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Unreliable narration in Herman Melville's Bartleby, the Scrivener

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Abstract. Herman Melville's novella Bartleby, the Scrivener is renowned for its narrative ambiguity and complex themes of alienation and resistance. This paper explores the concept of unreliable narration through an analysis of the lawyer-narrator's subjectivity, limited understanding, and shifting attitudes. It argues that the narrator's unreliability functions not only as a storytelling device but also as a critique of capitalist dehumanization and emotional detachment. The essay ultimately suggests that Melville presents Bartleby as a figure of passive resistance, whose fate reflects the failures of a system indifferent to individual suffering.

Keywords: Herman Melville, Bartleby, the Scrivener, unreliable narration

1. Introduction

Herman Melville (1819–1891), best known for Moby-Dick (1851), was a 19th-century American novelist and poet whose works frequently interrogate authority, identity, and the moral consequences of modernity. Among his shorter fiction, Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street stands out for its enigmatic characters and layered narration [1].

Set in a Wall Street law office, the novella follows a lawyer who hires a quiet scrivener, Bartleby. Initially diligent, Bartleby soon refuses tasks with the passive statement, "I would prefer not to." His increasing detachment and the narrator's perplexed response become central to the story. Written at a time when Wall Street was emerging as a financial powerhouse, the setting amplifies the text's critique of economic systems and emotional desolation.

The story's first-person narration plays a critical role in shaping reader perception. Wayne C. Booth's concept of the "unreliable narrator," introduced in The Rhetoric of Fiction, is central here [2]. Booth suggests that all narratives carry rhetorical intent and that a narrator may be deemed unreliable when their version of events conflicts with the implied or actual truth. This essay draws on Booth's framework to argue that the lawyer in Bartleby is not a trustworthy guide, and that his account must be scrutinized for its omissions, biases, and inconsistencies.

This paper analyzes the narrator's unreliability in three key aspects: subjectivity and bias, limited understanding, and inconsistent attitude. It also connects these narrative features to larger themes of alienation and passive resistance in capitalist society.

2. Subjectivity and bias

In Bartleby, the Scrivener, the unnamed lawyer who narrates the story presents himself as a reasonable, kind, and thoughtful employer. However, a closer look reveals that his narration is shaped by personal bias and limited understanding. This makes him a clear example of what literary critic Wayne C. Booth called an unreliable narrator—someone whose version of events is not fully trustworthy. The lawyer believes he is being fair, but the way he describes others shows that his perspective is deeply subjective. His self-image and judgment distort the way readers see the characters, especially Bartleby.

One key reason the narrator is unreliable is that he filters everything through his own limited point of view. In narratology, this is called focalization—the technique by which a story is presented through the thoughts, feelings, and perceptions of a particular character. In this case, the story is fully focalized through the lawyer. We see what he sees, and we interpret things the way he does—unless we read carefully and question his descriptions. Since we never get direct access to Bartleby's thoughts or perspective, we are forced to rely on what the lawyer tells us, even when his assumptions are questionable.

From the beginning, the narrator tries to shape how we see him. He says he is "a rather elderly man" and describes himself as someone who avoids conflict and prefers a quiet life. These details make him seem calm and harmless, but they also work to excuse his passivity. He presents his office as an orderly space and his employees as odd but manageable. His use of nicknames

for his clerks—Turkey, Nippers, and Ginger Nut—shows how he reduces them to comic types instead of treating them as full human beings. Turkey is described as efficient in the morning but loud and unsteady in the afternoon; Nippers is irritable and always adjusting his desk; Ginger Nut is young and mostly runs errands. These names turn real people into stereotypes, which makes it easier for the narrator to ignore their needs or frustrations. This also reveals his subtle class bias—he views his employees as tools rather than individuals.

Bartleby, who joins the office later, is the only employee the narrator refers to by a real name. Even so, his descriptions of Bartleby are shaped by assumptions and emotional reactions rather than facts. He calls Bartleby "pallidly neat" and "incurably forlorn," words that suggest sadness and strangeness without offering any real understanding. The lawyer admits that he knows almost nothing about Bartleby's background or feelings. Still, he draws conclusions about his character and mental state. This creates a gap between what is known and what is assumed—a gap the narrator fills with his own interpretations.

