

Revolutionary Situations in Benito Cereno and Bartleby

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Introduction

Herman Melville's "[Bartleby, the Scrivener](#)" and "[Benito Cereno](#)" both place ordinary systems of authority under pressure by showing what happens when people refuse the roles assigned to them. In "Bartleby," a Wall Street copyist quietly disrupts an office by answering requests with the phrase "I would prefer not to" and gradually withdrawing from labor, movement, conversation, and finally food. In "Benito Cereno," enslaved Africans aboard the *San Dominick* have already overthrown much of the Spanish crew and force Captain Benito Cereno to perform the appearance of command before the visiting American captain Amasa Delano. These acts of resistance are not equivalent. Bartleby's refusal is solitary, passive, and deliberately difficult to interpret, while the shipboard revolt is collective, strategic, and directed against enslavement. Comparing them reveals how power depends on cooperation and interpretation, and how different conditions produce different forms of resistance, from withdrawal and silence to coordinated rebellion and violent struggle.

Institutions That Depend on Compliance

Both stories expose institutions whose stability appears natural only because most people continue to behave as expected. The lawyer in "Bartleby" assumes that wages, property, and managerial authority entitle him to direct the work of his scriveners. Bartleby's polite refusal unsettles the office precisely because it does not fit the usual categories of negotiation, insubordination, or resignation. He neither demands better terms nor openly contests the employer's ownership of the workplace; he simply withholds cooperation. "Benito Cereno" reveals a far more violent institution. Slavery depends on force, racial ideology, law, trade, and the treatment of human beings as property. The revolt destroys the expected hierarchy aboard the ship, but the rebels must conceal that reversal from Delano by staging a false version of the old order. Authority in both texts therefore depends on performance. The employer needs the employee's participation to keep office routines meaningful, while the slave system needs the submission of those it enslaves to make domination appear stable. When cooperation disappears, institutional power becomes visible as something that must be actively maintained.

Bartleby's Refusal and the Limits of Interpretation

Bartleby begins as an extraordinarily productive copyist, making his later refusals more disturbing because they interrupt a pattern of apparent compliance. His phrase "I would prefer not to" is grammatically polite but functionally absolute. It does not provide a reason that the lawyer can evaluate, correct, or bargain with, and its calm repetition gradually deprives managerial authority of its expected effect. Bartleby eventually stops proofreading, copying, leaving the office, and eating. Readers may see depression, trauma, alienated labor, spiritual withdrawal, or political refusal in this progression, but the story provides too little evidence for a definitive clinical diagnosis or a single political program. Hannah Arendt's distinction between private conscientious refusal and organized civil disobedience helps clarify the difference. Bartleby does not announce a public principle, form a movement, or seek legal reform. His importance lies in the disruptive power of noncooperation itself. By refusing commands without replacing the office with another social order, he reveals how much authority relies on voluntary participation while also demonstrating the tragedy of resistance that has no community, articulated goal, or path toward another form of life.

Revolt, Performance, and Racial Misreading in Benito Cereno

The resistance aboard the *San Dominick* is collective and purposeful. The enslaved Africans have been transported as cargo within a system already founded on coercion and violence, and their uprising seeks liberation rather than symbolic protest. Babo organizes a complex performance in which Benito Cereno appears to remain captain while the actual power relationships have been reversed. This strategy succeeds for so long because Amasa Delano repeatedly interprets suspicious evidence through racial stereotypes. He assumes that Africans are naturally dependent and incapable of coordinating a sophisticated revolt, so the clues before him are forced into explanations that preserve the hierarchy he expects to see. The shaving scene is especially revealing because Babo's position beside Cereno can appear to Delano as attentive service while simultaneously functioning as intimidation. The story therefore connects power with narrative control. The revolt is not hidden simply because information is absent; it is hidden because Delano possesses a social theory that prevents him from interpreting what he observes accurately. His confidence becomes an analytical weakness that the rebels exploit.

Violence, Nonviolence, and Unequal Conditions of Resistance

Bartleby and Babo demonstrate almost opposite forms of resistance because the institutions confronting them offer radically different possibilities. Bartleby occupies a wage-labor system in which

he retains legal personhood, even though his economic security is weak and his work is mechanical and isolating. The enslaved Africans are denied legal freedom and face continued captivity, sale, punishment, and possible death. Nonviolent resistance can be powerful when audiences, public communication, and institutions exist through which refusal can generate pressure, but the captives aboard the ship possess no recognized legal channel through which to petition for release. Their violence must therefore be interpreted within an already violent system without assuming that every act committed during the revolt is morally uncomplicated. Melville does not produce a simple rule that one form of resistance is superior. Instead, the stories show how law, social position, collective organization, and available alternatives shape what resistance can look like. Bartleby withdraws from participation without articulating a destination, while Babo organizes toward the concrete objective of escape from enslavement and return.

Narrators, Benevolence, and Moral Distance

Both stories are filtered through men who consider themselves moderate and humane, and that self-image limits their understanding. The Wall Street lawyer repeatedly emphasizes patience and charity toward Bartleby, yet he continues to interpret the scrivener primarily as a problem that must be managed without disrupting the office's respectable order. Delano views himself as generous and optimistic, but his racial assumptions make African agency nearly impossible for him to imagine. Melville's critique becomes more unsettling because neither narrator is presented as a simple sadist. Their limitations are ordinary and socially respectable, suggesting that unjust institutions can persist through people who avoid personal cruelty while accepting the assumptions that organize inequality. Benevolence is therefore not the same as structural understanding. The lawyer can feel pity while failing to comprehend the conditions surrounding Bartleby, and Delano can behave cordially while remaining unable to recognize enslaved people as political actors. The stories ask whether moral goodness requires more than kind intentions—whether it also demands the ability to question the systems and interpretive habits through which power becomes normal.

Conclusion

"Bartleby, the Scrivener" and "Benito Cereno" become revolutionary not because they present identical rebellions but because both make familiar authority look unstable. Bartleby's repeated preference withdraws the cooperation on which office hierarchy depends, while the enslaved Africans aboard the *San Dominick* overturn a system of captivity and use theatrical control to conceal their power. Bartleby's resistance remains solitary and ambiguous, whereas Babo's is organized around collective liberation. These differences prevent either story from being reduced to a general claim that unhappy people simply "snap." Melville instead examines alienated labor, racial domination, failed communication, legal power, collective action, and the moral blindness of respectable observers. Both resisting figures are ultimately defeated: Bartleby dies in prison, and Babo is executed after the revolt is suppressed. Yet restored institutional order does not erase the questions

their resistance exposed. Authority can punish refusal, but punishment does not prove that the system being defended is just. The enduring force of both stories lies in making readers reconsider the cooperation, violence, and interpretation through which social order is sustained.

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