby prefers not to accept this gesture as well, refusing to eat and instead choosing to lie on the floor of the prison, wasting away.

The Lawyer cuts off his narration of Bartleby's tale at this point, saying that the reader can provide the imagination to figure out how it ends for Bartleby. Instead, The Lawyer ends the story by relaying a piece of information he's heard by rumor: that before working in the scrivener's office, Bartleby worked for a number of years at the **Dead Letter** Office, burning lost letters.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Bartleby – Bartleby's actions throughout the story come to embody the idea of passive resistance. By the story's end, Bartleby therefore becomes an antagonist to The Lawyer's goal of getting the most productivity out of his workers. While Bartleby begins as an exemplary employee, he soon says he "would prefer not to" do any of the tasks The Lawyer asks of him other than write. Bartleby is also a testament to the inherent failure present in language: it is revealed that Bartleby previously worked at the Dead Letter Office, where his task was to destroy lost or undelivered letters. Further, Bartleby rebuffs any of The Lawyer's attempts to learn about Bartleby by talking with him, revealing nothing to The Lawyer about his beliefs, his family, his relationships, or his personal history. Eventually, Bartleby's passive resistance becomes more extreme and he refuses to do even the basic requirements of his copying job, The Lawyer tries to fire Bartleby, who prefers not to vacate The Lawyer's office, even after The Lawyer changes offices and leaves Bartleby behind. At this point, Bartleby becomes a testament to the limits of charity (and the inherent self-annihilating flaw of extreme passive resistance), as when The Lawyer returns to his office to offer Bartleby his old job back, or to get him a new job, or to take Bartleby into his own home until they can determine a better solution, Bartleby resists all of these efforts. Further, when Bartleby winds up in prison and The Lawyer returns to Bartleby to offer him good food to eat to keep him alive, again Bartleby resists, preferring not to eat until he, presumably, dies. Whether Bartleby has the right to kill himself through passive resistance—and whether The Lawyer should have endeavored to help him further—is up to the reader to determine.

The Lawyer – We never learn his name, but The Lawyer, who narrates the story, tells us that he is a lawyer who owns his own law practice located on **Wall** Street in New York City. The Lawyer's status as both a Christian man *and* a business owner often forces him into internal conflict. As when he debates about whether to keep Bartleby employed, he often exhibits a tension between capitalistic pressure and Christian charitable morality, a tension many Americans were facing in the urbanizing economic boom of the mid-1800's. As with the character of Bartleby, the reader is told little to nothing about The Lawyer's personal life or family history, leaving the reader open to put themselves in The Lawyer's shoes. Like most reasonable people, The Lawyer's charitable urges have a breaking point—he's willing to tolerate Bartleby until Bartleby's presence threatens to hurt his business. Whether The Lawyer's line of charitable demarcation is right or wrong is up for debate, as The Lawyer puts up with far more than many reasonable bosses would (as can be seen by his relationship with Turkey and Nippers, neither of whom he fires despite each of them only putting in half of a good day's work each day), but there is little doubt that Jesus Christ would have put up with more than The Lawyer does, and would even perhaps have suffered in order to try to save Bartleby. Additionally, The Lawyer showcases the inability of language to connect people, as every one of his attempts to get to know Bartleby fail. Further, even The Lawyer's writing of this story itself—which delves into The Lawyer's complex feelings for Bartleby—is an example of language failing to connect, as Bartleby himself is deceased, and therefore can never read the story in order to understand

the way The Lawyer felt about him. This irony of the text has led some critics to argue that the story of Bartleby is itself a dead letter that The Lawyer has written to a dead man to tell him what he couldn't say in life.

Nippers – A young scrivener in The Lawyer's office who does a kind of changing of the guard with Turkey at lunchtime—Nippers is only useful after lunch, because he suffers from what The Lawyer calls "indigestion," which could possibly be some kind of drug habit of which the Lawyer is unaware. Like Turkey, we never learn Nippers's real name, as The Lawyer only refers to him by his nickname.

The Other Lawyer – This lawyer arrives in the narrative after The Lawyer has changed offices in order to escape Bartleby. This second lawyer informs The Lawyer (who narrates the story) that Bartleby hasn't vacated the premises of his old office, and threatens to call the police to take Bartleby away if The Lawyer doesn't intercede.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Turkey – An elderly scrivener in The Lawyer's office, Turkey is in good spirits and does good work before lunchtime, at which point he becomes drunk, cranky, and mostly useless. We never learn his real name, as The Lawyer refers to him only by his nickname.

Ginger Nut – A twelve-year-old helper who works in the law office. In this narrative he mostly runs errands for the other scriveners, often venturing out to get them food. We also never learn Ginger Nut's real name, as The Lawyer only refers to him by his nickname.

The Grubman – An employee at the prison where Bartleby ends up. The Lawyer hires The Grubman to cook for Bartleby, but his efforts go to waste as Bartleby refuses to eat the food.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

PASSIVE RESISTANCE

Bartleby's frequently repeated motto, "I would prefer not to," echoes throughout the narrative. Always polite, never aggressive, Bartleby says "I would prefer not to" to an ever-increasing range of things as the story progresses. In short, Bartleby's story is one of passive resistance, in which he refuses to do anything that he would prefer not to do.

Initially, Bartleby's resistance seems to exist within a fairly common capitalist struggle: an employer (The Lawyer, the story's unnamed narrator) wants to get the most utility out of his employee, and the employee (Bartleby) wants only to do the parts of his job he feels like doing. This is a delicate balance, and usually, when the scale of the employee-employer relationship tips too far to one side, either the employee becomes fed up with the job's requirements and quits, or the employer becomes fed up with the employee's disobedience and fires them. However, rather than flat-out refuse his boss's requests (which would likely lead to his dismissal), Bartleby uses a strategy of passive resistance, which, for a long time, allows him to both stay employed and keep his daily tasks within the limited set of responsibilities he finds acceptable.

Up to this point of the story, Bartleby seems diffident and strange, but also almost a kind of hero. After all, through his method of passive resistance, he avoids having to proofread and correct his own copy, avoids being sent out to the store for errands, avoids telling The Lawyer anything about his family or his past, avoids being reprimanded for living in the office after hours and on weekends, and even avoids getting fired by "prefer[ing] not to" vacate The Lawyer's office. But as the story progresses, and The Lawyer eventually moves his entire office to a new building as a way to escape Bartleby who still "prefers not" to leave the old one, the nature of Bartleby's passive resistance changes as well. As he faces ever more dire straits, Bartleby resists being "a little reasonable," resists The Lawyer's multiple and various offers to help him (including The Lawyer's offer that he come live in The Lawyer's home), and, even when he is dying in prison, Bartleby resists The Lawyer's offer of food. It's never clear if Bartleby's passive resistance originated simply as a refusal to perform work he didn't want to do and grew into something more general, or was always more general but that only became clear as his situation worsened. But what is clear by the end of the story is that Bartleby's passive resistance *is* more general, exemplified by his transition from preferring to eat gingernut cakes to preferring to eat nothing at all.

And yet, just *what* Bartleby is resisting, and what precisely the story is saying about that resistance, is also never made clear. It's possible to argue that Bartleby is resisting the increasingly capitalistic and materialistic culture in which he finds himself. It's also possible to argue that the story is showing how cruelly society treats any kind of nonconformist who dares to resist that society's values. And it's further possible to argue that Bartleby is resisting the very aspects of the human condition – the lack of compassion, isolation, inability to communicate – that makes society act in the way it does. Perhaps Bartleby, in the end, is resisting the condition of life that, as a human, is forced upon him.

THE DISCONNECTED WORKPLACE

Bartleby, the Scrivener is set during a time when Wall Street was becoming ever more important as a financial hub of American society, a society that was itself being transformed by the increasing importance of capital and finance in an industrializing world. This transformation had many impacts, but one of them was the increasing prevalence of the sort of office workplace in which the story is set. In fact, if you want to push things a bit, you could argue that *Bartleby* is one of the first office comedies, though Bartleby's "comedy" and viewpoint is so dark that it actually ends up as an office *tragedy*. Regardless, the tropes about the office that have come to dominate office comedies such as *The Office* or *Office Space* – the dreary dullness, absurdity, and disconnection of the office workplace – are captured with unmatched power in Bartleby.

Disconnection, in fact, is the basic state of this Wall Street law office. Turkey and Nippers, the two scriveners who work for The Lawyer before he brings on Bartleby, initially seem like comic characters (because they are described in comic ways by The Lawyer/Narrator who employs them). But the story manages to communicate deep despair in their situations and character that the narrator himself fails to understand. The description of these two clerks working like "sentries" who trade guard, as one is productive only in the morning and the other only in the afternoon, establishes their separateness. They work in the same place, but are never in any way together. Further, some close reading reveals what the narrator himself seems not to see: that Turkey is only a good employee before noon because he gets drunk at lunch, while a number of critics suggest that Nippers's "indigestion" that afflicts him in the morning is likely the result of a drug addiction that The Lawyer is oblivious to.

The sense of disconnection between the people in the office is heightened by The Lawyer's many failed efforts to get to know Bartleby (his only employee that he refers to by name). In fact, the entire time The Lawyer knows Bartleby, from when he hires him until Bartleby's imprisonment, The Lawyer learns nothing more from Bartleby about his history or personality than his name. Even when, at the story's very end, The Lawyer finally includes details about Bartleby's past (that he worked at the **Dead Letter Office**), he states that he has learned this through rumor only, so even this alleged information is disconnected from certainty.

Melville further builds the dreary disconnection of the office through its physical setting and space. One of the story's recurring symbols is the suffocating presence of **walls** within the law office. The narrator notes early on that the few windows in the office produce little to no light, as they run up against the walls of adjacent buildings, though that doesn't stop Bartleby from staring out them for hours at a time. Also, the office itself is divided by "ground-glass folding doors" into two separate rooms, one in which The Lawyer works, and one where the scriveners' desks are located. So, the narrator can see his workers through the glass, but cannot hear them when the doors are closed. When The Lawyer hires Bartleby, he decides to station Bartleby's desk in his own office, which would hint at the possibility for more connection. However, even then, The Lawyer places the desk in the corner of the room and provides a "high green folding screen" that keeps Bartleby within earshot but serves to "entirely isolate Bartleby" from his sight.

