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Herman Melville

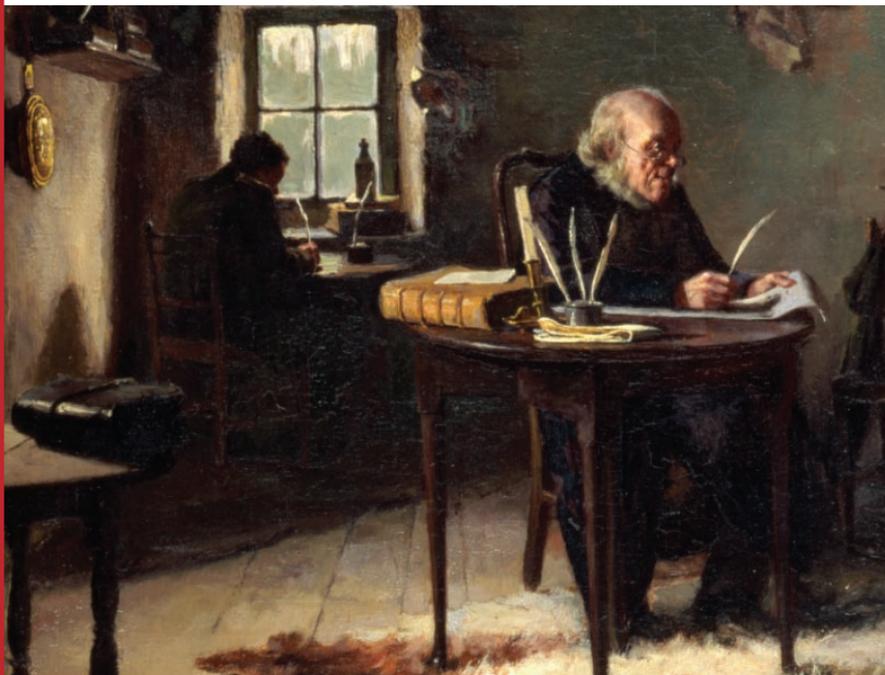
Bartleby the Scrivener and other stories

The Lightning-Rod Man • The Bell-Tower

Read by **William Roberts**

THE
COMPLETE
CLASSICS

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Bartleby the Scrivener

1	I am a rather elderly man.	4:05
2	Some time prior to the period at which this little history begins...	3:12
3	There are many singular coincidences I have known...	3:03
4	'With submission, sir,' said Turkey...	2:51
5	Among the manifestations of his diseased ambition...	2:40
6	Though concerning the self-indulgent habits of Turkey...	3:22
7	Now my original business – that of conveyancer...	2:09
8	At first Bartleby did an extraordinary quantity of writing...	3:57
9	A few days after this, Bartleby concluded...	2:45
10	It is not seldom the case that when a man is browbeaten...	3:39
11	Nothing so aggravates an earnest person as a passive resistance...	3:37
12	'Bartleby', said I, 'Ginger Nut is away...'	2:25
13	As days passed on, I became considerably reconciled...	3:09
14	Now, the utterly unsurmised appearance of Bartleby...	3:22
15	For the first time in my life a feeling of overpowering...	3:16
16	Revolving all these things, and coupling them...	3:46
17	It was rather weak in me I confess...	3:40
18	As he opened the folding-door to retire...	3:20
19	At length, necessities connected with my business...	5:12
20	As I had intended, I was rather earlier than usual...	3:14

21	'Will you, or will you not, quit me?'	3:14
22	I endeavored also immediately to occupy myself...	4:43
23	'Ere revolving any complicated project, however...	2:40
24	On the appointed day I engaged carts and men...	1:59
25	'I am very sorry, sir' said I...	3:10
26	'Now one of two things must take place.'	2:38
27	I answered nothing...	3:18
28	Being under no disgraceful charge...	3:02
29	'How's this?' said the grub-man...	3:01
30	There would seem little need for proceeding further in this history...	2:50

