



Instant Short Story Pack

Each pack contains:

- Objectives
- Full Text of Story
- Student Questions
- Activities and Graphic Organizers
- Teacher Answer Guide

Bartleby, the Scrivener:
A Story of Wall-Street
BY HERMAN MELVILLE

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.1, 4, 5
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.1, 4, 5, 6, 9



Note to Teacher:

An *Instant Short Story Pack* on Nathaniel Hawthorne’s “Rappaccini’s Daughter” is also available. You might find it helpful to teach these two stories—by contemporaneous authors with similar thematic interests—together.

Reading Literature Standard 11-12.9 specifies: *Demonstrate knowledge of eighteenth-, nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century foundational works of American literature, including how two or more texts from the same period treat similar themes or topics.* Question #6 in this unit is the same as Question #4 in the unit for Hawthorne’s “Rappaccini’s Daughter.” Students will have to have read both stories in order to answer this one question.

Objectives:

After completing the activities in this packet, the student will be able to:

- cite textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text (RL.9-10.1; 11-12.1),
- analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone (RL.9-10.4; 11-12.4),
- analyze how an author’s choice of where to begin or end a story contributes to its overall meaning and aesthetic impact (RL.9-10.5; 11-12.5),
- analyze a case in which grasping a point of view requires distinguishing what is directly stated in a text from what is really meant (RL.11-12.6), and
- demonstrate knowledge of how two or more texts from the same period treat similar themes or topics (RL.11-12.9).

Time:

3-5 class periods

Materials:

✓ 1 copy of each handout per student:

- **Handout #1** (3 pages) – Purpose-setting and Motivational Activities
- **Handout #2** (37 pages) – Text of Story
- **Handout #3** (1 page) – Student Questions
- **Handout #4** (7 pages) – Activities and Graphic Organizers

✓ Teacher Answer Guide

Procedure:

1. Reproduce all handouts.
2. Distribute **Handouts #1** and **#2**.
 - Allow students to read the short biography of Melville (approximately 10 minutes).
 - Read and discuss the information about Melville’s work and ideas (approximately 20 minutes).
 - Assign the story to be read for homework (might require 2 nights’ reading) OR
 - Allow students to read the story in class (might take 2 class periods) and perform the two **As you read...** activities.

Herman Melville

Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall-Street

“Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall-Street” is as much a puzzle as it is a story. It is one of those stories for which the phrase “no one knows what it really means” is not an exaggeration. There have been dozens of supportable interpretations put forward to explain the story, as well as an equal number of unlikely interpretations.

“Bartleby” was first published anonymously in two installments (November and December 1853) in *Putnam’s Monthly Magazine*. Melville later included it in his collection of short stories titled *The Piazza Tales*, which was published in May 1856. He published it anonymously first because none of his regular publishers would accept it. The reviews and sales of *Moby-Dick* had been disappointing, and the reviews and sales of his latest novel, *Pierre*, had been worse. No one was willing to touch a story by Herman Melville.

Modern scholars often consider it a forerunner of absurdist literature. In philosophy, absurdism explores the conflict between a person’s desire to find the inherent meaning of life and his absolute inability to find any. Absurdist literature, then, focuses on characters who find themselves performing actions that are ultimately meaningless and serve no essential purpose in life. The title character, Bartleby, is a scrivener, a person whose job is to make copies of important legal or business documents. By the time the narrator of this story employs Bartleby, the work of the scrivener was becoming obsolete. Carbon paper, which had been invented in Italy in 1801, would fairly quickly end the need to employ humans to make copies of documents.

Not only was Bartleby’s occupation about to be rendered extinct by a sheet of carbon paper, the copies Bartleby was called on to make—and whose accuracy he was required to verify—were, ultimately, nonessential records of real estate and financial transactions. They were most likely destined to be filed away and never actually read. Early in the story, the narrator tells the reader, “I am one of those unambitious lawyers who never addresses a jury, or in any way draws down public applause; but in the cool tranquility of a snug retreat, do a snug business among rich men’s bonds and mortgages and title-deeds.” Later, he admits about verifying the copies’ accuracy, “It is a very dull, wearisome, and lethargic affair.”