This feeling of disconnection and entrapment surfaces not only from the office's cramped layout, but also from the very name of the street where it is located: Wall Street. In fact, late in the story, after The Lawyer has moved offices and Bartleby has been forcibly removed by its subsequent tenants and put in a prison called The Tombs, the Lawyer goes to visit Bartleby but ends up getting trapped in the central yard area of the prison, with its "surrounding walls of amazing thickness." This description, mirroring the earlier description of the office and the very name of the street on which so many such offices are located, perhaps implies that in the Wall Street boom of the mid-1800's, offices in general had become eerily similar to prison cells.

ISOLATION AND THE UNRELIABILITY OF LANGUAGE

From its very first sentence, Melville signals to the reader that *Bartleby, the Scrivener* is a story in which language isn't always meant to be taken at face value. The Lawyer, who narrates the entire story, describes himself in the first line as "a rather elderly man." Presumably, The Lawyer knows his own age, but instead of passing that information along to the reader he chooses to describe himself as elderly—but he doesn't just leave it at that, he calls himself "rather elderly." It's the "rather" that makes this opening sentence as nonspecific as it is. It is entirely unclear without context what "rather elderly" means—is The Lawyer a middle-aged man who is being modest? A man near the very end of his life trying to be humble? Or is he simply a man in the midst of old age, not quite at the end, but further from his first breath than his last? The reader cannot know for certain the answer to any of these questions that the first sentence raises, because *Bartleby, the Scrivener* is told from the perspective of an unreliable—and often unspecific—narrator. For example, The Lawyer never tells the reader his own name, and only refers to his employees other than Bartleby by their nicknames: Turkey, Nippers, and Ginger Nut. So, the point-of-view of the story is in itself an example of language failing to create a perfect two-way relationship between storyteller and listener, between reader and writer.

This point is exemplified by the story's end. In the midst of the climactic sequence, The Lawyer abruptly stops telling the story of Bartleby's passive resistance, which at this point is leading

the scrivener to waste away in prison because he refuses to eat any food, and instead The Lawyer says that "imagination" on the part of the reader should be good enough to envision Bartleby's end. The Lawyer then states that what is to be told next should be questioned by the reader, as The Lawyer has heard it through rumor only, and he goes on to say that those rumors indicate that before Bartleby began working at The Lawyer's office, he had spent a number of years working at the **Dead Letter Office**. This means that Bartleby spent his life destroying lost letters, letters that were meant to connect two people through shared language but failed at that task. The story implies, then, that when he'd had too much of the dead letter office, Bartleby came to work at The Lawyer's office to try the exact opposite—as a scrivener, Bartleby copied letters. But, as the story shows, that, too, didn't fulfill the kind of communication Bartleby was seeking, perhaps because language is an inherently imperfect or incomplete communicative tool.

Bartleby's interactions with The Lawyer are full of failed communication. The Lawyer speaks with Bartleby to try to find out about Bartleby's family and history, but Bartleby brushes him off with his usual "I would prefer not to," excuse. Later, when The Lawyer is adamant that he must fire Bartleby and find a family member to whom he can pawn off the responsibility of caring for Bartleby, The Lawyer finally pleads with Bartleby to be "a little reasonable." Bartleby replies that he "…would prefer not to be a little reasonable." Reason uses language as its mode of communication, and, like two negotiators who speak different languages, The Lawyer is entirely unable to understand anything about Bartleby by talking with him because Bartleby refuses to engage with him on common logical ground.

One might then argue that all that is necessary for true communication or connection is active engagement from both sides, but the story, at least as Bartleby sees things, seems to take a darker view. Bartleby seems to have come to the conclusion that even if people do engage they *still* won't be able to communicate, and so he prefers not even to try, and then, ultimately, not even to live. In Bartleby's view, then, every person is like a dead letter, with information to share, but no one with whom to share it. And, of course, the fact that The Lawyer isn't even sure that Bartleby even ever worked in the Dead Letter Office only further supports this idea, as even the dark interpretation of Bartleby's life is made hazy and uncertain—even Bartleby's message of the meaninglessness of attempts at connection might itself be meaningless.

CHARITY AND ITS LIMITS

Through most of *Bartleby, the Scrivener*, The Lawyer treats Bartleby with what most reasonable people would describe as great charity. When he catches Bartleby in the office on the weekend and deduces that Bartleby must be secretly living there, The Lawyer is initially annoyed, but then realizes how lonely it must feel to live in a usually-busy office building while it's completely empty during the weekend. Rather than fire or reprimand Bartleby, The Lawyer decides to keep Bartleby on as an employee and not mention his living situation whatsoever. Then, even after Bartleby ceases doing any work at all and just spends his days staring out the window with no view, The Lawyer *still* keeps Bartleby employed in the spirit of charity. Later, when The Lawyer learns that his reputation and business are threatened by Bartleby's behavior, he finally does fire Bartleby, but The Lawyer still gives him a generous severance.

And though The Lawyer does abandon Bartleby by moving his office (after Bartleby "prefers not" to leave despite being fired), The Lawyer returns to try to help Bartleby when it becomes clear that the next tenant plans to call the police on the scrivener. There, the Lawyer offers Bartleby anything he can think of—a clerkship in a dry-goods store, a bartending job, and even offers to let Bartleby come live with him until they can work out an arrangement. And, finally, when Bartleby is wasting away in prison, The Lawyer's guilt pushes him to be charitable once more—not to the point of claiming Bartleby and having him removed from prison, but enough to pay someone at the prison to cook for his former employee. The Lawyer's charitable behavior in nearly every instance is highlighted by how *uncharitably* the rest of society treats Bartleby: without empathy and with complete indifference, locking him away in prison until a family member claims him or he dies.

And yet, the story is not one of The Lawyer's heroic charity, because Bartleby refuses every single one of The Lawyer's charitable efforts. Because of this, the story then forces its focus back onto The Lawyer's charitable acts and raised two related though different questions. First, the story makes the reader question whether The Lawyer's charitable acts were actually charitable enough. The Lawyer's motives, after all, were not always entirely pure. From his initial charity of allowing Bartleby to continue to work for him, The Lawyer derives a self-satisfied and soul-soothing pleasure, congratulating himself that another less charitable boss would fire Bartleby and throw him out onto the street. And his later charitable offers, as with the offer of food at the prison, were motivated at least in part by a sense of guilt. In addition, The Lawyer's charitable offers were always reasonable. They were generous, to be sure, but they weren't, say, the kind of completely self-sacrificing charity that a figure like Jesus Christ might have offered. The Lawyer tried to "do what he could." He never tried to do more.

The story therefore leaves open the question of whether things might have turned out differently if The Lawyer had practiced a more radical and total kind of charity. And in asking this question the story asks whether it is acceptable to ever limit one's charity, as doing so is essentially a writing off of other

people under the guise of being "reasonable" about every person's responsibility to be responsible for him or herself. And yet in Bartleby's constant refusals of all attempts to help, the story also raises the possibility that Bartleby would have refused *all* charity, no matter how complete. And by extension, the story suggests that total, radical charity, free of any sort of personal baggage or hesitancy, might be either beyond the grasp of any human to achieve or, even if achievable, not enough to bridge the gap between people.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

WALLS

Walls serve to create boundaries, and they disconnect people throughout the narrative of *Bartleby, the Scrivener*. The Lawyer's office is separated into two rooms by a ground-glass folding door: one room where The Lawyer works and one in which his scriveners work. When Bartleby is hired, The Lawyer places him inside his own office, but he installs a "folding screen" (basically a temporary wall) so that The Lawyer cannot see Bartleby and Bartleby cannot see him. Not only that, but the spot where The Lawyer stations Bartleby has a window that used to look out onto back yards, but now, because of the construction of new buildings, the window only looks out onto a brick wall.

Beyond the office's layout, the very name of the street on which the office is located, Wall Street, symbolizes the disconnected isolation within. The office's address is never actually written out in the story; instead it is always written in the format "No. – Wall Street." By keeping the office address vague, the office itself comes to stand in for all of Wall Street, implying that the disconnection apparent in The Lawyer's office is in fact characteristic of the entirety of New York's business sector.

By the story's end, walls take on an even more menacing quality, as when Bartleby is shipped off to prison, he is held not in a cell, but in the courtyard in the prison's very center, surrounded by walls of extreme thickness. Although he is alone in this huge yard, which would itself serve as a symbol of disconnected isolation, The Lawyer notes (when he visits Bartleby) that he can see the eyes of all the thieves and murderers who are locked away in their cells peering down on Bartleby. So, although Bartleby can see other human beings and they can see him through the cracks in the walls, the walls themselves serve to disconnect and isolate these felons from each other, much how the walls in The Lawyer's office separated Bartleby from the other employees and The Lawyer himself. The walls, then, come to symbolize not just the disconnection on Wall Street, but the disconnection that is a part of human life.

DEAD LETTERS

At the story's end, The Lawyer informs the reader that he has heard rumors that Bartleby worked for many years at the **Dead Letter** Office. Dead Letters – letters which for some reason or other can not be delivered to their intended destination– are a form of failed communication, of someone trying to reach out and connect to another person through language and failing to find that connection. In that way, Dead Letters serve as a symbol for disconnection, and for the failure of language to properly communicate.

Although Dead Letters never appear as a part of Bartleby's arc in the story, their inclusion at the end of the story serves to possibly illuminate Bartleby's initial motivation to passively resist any part of his job other than writing—after years of destroying communication and language, perhaps he craved to partake in the creation of language. Why he shuts down further and eventually refuses to write is open to interpretation, but it is possible it has something to do with his former job at the Dead Letter Office—perhaps Bartleby felt no more satisfaction (and no more connection) at the creation of language than he did in its destruction.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Penguin Classics edition of *Billy Budd, Bartleby, and Other Stories* published in 2016.

Bartleby, the Scrivener Quotes

I am a man who, from his youth upwards, has been filled with a profound conviction that the easiest way of life is the best.

Related Characters: The Lawyer (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 17

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs on the very first page of the story, and it is one of the few descriptors The Lawyer provides about himself, his personality, or his personal history. And, in fact, the story shows us that this quote is largely untrue, meaning that the way The Lawyer sees himself isn't the way he actually is. In the beginning of the story, The Lawyer gives examples of both Turkey and Nippers being difficult,

imperfect employees, yet he doesn't fire them though it would likely make his life easier.

Similarly, later in the narrative The Lawyer has immense trouble in dealing with Bartleby, and while the easiest solution would be to have Bartleby forcibly removed from his office by the authorities, The Lawyer's charitable Christian inclinations (and also, perhaps his dislike of change or causing trouble) lead him to keep Bartleby around. So, The Lawyer's conviction that the easiest way of life is the best often comes into conflict with his vision of himself as being a charitable Christian man, though sometimes his penchant for what is easiest does get in the way of him being fully charitable, as when he abandons Bartleby at his old office. So, this quote showcases language's power to be unreliable and inaccurate, and also sets up the biggest limit of charity in *Bartleby, the Scrivener*: personal convenience.

