

The Narrator of "Bartleby":

by Robert S. Boone

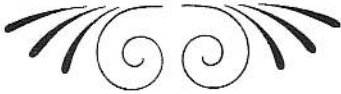
When it comes to fictional characters, we can ask all kinds of questions: Are they "good guys" or "bad guys"? Complicated or simple? Convincing or phony? Developing or static? Principal or minor? How do the characters affect the plot? How does the plot affect the characters? Do we like them? Do we despise them? *Should we like them?*

So far, these questions probably all seem familiar to you. At one time or another, you have asked them or answered them. But how about this one? "Are the characters at peace with themselves, or are they in crisis?"


Now this is a different kind of question. If we answer "Yes, the character is in a state of crisis," we must be discussing someone out of the ordinary. For a character to be in a state of crisis, a lot more is at stake than which play to call in the huddle or which brand of diet cat food to drop into the shopping basket. Characters who are truly in crisis are asking questions that challenge just about everything they once believed. Characters in crisis are living through critical moments in their lives; nothing will ever be the same again.

Creating such characters is a real challenge for us as writers. How can we capture in words, on a flat page of paper, the sense of such complicated and driven human beings? We can't just say: "Old Irma here is a character in crisis." We must show Irma's crisis, for showing is the job of the fiction writer.

It was a job that nineteenth-century American writer Herman



A Character in Crisis



Melville performed better than practically anyone else. Even if you have not read *Moby Dick*, you probably know that it concerns one of literature's troubled human beings, Captain Ahab, on the hunt for the great white whale. In his short story "Bartleby the Scrivener," Melville created another character who grows into a truly agonized human being. By the middle of the story, this man is utterly at odds with himself. He has a problem he cannot solve. What might have worked before will not work now. His dilemma forces him to question his entire philosophy of life. Nothing seems certain anymore. His crisis is at the very core of this fascinating piece of fiction.

A Contented Man

Briefly, "Bartleby" is a story narrated by an aging lawyer whose name we never learn. He tells about a young man named Bartleby whom he has hired as a scrivener, a copier of legal documents. At first Bartleby

does "an extraordinary quantity of writing," but then, one day, instead of following orders, he announces, "I prefer not to." Bartleby's refusals grow more and more frequent, until he just stares out the window all day long. The lawyer tries to get rid of him, but Bartleby will not leave. The lawyer finally moves his offices. Bartleby will not leave. In the end, Bartleby dies in prison.

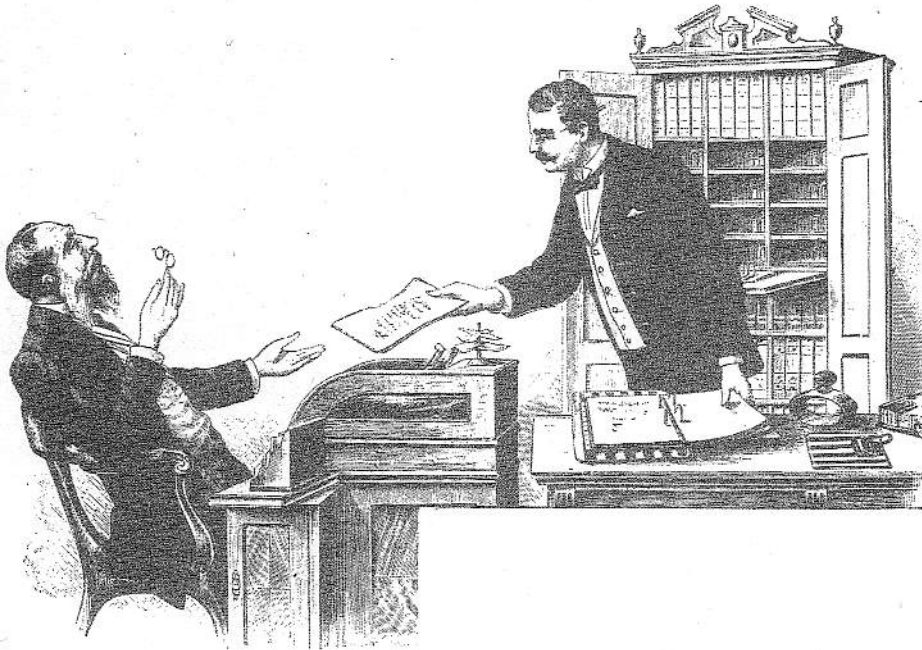
Now, you might think that because the story is named for the scrivener, he is the character in crisis. But he's not. The character in crisis is the lawyer. To show this, Melville makes a number of ingenious choices.

