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## Themes **Sample Answers** *Evidence and Analysis*



**Directions:** A theme is a concept or idea that an author explores in a literary work. For each theme, collect 5-6 details from *Bartleby, the Scrivener* (such as specific plot points, symbols, or quotes) that the author uses to explore that theme and enter them in the Evidence section of the table.

Next, use the evidence you've collected to write a Theme Description that explains the role of the theme in *Bartleby, the Scrivener*. Your Theme Description should be 1-2 paragraphs. Here are some questions to consider as you write each Theme Description:

- How do the ideas or actions of the main characters reflect different aspects of the theme?
- Does the theme develop or change over the course of *Bartleby, the Scrivener*? If so, how?
- If your evidence includes symbols, explain how the author uses those symbols to explore the theme.
- If your evidence includes specific quotes from the text, explain how those quotes provide examples of how the theme applies to *Bartleby, the Scrivener*?

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## Passive Resistance

Evidence		
1.	2.	3.
4.	5.	6.

Theme Description
<p><b>Bartleby's</b> frequently repeated motto, "I would prefer not to," echoes throughout the narrative. Always polite, never aggressive, Bartleby says "I would prefer not to" to an ever-increasing range of things as the story progresses. In short, Bartleby's story is one of passive resistance, in which he refuses to do anything that he would prefer not to do. Initially, Bartleby's resistance seems to exist within a fairly common capitalist struggle: an employer (<b>The Lawyer</b>, the story's unnamed narrator) wants to get the most utility out of his employee, and the employee (Bartleby) wants only to do the parts of his job he feels like doing. This is a delicate balance, and usually, when the scale of the employee-employer relationship tips too far to one side, either the employee becomes fed up with the job's requirements and quits, or the employer becomes fed up with the employee's disobedience and fires them. However, rather than flat-out refuse his boss's requests (which would likely lead to his dismissal), Bartleby uses a strategy of passive resistance, which, for a long time, allows him to both stay employed and keep his daily tasks within the limited set of responsibilities he finds acceptable.</p> <p>Up to this point of the story, Bartleby seems diffident and strange, but also almost a kind of hero. After all, through his method of passive resistance, he avoids having to proofread and correct his own copy, avoids being sent out to the store for errands, avoids telling The Lawyer anything about his family or his past, avoids being reprimanded for living in the office after hours and on weekends, and even avoids getting fired by "prefer[ing] not to" vacate The Lawyer's office. But as the story progresses, and The Lawyer eventually moves his entire office to a new building as a way to escape Bartleby who still "prefers not" to leave the old one, the nature of Bartleby's passive resistance changes as well. As he faces ever more dire straits, Bartleby resists being "a little reasonable," resists The Lawyer's multiple and various offers to help him (including The Lawyer's offer that he come live in The Lawyer's home), and, even when he is dying in prison, Bartleby resists The Lawyer's offer of food. It's never clear if Bartleby's passive resistance originated simply as a refusal to perform</p>

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work he didn't want to do and grew into something more general, or was always more general but that only became clear as his situation worsened. But what is clear by the end of the story is that Bartleby's passive resistance *is* more general, exemplified by his transition from preferring to eat gingernut cakes to preferring to eat nothing at all. And yet, just *what* Bartleby is resisting, and what precisely the story is saying about that resistance, is also never made clear. It's possible to argue that Bartleby is resisting the increasingly capitalistic and materialistic culture in which he finds himself. It's also possible to argue that the story is showing how cruelly society treats any kind of nonconformist who dares to resist that society's values. And it's further possible to argue that Bartleby is resisting the very aspects of the human condition - the lack of compassion, isolation, inability to communicate - that makes society act in the way it does. Perhaps Bartleby, in the end, is resisting the condition of life that, as a human, is forced upon him.



## The Disconnected Workplace

Evidence		
1.	2.	3.
4.	5.	6.