> Nothing so aggravates an earnest person as passive resistance. If the individual so resisted be of a not inhumane temper, and the resisting one perfectly harmless in his passivity; then, in the better moods of the former, he will endeavor charitably to construe to his imagination what proves impossible to be solved by his judgment.

Related Characters: The Lawyer (speaker), Bartleby

Related Themes:

Page Number: 28-29

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs after Bartleby has repeatedly stated that he "prefers not to" correct the copies he has worked on, and also "prefers not to" do any of a scrivener's job requirements other than write. It is one of the only points in the narrative where The Lawyer overtly explains *why* he allows Bartleby's behavior to spiral to the point that Bartleby is more in control of his working habits than his boss is: The Lawyer considers himself a man of "not inhumane temper," and he also considers Bartleby's statement of his preferences "perfectly harmless in his passivity." So, The Lawyer "charitably" decides to consider Bartleby's peculiar habits not as insolence, nor as disobedience, but simply an acceptable condition of his personality. The result of this is that Bartleby is allowed to work in the manner that he wants to, and The Lawyer, though it aggravates him, is able to feel he is being charitable.

> 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. But this mood was not invariable with me. The passiveness of Bartleby sometimes irritated me. I felt strangely goaded on to encounter him in new opposition… I might as well have essayed to strike fire with my knuckles against a bit of Windsor soap.

Related Characters: The Lawyer (speaker), Bartleby

Related Themes:

Page Number: 29

Explanation and Analysis

This quote is situated in the narrative after Bartleby has passively resisted correcting his own copies, but is still a useful employee in the amount of writing he is able to get done. Here, The Lawyer internally reasons with himself that to keep Bartleby on and accept his flaws and peculiarities would be a charitable gesture, but not one that requires much sacrifice on The Lawyer's part, as he thinks it will cost him "little or nothing." This fulfills The Lawyer's self-proclaimed idea that he believes the "easiest way of life" to be the best, and it also fulfills his self-image as a charitable Christian man.

However, despite The Lawyer's alleged inclination to do both what is easiest *and* what is charitable, he still allows Bartleby's passive habits to bother him, and thus he breaks his vow of leaving Bartleby alone and instead decides to try to get him to correct copies of papers once more. The Lawyer's attempt to get Bartleby to do anything outside of his preferences fails, of course, and rather than getting Bartleby to change his habits or bringing The Lawyer closer to his employee, this attempt results in The Lawyer becoming less likely to ask Bartleby to do anything that he might resist in the future. Thus, Bartleby's passive resistance trumps The Lawyer's urge to break Bartleby's habit, as he realizes that his attempts to reason with Bartleby through language haven't brought them any closer together, nor have they changed Bartleby's mind about what tasks he will or won't do.

> … Ah, happiness courts the light, so we deem the world is gay, but misery hides aloof, so we deem that misery there is none.

Related Characters: The Lawyer (speaker), Bartleby

Related Themes:

Page Number: 34

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs after The Lawyer has stopped by his office on a Sunday, on his way to church. He has just discovered that Bartleby has been secretly living in the office, and so must be homeless and totally isolated, without family or friends. Thus, The Lawyer, and the other employees at his office, could perhaps be the people Bartleby is closest to in the world, and yet none of them know anything about him. Although Bartleby literally lives in the office, The Lawyer learns more about him from searching his desk than he's learned from talking with Bartleby in the weeks and weeks he's been working there.

This quote directly states that happiness is easy to see, as happy people are willing to share their sunny disposition readily, whereas miserable or depressed people often hide their suffering beneath the surface. So, language is as ineffective a tool for spotting misery as sight is, for it is easy for someone to lie and say they're doing well even when they're not, just as it is easy for Bartleby to say he would "prefer not to" discuss his feelings or his personal history. Even if a tragic story hides beneath Bartleby's preferences not to share, The Lawyer would have no way of discovering it unless Bartleby is willing to tell him.

> "At present, I would prefer not to be a little reasonable," was his mildly cadaverous reply.

Related Characters: The Lawyer, Bartleby (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 37

Explanation and Analysis

This passage is situated after The Lawyer has found out Bartleby is living in the office, and he has thus resolved to find one of Bartleby's relatives, fire Bartleby (with a $20 severance bonus), and pawn the responsibility of Bartleby off on said relative. However, after asking Bartleby a barrage of questions about his past, none of which Bartleby answers, The Lawyer breaks down and asks if Bartleby will be "a little reasonable."

This quote that Bartleby would "prefer not to be a little reasonable" is the epitome of Bartleby's passive resistance—not only does Bartleby resist disclosing personal information to his boss or doing fundamental aspects of his job, he now resists participating in reason, so that even though The Lawyer's requests are entirely logical and fair, Bartleby still resists them as he has no interest in participating in fairness. Language cannot connect two people if they don't agree on a unifying system of logic; so, Bartleby is able to resist all of The Lawyer's requests, as a soldier would resist a general's orders if that soldier didn't recognize the general's authority, or, more reflective of this scenario, if that soldier felt entirely disconnected from the general. In Bartleby's mind, he is to The Lawyer as a German soldier would be to an American general: entirely outside his purview.

Additionally, The Lawyer's tag referring to Bartleby's response as "mildly cadaverous" foreshadows Bartleby's passively resistant demise.

> "…Good-bye, Bartleby, and fare you well." But he answered not a word; like the last column of some ruined temple, he remained standing mute and solitary in the middle of the otherwise deserted room.

Related Characters: The Lawyer (speaker), Bartleby

Related Themes:

Page Number: 40

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs after The Lawyer has decided that the only solution to ridding himself of Bartleby is to fire him. After giving Bartleby six days' firing notice, on the eve of the sixth day The Lawyer wishes Bartleby well, and leaves him with money, which is certainly a nice gesture, but it somehow seems to fall short of the definition of true Christian charity. The Lawyer could simply keep Bartleby on as an employee, agree to house him at the office but not pay him, try to help Bartleby secure housing, or even bring Bartleby home with him, but The Lawyer attempts to do none of those things (yet).

Additionally, The Lawyer metaphorically compares Bartleby to the last column of a ruined temple—the ruined temple being his office. Despite their already clear physical separation—embodied by the secluded area Bartleby works in, behind a screen and next to a window with a view of another wall—The Lawyer and Bartleby are even more so ideologically and emotionally separated. To use The

Lawyer's example, they are as separate as an ancient temple and a modern Wall Street law office. Also, this metaphor can be extended further, as perhaps Bartleby's needs represent the ancient, biblical definition of what charity can mean (full sacrificial charity, as Jesus suffered for man's sins), and The Lawyer represents what charity means in a modern capitalistic American context, i.e. an extra twenty bucks on top of whatever you're owed, and a courteous farewell.

> It was the circumstance of being alone in a solitary office, up stairs, of a building entirely unhallowed by humanizing domestic associations…which greatly helped to enhance the irritable desperation of the hapless Colt.

Related Characters: The Lawyer (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 43

Explanation and Analysis

This quote is situated immediately after The Lawyer has come back to his office (after firing Bartleby) to find that Bartleby, as well as his severance pay, is still in the office, as Bartleby has once more resisted The Lawyer's wishes. After arguing with Bartleby to no avail, The Lawyer decides to wait before pressing further, as he recalls the murder of the printer Samuel Adams by his client John C. Colt. The Lawyer notes that offices are devoid of "humanizing domestic associations," and this atmosphere which feels nothing like home (although it is, almost certainly, Bartleby's only home) may have been partially to blame for the escalation that led to Adams' murder. Essentially, The Lawyer is implying that the disconnected office, and the lack of connection he and Bartleby feel for one another, is a prime place and atmosphere in which a murder might occur.

Additionally, the subtext of this murder is related to the later reveal that Bartleby may have worked in the Dead Letter Office. Even worse than the missed connections that dead letters represent, Colt's murder of Adams was entirely related to payment in regard to a textbook that Adams printed for Colt. So, the printing of language, meant to share ideas and information and potentially bring people closer together, in this case because of capitalist intervention, led instead to the most extreme kind of disconnection: one of the men ended up murdered, and the other imprisoned. The Lawyer worries that his disconnection from Bartleby might lead to his own death and Bartleby's imprisonment, despite the fact that earlier in the narrative The Lawyer claims he trusts Bartleby completely.

> …charity often operates as a vastly wise and prudent principle—a great safeguard to its possessor. Men have committed murder for jealousy's sake, and anger's sake, and hatred's sake, and selfishness' sake, and spiritual pride's sake; but no man that ever I heard of, ever committed a diabolical murder for sweet charity's sake.

Related Characters: The Lawyer (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 43

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs after The Lawyer has discovered that Bartleby has yet to vacate the office, so The Lawyer tries to argue with Bartleby until he leaves, but that attempt fails, and so The Lawyer has left Bartleby alone for fear of getting murdered (as happened in the Adams/Colt case.) Thus, as is often the case with The Lawyer, he once more changes his mind, and decides that keeping Bartleby in his office is a charitable gesture worth taking on. The Lawyer even implies that his charitable inclinations may, in fact, be a "safeguard" to his well being, as no one commits a murder for the sake of charity, although they might do it for anger, jealousy, or hatred.

So, The Lawyer implies, perhaps Adams could have saved himself from Colt's wrath had he just been more charitable. Then, partially out of pity and partially out of an urge for self-preservation, The Lawyer decides to grant Bartleby charity by allowing him to remain in the office while doing absolutely no work. The limits of The Lawyer's charity, it seems, can shrink or grow according to how much effort he needs to put in.

> Yes, Bartleby, stay there behind your screen, thought I; I shall persecute you no more; you are harmless and noiseless as any of these old chairs… At last I see it, I feel it; I penetrate to the predestinated purpose of life… Others may have loftier parts to enact; but my mission in this world, Bartleby, is to furnish you with office-room for such period as you may see fit to remain.