The Lightning-Rod Man

31	What grand irregular thunder, thought I...	2:56
32	'Sir,' said I, bowing politely...	3:02
33	'I am a dealer in lightning-rods', said the stranger...	3:09
34	'Crash! Only three pulses...'	2:51
35	There was now a little cessation of the storm...	2:39
36	'Tall men in a thunder storm I avoid...'	3:48

The Bell-Tower

37	In the south of Europe...	3:39
38	At length the holiday of the tower came...	3:54
39	His felony remitted by the judge...	3:48
40	But, being questioned...	4:11
41	His still, Vulcanic face hiding its burning brightness...	4:16
42	'Hark! Is that – a footfall above?'	3:19
43	Slowly, the day drew on...	5:04
44	From the mystery unavoidably investing it...	3:15
45	He still bent his efforts...	4:22
46	It was thought that on the day preceding the fatality...	3:37
47	But as the pall-bearers entered the cathedral porch...	3:29

Total time: 2:38:57

Herman Melville

Bartleby the Scrivener and other stories

Herman Melville (1819 – 1891) is now seen as one of the great figures in American literature, a man who expanded the role of the novel, and gave new and complex depths to the meaning of a story.

His best work uses the form of the novel or the story as a means of carrying and discussing concerns about the nature of humanity, the role of God, and a sometimes satiric, sometimes bitter, examination of colonialism and capitalism. All of these are evident in the three stories included here, but his decision to write shorter fiction was to some extent forced on him.

Much of his current reputation rests on *Moby-Dick*, a vast novel with a world of submerged meanings and allegories in the story of the megalomaniac Captain Ahab chasing his personal nemesis and taking his crew down with him. Carl Jung thought *Moby-Dick* was the greatest American novel, and Melville himself believed he had achieved something extraordinary when he had finished it.

But it was a failure when it was published, with the public of the time keener to read straightforward exotic adventure stories rather than those with metaphysical

ideas wrapped up in them. This failure itself was not new to Melville. After his first two books (*Typee* and *Omoo*) were surprise successes, the third (*Mardi*) failed, in part because he started to develop ideas that were broader than his experiences as a sailor in the Polynesian Islands. In an attempt to reassure his publishers – and his father-in-law, who had been called upon to assist his new relation in the past – Melville wrote two further books (*Redburn* and *White-Jacket*) that were aimed at securing a wider readership. But he believed these were merely ‘jobs’ rather than writing, and with the support of his friend, neighbour and hero Nathaniel Hawthorne allowed himself full rein with *Moby-Dick*.

Much good it did him. As a result of its failure, again in order to raise money but also because he was convinced he had an obligation to explore these deeper concerns, he started to write short stories.

Bartleby the Scrivener, *The Lightning-Rod Man* and *The Bell-Tower* were all originally published in *Putnam’s Monthly Magazine*, and collected together with three other stories in *The Piazza Tales* of 1856 (the title came from the only piece written

especially for the collection, an introductory sketch called *The Piazza*). Despite the circumstances that made him turn to the shorter form, Melville enjoyed the technical challenges it posed, and he regarded many of his short stories more highly than some of his successful longer works. But they were just as loaded with allegory, symbolism and unease at man's condition.

Bartleby the Scrivener is the best-known of the three. In it, a successful legal man tells the story of a pale, listless employee (Bartleby) who takes a route of passive resistance against the bustle and obligation of Wall Street. His stock answer – 'I prefer not to' – his pallid strength and his determined weakness make him an equivocal figure, and it is by no means clear who or what he represents. Is he an anti-hero or a weak-willed sop? A symbol of the dehumanising impact of capitalism or someone who decides to die without fuss leaving no mess behind?

At the time of its writing, the image of these kinds of lowly employees and the terrible conditions they worked in were becoming better known to the reading public. In George G. Foster's examinations of New York life, he describes precisely this kind of pale young man and the effect of the relentless business machine on their lives.