The lawyer believes he is showing compassion, but his actions often reveal a desire to avoid discomfort rather than a true wish to help. When Bartleby first says, "I would prefer not to," the lawyer is confused, but he does not press Bartleby for answers. Instead, he backs down. He tells himself that Bartleby seems fragile, and so he lets the disobedience pass. In reality, he may be avoiding confrontation or protecting his sense of control.

The narrator's self-image as a kind and tolerant man becomes harder to believe as the story goes on. He continues to excuse Bartleby's refusal to work, but he never makes a serious effort to understand him. He speculates that Bartleby eats only ginger-nuts or that he once worked in the Dead Letter Office, but he never directly asks. This shows both a lack of curiosity and a lack of courage. Rather than seeking connection, the lawyer remains emotionally distant.

Through internal focalization—where all events are filtered through the narrator's thoughts—we as readers are given a narrow and possibly distorted view. We do not know how Bartleby sees the world or how others in the office feel about him. Ansgar Nünning has noted that unreliable narration often reveals itself through contradictions and one-sided descriptions [3]. The lawyer's account becomes the only story available, but it is clearly incomplete. The lawyer says he feels sympathy, but he also expresses annoyance. He claims to want to help, but he ends up leaving the office just to avoid Bartleby. These inconsistencies suggest that he is not as kind or responsible as he thinks he is.

Moreover, the lawyer's view of charity seems connected to control. He acts as though showing tolerance makes him morally superior, but he never treats Bartleby as an equal. He sees Bartleby's silence as a puzzle or inconvenience, not as a meaningful choice. Bartleby's refusal to explain himself threatens the lawyer's authority. Unable to categorize or manage him, the lawyer eventually gives up, leaving Bartleby behind.

In the end, the narrator's subjectivity is not just a personal flaw—it is a central part of the story's meaning. Melville invites readers to question the lawyer's version of events and to think critically about what has been left out or misunderstood. By showing us the story only through the lawyer's eyes, the text challenges us to recognize bias and think beyond it. The lawyer's reliability may be in doubt, but that doubt is what gives the story its depth and power.

3. Limited understanding

The narrator in Bartleby, the Scrivener often appears unsure, confused, or hesitant when describing Bartleby's actions and motivations. This limited knowledge is not just a personal failing but a structural part of the narration. Throughout the story, Melville uses the narrator's limited understanding to highlight the emotional and ideological distance between individuals in modern society. The narrator wants to be seen as thoughtful and sympathetic, but he often avoids asking direct questions or facing uncomfortable truths. His constant guessing about Bartleby's background and behavior reflects a deeper problem: he doesn't truly want to understand Bartleby—he only wants to manage or explain him away.

One way Melville shows this is by including what narratologists call narrative gaps—moments where important information is missing or withheld. These gaps force the reader to think critically about what is not being said. For example, we never learn anything definite about Bartleby's past. The narrator admits this himself: "what my own astonished eyes saw of Bartleby, that is all I know of him." Even the one potential clue—his supposed former job at the Dead Letter Office—is presented as a rumor and only mentioned at the very end of the story. This leaves the reader uncertain about who Bartleby really is and why he behaves the way he does. The lawyer's failure to seek the truth—or even try—is not just ignorance; it is a form of avoidance.

The narrator's perspective limits not just what he sees, but also how he interprets it. In this case, everything we know comes through the lawyer's eyes. We never get Bartleby's direct perspective or voice beyond a few repeated phrases. As a result, the story is shaped by the lawyer's thoughts, biases, and emotional responses. Because the narrator often avoids asking questions, avoids confrontation, and avoids acknowledging his discomfort, his perspective creates a distorted version of the events.

We see this clearly in the lawyer's handling of Bartleby's refusal to work. When Bartleby says, "I would prefer not to," the narrator is shocked but does not respond with authority or curiosity. He repeats the request, and when Bartleby repeats the refusal, the narrator simply backs off. This happens several times in the story, but the narrator never seriously tries to understand Bartleby's reasons. Instead, he rationalizes the behavior: perhaps Bartleby is ill, or overly sensitive, or quietly desperate. All these are guesses. The narrator even speculates that Bartleby survives only on ginger-nuts because he sees him eat them once. These assumptions reveal more about the lawyer's imagination than about Bartleby himself.