Related Characters: The Lawyer (speaker), Bartleby

Related Themes:

Page Number: 44

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs after The Lawyer has tried to fire Bartleby, has found him still in his office, and, after fearing Bartleby might murder him, The Lawyer has decided that he will be charitable to Bartleby and let him stay. Here, The Lawyer develops this idea further, proclaiming that Bartleby has entered his life because of the forces of divine predestination, and so it is his holy duty as a charitable Christian to provide Bartleby with a place to live. The Lawyer is brought to this feeling of holy duty not by speaking with Bartleby, nor by having any sort if interpersonal contact with his scrivener, but instead by reading two religious texts, Edwards on The Will and Priestly on Necessity. This quote in itself epitomizes the unreliability of language, and how it often has the most power when one is isolated, reading by one's self. That is one of the inherent ironies of language and literature—though it is meant to connect people, we often feel the most connected to others when we are by ourselves.

Also, despite The Lawyer's Christian inclination toward charity and his feeling that Bartleby was brought into his life via divine intervention, he still abandons Bartleby later in the narrative and leaves him on his own. So, though The Lawyer at this moment undoubtedly truly feels that it is his divine purpose to care for Bartleby, in the end he still allows worldly concerns to limit his ability to give Bartleby the charity he believes Bartleby deserves.

> ...it often is, that the constant friction of illiberal minds wears out at last the best resolves of the more generous.

Related Characters: The Lawyer (speaker), Bartleby

Related Themes:

Page Number: 44-45

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs soon after The Lawyer's internal monologue about Bartleby having entered his life via predestination (thus making it The Lawyer's Christian duty to charitably house Bartleby for as long as he wants). Obviously, The Lawyer is justifying why he has decided to go back on his vow to be wholly charitable to Bartleby, and this is the moment where The Lawyer is the most self-aware about his shortcomings as a charitable Christian.

Although he believes keeping Bartleby in his office is the right—and even the divine—thing to do, The Lawyer admits that he allows other people—who he refers to as "illiberal minds"—to influence him to rid himself of Bartleby. Immediately after this quote, Bartleby embarrasses The Lawyer by refusing a request of one of The Lawyer's colleagues, so, when Bartleby's behavior begins to threaten his business interests, The Lawyer decides once and for all that Bartleby has to go. If it weren't for The Lawyer's own capitalist interests, he might go on housing Bartleby until the day Bartleby or The Lawyer himself died, but in mid-1800s Wall Street, charity seems to reach its limit when business dictates it should, not when God does.

> The yard was entirely quiet. It was not accessible to the common prisoners. The surrounding walls, of amazing thickness, kept off all sounds behind them. The Egyptian character of the masonry weighed upon me with its gloom. But a soft imprisoned turf grew underfoot. The heart of the eternal pyramids, it seemed, wherein, by some strange magic, through the lefts, grass-seed, dropped by birds, had sprung.

Related Characters: The Lawyer (speaker), Bartleby

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 53

Explanation and Analysis

This quote is situated near the end of the narrative, after The Lawyer has abandoned Bartleby by moving offices, so the landlord has had Bartleby put in a prison called The Tombs. The Lawyer has visited once before and, out of a charitable urge (perhaps brought on by guilt), he has paid someone to provide Bartleby with good food (which he "prefers not to" eat). Here he visits Bartleby again, and finds that Bartleby is not in a cell, but is instead still alone in a yard in the middle of the prison.

The Tombs is an extremely appropriate name for this prison, not only because it is literally the place where Bartleby's passive resistance will cause him to die, but also because, just as in the office, Bartleby is as secluded from the other prisoners as he was from his colleagues at the office,

effectively meaning he is just as isolated as if he were literally in a tomb or a grave.

The walls "of amazing thickness" that even keep external sounds away from Bartleby are another example of his disconnection from everyone around him, especially when considering that he's in an area of the prison where other prisoners are not allowed. The Lawyer tries to see some good in this extremely dark situation: he notes that, somehow, as if by "strange magic" grass is blooming in the center of this "pyramid" (another allusion to tombs, as pyramids were the tombs of pharaohs), and perhaps, implicitly, The Lawyer is hoping that Bartleby's story will, in a way, grant a rebirth to this now-lifeless man. The entire narrative of Bartleby, the Scrivener, then, can perhaps be seen as granting a glimmer of hope to the connective and communicative possibilities of language: though Bartleby and The Lawyer will never understand each other, perhaps readers of this story might understand themselves and those around them better for having listened to Bartleby's and The Lawyer's respective journeys.

❝ Dead letters! does it not sound like dead men? … Sometimes from out the folded paper the pale clerk takes a ring:—the finger it was meant for, perhaps, moulders in the grave; a bank note sent in swiftest charity:—he whom it would relieve, nor eats nor hungers any more; pardon for those who died despairing; hope for those who died unhoping; good tidings for those who died stifling by unrelieved calamities. On errands of life, these letters speed to death. Ah, Bartleby! Ah, humanity!

Related Characters: The Lawyer (speaker), Bartleby

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 54

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs at the very end of the short story. Bartleby has presumably died, and The Lawyer cuts off Bartleby's narrative to impart one final piece of rumor to the reader: that Bartleby, allegedly, used to work at the Dead Letter Office.

In some ways, it could be argued that The Lawyer feels as if he has treated Bartleby like a dead letter—The Lawyer tried to connect with Bartleby, failed, and thus he discarded Bartleby, who would go on to die without ever communicating. After all, The Lawyer has just been reflecting on Bartleby's death when he comments "Dead letters! does it not sound like dead men?" Additionally, dead letters themselves are a literal example of language failing at its job of connecting people through imparting meaning, and The Lawyer gives numerous examples of tragic missed communications (and failed charitable offers) caused by these dead letters.

Also, The Lawyer (and Melville through him) makes an extremely significant grammatical choice in this final sentence—for the first time in the narrative, The Lawyer narrates in the present tense rather than the past tense. He does not say that these dead letters sped to death, but rather that "On errands of life, these letters speed to death." This shift implies that this phenomenon of dead letters—of language failing to connect us—is ongoing, and therefore The Lawyer's final cry of "Ah, Bartleby! Ah, humanity!" applies not only to the characters in the story, but to the reader as well. In the end, the narrative of Bartleby attempts to compel the reader to seek out connection, not in two-dimensional text, but in the three-dimensional world outside of words we all exist in.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

BARTLEBY, THE SCRIVENER

The unnamed narrator (who we will refer to as The Lawyer) introduces himself as a "rather elderly man" and establishes that he has had much contact with a set of men that have never before been written about—scriveners, or law-copyists. The Lawyer goes on to say that he'll forgo telling the biographies of the many scriveners he's met for the most peculiar of them all: Bartleby, of whom little to nothing is known, except what The Lawyer himself has witnessed (and one vague report he'll touch on later).

Melville lets the reader know immediately that The Lawyer is an unreliable and often unspecific narrator. For example, The Lawyer tells the reader know that the story will focus on Bartleby, and then proceeds to not mention Bartleby until seven pages later. The Lawyer's storytelling is, in itself, an example of language failing to properly communicate.

The Lawyer then states that he is a lawyer, and describes his business as focusing around "rich men's bonds, and mortgages, and title deeds." The Lawyer is proud to have worked for the late John Jacob Astor (who was considered one of the richest men in America), and he is also proud to have been bestowed the now defunct title Master Of Chancery. The Lawyer then describes his office. It is bookended by two windows, one that looks upon the white **wall** of a skylight shaft, and the other that grants an "unobstructed view of a lofty brick wall".

The Lawyer provides the name of John Jacob Astor, a man who is never referenced again in the story, but fails to provide his own name, another example of unreliable (and unhelpful) narration. Also, the description of the office having a clear view of a brick wall feels like it should be a joke, but The Lawyer truly seems proud of it. In reality, there is little difference between a window with no view and a wall.

The Lawyer goes on to describe his employees before Bartleby's arrival. First he delves into Turkey, a short, overweight Englishman of elderly age, who is extremely productive before noon. But, like clockwork, after that Turkey ceases to be productive and is instead "altogether too energetic," creating inkblots on documents, making an unpleasant racket, and becoming easily irritable and prone to fits. The Lawyer recounts having tried to suggest that Turkey go home for the latter half of the day due to his old age, but Turkey had rebuffed him, arguing that to work during old age is honorable. And so, The Lawyer resolves to keep Turkey on as an employee, mostly for his good work during the first half of the day.

The concept of an employee only being productive for one half of the day, every day, is a prime example of how disconnected The Lawyer's office is—not only do walls separate people, but so do temperaments. Also, The Lawyer doesn't overtly say it, but he implies that Turkey's problems stem from his heavy drinking. The Lawyer not being entirely upfront about Turkey's issues is an example of language failing to reveal the whole truth, as is the fact that The Lawyer doesn't call Turkey by his real name.

Next, The Lawyer details his employee Nippers, who is also a scrivener. Nippers is about twenty-five years old, has yellow complexion, wears a mustache, and, in The Lawyer's view, is "victim of two evil powers—ambition and indigestion." Nippers's ambition and indigestion lead him to grind his teeth over copying mistakes, become impatient with his duties as a copyist, and continually express dissatisfaction with the height of his desk so that he incessantly fidgets with it. Nippers also receives visits from men in "seedy coats" whom he calls his clients. The Lawyer notes that Nippers does business at the Justices' courts, and also at the local prison, The Tombs.

Again, The Lawyer not using Nippers' real name is an example of language not communicating fully. Also, The Lawyer's description of Nippers being victim of ambition and indigestion is most likely not the whole truth: critics have argued that this description is a thinly veiled way to say that Nippers is a drug addict. Therefore, his irritability is caused by not having had his fix, and his visits to the court and prison are likely the sites of drug deals.

However, despite these issues, The Lawyer considers Nippers a useful employee as a scrivener, as he is a good dresser, which adds an air of formality and importance to the image of the office, and he also writes in a neat, swift hand. Like Turkey, Nippers is only really useful for half of the day, as before lunch Nippers is prone to fits of irritability and nervousness, whereas in the afternoon he is calm and professional. So, The Lawyer notes, Turkey and Nippers's fits "relieved each other, like guards" so that neither is unproductive (nor productive) at the same time.

The Lawyer is more concerned with the image of his office than the reality—he is paying two men to do good work for half a day each, and yet he still considers both of them "useful." However, rather than Turkey and Nippers being useful for the same half of the day, the fact that they switch off at noon is a chief example of the office being a disconnected, disjointed space.

The last of The Lawyer's employees is Ginger Nut, a twelve-year-old office helper being paid one dollar per week. Ginger Nut has a desk that he rarely uses, instead being employed mostly as a gopher, fetching cakes and other items for The Lawyer and his two scriveners. The Lawyer then recounts a time when Turkey clapped a ginger-cake onto a mortgage as a seal, which infuriated The Lawyer to the point of nearly firing Turkey, who apologized to The Lawyer and told him it was his own stationery that he ruined, not The Lawyer's. Done with his descriptions, The Lawyer then states that his Master of Chancery title led to more business, and so he posted an ad for a new scrivener, which is how Bartleby entered his life.

