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The Lacanian Manifestation of the Real in Silence, Absence, and the Collapse of Meaning in the Story *Bartleby, the Scrivener* by Herman Melville

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Abstract

The present study offers a Lacanian psychoanalytic reading of Herman Melville's *Bartleby, the Scrivener* by focusing on the relationship between silence, refusal, and the crisis of meaning. Unlike previous Lacanian interpretations that have mainly examined Bartleby as a figure of alienation, resistance, or the failure of language, this study specifically investigates how the interaction between the three Lacanian registers—the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real—constructs the gradual collapse of the subject's relation to language and social meaning. Using a descriptive-analytical method, the research applies Lacan's concepts of the Symbolic order, the divided subject, lack, and the Real to analyze Bartleby's repetitive phrase "I would prefer not to", his withdrawal from communication, and his progressive detachment from the social system of the lawyer's office. The findings demonstrate that the Imaginary operates through the narrator's unsuccessful attempts to create a stable image and understanding of Bartleby, while the Symbolic is represented by the legal and administrative order of Wall Street that seeks to regulate subjects through language, law, and occupational roles. However, Bartleby's refusal disrupts this structure and reveals the emergence of the Real as the central dimension of the narrative. His silence and repetition do not simply represent personal rejection but expose the inability of language to fully contain subjective experience. The study further shows that the movement from loss to isolation and finally death represents a gradual dissolution of the subject's connection with the Symbolic order. Therefore, *Bartleby, the Scrivener* can be understood not merely as a story of individual withdrawal, but as a narrative that reveals the fundamental limits of language, meaning production, and subject formation in modern experience.

Keywords: Bartleby, the Scrivener, Jacques Lacan, the Real, Symbolic Order, Silence and Refusal.

1. Introduction

Herman Melville's "*Bartleby, the Scrivener*" has received considerable attention in nineteenth-century American literary studies due to its distinctive narrative structure, ambiguous characterization, and its central themes of silence, refusal, and the crisis of meaning. Due to its distinctive narrative structure, ambiguous characterization, and central focus on silence and refusal, it has consistently attracted the attention of literary critics. Bartleby, a copyist working in a lawyer's office, resists professional, social, and institutional demands with his famous phrase, "I would prefer not to." However, this resistance does not appear in the form of open rebellion or direct protest; rather, it emerges through silence, passivity, and repetitive refusal. This feature has elevated Bartleby beyond the level of a fictional character and turned him into a sign of the crisis of meaning, language, and subjectivity in the modern world. The main issue of this research is that Bartleby's silence and refusal cannot be interpreted merely as individual disobedience, mental illness, or a social reaction. In Melville's text, Bartleby represents a presence that disrupts the ordinary order of language, work, law, and social relations. The lawyer, as the narrator, repeatedly attempts to explain, categorize, and rationally frame Bartleby's behavior; however, the more he tries, the more he encounters the failure of language and the breakdown of meaning. From this perspective, Bartleby is not only a silent character but also a sign of something that resists symbolic understanding and cannot easily be integrated into the system of meaning.

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Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic theory, particularly the concept of "the Real", provides an appropriate framework for analyzing this situation. In Lacanian thought, the Real is a dimension that escapes symbolization and resists language, law, and meaning. The Real is not objective reality, but rather a rupture within the symbolic order—something that cannot be fully expressed, interpreted, or absorbed. Accordingly, Bartleby's silence and refusal can be seen as manifestations of the Real in the text; a presence that disrupts discourse and reveals the limits of language. The central research question is: how can Bartleby's silence and refusal in "*Bartleby, the Scrivener*" be analyzed as a manifestation of the Real in Jacques Lacan's theory? Alongside this question, the article seeks to show how the repeated phrase "I would prefer not to" destabilizes the boundaries between speech and silence, meaning and meaninglessness, obedience and disobedience, and how Bartleby creates a rupture within the symbolic order of the lawyer's office. The significance of this study lies in addressing a gap in previous Lacanian interpretations of *Bartleby, the Scrivener*. While earlier studies have examined Bartleby through concepts such as alienation, resistance, the failure of language, and the emergence of the Real, many of these readings have primarily focused on Bartleby as a figure who exists outside or against the symbolic order. The present study seeks to extend these interpretations by examining the dynamic interaction among Lacan's three registers—the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real—and by demonstrating how Bartleby's refusal and silence gradually disrupt both the narrator's attempt to construct a stable image of the subject and the symbolic structures of law, work, and communication. Therefore, this research focuses not merely on Bartleby's confrontation with the Real, but also on the process through which the failure of imaginary identification and symbolic integration leads to the manifestation of the Real in the narrative.

