

# BARTLEBY THE SCRIVENER

## The Art of the Novella Series

Herman Melville

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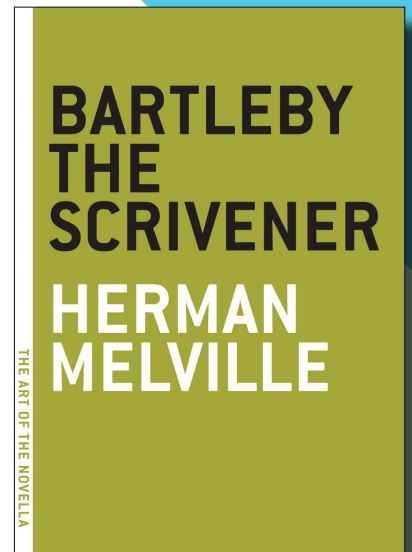
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“I’ve always been haunted by Bartleby, the proto-slacker. But it’s the handsomely minimalist cover of the Melville House edition that gets me here, one of many in the small publisher’s fine ‘Art of the Novella’ series. —*The New Yorker*

“Praise for the Art of the Novella Series

"I wanted them all, even those I'd already read."  
—**Ron Rosenbaum, *The New York Observer***

“Small wonders.”  
—*Time Out London*



## NOTE TO THE READER

### The Art of the Novella Series

Too short to be a novel, too long to be a short story, the novella is generally unrecognized by academics and publishers. Nonetheless, it is a form beloved and practiced by literature's greatest writers. In the Art of the Novella series, Melville House celebrates this renegade art form and its practitioners with titles that are, in many instances, presented in book form for the first time.

Academics hail it as the beginning of modernism, but to readers around the world—even those daunted by *Moby-Dick*—*Bartleby the Scrivener* is simply one of the most absorbing and moving novellas ever. Set in the mid-19th century on New York City's Wall Street, it was also, perhaps, Herman Melville's most prescient story: What if a young man caught up in the rat race of commerce finally just said, "I would prefer not to"?

The tale is one of the final works of fiction published by Melville before, slipping into despair over the continuing critical dismissal of his work after *Moby-Dick*, he abandoned publishing fiction. The work is presented here exactly as it was originally published in Putnam's magazine—to, sadly, critical disdain.

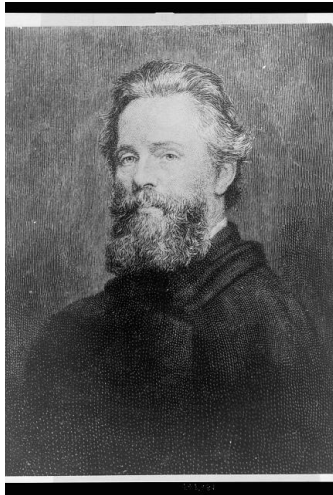
## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Melville does not give many facts about Bartleby, only his prior profession which is revealed at the very end. Would knowing information about the unusual man's life prior to Wall Street change the sentiment surrounding his character?
2. Bartleby's consistent defiance paired with his gentle nature causes the narrator to easily submit to his scrivener. If Bartleby had been someone of ill temper, like Nippers or Turkey, would he have been tolerated for so long? Overall, is Bartleby considered a kind man? Explain using examples from the story.
3. The narrator believes that Bartleby's defiance stems from a lack of incentive, which is arguably the case for the "quiet quitters" of today. His attitude about his workload transfers quite easily to the other scriveners as they realize they do not want to "do another man's work without pay." Think of the workforce today. Does behavior among colleagues still transfer easily in the modern workforce?



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4. Many times throughout the story, Bartleby is referred to as an apparition. Although it is proven to not be the case, give examples of how Melville explores the theme of death in the novella.
5. In regards to the above, what do you think is the significance of Bartleby working in the Dead Letters Office?
6. Language and communication play the biggest roles in Bartleby's character. Aside from behavior, the scriveners and even the narrator unknowingly adopt the word "prefer" in their everyday conversations. Give examples of the effectiveness of passive and assertive language used by Bartleby, the narrator, and even other characters such as the prison chef or the lawyers. Is one better than the other in the act of persuasion? Explain.
7. Think of the relationship the narrator has with his original scriveners. Does he regard Bartleby in the same fashion, or is there a hierarchy? What can we tell about the narrator from the way he describes his staff?
8. Is Melville's portrayal of 19th-century workmen still applicable today? How can today's average working class relate to the characters and themes surrounding Bartleby? Explain with examples.
9. Think of the homeless epidemic that continues to grow in New York City. Is the narrator's relationship with Bartleby congruent with the relationship between social classes today? Explain.
10. The last line of the novella is "Ah, Bartleby! Ah, humanity!" What do you think the narrator means by this exclamation?



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Herman Melville** was born in New York City in 1819. At eighteen he set sail on a whaler, and upon his return, wrote a series of bestselling adventure novels based on his travels, including *Typee* and *Omoo*, which made him famous. Starting with *Moby-Dick* in 1851, however, his increasingly complex and challenging work drew more and more negative criticism, until 1857 when, after his collection *Piazza Tales* (which included *Bartleby the Scrivener*), and the novel *The Confidence Man*, Melville stopped publishing fiction. He drifted into obscurity, writing poetry and working for the Customs House in New York City, until his death in 1891.

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