Even though he is essentially an intern, Ginger Nut is given a desk in the office that he basically never uses, leaving an empty, useless space in an already-crowded office. The story of Turkey using a cake as a seal and somehow talking his way out of getting reprimanded or fired is an example of language serving to obscure the truth rather than reveal it. Also, The Lawyer using a written ad to find Bartleby hints at language's connective power, but the rest of the narrative entirely undercuts that possibility.

After exchanging words about his qualifications, The Lawyer is happy to hire Bartleby, because he hopes that Bartleby's "singularly sedate" nature might help calm the erratic natures of Turkey and Nippers. The Lawyer then describes the layout of his workplace, stating that glass doors (which The Lawyer opens and closes whenever he wants to) separate his own office from the area where the other scriveners and Ginger Nut work. However, The Lawyer decides to place Bartleby in a corner on *his* side of the folding doors, away from the other scriveners, but near a window that looks out onto the **walls** of two tall buildings. The Lawyer also puts up a "high green folding screen" that serves to "entirely isolate" Bartleby from his sight, but keeps him within earshot.

The Lawyer learns some of Bartleby's qualifications—the most he learns about Bartleby in the entire story—and he fails to share it with the reader (another example of language being unreliable). The layout of the office is a clear example of the disconnected modern workplace: the boss sits in a separate room from his employees, and even when he places Bartleby near him, The Lawyer puts a screen around the scrivener so that he cannot see his employee.

At first, Bartleby provides The Lawyer with an enormous quantity of writing, working nonstop all day and not pausing for lunch. The Lawyer notes that he would have been quite delighted by this, if not for the fact that Bartleby writes "silently, palely, mechanically" rather than with any delight. The Lawyer then mentions that an important part of a scrivener's job is to re-read what they have written in order to check for mistakes. Traditionally, when there is more than one scrivener present, they help each other with their corrections, and, because it's tedious, The Lawyer believes this is not work that someone like "the mettlesome poet, Byron," would be willing to do.

Even before his usefulness wanes, The Lawyer is already skeptical of Bartleby because he doesn't take joy in his work. However, because the office is so personally disconnected, he chooses not to discuss this with Bartleby at all. Additionally, The Lawyer stating that an important part of a scrivener's job is to correct copies is in itself an example of the imperfection of language: even those whose job it is to write exact copies all day often make mistakes.

In the past, The Lawyer says that he has helped with correcting copy himself, and one of the reasons he placed Bartleby so close by was so that he could easily call him over to go through this correcting process. However, on the third day (The Lawyer thinks) of Bartleby's employment, The Lawyer hastily calls Bartleby over to correct a paper he is holding. He holds the copy out for Bartleby to take, but Bartleby never comes to his desk, instead calling out from behind the screen, "I would prefer not to."

In an attempt to make the office more spatially efficient and connected, The Lawyer places Bartleby close by so they can save time in reviewing copies together. However, he just assumes Bartleby will comply, never asking the scrivener if it's okay. Here The Lawyer is alerted to the first signs of Bartleby's deep-seated passive resistance.

The Lawyer stews in silence, and initially thinks he has misheard Bartleby. He repeats the request, and Bartleby again responds with, "I would prefer not to." After questioning what Bartleby means by this phrase, The Lawyer gets up, walks over to Bartleby, and again tells his employee to come and compare the sheet with him for errors, thrusting the sheet over the screen towards his employee. But Bartleby doesn't take it, and instead repeats that he "would prefer not to." The Lawyer examines Bartleby's features, and says that if he could have seen *any* glimmer of agitation, "uneasiness, anger, impatience" or any other negative intentions, he would have fired Bartleby on the spot.

The Lawyer's first assumption is that language, or his capacity to understand it, has failed him. But when he asks again, The Lawyer must confront the reality that Bartleby is, in fact, resisting him, not by overtly refusing, but by stating his preferences. Bartleby leaves how to react to his preferences entirely up to The Lawyer and, rather than assume Bartleby is being insolent, The Lawyer tries to read the features of a man he barely knows, trying to connect with someone who doesn't care to connect with him.

However, after staring at Bartleby and watching him write for a while, The Lawyer can detect no such intention, and so, though he finds Bartleby's behavior "very strange," he becomes busy with work and resolves to deal with it in the future. He then calls Nippers into his office, and the two of them correct the copy together.

Rather than deal with Bartleby immediately, The Lawyer decides to leave him in his corner and call Nippers from farther away to help—an example of Bartleby's passive resistance being entirely successful in achieving what he wants.

A few days later, The Lawyer convenes a meeting in his office, calling in Turkey, Nippers, and Ginger Nut, as Bartleby has just finished writing out four lengthy copies of a week's testimony that The Lawyer presided over in the High Court of Chancery. Intending to read from the original while his four employees examine the copies, The Lawyer calls to Bartleby that the rest of them are waiting for him. Bartleby comes out from behind the screen, and then he again states that he "would prefer not to" participate. He goes back behind his screen.

As the saying goes, doing the same thing over and over and expecting a different result is one definition of insanity. Yet The Lawyer attempts the same oral exchange with Bartleby, expecting him to comply. Of course, Bartleby passively resists, and in escaping behind his screen (a make-shift wall), he disconnects himself, at least momentarily, from the rest of the office.

The Lawyer stands there, unsure what to do. Finally he advances toward the screen, and asks Bartleby *why* he refuses. Bartleby again responds simply that he "would prefer not to." The Lawyer says that if he were dealing with anyone else, he would have them thrown out of his office—but in that moment something about Bartleby disarms The Lawyer, so he tries to reason with Bartleby, arguing that because these are Bartleby's own copies that they are all examining, this process will be labor-saving to him. And, further, correcting copy is a common job requirement of being a scrivener. The Lawyer demands, "is it not so? Will you not speak? Answer!" To which Bartleby replies, "I prefer not to."

The Lawyer is lying to the reader (an example of unreliable language) when he says that if any of his other employees acted this way he would throw them out of the office—yet earlier in the story, Turkey puts a ginger-cake onto an envelope as a seal, and The Lawyer lets him weasel his way out of it, just as he makes exceptions for Bartleby's peculiar habits. Also, The Lawyer and Bartleby are on separate sides of the screen, making them physically disconnected.

The Lawyer feels as if Bartleby is not being curt with him. He feels that Bartleby has listened to his argument, and still prefers not to. After The Lawyer asks Bartleby whether he has indeed decided not to comply with The Lawyer's request to review the papers although it is "a request made according to common usage and common sense," Bartleby confirms that his decision is irreversible.

Common sense is only an effective tool when both parties agree with what is sensible. Though The Lawyer clearly knows he is in the right, Bartleby and he are disconnected in their understanding of the scrivener's job requirements.

The Lawyer asks Turkey what he thinks of the situation, and Turkey says that he believes The Lawyer to be correct in the fairness of his request. The Lawyer asks Nippers what he thinks, and Nippers says that The Lawyer should kick Bartleby out of the office. The Lawyer then notes that, since it is the morning, this is the time when Nippers is ill tempered and Turkey is mild. Finally, The Lawyer asks Ginger Nut what he thinks, and Ginger Nut replies that Bartleby is a "luny." So, The Lawyer again turns toward Bartleby's screen, and urges Bartleby to come out and do his "duty." However, Bartleby neither replies nor emerges from his desk. The Lawyer states that business then hurried him, so he vowed to deal with this problem at a later date.

Turkey and Nippers are, as always, disconnected in their attitudes, but still there emerges a unanimous consensus in the office that Bartleby is in the wrong. However, despite this conclusion between the other four members of the office, Bartleby remains hiding behind his screen, and though The Lawyer verbally urges him to do his duty, Bartleby passively abstains, until The Lawyer gives up and decides to do it on his own. This is an example of language failing and passive resistance winning out.

The Lawyer notes that they managed to correct the papers without Bartleby's help, with Turkey commenting on how unusual the situation was, and Nippers cursing at Bartleby between grinding his teeth, and ending with saying that he'll never again do another man's work without compensation. However, Bartleby does not reply, staying in his corner out of sight.

If these jibes from his coworkers bother Bartleby, he shows no indication. As with any insult or complaint, if the words don't mean anything to you, they won't be offensive or demeaning, as Nippers intends them to be. Rather than respond, Bartleby hides behind his screen and passively ignores the scene entirely.

Some days pass, and The Lawyer says that due to Bartleby's odd behavior, he has started watching Bartleby's habits more closely. The Lawyer notes that Bartleby never leaves for dinner, and, indeed, never leaves the office at all. Around 11 A.M., though, Ginger Nut walks over to the opening in Bartleby's screen, runs out of the office with his pockets jingling with coins, and reappears with a handful of gingernut cakes which he brings to Bartleby, receiving two of the cakes for having run the errand. The Lawyer then wonders whether gingernut cakes are all that Bartleby eats, and he ponders the effect of what an all-gingernut-cake diet might do to the human constitution. "Now, what was ginger?" The Lawyer wonders—hot and spicy, he determines. Does that make Bartleby hot and spicy? Of course not, The Lawyer concludes, he's just the opposite.

Although Bartleby spends literally *all of his time in the office, The Lawyer is unable to get to know him better, and the only member of the office Bartleby interacts with is Ginger Nut, a twelve-year-old boy. Though The Lawyer could potentially learn about Bartleby from his young employee, he never ventures to ask Ginger Nut about his elusive scrivener. The Lawyer's strange thought-process about Bartleby's diet is derived from the Theory of Humorism, and its nonsensical conclusion is another example of language (and logic) failing to illuminate the truth.*

The Lawyer then delves into Bartleby's attitude, which he refers to as "passive resistance," saying that nothing can so aggravate an honest person as being passively resisted by another, as the honest person will give the passive one the benefit of the doubt in charitable good conscious, as The Lawyer is doing with Bartleby. The Lawyer then decides he has pity for Bartleby, as he means no mischief or insolence with his attitude; it is simply how he is. So, The Lawyer reckons that if he were to turn Bartleby away, another employer would probably not be so willing to accept his eccentricities. Here is a situation, The Lawyer decides, where he can "cheaply purchase a delicious self-approval," as keeping Bartleby on will cost him little, but it well make him feel good about himself as a charitable Christian man.

