

Revolutionary Situations In Benito Cereno And Bartleby

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Most people spend much of their lives following systems they did not create: workplaces, laws, customs, markets, and hierarchies that define acceptable conduct. At certain moments, however, an individual or group refuses those expectations and exposes the instability beneath ordinary order. Herman Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener" and "[Benito Cereno](#)" both present such revolutionary situations. The first takes place in a nineteenth-century Wall Street office, where a copyist quietly refuses assigned work by repeating, "I would prefer not to" (Melville, 1853/2002). The second takes place aboard a slave ship whose apparent Spanish command conceals a successful revolt by enslaved Africans (Melville, 1855/2002). The original essay correctly connects both works with disobedience and asks what pushes human beings to resist systems that constrain them.

The two narratives should not be treated as identical. Bartleby's resistance is individual, passive, and difficult to interpret, whereas the revolt in "Benito Cereno" is collective, planned, and directed against enslavement. Bartleby gradually withdraws from labor, conversation, movement, and finally food. Babo and the other enslaved Africans seize the *San Dominick*, kill members of the crew, and compel Captain Benito Cereno to perform the appearance of command before the visiting American captain Amasa Delano. Both stories disturb social authority, but the moral circumstances and forms of action differ. Comparing them reveals how resistance may operate through refusal, concealment, performance, violence, and control of interpretation.

Systems That Appear Natural

Melville's works examine institutions that many of his contemporaries treated as ordinary. In "Bartleby," the office is organized around legal copying, property transactions, schedules, and employer authority. The unnamed lawyer narrates the story as a respectable, cautious man who values safety and routine. He assumes that wages and managerial kindness give him the right to command labor. Bartleby's refusal therefore seems irrational because it rejects the exchange on which the office depends. The scrivener does not bargain for higher pay or better conditions; he simply declines.

"Benito Cereno" addresses the far more violent institution of slavery. Enslavement depends on force, racial ideology, law, trade, and the reduction of people to property. The revolt aboard the ship makes visible what the slave system attempts to deny: enslaved people possess intelligence, political purpose, fear, anger, and the capacity to organize. The apparent order that Delano observes is not natural. It is a theatrical arrangement imposed after the original hierarchy has been overturned.

Bartleby's First Refusal

Bartleby initially appears to be an ideal employee. He copies legal documents with intense persistence and asks for little. The office's routine changes when the lawyer requests that he help compare a copy and Bartleby replies, "I would prefer not to." The wording is important. It is neither a direct declaration of rebellion nor an explanation. "Prefer" sounds polite and personal, yet its repetition removes the employer's authority. The lawyer cannot respond easily because Bartleby neither argues nor apologizes.

The original essay describes people as holding negative feelings until they "snap." Bartleby's behavior is more gradual and controlled than that description suggests. His refusals expand from proofreading to other tasks, then to copying itself, leaving the office, and participating in life. The narrative gives no single confirmed cause. Diagnosing him with a mood disorder from the story would oversimplify Melville's deliberate ambiguity. Bartleby can be read psychologically, economically, spiritually, or politically, but the text resists one final explanation.

Passive Resistance and Civil Disobedience

Bartleby does not attempt to seize the office. His power comes from withholding cooperation. The employer possesses legal and economic authority but discovers that authority requires the employee's participation. Physical force could remove Bartleby, yet the lawyer hesitates because the scrivener's calm vulnerability creates a moral demand. The phrase "I would prefer not to" spreads through the office's language and unsettles the narrator's confidence.

Hannah Arendt distinguishes civil disobedience from private conscientious refusal by emphasizing public, organized action directed toward political change (Arendt, 1970). Under that definition, Bartleby is not a conventional civil disobedient because he does not join others, announce a public principle, or seek legal reform. Nevertheless, his refusal dramatizes a condition that civil disobedience uses: institutions function only while people cooperate. The story can therefore illuminate refusal without converting Bartleby into a political organizer he is not.