Some critics claim the story is an autobiographical allegory. At the time he wrote “Bartleby,” Melville was largely considered—and he considered himself—a failed writer. Perhaps Bartleby’s refusal to work reflects Melville’s dissatisfaction with his own work. Some of these critics even claim that Bartleby’s pointless job and his past in the dead letter office predict Melville’s eventual fate as a clerk in the New York customs office.

Herman Melville

Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall-Street

Lexile Measure: 1040L

I AM A RATHER ELDERLY man. The nature of my avocations for the last thirty years has brought me into more than ordinary contact with what would seem an interesting and somewhat singular set of men, of whom as yet nothing that I know of has ever been written:—I mean the law-copyists or scriveners. I have known very many of them, professionally and privately, and if I pleased, could relate divers histories, at which good-natured gentlemen might smile, and sentimental souls might weep. But I waive the biographies of all other scriveners for a few passages in the life of Bartleby, who was a scrivener of the strangest I ever saw or heard of. While of other law-copyists I might write the complete life, of Bartleby nothing of that sort can be done. I believe that no materials exist for a full and satisfactory biography of this man. It is an irreparable loss to literature. Bartleby was one of those beings of whom nothing is ascertainable, except from the original sources, and in his case those are very small. What my own astonished eyes saw of Bartleby, *that* is all I know of him, except, indeed, one vague report which will appear in the sequel.

Ere introducing the scrivener, as he first appeared to me, it is fit I make some mention of myself, my *employees*, my business, my chambers, and general surroundings; because some such description is indispensable to an adequate understanding of the chief character about to be presented.

Imprimis: I am a man who, from his youth upwards, has been filled with a profound conviction that the easiest way of life is the best. Hence, though I belong to a profession proverbially energetic and nervous, even to turbulence, at times, yet nothing of that sort have I ever suffered to invade my peace. I am one of

Herman Melville

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STUDENT QUESTIONS:

1. (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.1; 11-12.1) “Bartleby, the Scrivener” was first published in November and December 1853, and the narrator makes it clear that he is recounting events that occurred some time prior to that. Approximately when does the story take place? What clues does Melville provide to suggest the time setting of the story?
2. (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.4; 11-12.4) Explain how Melville’s frequent use of litotes contributes to the development of the narrator’s character.
3. (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.6) The narrator is the only round character in this story. Examine the information Melville provides about the narrator—both what he says about himself and the inferences we can draw from his actions—and provide a well-rounded description of the narrator. Explain the conflicts and contradictions that make the narrator worthy of study. Be certain to support all of your claims and inferences with direct references to the story.
4. (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.5; 11-12.5) What does Melville achieve by not revealing Bartleby’s history until after the story has ended? In what ways does the presence of the “sequel” that is mentioned in the very first paragraph alter the overall impact of the story?
5. (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.6) This story is a combination of rumor, conjecture, and fact. What are the facts? What evidence does Melville provide to suggest whether the rumor and conjecture might be accurate or off the mark?
6. (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.9) Examine how fellow anti-transcendentalists Herman Melville and Nathaniel Hawthorne (“Rappaccini’s Daughter”) treat some of the most essential tenets of transcendentalism (e.g., the need for isolation, the perfectibility of humankind, the veneration of Nature, the role of intuition in gaining knowledge, etc.). How can both stories be said to illustrate their authors’ objections to Transcendental philosophy?

Question 3: The narrator is the only round character in this story. Examine all of the information Melville provides about the narrator—both what he says about himself and the inferences we can draw from his actions—and provide a well-rounded description of the narrator. Explain the conflicts and contradictions that make the narrator worthy of study. Be certain to support all of your claims and inferences with direct references to the story.

This is a fairly straightforward question. However, you might find the following chart helpful.