The Lawyer decides that Bartleby's resistance to his authority is not a choice that Bartleby is making, but rather a condition of his personality, like a disability. So, rather than be angry, The Lawyer justifies his acceptance of Bartleby as charitable *rather than a compromise he accepts because of business interests, as he's done with Turkey and Nippers. However, The Lawyer is somewhat self-aware about this feelings, as can be seen when he calls his good feelings "cheaply purchase[d]," as true charity, it could be argued, might require real work or suffering.*

However, despite The Lawyer's resolve to accept Bartleby as he is, one day The Lawyer is overtaken by what he deems an "evil impulse," and he decides to again ask Bartleby to compare papers with him. Bartleby once more says he would "prefer not to," and again The Lawyer walks over to Turkey to ask him what he thinks of Bartleby's behavior. It being the afternoon, Turkey, in his drunken state, says that he should step back behind Bartleby's "screen and black his eyes for him!" Turkey approaches Bartleby's desk, until The Lawyer orders him to sit back down. The Lawyer then asks Nippers his opinion on whether he should dismiss Bartleby. Nippers calmly says that Bartleby's behavior is unusual and unjust, and that The Lawyer might be justified in that action, but what to do is ultimately for The Lawyer to decide.

This urge by The Lawyer to test Bartleby's passively resistant attitude is an example of the promises we break to ourselves—and how language, even when constructed with completely honest intent in our own minds, can be unreliable. Turkey and Nippers swapping responses about Bartleby (Turkey being incensed this time and Nippers being reasonable) because of the time of day is another example of the absurd disconnection at play in this office.

The Lawyer states that Nippers has changed his opinion since the last time he asked about Bartleby, and Turkey exclaims that Nippers's "gentleness is the effects of beer," and then again asks if The Lawyer would like Turkey to take a swing at Bartleby. The Lawyer tells Turkey to put his fists down, and again walks over to speak with Bartleby. This time, The Lawyer requests that Bartleby to go out to the post office and pick something up for him, because Ginger Nut is out today. Bartleby states once more that he would "prefer not to." The Lawyer asks if he "*will* not," but Bartleby again states that he'd "*prefer* not."

Although alcohol is what makes Turkey upset, he argues that Nippers' calm attitude is the result of beer, which is linguistically nonsensical. Additionally, The Lawyer requesting Bartleby go to the Post Office must be especially off-putting to Bartleby, as he used to work in the Dead Letter Office (as we learn later). This is another example of language failing to connect people, as The Lawyer learns of Bartleby's past occupation only after he is already dead.

The Lawyer then sits at his desk, and after some thought, calls out for Bartleby, who doesn't respond. The Lawyer calls again. Still nothing. On the third time The Lawyer yells, and this time Bartleby emerges "like a very ghost" and stands at the entrance of his screened-in area. The Lawyer asks Bartleby to go to the next room and summon Nippers for him. Bartleby, in a respectful tone, says that he would "prefer not to," and disappears behind his screen. The Lawyer says, "Very good, Bartleby." The Lawyer sits there pondering what to do, and in the end he decides to keep Bartleby on, so that an unspoken agreement emerges as the new status quo: Bartleby is technically in The Lawyer's employment as a scrivener, but he is exempt (or has exempted himself) from any of the duties of the job aside from writing down copy.

The Lawyer is speaking metaphorically when he says Bartleby emerged from his screened-in area like a ghost, but it is a poignant metaphor: although The Lawyer and Bartleby are physically in the same space, ideologically they're in two very different planes of existence. So, when The Lawyer's final attempt to assert his control over Bartleby's working habits fails, The Lawyer allows Bartleby's resistant nature to become the status quo, and he works around Bartleby's preferences rather than the other way around, an upside-down construction of how the boss-employee relationship is supposed to function.

As days pass, The Lawyer becomes increasingly accepting of Bartleby's habits. He enjoys Bartleby's work ethic (aside from the occasional times when he stands silently behind the screen doing nothing), his stillness, and his consistency, always being the first one there in the morning and the last still in the office at night. The Lawyer feels that he entirely trusts Bartleby with his valuable papers. The Lawyer states that, once in a while, out of habit, he will summon Bartleby to do a simple task for him, and each time the reply comes from Bartleby that he would "prefer not to." However, rather than get fed up with Bartleby, The Lawyer simply begins to alter his habits so that Bartleby refuses him less and less often.

The Lawyer trusts Bartleby fully despite not knowing anything about him, and he cannot figure out that the fact that Bartleby arrives early to and leaves late from the office is caused by his condition of living there. This epitomizes how disconnected the office is, as well as how sharing language has failed to create a close-knit bond in the office. Additionally, Bartleby's passive resistance becomes even more controlling of the office, changing The Lawyer's habits and leaving Bartleby's unchanged.

The Lawyer notes that, as is customary, there are several keys to the door that opens his office. A cleaning person has one, Turkey has the second, and The Lawyer himself has the third, but The Lawyer is unaware who has the fourth key. One Sunday morning, The Lawyer is heading to church and decides to stop by the office on the way. When he tries to unlock the door, he finds another key already in the lock, blocking his so that he cannot open the door. The Lawyer calls out, and none other than Bartleby answers the door, dressed in unprofessional, disheveled clothing. Bartleby tells The Lawyer that he is "deeply engaged" at that moment, and would prefer not to admit The Lawyer into his office at present. He suggests that perhaps The Lawyer should walk around the block a few times until Bartleby concludes his activities.

Bartleby's passive resistance has evolved a step further: rather than simply refusing his boss and causing The Lawyer to change his habits, Bartleby effectively refuses The Lawyer entry to a place that he is legally entitled to reside in. Rather than yell at Bartleby and seize back control of the office in some way, The Lawyer accepts Bartleby's wishes and leaves, showing that The Lawyer is no longer in control of their relationship. Also, this conversation happens with Bartleby inside and The Lawyer outside, symbolizing their disconnected ideologies via physical separation.

The Lawyer, though frustrated, follows Bartleby's request and walks around the block, noting that it is Bartleby's "wonderful mildness" that compels him to follow his employee's requests. The Lawyer then wonders what Bartleby could possibly be doing in his office in informal dress on a Sunday morning. He contemplates whether something could be amiss, then dismisses that thought, instead wondering whether Bartleby could be doing work at this hour, but The Lawyer dismisses that, too, as he's never known Bartleby to work in informal clothing. When The Lawyer returns, he inserts his key in the lock, finds it vacated, and enters the office to find Bartleby gone.

Although his words are mild, Bartleby's attitude is quite rigid, showcasing the separation between the literal definitions of the words Bartleby uses and the meaning that he intends. Also, while The Lawyer does speculate about what Bartleby could be doing at the office, by the time he returns Bartleby is gone, so their physical disconnection leaves The Lawyer unable to discover Bartleby's purpose through asking him, though that likely would've proved ineffective as well.

Once he's alone in the office, The Lawyer determines that Bartleby must be eating, dressing, and even sleeping in the office. The Lawyer finds a blanket under Bartleby's desk as well as some toiletries and a stash of food. The Lawyer then ponders how great Bartleby's poverty and solitude must be, living in a place that is usually thrumming with industry during the workweek, but so empty that it echoes at night and on weekends.

It is only once Bartleby is gone that The Lawyer learns anything of substance about his employee and begins to empathize with Bartleby. This is indicative of the failure of language to connect The Lawyer to Bartleby, and also how isolated and disconnected the workers in The Lawyer's office are from each other.

The Lawyer is suddenly struck with a deep melancholy, causing him to ponder the nature of happiness and loneliness. He notes that "happiness courts the light," and that it is easy to see on people's faces, whereas "misery hides" so we deem that "there is none." As he is thinking about Bartleby, The Lawyer is suddenly attracted to Bartleby's closed desk, which has its key sticking out of the lock. The Lawyer searches the desk, and finds that Bartleby's papers are neatly laid out. However, beneath the papers, The Lawyer finds an old knotted handkerchief. He opens it, and finds that within is Bartleby's savings bank, filled with coins.

The Lawyer is basically arguing that language is an ineffective tool for communicating misery, as it is easy to lie and hide it. The Lawyer proves his own point by finding Bartleby's savings in his desk, learning of his deep poverty and isolation in the office not through communicating, but through a physical investigation of a space (his office) that he should *know everything about, but obviously does not.*

The Lawyer recalls all of Bartleby's curious habits and mysteries—his lack of speaking except to answer, the fact that he stands looking out his window (with a view of a brick **wall**) for long periods, that he never drinks beer, never leaves the office to eat or go for a walk (unless that is what he's doing right now), that he has never said a word about his past or family, and his overall reserved manner, which has "awed" The Lawyer into his "tame compliance." These reminiscences turn The Lawyer's initial feeling of melancholy and pity for Bartleby into fear and repulsion, as he feels that Bartleby is so far beyond the point of being helped that there is nothing to be done, as it is Bartleby's soul, not his body, that is suffering and beyond The Lawyer's reach.

Here is a striking example of the limits of charity in the modern Wall Street world: The Lawyer has just learned his employee is homeless and alone, and after reviewing all he knows of Bartleby, The Lawyer determines that Bartleby's soul is too far gone to be helped, which enrages and scares The Lawyer. The Lawyer, then, only wants to be charitable if he can see the rewards of his efforts and feel good about himself. If a charity case becomes too much of an effort, then, it becomes a burden The Lawyer is unwilling to bear.

Rather than going to church as he had intended, The Lawyer decides to head home, and on the way he resolves to ask Bartleby about his history tomorrow morning. If he declines to answer, The Lawyer states that he will give Bartleby a 20-dollar bonus on top of whatever he owes him and send him on his way, with the promise that if Bartleby is ever in need, he can write to The Lawyer and expect a reply. The next morning arrives, and The Lawyer asks Bartleby where he was born, to which Bartleby replies that he'd prefer not to say. The Lawyer asks if Bartleby will tell the lawyer "*anything*" about himself and Bartleby gives the same reply. When The Lawyer asks what Bartleby's reasonable objection is to answering, Bartleby says he would "prefer to give no answer."

To be charitable is to be compassionate, empathetic, and do what you can to help those in need; at this point in the narrative, The Lawyer wants to connect with Bartleby solely to be able to rid himself of the responsibility of his employee. The $20 severance check is generous, but it is not wholly charitable, as The Lawyer gives it partially to absolve his own guilt, not to help Bartleby. But, despite his best efforts to connect with Bartleby through questions, Bartleby's passive preference to reveal nothing about himself beats The Lawyer's resolve to find out.