Melville knew Wall Street – one of his

brothers was a lawyer there, and Melville shared a residence with him shortly after his marriage – but Bartleby is more than a recognisable figure to the public of the 1850s; he is a kind of Everyman. For some, *Bartleby the Scrivener* is a precursor to the likes of Kafka or Ionesco, and both authors shared Melville's belief that the world was an elaborate joke at the individual's expense. Bartleby still has that ambiguous resonance, with a film of the story being made in 2001, and whatever that mysterious figure represents, it is still a sympathetic idea.

Melville's writing was of its time, though, however much its ideas may have been ahead of it. The mid-19th century saw huge sales of cheap, sensational literature. The appetite for this was enormous and democratic – Edgar Allan Poe often used them for inspiration, and Hawthorne had bundles shipped to him in England. Melville was influenced by the style, and in *The Lightning-Rod Man* and *The Bell-Tower* the stories are told in a manner that now feels rather over-wrought and bombastic. But again, he was using the style to carry the ideas, as well as making something of a point in response to the bland, genteel manner adopted by other writers of the time who turned against the popular medium.

In *The Lightning-Rod Man*, another nameless narrator takes on a travelling

salesman (of a rather curious sort) peddling lightning rods. The salesman is terrified by the thunder of the storm, and uses the fear and gullibility of his customers to get a sale. For the argumentative narrator, the salesman's claims are just so much hogwash in the face of natural forces. Their discussion is a veiled argument about man's ability to quell the wrath of an unpredictable God, and for Melville it seems that there is a limit to what one can and should attempt to do in the face of nature.

The Bell-Tower is in the same family as the likes of *Frankenstein* and other Gothic tales of man's vanity in creating monsters that it cannot control. But Melville makes a point of saying that Bannadonna is not claiming an alchemical power or mystical

command over the forces of nature. Bannadonna was a 'practical materialist', who believed he would be able to 'outstrip and rule' nature by use of the 'vice-bench and hammer'. Of course, events determine otherwise, and the remains of Bannadonna's work are left like Ozymandias's statue as a reminder to humanity to beware its own pride. It is a story that predates many science-fiction tales with a similar theme, just as *Moby-Dick* and *Bartleby the Scrivener* are seen as creations with a significance beyond the lifetime of their author or their original audience.

Notes by Roy McMillan

The music on this recording is taken from the NAXOS catalogue

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| National Radio Symphony Orchestra of Ukraine / Theodore Kuchar | |
| FRY THE BREAKING HEART | 8.559057 |
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Music programmed by Arthur Ka Wai Jenkins

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Herman Melville
Bartleby the Scrivener
and other stories

The Lightning-Rod Man • The Bell-Tower

Read by **William Roberts**

Melville's *Bartleby* is a classic American short story, a wry tale of an assiduous copyist whose catch-phrase is 'I would prefer not to.' It is joined here by two other stories from *The Piazza Tales*, Melville's idiosyncratic collection: *The Lightning-Rod Man* and *The Bell-Tower*.



William Roberts has appeared extensively in TV, film and theatre, varying from *The Young Indiana Jones Chronicles* and *Navy Seals* to *Martin Chuzzlewit* and *A View to Kill*. He is also a familiar voice on radio and audiobooks, with numerous dramas and books to his credit. He has also read *The Fall of the House of Usher & other Tales* and *Billy Budd* for Naxos AudioBooks.

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Total time
2:38:57

Scriveners, it seems, were what we had before word-processors: clerks whose job it was to copy legal documents by hand. When the enigmatic Bartleby ("pallidly neat, pitiably respectable, incurably forlorn") presents himself at the narrator's Wall Street law office for such a job, he appears too insubstantial to give his employer any trouble, but by his peculiar form of passive resistance he manages to cause havoc. "I would prefer not to" is his refrain when asked to do anything. It's a haunting story - are we missing the clues as to why Bartleby behaves as he does? Two shorter stories make up this offering, but neither lingers in the. Want to read more? [Subscribe now](#) and get unlimited digital access on web and our smartphone and tablet apps, free for your first month. Start your free trial.