Work, Alienation, and Wall Street

The office setting connects resistance with the changing nineteenth-century economy. Bartleby copies documents mechanically, reproducing language owned and used by others. His work requires attention but offers little creative control. The walls, screens, and limited views create an atmosphere of enclosure. Even the lawyer's charitable response remains managerial; he tries to fit Bartleby into a recognizable category and solve the disruption without questioning the larger system.

Bartleby's previous employment in the Dead Letter Office, revealed late in the story, deepens the

theme. Dead letters contain messages that failed to reach their recipients. The narrator imagines Bartleby sorting hopes, money, forgiveness, and love that arrived too late. Whether this experience caused his withdrawal is uncertain, but the image links communication failure with the scrivener's increasingly inaccessible interior life. His repeated phrase is clear in form yet refuses explanatory communication.

Revolution on the San Dominick

"Benito Cereno" presents a different kind of refusal. The enslaved Africans do not merely decline work; they overthrow the ship's officers and attempt to compel a return to Senegal. Babo organizes the performance through which the surviving Spaniards conceal the revolt from Delano. Benito Cereno appears to command, while Babo remains near him under the role of devoted servant. Every gesture must carry two meanings: one visible to Delano and another understood by captors and captives.

The original essay correctly states that brutal enslavement and coercion create the conditions for revolt. The Africans have been abducted, transported, and treated as cargo. Their violence occurs within a system already founded on violence. This context does not make every act morally uncomplicated, but it prevents the revolt from being described as an irrational breakdown. The uprising has goals, leadership, strategy, and political meaning.

Delano's Failure to See

Amasa Delano's perspective shapes most of "Benito Cereno." He notices strange details but repeatedly explains them through racial stereotypes (Morrison, 1992). He cannot imagine that Africans have organized the ship because he assumes they are naturally dependent and obedient. Babo uses this prejudice as part of the revolt's concealment. Delano's confidence becomes a weakness: he interprets evidence according to the social hierarchy he expects to find.

This narrative method makes the reader participate in uncertainty. The story withholds the truth while showing clues that Delano misreads. When the revolt is revealed, earlier scenes acquire new meaning. The shaving scene, in which Babo holds a razor near Cereno's throat, is both an apparent act of service and a threat. The story demonstrates that power includes control over the narrative through which events are interpreted.

Babo and Bartleby as Disruptive Figures

Babo and Bartleby both unsettle authority, but they do so through nearly opposite forms. Babo is active, strategic, communicative, and capable of directing a group. Bartleby is passive, solitary, and increasingly silent. Babo creates an elaborate performance; Bartleby reduces action and language.

Babo seeks geographical and collective liberation, while Bartleby states no identifiable political objective.

The similarity lies in the way each figure reveals dependence within a hierarchy. The lawyer needs Bartleby's compliance to preserve office routine. The slave system needs the labor and submission of those it enslaves. When cooperation disappears, the apparent stability of authority breaks down. Both works therefore show that domination is not self-sustaining; it must be reproduced through behavior, belief, and force.

Violence and Nonviolence

The original essay contrasts battle aboard the slave ship with refusal in an office where attacking an employer would mean criminal punishment and unemployment. This contrast can be developed through the conditions of resistance. Bartleby occupies a formal labor market and retains limited legal personhood, even though his economic security is weak. The enslaved Africans are legally treated as property and face continued captivity, sale, and possible death. The available routes for change are not equal.

Nonviolent resistance can expose injustice and mobilize public support, but it often depends on audiences, communication, and institutions capable of responding. The Africans aboard the *San Dominick* lack recognized legal channels. Melville does not provide a simple moral lesson that one method is superior. He shows how political conditions shape the forms resistance can take and the risks attached to them.

The Narrators and Moral Distance

Both stories are mediated through men who consider themselves moderate and humane. The lawyer describes his patience with Bartleby and believes himself charitable. Delano sees himself as generous and optimistic. Their self-images partly prevent deeper understanding. The lawyer repeatedly converts Bartleby into a problem of personal management, while Delano's racism prevents him from seeing African agency.

