

## Soul Rebel

“Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street” is a tale about the modern world of habitual work, exhaustion and corruption found in the rapidly industrialized commerce sector of America during the late 1800’s. We are introduced to a “pallidly neat, pitiably respectable, incurably forlorn...Bartleby” (78) who is hired as a scrivener by our “unambitious lawyer” (74) narrator. But unlike his coworkers, Nippers and Turkey, Bartleby does not seem to adjust to life on Wall Street, becoming increasingly disengaged from his associates and boss, eventually ceasing to do any kind of work in the office at all. Is Bartleby’s response to Wall Street an unfortunate result of the dehumanizing and emotionless environment, or is it a conscious choice to rebel against an increasingly corrupt and selfish society? I believe Bartleby’s unconventional behavior is a conscious choice to revolt against the mechanical routine, materialistic environment, and flippant nature of Wall Street.

The scrivener’s job is to recopy legal texts and documents in order to be distributed to court officials and other lawyers for use and quickly becomes “a very dull, wearisome, and lethargic affair” (78). Each day is filled with tedious and predictable copying by the scriveners with every day the same as before. Even the narrator’s two scriveners before Bartleby are themselves, banal and predictable in their day-to-day actions and afflictions. We learn nothing of their lives outside the scrivener’s office leading us to believe their jobs consume their lives. It can be counted on that everyday “after twelve o’ clock meridian” (75) Turkey comes into work drunk “with the like regularity” (75) of a rising and setting sun. Perhaps the tedious mindlessness of copying documents day in and day out drives Turkey to drink as a way of feeling or experiencing something. And Nippers, who suffers from an “ambition and indigestion” (77) which causes him to be extremely irritable every morning but much calmer in the afternoon is equally as predictable. Each clerk performs his duties in a servile manner and, with daily, clocklike precision, complements the other’s mood.

While the narrator could easily replace the two troublesome scriveners, he is filled with “the profound conviction that the easiest way of life is the best” (74) and it is much easier to simply keep Nippers and Turkey as each is a “very useful man” (76) performing their duties with regularity and predictability. The narrator does, however, break his routine

to hire a new scrivener when his “ original business-that of conveyance and title hunter, and drawer-up of recondite documents of all sorts-was considerably increased by receiving the Master’s office. There was now a great work for the scriveners. “Not only must I push the clerks already with me, but...must have additional help” (78). It is here that we meet Bartleby, whom the narrator is “glad to have among the corps of copyists” (78) because “at first [he] did an extraordinary quantity of writing” (78).

It seems Bartleby “ran a day and night line, copying by the sun-light and by candle-light. [The narrator] should have been quite delighted with his application, had he been cheerfully industrious. But he wrote on silently, palely, mechanically” (78). Again in this passage we glimpse the dull and mindless nature of the scrivener’s work on Wall Street. One could liken Bartleby to a machine that works constantly day and night, never seeing sun or interacting with anyone. This productivity soon stops as Bartleby “finds himself trapped within the mindless and monotonous cycle of the working man” (Beverungen). There is no gratification or satisfaction for Bartleby within the law office. When asked to “examine a small paper” (79) Bartleby replies that he would “prefer not to” (79). The narrator hears Bartleby’s response and finds it is without any “uneasiness, anger, impatience, or impertinence in his manner... [without] anything ordinarily human” (79). Once again, we find Bartleby lacking even the slightest emotion or anything even resembling a human response. Bartleby does not necessarily refuse but replies “ I prefer not to,” implying a conscious choice not to engage any further in the workings on Wall Street. When questions arise as to “[w]hy... [Bartleby] refuse[s]” (80), Bartleby engages in no explanation, only repeating “I prefer not to” (80).

The narrator says “it seemed to me that, while I had been addressing him, he carefully revolved every statement I made; fully comprehend[ing] the meaning; could not gainsay the irresistible conclusion; but, at the same time, some paramount consideration prevail[s] with him to reply as he [does]” (80). This passage illustrates that Bartleby understands what is being asked of him, considers his options, and chooses to do of his own accord. It is here that Bartleby ascertains his freedom of will and independence from the corporate world. As Giles says “[t]o have preferences and the will to act on them, especially in the face of superiors, is the ultimate realization of freedom and selfhood.” Bartleby’s unwillingness to explain himself and his actions to the narrator reflect his unwillingness to conform to the mechanical workings of corporate Wall Street and stay true to himself about all else.