Melville begins by making the lawyer, when we first meet him, the total opposite of a character in crisis. By making him the narrator, Melville can have him speak directly to us, and tell us his image of himself:

I am a man who . . . [is] filled with the 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.

He describes himself as a "safe" man who does a "snug business among rich men's bonds." How emotional is he? "I seldom lose my temper." And why should he lose his temper? Everything goes his way. He has a philosophy that works. He avoids problems that might upset him. All of this he tells us more or less directly.

Melville further emphasizes the narrator's early confidence by comparing him with two of his employees. One, named Turkey, is calm in



the morning, but after lunch he takes on a "strange, inflamed, flurried, flighty recklessness of activity about him." He acts in fits of "sudden passion." Next to this wild man, the narrator stands out as a "man of peace."

Then there is another employee, Nippers, whose "ambition and indigestion" keep him from being calm and controlled. Like Turkey, he is a man on fire, and he makes the narrator's calm confidence stand out by comparison. Nippers is ambitious; he wants something he does not have. The narrator, on the other hand, has it all. Nothing bothers him because he's got it all figured out.

Enter Bartleby

Then Bartleby comes to work, and the lawyer's calm begins to dissolve. As the narrator, he reports what happens, starting with Bartleby's first refusal:

... I called to him, rapidly stating what it was I wanted him to do—namely, to examine a small paper with me. Imagine my surprise, nay, my consternation, when, without moving from his privacy, Bartleby, in a singularly mild, firm voice, replied, "I would prefer not to."

At first, the lawyer applies a commonsense explanation—Bartleby "misunderstood" him. But it soon

becomes clear he did not. The narrator asserts he would have fired him on the spot "had there been anything ordinarily human about him." He finally decides, after this first encounter: "This is very strange, thought I. What had one best to do? But my business hurried me."

Soon after, Bartleby again refuses to accept work. The narrator notes: "There was something about Bartleby that not only disarmed me, but in a wonderful manner, touched and disconcerted me." At this point he is using mild terms—*strange, disconcerted*—to register his mild frustration with the problem.

As Bartleby keeps refusing to work, the narrator reports his own increasing agitation. Gradually the "dilemma" increases, as he tells us: "The passiveness of Bartleby sometimes irritated me. I felt strangely goaded on to encounter him in new opposition." He describes these unexplained feelings as an "evil impulse."

Finally, he resorts to much stronger language:

For the first time in my life a feeling of overpowering stinging melancholy seized me.... The bond of a common humanity now drew me irresistibly to gloom. A fraternal melancholy! For both I and Bartleby were sons of Adam.

A few short pages before, this man was smug and satisfied; now he's entertaining thoughts that never invaded his head before.

What shall I do? I now said to myself, buttoning up my coat to the last button. What shall I do? What does conscience say I shall do with this man, or rather ghost. Rid myself of him, I must; go, he shall. But how?

At this point, we realize that the usually calm narrator has been moved to new emotion. This has happened because of his contact with Bartleby. We know because he tells us so.

