

Study Guide for Herman Melville's "Bartleby the Scrivener" by Course Hero Study Guides

Herman Melville's "Bartleby the Scrivener" is a captivating and enigmatic short story that explores themes of alienation, obedience, and the human condition. This study guide provides an in-depth analysis of the story, including character analysis, plot summary, themes, symbols, and more. Perfect for students and literary enthusiasts alike, this guide will enhance your understanding and appreciation of Melville's masterpiece.



Study Guide for Herman Melville's *Bartleby the Scrivener* (Course Hero Study Guides) by Monique Dong

★★★★☆ 4.8 out of 5

Language : English

File size : 673 KB

Screen Reader : Supported

Print length : 119 pages

Lending : Enabled



Character Analysis

Bartleby

Bartleby is the enigmatic and enigmatic protagonist of the story. He is a scrivener, a copyist of legal documents, who is hired by a lawyer narrator. Bartleby is characterized by his passive resistance and his enigmatic phrase, "I would prefer not to." This phrase becomes a symbol of his alienation and his refusal to conform to societal norms.

The Lawyer

The lawyer narrator is the foil to Bartleby. He is a successful and ambitious man who represents the capitalist values of the time. The lawyer is initially frustrated by Bartleby's refusal to work, but he eventually comes to respect and even admire Bartleby's passive resistance.

Other Characters

* **Turkey:** The lawyer's assistant, who is characterized by his sycophantic behavior and his eagerness to please. * **Nippers:** A scrivener who is fired by the lawyer for his inefficiency. Nippers represents the disposable nature of workers in the capitalist system. * **The Landlord:** The owner of the building where the lawyer's office is located. The landlord is a greedy and heartless man who represents the oppressive forces of society.

Plot Summary

The story begins with the lawyer hiring Bartleby as a scrivener. Bartleby initially works diligently, but he soon begins to refuse to do certain tasks, always replying with the phrase, "I would prefer not to." The lawyer is initially frustrated by Bartleby's refusal to work, but he eventually comes to respect and even admire Bartleby's passive resistance.

As the story progresses, Bartleby becomes increasingly isolated and alienated. He spends his days sitting in a corner of the office, staring at a blank wall. The lawyer tries to help Bartleby, but Bartleby refuses to leave the office. Eventually, the lawyer is forced to evict Bartleby.

Bartleby is arrested and taken to prison, where he dies. The lawyer visits Bartleby in prison and learns that Bartleby was once a clerk in the Dead Letter Office. This revelation suggests that Bartleby has been traumatized

by his experiences in the Dead Letter Office and that his passive resistance is a form of self-protection.

Themes

Alienation

Alienation is a central theme in "Bartleby the Scrivener." Bartleby is alienated from society, from his job, and from himself. He is unable to connect with others and he feels like an outsider. His alienation is symbolized by his refusal to work and his desire to be left alone.

Obedience

Obedience is another important theme in the story. The lawyer represents the capitalist values of the time, which emphasize obedience and conformity. Bartleby's refusal to obey the lawyer's orders is a form of rebellion against these values. Bartleby's passive resistance shows that it is possible to resist oppression and injustice, even if it means suffering the consequences.

The Human Condition

"Bartleby the Scrivener" is also a story about the human condition. Bartleby's character represents the struggle of the individual against the forces of society. Bartleby's refusal to conform to societal norms is a reminder that we all have the potential to resist oppression and injustice.

Symbols

The Wall

The wall in the lawyer's office is a symbol of Bartleby's isolation and alienation. Bartleby spends his days staring at the wall, which represents

his inability to connect with others. The wall also symbolizes the barriers that society erects between people.

The Dead Letter Office

The Dead Letter Office is a symbol of Bartleby's past trauma. Bartleby was once a clerk in the Dead Letter Office, where he was responsible for sorting through undeliverable letters. This experience traumatized Bartleby and it is the root of his passive resistance.

Herman Melville's "Bartleby the Scrivener" is a complex and challenging story that explores the themes of alienation, obedience, and the human condition. This study guide has provided an in-depth analysis of the story, including character analysis, plot summary, themes, symbols, and more. By understanding these elements, you will be able to better appreciate the richness and complexity of Melville's masterpiece.



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