

# Ambiguity in *Bartleby, The Scrivener: A Story of Wall-street*

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## Abstract

**Bartleby, The Scrivener: A Story of Wall-street is a short fiction written by American writer Herman Melville. This paper mainly focuses on the analysis of the ambiguous artistic feature and the ambiguous theme in this work. Through analyzing the ambiguity in characterization and ambiguity in images in *Bartleby, The Scrivener: A Story Of Wall-street*, this paper provides readers with more possibilities to better appreciate and understand this short fiction.**

## Keywords

**Bartleby; The Scrivener: A Story of Wall-street; Herman Melville; Ambiguity.**

## 1. Introduction to Ambiguity

Ambiguity is an important concept for New Criticism. I.A Richards is a representative of New Criticism who holds the ideas similar to the characteristics of the ambiguity. According to Richards, a work inevitably contains more than one meaning. He thinks that the deliberate ambiguity can contribute to the effectiveness and richness of a work. [4] William Empson, a student of Richards', published *Seven Types of Ambiguity* in 1930. In this book, he lists seven situations when ambiguity occurs. About the explanation to the ambiguity, Empson proposes "to use the word in an extended sense, and shall think relevant to my subject any verbal nuance, however slight, which gives room for alternative reactions to the same piece of language." [1] Guerlin defines it as "doubtfulness or uncertainty about the intention or meaning of something." [2] It is "used for words that suggest two or more appropriate meanings or that convey both a basic meaning and complex overtones of that meaning." [2] Ambiguity, as one of the important aesthetic characteristics of literature, leaves readers with endless aftertaste.

## 2. Ambiguity in *Bartleby, The Scrivener: A Story of Wall-street*

In *Bartleby, The Scrivener: A Story of Wall-street*, Melville skillfully exerts a serious of ambiguity of the language. By virtue of ambiguity, Melville successfully implies the possibilities of readers' multiple interpretation to this short fiction. *Bartleby, The Scrivener: A Story of Wall-street* is ambiguous. Ambiguity enables one to consider possibilities. There is no fixed judgment in the story but ambivalent arrangement which leaves huge space for different interpretations and adds to the complexity and depth of the novel.

### 2.1. Ambiguity in the Characterization

The morality of the old lawyer is ambiguous in this work. It is difficult for us to make an accurate judgement whether the old lawyer is a good person or a bad person, for the human nature is too complicated to be judged by a single criterion. Melville adopts the first-person narrative perspective to present us the whole story, which makes the narration very subjective. In this work, the old lawyer who is the narrator of this story tries to show how friendly and compassionate he is. In face with Bartleby's resistance again and again, he always represses his bad mood, and sometimes even makes excuses for Bartleby's eccentric behaviors. He thinks that "nothing so aggravates an earnest person as a passive resistance. If the individual so resisted be of a not inhumane temper, and the resisting one perfectly harmless in his passivity;

then, in the better moods of the former, he will endeavor charitably to construe to his imagination what proves impossible to be solved by his judgment." [3] The old lawyer even considers Bartleby as a very poor, and pitiful person. He thinks that "if he turns him away, the chances are he will fall in with some less indulgent employer, and then be rudely treated, and perhaps driven forth miserably to starve." [3] Therefore, the old lawyer thinks that he can cheaply purchase a delicious self-approval. He cares about Bartleby's living conditions and his future after being dismissed from his office. When Bartleby is sent to the prison, the old lawyer bribes the turnkey and asks the turnkey give particular attention to his friend. To some extent, the old lawyer is a kind and charitable person. If readers feel only by believing what the lawyer presents, they will easily believe the lawyer's narration. However, readers need to recognize that their perceptions and thoughts are conducted and influenced by the narrator.