Not only do we see Bartleby consciously turn away from the mechanical workings of Wall Street but we also see him reject the materialism rampant among corporate America. Bartleby shows that even though he does not have much in the way of possessions, he is not interested in money for he “frequently restore[s] to [the narrator] sixpences and shillings carelessly dropped upon the floor” (88). We learn not only of Bartleby’s unconcern for

wealth but also the narrator, who is the embodiment of corporate America, his careless disregard for the wealth he has acquired since he is “apt to be very reckless” (88) by leaving money all over the floor. We also find that Bartleby’s “poverty is great” (84) as evidenced by the narrator’s summation “that for an indefinite period Bartleby must have eaten, dressed and slept in my office, and that, too, without any plate, mirror, or bed” (84). For the narrator, who keeps Nippers partly because he “always dressed in a gentlemanly sort of way; and so incidentally, reflect[s] credit upon [the narrator’s] chambers” (76) and did a “snug business among rich men’s bonds, and mortgages, and deeds” (74), it was unthinkable that a man could live in an office without commodities such as a plate or bed or mirror. However, Bartleby’s sparse life does not seem to bother him in the slightest sense as he is unconcerned with such things.

In a story such as “Bartleby, the Scrivener” where materialism plays such a prominent role, food makes a good metaphor for desire and avarice. Throughout the story the two scriveners send “Ginger Nut very frequently for that peculiar cake... Turkey...gobble[s] up scores of these cakes, as if they were mere wafers--indeed, they sell them at the rate of six or eight for a penny” (77). We can see by the description of Turkey and his ginger cakes the disregard concerning the cost of the cakes and the voracious way in which these cakes are consumed. Turkey’s actions exemplify the way in which Wall Street functions regarding commodities and money. There is little concern about how much is spent so long as there is some materialistic gain to be had. The narrator is baffled by the fact that Bartleby does not eat “and never went to dinner... [and] never eats a dinner, properly speaking” (81). The narrator wonders how Bartleby can survive without food; in much the same way he wonders how Bartleby survives without a plate, mirror, or bed. Food is just another commodity that the narrator feels he cannot live without. Bartleby, who prefers not to deal with desire and greediness, is ultimately killed by his preference not to consume food. When in the Tombs Bartleby says, “I prefer not to dine today...it would disagree with me; I am unused to dinners” (97) demonstrating his preference for an austere lifestyle and clear conscience. His saying “it would disagree with me” illustrates how going along with Wall Street would go against the moral fiber of his very being and what he knows to be true and right. This preference not to eat signifies his disinterest in partaking in the gluttony that is Wall Street and corporate America. Bartleby’s conviction to remain true to himself and rebel against the materialistic ways of Wall Street is so profound that the narrator eventually finds him “strangely huddled at the base of the wall, his knees drawn up, and laying on his side, his head touching the cold stones...the wasted Bartleby” (97). Bartleby would rather die with his virtues intact than engage the corporate world of avarice and materialism presented to him.

Not only is Wall Street mechanical and materialistic but also extremely flippant in nature. We observe this time and again in our narrator, the embodiment of corporate

America, who cannot make up his mind regarding anything. We find the narrator in turmoil over Bartleby constantly without ever coming to a definitive decision on what to do. Upon Bartleby's preference not to examine copies the narrator "turns to [Nippers and Turkey] for some reinforcement for his own faltering mind" (80) showing how unsure he is on how to proceed to resolve this situation. We see the narrator repeatedly "postpone the consideration of this dilemma to [his] future leisure" (80) instead of addressing the problem, coming to a decision, and resolving the turmoil. The narrator says, "nothing so aggravates an earnest person as passive resistance" (81) regarding Bartleby's behavior one moment and then "[p]oor fellow...he means no mischief; it is plain he intends no insolence...his eccentricities are completely involuntary" (81) changing his mind the very next. After learning Bartleby is living in his office the narrator "resolve[s] upon this-I [will] put certain calm questions to him the next morning...and if he decline[s] to answer them openly and unreservedly...then to give him a twenty dollar bill...and tell him his services are no longer required" (86) but when the next morning came and Bartleby prefers not to answer we find the narrator "again...ruminating what I should do" (86). After coming to yet another decision regarding Bartleby, the narrator muses "[t]he more I [think] over my procedure, the more I [am] charmed with it. Nevertheless, next morning, upon awakening, I had my doubts" (89) displaying the narrator's fickle nature. Although he makes a decision regarding his course of action when the time comes for him to follow through on his decision, he is unable to, changing his mind to suit his preference of an easy life. This type of behavior is indicative of Wall Street which changes according to what is most profitable or most beneficial regardless of the consequences.

"Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street" tells the story of a soul that prefers to remain true to what is right and not be drawn into the sordid affairs of corporate America. Rather than succumbing to the pressures exerted on him by Wall Street, Bartleby consciously chooses to rebel against the norms of a society preoccupied with wealth and status. His stand against corporate America has a lasting impact on the narrator, as well as his cohorts, who all find themselves with new "preferences" taken from Bartleby. Bartleby is a man whose soul rebels against the transient nature of corporate America and chooses to live by the virtues he deems worthy even unto his death.

## Works Cited

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