The method of this research is descriptive-analytical and employs a Lacanian psychoanalytic reading framework. The analysis is based specifically on Lacan's concepts of the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real, along with related concepts of the divided subject, lack, and the limits of symbolization. Through these concepts, the study examines Bartleby's repeated phrase "I would prefer not to", his progressive withdrawal from social relations, and the collapse of meaning within the symbolic structure of the lawyer's office.

2. Research Background

From the perspective of language and interpretation, [Verdicchio's \(2018\)](#) study, entitled "*Bartleby the Scrivener: An Allegory of Reading*", provides an important contribution by examining the story as a reflection on the process of reading itself. Verdicchio argues that Bartleby functions not simply as a psychological character but as a figure of unreadability who interrupts the reader's attempt to establish a stable meaning. In this interpretation, Bartleby's repeated phrase "I would prefer not to" does not merely indicate refusal but creates a suspension of interpretation in which language fails to produce a final and fixed meaning. Thus, the story becomes an allegory of the crisis of reading and the instability of signification ([Verdicchio, 2018](#)). Earlier linguistic approaches have also emphasized the relationship between Bartleby's silence and the failure of communication. [Pinsker \(1975\)](#), in "*Bartleby the Scrivener: Language as Wall*", examines the role of language in constructing distance between individuals and argues that Bartleby's linguistic minimalism creates a barrier within social interaction. From this perspective, language in Melville's narrative does not merely facilitate communication; rather, it reveals the limitations and failures inherent in human communication. In relation to ideological and socio-economic interpretations, [Reed \(2004\)](#) analyzes "*Bartleby, the Scrivener*" through the relationship between labor, capitalism, and commodity culture. He argues that Bartleby's refusal challenges the economic and bureaucratic structures of Wall Street, transforming him into a figure who exposes the contradictions of modern labor systems. Similarly, [Thompson \(2000\)](#) examines the office environment and the language of bureaucracy in Melville's story, showing how administrative discourse shapes human relations and reduces individuals to functional positions within institutional structures. From a philosophical and psychoanalytic perspective, later studies have focused on Bartleby's relationship with subjectivity, absence, and the limits of meaning. [Bojesen and Allen \(2019\)](#), in their article "*Bartleby Is Dead: Inverting Common Readings of Melville's Bartleby, the Scrivener*", challenge conventional interpretations of Bartleby as merely a passive or resistant figure. They argue that Bartleby's withdrawal should be reconsidered through the concepts of absence, subjectivity, and the disruption of established interpretive frameworks. Their study contributes to understanding Bartleby as a figure who unsettles conventional assumptions about identity and agency.

Furthermore, psychoanalytic readings influenced by Lacanian theory have emphasized the connection between Bartleby's refusal and the failure of symbolic representation. These interpretations generally consider Bartleby as a subject whose silence and withdrawal reveal a rupture within the symbolic order and demonstrate the inability of language to fully represent subjective experience. However, many existing Lacanian approaches have primarily focused on Bartleby's relation to the Real or his position outside symbolic structures, while paying less attention to the process through which the Imaginary and Symbolic registers collapse before the emergence of the Real. Overall, previous studies demonstrate that "*Bartleby, the Scrivener*" is a multidimensional text that has been interpreted through different theoretical frameworks. Nevertheless, a gap remains in examining how the interaction among Lacan's three registers—the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real—constructs the gradual breakdown of meaning and subjectivity in the narrative. Therefore, the present study differs from previous readings by not limiting Bartleby's silence and refusal to a form of social resistance, linguistic failure, or confrontation with the Real alone. Instead, it investigates the complete Lacanian process through which the narrator's imaginary attempts to understand Bartleby fail, the symbolic order of law and work is disrupted, and the Real emerges as a manifestation of the limits of language and subject formation.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1. The Imaginary

The Imaginary constitutes one of Lacan's three fundamental registers, together with the Symbolic and the Real, and refers to the process through which the subject constructs a sense of identity through images, identification, and relations with the Other ([Nazari, 2018, p. 2](#)). Lacan's formulation of the Imaginary is closely associated with the mirror stage, in which the subject recognizes himself or herself

through an external image and develops an initial sense of unity and coherence. However, this unity is fundamentally based on misrecognition, since the subject's self-image is formed through an external representation rather than through direct access to an essential identity (Evans, 2006, p. 31). Accordingly, the Imaginary simultaneously enables the formation of identity and produces a potential illusion of wholeness, as the subject's understanding of the self and the Other remains dependent on images and interpretive constructions (Hendrix, 2019, p. 4). Within this framework, the Imaginary is not limited to visual perception but refers to the broader mechanism through which the subject organizes relationships, meanings, and expectations through processes of identification and projection. The subject encounters the Other through an image that appears coherent and meaningful; however, this image is always unstable because it is shaped by the subject's own assumptions and by the gaze of the Other (Parker, 2003, pp. 18–19). Therefore, the Imaginary represents a field in which identity is produced through relations of resemblance, difference, and recognition, while simultaneously containing the possibility of misunderstanding and interpretive failure (Jahangiri & Bandarizadeh, 2012, p. 71).