Melville does not portray these narrators as simple villains. Their limitations are socially ordinary, which makes the critique more unsettling. Oppression can persist through respectable people who avoid cruelty personally but accept the institutions that organize it. The stories ask whether benevolence without structural understanding is enough.

Mental Illness and the Limits of Diagnosis

The original essay suggests that Bartleby appears to have a mental issue or mood disorder. Readers may reasonably observe signs of depression, trauma, or severe withdrawal, but a literary character should not be assigned a definitive diagnosis without clinical evidence. More importantly, a diagnosis could narrow the story by treating resistance solely as pathology. Bartleby's suffering may be personal, but it also exposes an environment of mechanical labor, isolation, and failed communication.

Compassionate interpretation can hold both possibilities. A person may require mental-health support and still express a valid response to an oppressive system. Institutions often label nonconforming behavior as illness in order to avoid confronting the conditions that produce distress. Melville's ambiguity keeps the reader from deciding too easily whether Bartleby is sick, saintly, rebellious, or defeated.

Revolution and the Desire for Change

The original conclusion identifies unhappiness with circumstances as a shared cause of resistance. This is true but incomplete. Many unhappy people do not rebel, and resistance requires more than accumulated feeling. Babo has fellow captives, a clear enemy, a geographical objective, and an opportunity to organize. Bartleby has no visible community and no stated future. His resistance therefore becomes a negative freedom—the refusal of demands—without a positive project for another form of life.

Revolutionary situations arise when authority loses legitimacy, cooperation breaks down, and people can imagine or enact an alternative. “Benito Cereno” contains these elements more clearly. “Bartleby” presents a revolutionary effect inside a small institution: one person's refusal makes ordinary command appear strange. The lack of a collective future contributes to the tragic ending.

Death and the Restoration of Order

Both narratives end with institutional order restored at the cost of the resisting figure. Bartleby is removed to the Tombs and dies after refusing food. Babo is captured, tried, executed, and displayed. The lawyer returns to reflection, and Delano attempts to reassure Cereno, but neither story provides genuine resolution. Cereno remains psychologically devastated and dies soon afterward.

The state can punish resistance, yet punishment does not erase the questions the resistance exposed. Bartleby's death leaves the lawyer with the cry “Ah Bartleby! Ah humanity!” Babo's silent head continues to confront the social order that executed him. Melville's endings deny readers the comfort of believing that restored authority equals restored justice.

Relation to Walzer and Moral Argument About War

Michael Walzer's work on just and unjust wars argues that moral judgment remains possible even during conflict (Walzer, 2015). The original essay invokes broader ideas of warfare and civil disobedience. "Benito Cereno" complicates conventional war categories because enslaved people resist captors outside a recognized state conflict. Their struggle raises the question of whether people denied legal personhood possess a right to use force for liberation. A rights-based perspective recognizes slavery as ongoing aggression, making resistance morally different from conquest for power.

"Bartleby" presents the opposite problem: how far refusal can go when no violence is used and no demand is stated. The lawyer's legal rights do not settle his moral responsibility toward a vulnerable person. Together, the stories show that legality and justice may diverge. The slave trade is legally organized yet morally indefensible; the lawyer's property rights are lawful yet insufficient to explain what he owes Bartleby.

Conclusion

"Bartleby, the Scrivener" and "Benito Cereno" both depict systems disrupted by people who refuse assigned roles. Bartleby withdraws from labor and social participation through the repeated statement "I would prefer not to." Babo and the enslaved Africans seize the *San Dominick* and use performance to conceal their revolt. Both actions reveal that authority depends on cooperation, interpretation, and force.

The differences are equally important. Bartleby's resistance is private and ambiguous, while the shipboard revolt is collective and directed against slavery. It is therefore inaccurate to explain both simply as people "snapping" or failing to think clearly. Melville portrays calculated rebellion, passive refusal, psychological suffering, racial blindness, and the moral limitations of respectable narrators. The works remain revolutionary because they make ordinary systems look unstable and ask what forms of resistance become possible when law, labor, and social convention no longer appear legitimate.

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