If readers carefully analyze the old lawyer from another perspective, it is not difficult to find that he is by no means a so-called charitable and safe person. Although he thinks that the measure of befriending Bartleby and humoring him in his strange willfulness will cost him little or nothing, he does not really want to do that. He thinks "while I lay up in my soul what will eventually prove a sweet morsel for my conscience. But this mood was not invariable with me. The passiveness of Bartleby sometimes irritated me." [3] From the description to the lawyer's thoughts, it is not hard to find that the old lawyer holds a very complicated and contradictory mood. He is testified by morality. On the one hand, driving Bartleby away will be a betrayal of his conscience. On the other hand, if he does not drive Bartleby away from his chamber, he will always tolerate his passiveness and resistance. After a struggle, he chooses to forgive Bartleby's unreasonable behaviors. The struggle here shows his hesitate in doing charitable things for Bartleby. As an employer, he values the benefits that employees can bring to him. He emphasizes that Turkey, Nippers although have some shortcomings, they are very useful to him. As long as these scribes have useful value, he can continue to put up with them. The starting point of his charity is mostly to meet the needs of his conscience. The reason why he gives Bartleby money is that he wants to make Bartleby resign proactively so as not to scandalize his professional reputation. The reason why Bartleby is homeless is because the old lawyer forces Bartleby to be taken away by others by moving out of his chamber. When the lawyer who takes over the office asks the old lawyer to be responsible for Bartleby, the old lawyer quickly clears the relationship with him and says "I'm very sorry sir, but the man you allude to is nothing to me, he is no relation or apprentice of mine, that you should hold me responsible for him." [3] The old lawyer is not as good as he describes himself. When Bartleby's actions seriously damage his own interests, he does not hesitate to sacrifice Bartleby to safeguard his own interests. Here, the hypocrisy and selfishness of the old lawyer are vividly and clearly presented.

Bartleby's attitude towards life is ambiguous, which makes the reader hard to make an accurate judgement that whether he holds passive or positive attitude to life. To some extent, his behaviors of doing nothing is a kind of escape from the world. Since the sentence "I prefer not to" spoken by Bartleby appears for a dozen times in this work, we need to pay much attention to it. According to the lawyer's description to Bartleby, he is a motionless young man. His figure is "pallidly neat, pitiably respectable, incurably forlorn." [3] The narrator's description to Bartleby's appearance and his motion makes us feel his passiveness. He does not have the vitality that a young man should own. He seems like a passive character for his several resistances to his boss' requests and refusals to others' concerns. He always says "I would prefer not to." It not only contains the meaning of Bartleby's rebellion against the authority of the lawyer, but also contains other different meanings. He prefers not to change, not to accept others. Bartleby never goes to dinner, and he never goes anywhere. He always keeps a distance with other people, never having a normal communication with others. To some extent, he confines himself into an invisible prison. Actually, it is Bartleby himself subjectively refuses to integrate himself into this society. In the dialogue between the old lawyer and Bartleby, it is not

hard to feel that he is negative to his work and even to his future life. After Bartleby is dismissed, the old lawyer cares about his career and asks him what profession he wants to do. He offers Bartleby several job options. However, Bartleby tells him he prefers not to do any one of them, and he does not want to make any change. "What I saw that morning persuaded me that the scrivener was the victim of innate and incurable disorder. I might give alms to his body; but his body did not pain his soul that suffered, and his soul I could not reach." [3] He asks Bartleby whether he would like to re-engage in coping for someone. Bartleby refuses "No, I would prefer not to make any change." [3] The lawyer asks him whether he would like a clerkship in a dry-goods store. Bartleby reduces again "there is too much confinement about that. No, I would not like a clerkship; but I am not particular" [3] According to the lawyer's description, Bartleby is undoubtedly an eccentric scrivener who is totally different from other scriveners.

However, we cannot surely consider that Bartleby is passive, for he is positive to resist bourgeois oppression. The way Bartleby refuses are very different from the ordinary people. We cannot believe that such a silent and superficially less aggressive person will fight against the person and the environment surrounding him. With his peaceful but powerful words and actions, Bartleby refuses to do all the things. He even refuses to move out from the lawyer's chamber after he is dismissed. He does not refuse emotionally with the words "I will not do that", but says, "I would prefer not to." [3] Here, long-term repression and tolerance are reflected in his words. Bartleby's response is a kind of peaceful but powerful resistance. He is positive to resist the unequal social system. So, to some extent, he is not a passive character. We may have different interpretations to the sentence "I would prefer not to" which reflects Bartleby's attitude towards society. He dares to convey his disobedience to the authority, and he dares to pursue his basic right as a man. To some extent, Bartleby's insist on his own rights of pursuing freedom and being an independent individual makes him a hero.