The Lawyer ruminates on how he should handle this situation. Despite his resolution to dismiss Bartleby should this problem arise, The Lawyer feels a "superstitious knocking" at his heart that makes him feel like a bad person if he is to go through with dismissing Bartleby. The Lawyer approaches Bartleby's desk and says that it's okay if Bartleby doesn't want to discuss his past, but from now on he must comply with the full range of his duties as a scrivener, including correcting copy. He urges Bartleby to say that in a day or two he will begin being "a little reasonable." To all of this Bartleby replies that he "would prefer not to be a little reasonable."

The Lawyer decides once again that keeping Bartleby on is the best thing to do, but he tries to push back against Bartleby's passive resistance so that Bartleby will comply with the full range of the duties of a scrivener. However, Bartleby resists once more, even resisting to be reasonable, so that The Lawyer has no way to gain authority over Bartleby through an oral request, as Bartleby will not accept the parameters of reasonable logic, nor accept The Lawyer's power as his boss.

Nippers enters the office, overhears Bartleby's words, and calls him a stubborn mule. The Lawyer says he would "prefer" that Nippers withdraw from the room, which he does. The Lawyer notes that, somehow, he's taken on the habit of using the phrase "prefer" in all kinds of "not exactly suitable occasions." Turkey then suggests that if Bartleby would "but prefer" to drink alcohol, his problems would go away. When The Lawyer asks why Turkey is using the word "prefer," Turkey says he never uses that word himself, and when The Lawyer asks Turkey to leave the room, he replies that he will if The Lawyer "prefer" that he should. Nippers then asks if The Lawyer would prefer he use blue or white paper, and, as this phrase has overtaken his whole office, The Lawyer resolves to dismiss Bartleby shortly before his effects on the office worsen.

Although Bartleby isn't forcing the other members of the office to change their vernacular, his passive resistance has spread into their speech. This would indicate that the group is somehow connected, even though Turkey's denial of his use of the word "prefer" as he uses it shows the inability of language—especially if improperly used—to connect people. So, finally, The Lawyer again decides it is time to fire Bartleby, because of his effect on the attitudes of the others in the office. In the one moment in the story that hints at the connection of his employees, The Lawyer resolves to pull them apart.

The next day, The Lawyer notices that Bartleby has done "nothing but stand at his window in his dead-**wall** reverie." When The Lawyer asks him why, Bartleby replies that he has decided on no more writing. The Lawyer asks what his reason is, and Bartleby replies, "Do you not see the reason for yourself?" providing no further information. It then occurs to The Lawyer that perhaps Bartleby's vision has become impaired from the little light that emanates from the window near his desk that is right up against a brick wall, and that is why he won't write anymore. The Lawyer accepts Bartleby's wishes, and urges him to go out in the daylight to get his sight back, but Bartleby simply stays in the office.

Reason, logic, and language can only connect people if both parties understand the rules and choose to follow them. Bartleby stares out a viewless window doing nothing, and rather than tell his boss why, he implies that The Lawyer already knows. So, Bartleby's miscommunication leads The Lawyer to assume Bartleby has lost his sight due to the dark walled-off layout of the office, and Bartleby neither confirms nor denies his assumption.

A few days later, with the other employees absent, The Lawyer asks Bartleby to carry letters to the Post Office, but Bartleby declines, forcing The Lawyer to go himself. As days go by, The Lawyer thinks Bartleby's eyes are getting better, but when he asks Bartleby about it, Bartleby gives no answer. Further, Bartleby continues to do no copying at all, informing The Lawyer that he has given up copying permanently. Still, Bartleby remains a "fixture" in The Lawyer's chamber, becoming not only useless, but "afflictive" to have around. However, The Lawyer feels "sorry" for Bartleby, as he seems "absolutely alone in the universe." The Lawyer states that if he knew a single one of Bartleby's relatives or friends, he would feel comfortable urging them to take Bartleby, but he knows of none. Still, The Lawyer informs Bartleby that in six days time he must leave the office.

Again, The Lawyer asking Bartleby to go to the Post Office is likely psychologically off-putting to Bartleby due to his time spent working at the Dead Letter Office, but The Lawyer only finds that out after Bartleby is dead. Additionally, when Bartleby's presence transitions from neutral to "afflictive," The Lawyer, despite feeling bad about Bartleby's isolation, decides that his charitable gesture of keeping Bartleby around has reached a breaking point. Thus The Lawyer decides that, whether he can locate Bartleby's family or not, their time together must end.

Six days later, Bartleby remains in the office. The Lawyer offers Bartleby the 20-dollar bonus and tells him he must go. Bartleby replies that he would prefer not to. The Lawyer tells him he *must*, but Bartleby sits there silently. The Lawyer gives Bartleby all the money the scrivener is owed, plus the 20-dollar bonus. He tells Bartleby that he wishes him well, and that if he can be of service to the scrivener, Bartleby shouldn't hesitate to contact The Lawyer. Bartleby doesn't respond. The Lawyer leaves, confident that Bartleby will listen to him and vacate the premises.

The difference between a preference and a command is that a command, in general, is never supposed to be disobeyed. Unlike earlier, when Bartleby at least acknowledges The Lawyer's commands with a response, Bartleby's passive resistance has evolved one stage further, so that his resting state is now total noncompliance, and Bartleby seems almost more like a zombie than a man.

As The Lawyer walks home, he becomes more and more confident that Bartleby will comply with his order to leave. He calls his own handling of the situation "masterly," as he "assumed the ground" that Bartleby must depart, so Bartleby has no choice but to do so. However, when he wakes the next morning, doubts flood The Lawyer's mind. He worries that the assumption was simply his "own, and none of Bartleby's," as Bartleby is "more a man of preferences than assumptions."

The Lawyer's initial triumphant feelings are an example of how disconnected he is from Bartleby. This is undercut by The Lawyer's realization that his assumption of authority and Bartleby's "preferences" may not line up. Ironically, as The Lawyer distances himself from his office, his thoughts about the office's dynamics become clearer.

On his way to the office, The Lawyer debates back and forth in his head whether Bartleby has stayed or left the office. He passes someone on the street who says, "I'll take odds he doesn't," to which The Lawyer agrees to take the other side of the bet, telling the other man, "put up your money." However, The Lawyer realizes that today is election day, and the man must have been talking about some candidate, not Bartleby. The Lawyer reaches the office, fumbles under the door for the key where he hopes Bartleby will have put it, and accidentally bumps his knee against the door. To this noise, there is a reply from within, "Not yet; I am occupied." Of course, it is Bartleby.

The dialogue between The Lawyer and a passerby is a tongue-in-cheek comment on the unreliability of language and how isolated The Lawyer is from those around him. Although The Lawyer and this passerby speak the same language, without a common context their brief exchange means two very different things to the two parties. (This type of sequence is continually repeated whenever The Lawyer and Bartleby speak to each other—though they understand each other's words, nothing gets communicated.)

The Lawyer is somewhat shocked that Bartleby is still there, and mutters to himself on the street. He walks around the block, pondering what to do about Bartleby—he does not want to forcibly remove the scrivener from the building, and calling the police seems like "an unpleasant idea." Still, The Lawyer doesn't want to let Bartleby stay and be victorious, but the plan he comes up with to simply ignore Bartleby's presence and act as if he has left seems unlikely to succeed. The Lawyer decides to simply argue the matter with Bartleby once more, and so he returns to the office.

The door, a physical symbol of The Lawyer and Bartleby's ideological isolation from one another, disconnects the employer from his employee. Additionally, The Lawyer tries to use logic to come up with any way to break through Bartleby's passively resistant demeanor without *resorting to calling in higher authorities, but after brainstorming, his only solution is to once more try a tool that hasn't worked at all in their shared past: language.*

The Lawyer asks Bartleby if Bartleby will leave, to which Bartleby replies that he'd prefer not to. The Lawyer asks what right Bartleby has to stay, as he doesn't pay rent, taxes, or own the property. Bartleby says nothing. The Lawyer asks if Bartleby is ready to write again, or go to the post office, or do anything to be useful to The Lawyer. Rather than respond, Bartleby retreats to his area behind the screen. The Lawyer recalls the story of Samuel Adams and John C. Colt: Colt was convicted of murdering Adams when they were alone in the office together. The Lawyer notes that he'd often thought about the fact that, had Colt and Adams's disagreement happened in public, or even at a private residence rather than an office, it might have been resolved differently, as offices are entirely without "humanizing domestic associations" that one's own home might be filled with.

The Lawyer's attempts to use language to show Bartleby the illogical and illegal nature of his behavior prove futile, as Bartleby first passively resists by again stating his preferences, and then shuts down into silence. The case of Colt and Adams is a colorful example of language and the workplace both serving to disconnect rather than connect people: Colt murdered Adams over a dispute about a bookkeeping textbook *in Adams' office. So, the creation of a text meant to share wisdom and ideas through language leads both men to destruction—Adams to his death, and Colt to prison.*

Sitting at his desk, The Lawyer's resentment of Bartleby grows, but a Christian impulse overtakes him, reminding him that it his duty as a Christian to "love one another." So, feeling this charitable impulse, The Lawyer decides not to reprimand Bartleby or throw him out on the street, instead thinking of how pitiable Bartleby's situation is. Secretly, The Lawyer hopes Bartleby will still leave of his own accord, but as the day progresses and the rest of the employees arrive, Bartleby stays at his desk, unmoving.

The Lawyer's line of logic keeps switching back and forth: though his practical side resents Bartleby for taking advantage of the situation and believes that ridding himself of Bartleby would make his life easier, his moralistic Christian side urges him to be charitable and accept Bartleby as he is. Language, even in our own minds, can be tricky and often unreliable.

Some days later, after reading two religious texts, The Lawyer decides that Bartleby has been thrust into his life via predestination from eternity, and God's intention regarding Bartleby's influence on his life will remain mysterious to him. So, The Lawyer is content to allow Bartleby to remain behind his screen. That is, until a while later, when The Lawyer has a meeting in his office with many colleagues. One of the visiting lawyers asks Bartleby to run an errand for him, and Bartleby refuses, preferring to stand next to the wall doing nothing. The news of this refusal spreads "all through the circle" of The Lawyer's profession, causing much speculation as to the nature of The Lawyer and Bartleby's relationship. So, as Bartleby's presence has begun to impact The Lawyer's professional reputation, The Lawyer resolves to rid himself of Bartleby, who he now refers to as an "intolerable incubus."