An Unconscious Struggle

But, as you might have noticed already, the lawyer is not telling the whole story, because he doesn't know the whole story. He may be the narrator, but he doesn't always understand what he's narrating. He has a clue about what's going on, but not full knowledge. He doesn't understand, for example, that Turkey and Nippers are hot-tempered and erratic because they drink at lunch. He doesn't realize what an arrogant snob he is when he boasts about all of his important friends. He doesn't realize that Bartleby is making a much deeper impression than he can ever explain in his usual stuffy way. There is a mystery here: Why should a man of his stature tol-

erate someone like Bartleby—unless he somehow sympathizes with the strange little man?

Bartleby knows that the lawyer is missing the point. Toward the end, the two have this encounter:

The next day I noticed that Bartleby did nothing but stand at his window in his dead-wall reverery. Upon asking him why he did not write, he said that he had decided upon doing no more writing.

"Why, how now? what next?" exclaimed I, "do no more writing?"

"No more."

"And what is the reason?"

"Do you not see the reason for yourself?" he indifferently replied.

By asking "Do you not see the reason for yourself?" Bartleby wants the narrator to recognize the strange interaction, a kind of struggle, that has been going on between them. But the narrator lacks insight. He is aware of his frustration without understanding exactly what Bartleby means to him. If Bartleby had felt like it, he could have said something like this to the puzzled lawyer: "Can't you see, you smug oaf, that there is no reason to do anything? Why is your life any better? Just because it's easier, does that make it right? The reason I have such an effect on you is that you realize—but won't admit—that there is something noble about my rebellion, even if it will kill me."

The real genius of Melville's creation is that we understand more of the lawyer's crisis than the character himself does. We are forced to feel what he does not let himself feel—that Bartleby's misery silently rebukes his own smugness. And this could be Melville's point: By making this narrator nameless, he wants us *all* to contemplate what it would be like to encounter a Bartleby, who "prefers not" to live life.

At the very end, the lawyer visits Bartleby in jail, where he has been taken by the police for trespassing. Bartleby refuses to have anything to do with him. The narrator feels guilty



enough to try to arrange special treatment for his former employee. But Bartleby apparently refuses help, and soon after, he dies.

The story ends with the narrator sharing a rumor concerning Bartleby's job prior to working for him. It seems that Bartleby once worked in the dead letter office, where lost mail is sorted and finally destroyed. The narrator thinks how horribly fitting it is for someone like Bartleby to be "handling these dead letters."

He describes all of this in his typical pompous language. But then he does show some compassion, as he imagines Bartleby at work in that office:

Sometimes from out of the folded paper the pale clerk takes a ring—the finger it was meant for, perhaps, moulders in the grave; 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.

Ah, Bartleby! Ah, humanity!

Does this final show of feeling mean that the crisis will change the narrator? That he acknowledges some connection to Bartleby, or to humanity? Has he learned enough from the experience to realize that no one has the right to be as totally confident and self-satisfied as he was?

Melville leaves us with these questions, but at the same time he leaves us with a better knowledge of how to turn an ordinary character into a character in crisis—or for that matter, how to develop *any* character. While you come up with strate-

gies for your own writing, you might hold this conversation with yourself:

"I've got this really agonized character. Where should I put him in the story?"

"Why not make him narrator?"

"Is he going to be able to tell his own story?"

"Sure. Make him a lawyer or someone who's supposed to be good with language."

"But will he know everything? Remember, he's going through a real crisis."

"No. Make him arrogant and sheltered. He can report what's happening, but not really get the point."

"The readers will know more than he does. Won't that be hard to do?"

"It will be very hard, but if you pull it off, it will be worth it." □



Write Away

I. Describe a time when you survived a crisis. How did it start? What were the particular events that made it such a serious time for you? How was the crisis finally resolved? What did you learn from the experience?

II. Describe a small incident using the first-person point of view. Make sure that your narrator is smart enough to tell the story, but not clever enough to see the real meaning.

III. Describe the personality of a character that you know or a character that you can imagine clearly. Begin by describing someone who is just the opposite.

IV. Describe what you would do if you were the narrator of "Bartleby." How would you respond to an employee preferring not to work?