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Literary Analysis of "Bartleby the Scrivener"  
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Death is one event that everyone will eventually face. Yet, people have adopted a number of different attitudes toward it. Some choose to forget about it; others constantly fear it. Some regard it as a reminder to live every day to the fullest; others consider it a reason to stop caring. That last position was the one accepted by Bartleby, one of the central characters in Herman Melville's short story, "Bartleby the Scrivener." Through his descriptions of Bartleby's behavior and possible former occupation, Melville suggests that Bartleby's aberrance stems from an overpowering belief that nothing in life actually matters.

The most solid evidence as to the origin of this apathy comes from the rumor that the narrator relates at the end of the story: Bartleby reputedly worked in the Dead Letter Office in Washington, where he burned mail that could not be delivered or returned. The dead mail might include "a bank-note sent in swiftest charity—he whom it would relieve, nor eats nor hungers any more; pardon for those who died despairing; hope for those who died unhoping; good tidings for those who died stifled by unrelieved calamities. On errands of life, these letters speed to death" (994). Melville's examples illustrate the impact that the Dead Letter Office may have had on Bartleby: day after day, he saw how all of the "errands of life" that people work so hard to carry out become meaningless once death arrives. Thence, Bartleby would have concluded that it is foolish to lead an active life when everything that we could ever accomplish will be nullified by death.

In view of this explanation, Bartleby's manner of "pallid hopelessness" (994) begins to make more sense. Bartleby lives in the narrator's office (980), and "he never went anywhere" (977). "[H]e eats nothing but ginger-nuts," notwithstanding the "hot, spicy" nature of ginger

contrasts sharply with his “passive” personality (977). Bartleby will not check the documents that he transcribes (975), and he soon refuses to even copy documents, because his eyes have become “dull and glazed” (984). Whenever the narrator beseeches Bartleby to perform his duties as a scrivener, the reply is invariably, “I would prefer not to” (975). Bartleby’s eccentricities are the symptoms of an overwhelming indifference toward life; during his “dead-wall reveries” (982), Bartleby stares out of a window at a blank wall, simply waiting for death to come.

Melville intimates that Bartleby’s reported service in the Dead Letter Office led to his withdrawal. From his bland diet to his refusal to move out of the narrator’s office, Bartleby’s behavior evinces a fundamental lack of excitement or concern for the “errands of life” that, he believes, will not matter after death. While the story’s narrator did not appear to accept Bartleby’s hopeless view of life, he did ultimately recognize the inevitability of death for us all when he cried, “Ah, Bartleby! Ah, humanity!”