Theme Description
<p><i>Bartleby, the Scrivener</i> is set during a time when Wall Street was becoming ever more important as a financial hub of American society, a society that was itself being transformed by the increasing importance of capital and finance in an industrializing world. This transformation had many impacts, but one of them was the increasing prevalence of the sort of office workplace in which the story is set. In fact, if you want to push things a bit, you could argue that <i>Bartleby</i> is one of the first office comedies, though <b>Bartleby's</b> "comedy" and viewpoint is so dark that it actually ends up as an office <i>tragedy</i>. Regardless, the tropes about the office that have come to dominate office comedies such as <i>The Office</i> or <i>Office Space</i> - the dreary dullness, absurdity, and disconnection of the office workplace - are captured with unmatched power in <i>Bartleby</i>. Disconnection, in fact, is the basic state of this Wall Street law office. <b>Turkey</b> and <b>Nippers</b>, the two scriveners who work for <b>The Lawyer</b> before he brings on Bartleby, initially seem like comic characters (because they are described in comic ways by The Lawyer/Narrator who employs them). But the story manages to communicate deep despair in their situations and character that the narrator himself fails to understand. The description of these two clerks working like "sentries" who trade guard, as one is productive only in the morning and the other only in the afternoon, establishes their separateness. They work in the same place, but are never in any way together. Further, some close reading reveals what the narrator himself seems not to see: that Turkey is only a good employee before noon because he gets drunk at lunch, while a number of critics suggest that Nippers's "indigestion" that afflicts him in the morning is likely the result of a drug addiction that The Lawyer is oblivious to.</p> <p>The sense of disconnection between the people in the office is heightened by The Lawyer's many failed efforts to get to know Bartleby (his only employee that he refers to by name). In fact, the entire time The Lawyer knows Bartleby, from when he hires him until Bartleby's imprisonment, The Lawyer learns nothing more from Bartleby about his history or personality than his name. Even when, at the story's very end, The Lawyer</p>

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finally includes details about Bartleby's past (that he worked at the Dead Letter Office), he states that he has learned this through rumor only, so even this alleged information is disconnected from certainty.

Melville further builds the dreary disconnection of the office through its physical setting and space. One of the story's recurring symbols is the suffocating presence of walls within the law office. The narrator notes early on that the few windows in the office produce little to no light, as they run up against the walls of adjacent buildings, though that doesn't stop Bartleby from staring out them for hours at a time. Also, the office itself is divided by "ground-glass folding doors" into two separate rooms, one in which The Lawyer works, and one where the scribes' desks are located. So, the narrator can see his workers through the glass, but cannot hear them when the doors are closed. When The Lawyer hires Bartleby, he decides to station Bartleby's desk in his own office, which would hint at the possibility for more connection. However, even then, The Lawyer places the desk in the corner of the room and provides a "high green folding screen" that keeps Bartleby within earshot but serves to "entirely isolate Bartleby" from his sight.

This feeling of disconnection and entrapment surfaces not only from the office's cramped layout, but also from the very name of the street where it is located: Wall Street. In fact, late in the story, after The Lawyer has moved offices and Bartleby has been forcibly removed by its subsequent tenants and put in a prison called The Tombs, the Lawyer goes to visit Bartleby but ends up getting trapped in the central yard area of the prison, with its "surrounding walls of amazing thickness." This description, mirroring the earlier description of the office and the very name of the street on which so many such offices are located, perhaps implies that in the Wall Street boom of the mid-1800's, offices in general had become eerily similar to prison cells.

# Isolation and the Unreliability of Language



Evidence		
1.	2.	3.
4.	5.	6.

**Theme Description**

From its very first sentence, Melville signals to the reader that *Bartleby, the Scrivener* is a story in which language isn't always meant to be taken at face value. **The Lawyer**, who narrates the entire story, describes himself in the first line as "a rather elderly man." Presumably, The Lawyer knows his own age, but instead of passing that information along to the reader he chooses to describe himself as elderly—but he doesn't just leave it at that, he calls himself "rather elderly." It's the "rather" that makes this opening sentence as nonspecific as it is. It is entirely unclear without context what "rather elderly" means—is The Lawyer a middle-aged man who is being modest? A man near the very end of his life trying to be humble? Or is he simply a man in the midst of old age, not quite at the end, but further from his first breath than his last? The reader cannot know for certain the answer to any of these questions that the first sentence raises, because *Bartleby, the Scrivener* is told from the perspective of an unreliable—and often unspecific—narrator. For example, The Lawyer never tells the reader his own name, and only refers to his employees other than **Bartleby** by their nicknames: **Turkey**, **Nippers**, and **Ginger Nut**. So, the point-of-view of the story is in itself an example of language failing to create a perfect two-way relationship between storyteller and listener, between reader and writer.

This point is exemplified by the story's end. In the midst of the climactic sequence, The Lawyer abruptly stops telling the story of Bartleby's passive resistance, which at this point is leading the scrivener to waste away in prison because he refuses to eat any food, and instead The Lawyer says that "imagination" on the part of the reader should be good enough to envision Bartleby's end. The Lawyer then states that what is to be told next should be questioned by the reader, as The Lawyer has heard it through rumor only, and he goes on to say that those rumors indicate that before Bartleby began working at The Lawyer's office, he had spent a number of years working at the Dead Letter Office. This means that Bartleby spent his life destroying lost letters, letters that were meant to connect two people through shared language but failed at that task. The

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story implies, then, that when he'd had too much of the dead letter office, Bartleby came to work at The Lawyer's office to try the exact opposite—as a scrivener, Bartleby copied letters. But, as the story shows, that, too, didn't fulfill the kind of communication Bartleby was seeking, perhaps because language is an inherently imperfect or incomplete communicative tool.