The lawyer feels sympathy for Bartleby, but this sympathy rarely turns into real action. When Bartleby stops working entirely and begins living in the office, the narrator simply works around him, pretending not to notice. Later, when others begin to complain about Bartleby's presence, the narrator's sympathy turns into embarrassment and anxiety. Instead of confronting the problem, he moves his office to a new location, leaving Bartleby behind. He tells himself this is a kind way to avoid hurting Bartleby, but it is really a way of avoiding responsibility.

This avoidance is part of a larger pattern. The narrator sets up physical and emotional barriers between himself and others. He installs a screen between his own desk and his employees. He rarely speaks with them directly and mostly comments on their quirks. Bartleby, who sits behind a screen as well, becomes an even more distant figure. When Bartleby stops responding, the lawyer's solution is not to talk to him but to move away. The repeated presence of "walls" in the story—literal and symbolic—emphasizes how limited the narrator's understanding really is. He does not look past those walls, nor does he try.

These actions reveal a failure not only of understanding but of moral clarity. The narrator prefers to believe he is charitable and kind, even while he distances himself from someone in need. When Bartleby is arrested and taken to the Tombs, the lawyer visits him once but then stops trying to help. Bartleby dies shortly after, alone and hungry. The lawyer reflects on this with the vague phrase "Ah, humanity!"—a line that sounds emotional but does not explain anything. As critic Ingo Berensmeyer notes, this phrase works more like a moral cover than a real insight [4]. It closes the story while avoiding the deeper question of who was responsible for Bartleby's decline.

In narratology, narrative gaps often serve as invitations for readers to interpret events in their own way. In this story, Melville creates many such gaps—not only in Bartleby's backstory, but in the narrator's motivations as well. Why does he tolerate Bartleby for so long? Why does he suddenly stop caring? These unanswered questions invite the reader to step into the story and consider what might be happening behind the scenes. Melville gives us only the narrator's version, but he includes enough inconsistencies and absences that we begin to see that version as incomplete. This is part of what makes the narrator unreliable—not because he is lying, but because he cannot face the full truth.

Ultimately, the narrator's limited understanding is both a personal flaw and a symbol of a larger problem. He represents a professional class that avoids emotional engagement and hides behind routines and rationalizations. Bartleby challenges this way of living simply by refusing to participate. His silence, his passivity, and his isolation all draw attention to how disconnected people have become from one another. The narrator cannot understand Bartleby because he does not really want to. His confusion and passivity protect him from guilt, but they also prevent any real human connection.

4. Inconsistent attitude

One of the clearest signs of the narrator's unreliability in Bartleby, the Scrivener is the inconsistency between what he says and what he does. At different points in the story, he expresses sympathy, confusion, irritation, and fear toward Bartleby, yet his actions often contradict these feelings. He claims to be acting with kindness and moral concern, but more often he is motivated by self-protection and avoidance. This gap between the narrator's stated values and his behavior reveals what Wayne C. Booth calls ethical unreliability—a kind of unreliability that emerges not from factual errors, but from the narrator's failure to follow his own moral reasoning [2]. It is through these shifting attitudes that Melville constructs a narrator who cannot be fully trusted and who may be unaware of his own contradictions.

At the beginning, the narrator describes Bartleby with a mix of curiosity and mild sympathy. He says Bartleby is "neat," "respectable," and "forlorn." When Bartleby begins to decline tasks by simply saying "I would prefer not to," the narrator's first reaction is surprise, but he quickly tells himself that he feels "touched" and "disconcerted" rather than angry. This emotional response seems admirable, but it also sets the stage for avoidance. Rather than addressing Bartleby's behavior directly, the narrator starts to rationalize it. He imagines that Bartleby is delicate or mentally unwell, and he tells himself that forcing him to work would be cruel. These excuses serve to ease the narrator's discomfort, but they do little to help Bartleby.

As the story progresses, the narrator's attitude shifts repeatedly. He admits that Bartleby's strange behavior disturbs him, yet he continues to tolerate it until it begins to affect his own reputation. When visitors notice Bartleby doing nothing, the narrator becomes embarrassed and begins to see him as a threat to the office's professional image. Still, he hesitates to act. He explains his inaction in moral terms, saying he does not want to be unkind, but in reality, he fears confrontation and social judgment.