Even after The Lawyer delves fully into the religious line of logic that Bartleby has been brought into his life via predestination, The Lawyer still cannot stick to his charitable intentions toward Bartleby once his presence begins to negatively impact The Lawyer's business. So, it seems, The Lawyer's charitable inclinations reach their limit when they begin to have negative consequences on the comfort of his own life. In other words, The Lawyer isn't willing to truly suffer for his sins as Jesus did, or make any kind of real sacrifice to help his fellow man..

First, The Lawyer simply suggests to Bartleby that he leave. After he thinks about it for three days, Bartleby tells The Lawyer that he would still prefer not to go. The Lawyer considers what to do, and resolves once more not to throw Bartleby out of the office, nor call the police. So, The Lawyer decides that since Bartleby will not quit, The Lawyer "must quit him." He plans to find a new office, and then tell Bartleby that if he finds him at this new location he will have to treat him as a "common trespasser." The next day, The Lawyer tells Bartleby that he will be moving offices next week, and Bartleby should seek out a new place to be. Bartleby does not respond.

When language and logic fail to connect The Lawyer and Bartleby, The Lawyer finally uses the scrivener's tool of passive resistance against him. The Lawyer manages to feel good about his charitable dealings (by not calling the police on Bartleby) while still placing a limit on how much he's willing to take; so, in The Lawyer's mind, changing offices is a middle-ground between being wholly and sacrificially charitable and simply treating Bartleby as a criminal and having him arrested.

The Lawyer moves offices the next week, emptying the office of furniture. When everything is gone, The Lawyer says goodbye to Bartleby, and tells him that he hopes God blesses him. Despite The Lawyer's fears, Bartleby never shows up at the new office. All is going smoothly, until a different lawyer (The Other Lawyer) arrives to ask whether The Lawyer has recently vacated an office on **Wall** Street. The Lawyer replies that he has, and this Other Lawyer says that The Lawyer is responsible for the man (Bartleby) who has been left there. The Lawyer says that Bartleby is "nothing" to him—no apprentice or relation, so someone else must deal with him. This other lawyer asks who Bartleby is, and The Lawyer replies that he does not know—just someone he used to employ. The Other Lawyer leaves, saying he'll take care of the problem.

The Lawyer telling Bartleby he hopes God blesses him directly conflicts with his earlier feelings that Bartleby was brought into his life via predestination—if The Lawyer wanted God to bless Bartleby, he could bless Bartleby himself by continuing to care for him. When The Lawyer is called on by The Other Lawyer to claim responsibility for Bartleby, The Lawyer does not abide by his charitable urges and instead claims Bartleby is "nothing" to him, which, in one sense, is true, as The Lawyer knows essentially nothing about Bartleby's personal life or past.

Several days pass, and The Lawyer thinks he has finally been ridded of Bartleby. However, a week or so later, The Other Lawyer returns to the office to tell The Lawyer that he must take Bartleby away from his old office at once, informing him that Bartleby is now haunting the whole building, not just The Lawyer's former office space. Reluctantly, The Lawyer agrees to return to his old office to try to reason with Bartleby. Once there, The Lawyer explains that Bartleby has two options—he "must do something" or something must be done to him. The Lawyer offers to give him his old copying job back, or to get him any number of new jobs, all of which Bartleby says he would prefer not to do. The Lawyer then offers to take Bartleby to his own home where they can figure out an arrangement, and Bartleby says he would "prefer not to make any change at all."

Here The Lawyer—no doubt partially motivated by guilt—is once again charitable to Bartleby, going above and beyond what he's offered before. However, when The Lawyer speaks to Bartleby and his former scrivener passively resists all of The Lawyer's job offers as well as his offer to take Bartleby into his own home, The Lawyer once more reaches his limit of what he is willing to sacrifice for Bartleby.

The Lawyer rushes out of the building, ignoring anyone who tries to stop him. He decides that he has done all that he possibly could for Bartleby, and, "so fearful" of being "hunted out by the incensed landlord" and his tenants, The Lawyer lets Nippers run the business for a few days while he spends some time in the suburbs. When The Lawyer returns to his office, he finds a note from the landlord, informing him that the police were called and Bartleby has been taken to the Tombs, a local prison, for being a vagrant, and that, since The Lawyer knows more about Bartleby than anyone else, his presence is requested at the Tombs to make a statement about the facts of Bartleby's life.

After abandoning Bartleby for the second time (the first being changing offices), The Lawyer physically disconnects himself from Bartleby by literally leaving the city, and he justifies that he has done all he possibly could for Bartleby, which is blatantly untrue. Yes, The Lawyer has been reasonably charitable toward Bartleby, but there is no question that The Lawyer had the power to do more (for example, he could have remained in his old office).

That day, The Lawyer heads to the prison to attest to the fact that Bartleby is an honest, but eccentric, man. The Lawyer then requests to visit Bartleby and speak with him. Because Bartleby is non-violent, the court has permitted him to wander freely around the prison, "especially in the inclosed grass-platted yards." When The Lawyer finds Bartleby, he is standing alone in the quietest yard, "his face towards a high **wall**," while the eyes of murderers and thieves peer down on him from the slits in the jail cells. When Bartleby recognizes The Lawyer, he says he has "nothing to say" to his former boss. The Lawyer says that he isn't the one who brought Bartleby to prison, and that it isn't so bad here after all. Bartleby says "I know where I am," but will say nothing more to The Lawyer.

The Lawyer likely knows deep down that he did not *do all he could for Bartleby, which might be why he goes to see Bartleby once more when he could easily leave the prison without seeing his former employee. Bartleby facing a wall is a direct parallel to the "dead-wall reveries" he would have at The Lawyer's office, implicitly comparing Wall Street offices to prisons. Though The Lawyer tries to talk to Bartleby, and Bartleby doesn't ignore him, Bartleby states that he has no intention of engaging with The Lawyer whatsoever.*

On his way out, a man (The Grubman) stops The Lawyer and asks if Bartleby is his friend. The Lawyer says "yes," and the man says that if The Lawyer wants him to starve, he'll allow him to eat the prison food. The man, who now says that he is a "grubman" of the prison, offers to provide Bartleby with good food, for a fee. The Lawyer pays The Grubman to provide Bartleby with food, asking him to give him "the best dinner" The Grubman can make. Then, The Lawyer brings The Grubman over to Bartleby, and tells him that The Grubman will be his friend. The Grubman says he is a servant, and offers to make Bartleby dinner. Bartleby replies that he would "prefer not to dine today," as it would disagree with him. Then Bartleby walks over to a "dead-**wall**" and stands in front of it.

The Lawyer tells The Grubman that Bartleby is his "friend," even though just a little while earlier he told The Other Lawyer that Bartleby was "nothing" to him. Here, it seems The Lawyer is aware that his charity towards Bartleby has been fickle and somewhat limited, so he tries to make up for it with a last-ditch effort of paying The Grubman to provide Bartleby with food. However, Bartleby resists this charitable gesture, preferring not to eat, and instead "preferring" to stare at the wall. In prison, The Lawyer and Bartleby are as disconnected as they were in the office.

The Lawyer and The Grubman chat about Bartleby being odd, and The Lawyer says he is somewhat "deranged." The Grubman says he initially thought Bartleby was a forger, and asks if The Lawyer knows Monroe Edwards, a notorious forger who used to be at this same prison Bartleby is being held at. The Lawyer says no, he's never known any forgers.

We learn the name of Monroe Edwards, a figure irrelevant to the story, but not to that of The Grubman or The Lawyer. Also, The Lawyer calls Bartleby "deranged" despite just having called him his friend. Language is subjective, especially when combined with The Lawyer's fickle thought processes.

Some days later, The Lawyer returns to the prison, and finds Bartleby asleep in the yard, surrounded by **walls** "of amazing thickness." Bartleby is huddled at the base of a wall, his knees drawn up, and his body looking "wasted." His "dim eyes" are open but his body appears to be asleep. The Lawyer touches Bartleby's hand, causing a shiver to run up and down his spine. The Grubman appears, saying that Bartleby's dinner is ready. "Won't he dine today either? Or does he live without dining?" the Grubman asks. The Lawyer replies, "Lives without dining." The Grubman comments that Bartleby's asleep, and The Lawyer replies, "With kings and counselors."

For the first time in the story, The Lawyer physically touches Bartleby. So, when The Lawyer and Bartleby are the most physically connected is also when they are spiritually the furthest apart—Bartleby's passive resistance has driven him into some kind of coma or stupor, so that despite his eyes being open it is as if his soul has vacated his body. He "lives without dining," but as The Lawyer implies, Bartleby isn't far from passing on into heaven, hell, or nonexistence.

The Lawyer cuts off his narration, saying that there is "little need for proceeding further," as the reader can easily imagine Bartleby's fate. Then, The Lawyer decides to "divulge one little item of rumor" he has heard since Bartleby's death. He isn't sure how true it is, but The Lawyer has heard that, before working for The Lawyer, Bartleby worked as a clerk in the "**Dead Letter** Office" in Washington, and had been abruptly fired in a change of administration. When The Lawyer ponders the rumor, he can't help but become emotional, as dead letters sounds much "like dead men" to him. He notes that this business of burning dead letters, carrying with them "pardon for those who died despairing; hope for those who died unhoping" could turn any man into a hopeless one. "On errands of life," The Lawyer notes, these letters sped to death. He ends the story, "Ah, Bartleby! Ah, humanity!"

It has been argued by critics that this story itself is a "Dead Letter" from The Lawyer to Bartleby—it is only after Bartleby's death that The Lawyer is able to understand even a little bit about his former employee's history and mentality. Also, The Lawyer shows by far the most emotion he has in the entire story in this final passage, empathizing with Bartleby more after his death than he ever could in life. The Lawyer feels for Bartleby having had to witness so many failures by words to connect people, but, further than that, he comes to see Bartleby as a proxy for all humanity, as we all have handicaps and weaknesses that separate us, so perhaps we should try to be more connected to—and more charitable towards—each other.

HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Koltun, Moe. "*Bartleby, the Scrivener.*" *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 24 Jan 2017. Web. 21 Apr 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Koltun, Moe. "*Bartleby, the Scrivener.*" LitCharts LLC, January 24, 2017. Retrieved April 21, 2020. https://www.litcharts.com/lit/bartleby-the-scrivener.

To cite any of the quotes from *Bartleby, the Scrivener* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Melville, Herman. Bartleby, the Scrivener. Penguin Classics. 2016.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Melville, Herman. Bartleby, the Scrivener. New York: Penguin Classics. 2016.