Bartleby's interactions with The Lawyer are full of failed communication. The Lawyer speaks with Bartleby to try to find out about Bartleby's family and history, but Bartleby brushes him off with his usual "I would prefer not to," excuse. Later, when The Lawyer is adamant that he must fire Bartleby and find a family member to whom he can pawn off the responsibility of caring for Bartleby, The Lawyer finally pleads with Bartleby to be "a little reasonable." Bartleby replies that he "...would prefer not to be a little reasonable." Reason uses language as its mode of communication, and, like two negotiators who speak different languages, The Lawyer is entirely unable to understand anything about Bartleby by talking with him because Bartleby refuses to engage with him on common logical ground.

One might then argue that all that is necessary for true communication or connection is active engagement from both sides, but the story, at least as Bartleby sees things, seems to take a darker view. Bartleby seems to have come to the conclusion that even if people do engage they *still* won't be able to communicate, and so he prefers not even to try, and then, ultimately, not even to live. In Bartleby's view, then, every person is like a dead letter, with information to share, but no one with whom to share it. And, of course, the fact that The Lawyer isn't even sure that Bartleby even ever worked in the Dead Letter Office only further supports this idea, as even the dark interpretation of Bartleby's life is made hazy and uncertain—even Bartleby's message of the meaninglessness of attempts at connection might itself be meaningless.

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## Charity and Its Limits

Evidence		
1.	2.	3.
4.	5.	6.

Theme Description
<p>Through most of <i>Bartleby, the Scrivener</i>, <b>The Lawyer</b> treats <b>Bartleby</b> with what most reasonable people would describe as great charity. When he catches Bartleby in the office on the weekend and deduces that Bartleby must be secretly living there, The Lawyer is initially annoyed, but then realizes how lonely it must feel to live in a usually-busy office building while it's completely empty during the weekend. Rather than fire or reprimand Bartleby, The Lawyer decides to keep Bartleby on as an employee and not mention his living situation whatsoever. Then, even after Bartleby ceases doing any work at all and just spends his days staring out the window with no view, The Lawyer <i>still</i> keeps Bartleby employed in the spirit of charity. Later, when The Lawyer learns that his reputation and business are threatened by Bartleby's behavior, he finally does fire Bartleby, but The Lawyer still gives him a generous severance.</p> <p>And though The Lawyer does abandon Bartleby by moving his office (after Bartleby "prefers not" to leave despite being fired), The Lawyer returns to try to help Bartleby when it becomes clear that the next tenant plans to call the police on the scrivener. There, the Lawyer offers Bartleby anything he can think of—a clerkship in a dry-goods store, a bartending job, and even offers to let Bartleby come live with him until they can work out an arrangement. And, finally, when Bartleby is wasting away in prison, The Lawyer's guilt pushes him to be charitable once more—not to the point of claiming Bartleby and having him removed from prison, but enough to pay someone at the prison to cook for his former employee. The Lawyer's charitable behavior in nearly every instance is highlighted by how <i>uncharitably</i> the rest of society treats Bartleby: without empathy and with complete indifference, locking him away in prison until a family member claims him or he dies.</p> <p>And yet, the story is not one of The Lawyer's heroic charity, because Bartleby refuses every single one of The Lawyer's charitable efforts. Because of this, the story then forces its focus back onto The Lawyer's charitable acts and raised two related though different questions. First, the story makes the reader question whether The Lawyer's charitable</p>

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acts were actually charitable enough. The Lawyer's motives, after all, were not always entirely pure. From his initial charity of allowing Bartleby to continue to work for him, The Lawyer derives a self-satisfied and soul-soothing pleasure, congratulating himself that another less charitable boss would fire Bartleby and throw him out onto the street. And his later charitable offers, as with the offer of food at the prison, were motivated at least in part by a sense of guilt. In addition, The Lawyer's charitable offers were always reasonable. They were generous, to be sure, but they weren't, say, the kind of completely self-sacrificing charity that a figure like Jesus Christ might have offered. The Lawyer tried to "do what he could." He never tried to do more.

The story therefore leaves open the question of whether things might have turned out differently if The Lawyer had practiced a more radical and total kind of charity. And in asking this question the story asks whether it is acceptable to ever limit one's charity, as doing so is essentially a writing off of other people under the guise of being "reasonable" about every person's responsibility to be responsible for him or herself. And yet in Bartleby's constant refusals of all attempts to help, the story also raises the possibility that Bartleby would have refused *all* charity, no matter how complete. And by extension, the story suggests that total, radical charity, free of any sort of personal baggage or hesitancy, might be either beyond the grasp of any human to achieve or, even if achievable, not enough to bridge the gap between people.