The narrator's language becomes increasingly contradictory. At one point, he describes himself as "unmanned" by Bartleby's quiet resistance. Later, he admits that Bartleby's presence fills him with both pity and fear. He says, "just in proportion as the forlornness of Bartleby grew... did that same melancholy merge into fear, that pity into repulsion." This emotional reversal shows how unstable the narrator's attitude really is. What begins as sympathy transforms into resentment, but the narrator is reluctant to admit this change. Instead, he continues to tell himself that he is acting ethically, even as he moves his office to avoid Bartleby altogether.

Just after Bartleby refuses to answer any questions about his history, the lawyer finds that he begins using the word "prefer" involuntarily and does his clerks either. He feels terrified. At that time, Bartleby becomes something like a virus that is contagious, but mentally. If it is still going on, it will be hard to keep order and authority for the boss. So, the lawyer decides to drive Bartleby away but in a mild way. So, it is inferred that the true reason why the lawyer helps Bartleby and sounds like a man

full of charity and kindness is to regain the sole authority of the office. He declares himself as a thoughtful and sympathetic man and gives Bartleby a considerable sum of money, but it is like throwing money at social problems without taking time to understand it [5]. When we reread the story, we find out that the narrator tells this story to convince the readers that he is not against his conscience and to cover up his unfair treatment of his employees.

These contradictions highlight the narrator's desire to appear morally consistent, even when he is not. He often narrates his actions in a way that makes them seem kinder or more reasonable than they really are. For example, when he finally gives Bartleby money and a vague suggestion to find work elsewhere, he presents this as a generous gesture. But when Bartleby refuses and remains at the old office, the narrator simply leaves him behind. Later, when Bartleby is arrested and sent to jail, the narrator visits once but does not intervene further. Bartleby dies in prison, and the narrator ends the story with the vague and sentimental phrase, "Ah, humanity!" This final statement can also be read as a way of avoiding the concrete truth that resides in Bartleby's fatal end [4]. This disconnect between appearance and action is a key marker of unreliable narration. But it also raises a larger question: what is Melville's purpose in constructing such a narrator? Here, the concept of the implied author becomes useful. Coined by Booth, the implied author is not the real historical writer, but rather the version of the author that readers infer from the structure and tone of the text. The implied author of Bartleby seems aware of the narrator's flaws and wants the reader to see through them. By showing the lawyer's inconsistencies and evasions, the implied author invites the reader to take a more critical view—not just of the narrator, but of the system he represents.

The narrator is not simply a flawed individual; he is a product of a larger social and economic order. His position as a lawyer on Wall Street, his desire to keep order, and his discomfort with emotional engagement all point to the values of a capitalist society that rewards efficiency, detachment, and hierarchy. Bartleby, by refusing to participate in this system, exposes its moral emptiness. His silence and passivity are unsettling not because they are aggressive, but because they reveal how little space there is in that system for human need, vulnerability, or difference.

Melville does not give us direct access to his own voice, but through the narrator's inconsistencies, he constructs a space for critique. The story does not tell us what to think, but it gives us the tools to question the narrator's judgment. In Bartleby, this tension pushes readers to see that the narrator is not just morally confused but is also an example of how good intentions can mask complicity and indifference.

In the end, the narrator's inconsistency is not just a narrative flaw—it is the very point. His shifting emotions, rationalizations, and final sentimental sigh all reflect a person trying to escape responsibility without admitting failure. Through this portrayal, Melville offers a sharp commentary on the way people use moral language to protect themselves from uncomfortable truths. The implied author does not condemn the narrator outright, but he gives the reader every reason to do so.

5. Conclusion

Melville's Bartleby, the Scrivener offers a powerful critique of capitalist alienation through the lens of unreliable narration. The lawyer's subjectivity, ignorance, and moral inconsistency call into question the credibility of his story. His unreliability invites readers to look beyond his perspective and consider the deeper implications of Bartleby's silent protest.

Rather than portraying Bartleby as merely eccentric, Melville positions him as a figure of resistance—one who quietly challenges the norms of obedience, productivity, and submission. In doing so, Melville reveals the dehumanizing tendencies of modern bureaucracies and the moral blindness of those who benefit from them.

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