**“Bartleby, the Scrivener – A Story of Wall Street”**

**Possible Interpretations of the Story:**

Bartleby as a Response to Transcendentalism and Its Ideas

Bartleby is a passive resistor, like Thoreau. The narrator says that nothing so aggravates an earnest person as passive resistance; in fact, it is Bartleby’s passivity that incites the narrator to confront Bartleby. While Thoreau argues that his passive resistance “frees” him (even as he is imprisoned in the town jail), Bartleby’s refusal to accept authority results in his death...in prison. Being in jail opens Thoreau’s eyes, allowing him to *see* (literally and figuratively) more about Concord and its townspeople than he was ever able to perceive as a free man. Bartleby can see only the brick wall in jail. The narrator attempts to have him admire the blue sky and the grass in the yard, but these views of *nature* don’t provide Bartleby with any solace or insight. Thoreau’s passive resistance liberates him and allows him to express himself fully while Bartleby’s passive resistance only affirms the authority and control that society has over him.

Biographical Reading: Melville as Bartleby

Melville initially made a name for himself by publishing a few best-selling, “non-serious” adventure novels. His real passion, however, was for his more serious work like *Moby-Dick*. When his friends suggested that he return to writing best-selling genre fiction, he resisted. Just as Bartleby is sick of copying the words of others, Melville resists having to write to fulfill the expectations and demands of others. Bartleby writes non-stop at first, then only when he feels like it, and finally he stops writing altogether. Similarly, if Melville can’t produce the type of work that is meaningful to him, he would prefer not to work (write) at all. When Bartleby stops writing altogether, however, he eventually dies; would not writing at all result in a figurative “death” for Melville? The narrator and the bureaucratic world he represents could represent Melville’s father-in-law, a lawyer who supported Melville financially while he worked as a clerk in a custom’s house (another bureaucracy).

Existentialist Reading

Existentialists, who believe that life is basically meaningless, might consider Bartleby an urban martyr who, through his passive resistance, exposes the uselessness and absurdity of modern life. An existentialist reading might also interpret Bartleby as a Christ-figure (at one point the narrator refers to “the advent of Bartleby”) who is sacrificed to the “progress” of modern life; like Christ, he dies for our sins of wanting to make money, to get ahead, to be a part of the “machine.”

  Psychoanalytic Reading

Psychoanalytical critics might interpret this story as a tale of the schizophrenia of the modern world, positing that Bartleby and his narrator are symbols of the two halves of a single person--the one half that wants to conform and belong and the other half which refuses to participate. The physical layout of the narrator’s office and Bartleby’s “cubicle” reinforce this interpretation; Bartleby is like the “little voice” inside the narrator that has to remain unheard and unseen if he is to be successful in the world. The narrator believes in the “system” (law, charity, prison, reform, etc.), but Bartleby’s fate shows its failure to work or help. A Freudian interpretation might look at the story as a father/son drama.

Marxist Reading

Marxists critics focus on the social issues of stories, with a particular focus on work and class relations. Marxists would immediately point out the story’s subtitle as significant, seeing the story as illustrating how the Wall Street (literally, a walled street) mentality and ethic control and kill human creativity and reflection (Bartleby is, basically, a human photocopy machine). Since Bartleby lost his job in Washington DC because of a change in administration and the narrator similarly lost business due to the changes in patronage laws, these critics would argue that the story is showing how capitalism makes it impossible for workers to prosper. Bartleby is a symbol of the alienated working classes who have no purpose and no hope in their lives. The narrator represents the upper classes, who try to assuage their guilt with their money--by giving to charity or otherwise “buying” a clean conscience (the narrator’s attempts to give Bartleby money).

  Deconstructionist/Semiotics Reading

Deconstructionists explain that language is a cultural construct (like courtesy). The “rules” change from culture to culture and words “mean” only what we make them mean. Therefore, these critics like to “play” with words and language a lot and to find examples of how stories comment on, use, abuse, and play with words. Ultimately, they feel that all literature is about reading and writing, and they tend to look for examples of language “breaking down” (or deconstructing). Deconstructionists would point out the realities of Bartleby’s job--copying the words of others--and how it makes language and words arbitrary and meaningless (like repeating a single word aloud over and over until it begins to sound like nonsense to you). These critics would also discuss Bartleby’s job in the Dead Letter office, which “deconstructs” the ordinary construct of the Post Office: what is meant to happen (messages are delivered) doesn’t happen (the letters never arrive); the process of communication breaks down.

Christianity

It is possible to argue that the story of Bartleby is an allegory, Melville’s way of disclosing the modern society’s Christian morals with the lawyer acting either like the Good Samaritan and/or Peter, and Bartleby resembling Christ. Apart from the lawyer’s reminding the readers of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10: 30-35, Melville alludes said passages several times in the story, one of which on the first time the lawyer met Bartleby. The lawyer is also considered to be an allusion to Peter, most notably when Peter denied of knowing Jesus three times after Jesus’ arrest. The lawyer denied knowing Bartleby, or having to have anything to do anything with him three times, when the new tenant of his former office asked him to get Bartleby out of the premises. Should one choose to do a Christianity reading of “Bartleby the Scrivener”, it is apparent that Melville presents the eponymous character as a Christ-like figure, rebelling against the cold impersonality of capitalism and eventually being sacrificed in the debased ethics of Wall Street—as a way of criticizing the modern Christian morals that is being lost and construed due to society’s modern way of living and standards.