## 2.2. Ambiguity in the Images

The image of Wall-street is ambiguous. From the title of this short fiction, the author would like to tell us a story which is happened in Wall-street in New York. Wall-street, as the financial center of America, represents not only the financial and economic power of America but also the ruthless capitalistic society. Wall-street is actually an epitome of capitalist society. Moreover, we can have other explanations to Wall-street. It can be literally regarded as a street full of walls. Melville uses the pun word, Wall-street, to indicate that people are living in an environment surrounded by walls. The Wall-street hints that human nature is imprisoned by various social institutions and conventions. People are bounded by the social system. Their working place is surrounded by the towering buildings and walls. In this work, we know that the old lawyer's chambers are upstairs at one of the buildings in Wall-street. "At one end they looked upon the white wall of the interior of a spacious sky- shaft, penetrating the building from top to bottom. In that direction my windows commanded an unobstructed view of a lofty brick wall, black by age and everlasting shade; which wall required no spy-glass to bring out its lurking beauties, but for the benefit of all near-sighted spectators, was pushed up to within ten feet of my window panes. Owing to the great height of the surrounding buildings, and my chambers being on the second floor, the interval between this wall and mine not a little resembled a huge square cistern." [3] The old lawyer tells us that Bartleby lives in the office and regards the office as his home. In his mind, Bartleby is friendless and loneliness. "Of a Sunday, Wall-street is deserted as Petra; and every night of every day it is an emptiness. This building too, which of week-days hums with industry and life, at nightfall echoes with sheer vacancy, and all through Sunday is forlorn." [3] Bartleby is very lonely and nobody cares about him. People who are imprisoned in this isolated prison of the society lose their ability to communicate and understand each other. So, the wall is also a barrier to interpersonal

communication. The exist of the wall causes loneliness, selfishness and apathy of people in capitalist society.

The meaning of the grass-seed in the yard is ambiguous, for it is hard to discern and judge whether it implies a society with a bright future or one that is still bound by the capitalist system. "The yard was entirely quiet. It was not accessible to the common prisoners. The surrounding walls, of amazing thickness, kept off all sounds behind them. The Egyptian character of the masonry weighed upon me with its gloom. But a soft imprisoned turf grew under foot. The heart of the eternal pyramids, it seemed, wherein, by some strange magic, through the clefts, grass-seed, dropped by birds, had sprung." [3] In this part, Melville's choice of words is totally different from the previous dull words. The depiction of two contradictory pictures shows the ambiguity of the ideas conveyed by the author. Here, the poetic depiction to the environment of the yard brings us a kind of enjoyment and delight. In the industrialized and materialized American society, the original beauty of nature is destroyed and deprived by the relentless industrial civilization. People who live in this mechanical and materialized society lose their ability to enjoy nature and enjoy the beauty surrounding them. They lose their original nature of being a man of flesh and blood, but become a soulless and emotionless body, working like a machine. They are bound to various kinds of social systems, and become the slaves of this society. There is little hope for them to escape from this ruthless world. However, Melville's description to the growth of the grass-seed sweeps away our previous feelings of oppression and hopelessness. Here, the growth of grass-seed may give us a kind of vitality and hope. With the tenacious vitality, the grass although is imprisoned and isolated by the wall, it still struggles with the harsh living conditions. To some extent, the grass-seed depicted by Melville is very like our main character Bartleby, weak but unyielding. Bartleby fights against the hypocritical and utilitarian society lonely. He tries his best to rebel against the ruthless exploitation and oppression of the lower classes by the bourgeoisie in America. So, the grass-seed implies courage and the spirit of perseverance. It also implies a firm belief and a good hope for the future, that is, there will be an equal society without any exploitation and oppression in the future.

The grass seed represents a bright and hopeful future. However, the grass described by the author is grown in prison, which makes its symbolic meaning ambiguous. In this work, almost all the things are imprisoned, even the turf in the yard is imprisoned. The grass grown in the yard is surrounded by the walls. No matter how hush the grass will grow, it is still a confined life. No matter how stubborn life is or how fierce the struggle is, it is always difficult for people to escape the stipulations of society. To some extent, the power of the grass seed is too weak to shake the powerful capitalist system. Therefore, the imprisoned grass reveals the author's regret and pessimism about the future. It is not known what kind of emotion the Melville wants to express through depicting the growth of grass-seed. It is also not known what kind of attitude Melville has towards the future. Maybe Melville would like to convey us an idea that there is no fixed understanding of a literary work.

### 3. Conclusion

To conclude, the use of ambiguity makes this short fiction more charming and more complicated to read. In this paper, the ambiguity of the morality of the old lawyer and the ambiguity of Bartlby toward his life are discussed, which makes us know the uncertainty of the human nature. The ambiguity of the image of Wall-street and the grass-seed gives us more possibilities to understand the connotations of this work. Through analyzing the ambiguity in *Bartleby: The Scrivener, A Story of wall-street*, this paper helps readers to feel the strong artistic charm and inherent complexity of this work better.

## References

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- [2] Guerlin, Wilfred L: A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature (Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, China 2004), p. 33-34.
- [3] Melville, Herman: Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall-street. (Harper Collins Publishers, Australia 2009).
- [4] Richards, I, A: Principles of Literary Criticism ( Routledge, U.S. 2001).