In Lacanian literary criticism, the Imaginary provides a framework for examining the construction of character identity, the narrator's perception of others, and the processes through which subjects attempt to produce coherent interpretations of themselves and others (Farshid & Darabi, 2012, p. 138). In *"Bartleby, the Scrivener"*, the concept of the Imaginary is employed to analyze the narrator's repeated attempts to construct a comprehensible image of Bartleby. The narrator interprets Bartleby's appearance, silence, and behavior through familiar psychological and social categories in an effort to transform him into a knowable subject. Nevertheless, Bartleby continuously escapes these interpretive images, revealing the limitations of the narrator's imaginary knowledge. Thus, the failure of the Imaginary in the narrative emerges not from the absence of an image of Bartleby, but from the inability of such images to produce a stable understanding of his subjectivity. This failure establishes the initial rupture that eventually challenges the Symbolic order and prepares the emergence of the Real as the central dimension of the text.

3.2. The Symbolic

The Symbolic is one of Lacan's three fundamental registers and refers to the domain of language, law, social structures, and systems of signification through which the subject acquires a position within the social order. Unlike the Imaginary, which is primarily associated with identification and images, the Symbolic constitutes the field in which subjectivity is organized through signifiers, rules, and cultural structures. For Lacan, the subject does not exist as an independent and pre-linguistic entity; rather, identity is produced through the subject's position within a network of language and social relations. Language, therefore, is not merely a tool for communication but a structure that shapes the subject's desires, perceptions, and possibilities of meaning. However, entry into the Symbolic order also involves a fundamental loss, because language can never fully represent subjective experience, and meaning always remains incomplete within the chain of signification (Tajik, 2007, p. 19). A central concept within the Symbolic is the "big Other", which represents the broader system of language, law, institutions, and social conventions through which the subject defines himself or herself. The big Other is not a particular individual but the symbolic structure that determines what can be said, recognized, and accepted as meaningful within a social system (Chiesa, 2014, pp. 88–89). Accordingly, the Symbolic provides the subject with identity and social position, while simultaneously limiting the subject through rules, prohibitions, and established forms of meaning. The subject's entrance into this order is therefore accompanied by lack, since becoming a speaking subject requires separation from an imagined state of completeness and acceptance of the limits imposed by language and law (Fink, 2018, p. 54). In literary analysis, the Symbolic allows researchers to examine how characters are positioned within networks of discourse, social roles, institutional structures, and systems of meaning. It reveals how language, law, and social expectations regulate the possibilities of action and expression available to characters. Nevertheless, the Symbolic is not a completely closed system; moments of refusal, silence, or failure of communication reveal the internal gaps and contradictions within this order (Jahangiri & Bandarizadeh, 2012, p. 75). In this sense, the Symbolic is simultaneously the structure that produces meaning and the structure that exposes its own limitations (Stavrakakis, 2019, p. 78).

In *"Bartleby, the Scrivener"*, the concept of the Symbolic is applied to analyze the legal and administrative world of the Wall Street office as a representation of symbolic order. The office operates through a network of signifiers, including law, documents, professional duties, hierarchy, and the expectation of obedience. As a scrivener, Bartleby initially occupies a recognizable position within this system: his identity is defined through writing, copying, and participation in the administrative structure. However, his repeated refusal—"I would prefer not to"—creates a disruption within this symbolic framework because it does not conform to the expected logic of command and response. Bartleby neither openly rejects the system nor fully accepts its demands; instead, his silence and refusal expose the inability of the Symbolic order to categorize a subject who resists its established positions. Therefore, the analysis of the Symbolic in this study focuses on how Bartleby's withdrawal reveals the limits of language, law, and institutional meaning, ultimately preparing the emergence of the Real as a rupture within the symbolic structure (Nasio, 1998, p. 37).

3.3. The Real

The Real is the most complex register in Lacan's triad of the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real. Contrary to the ordinary meaning of "reality", the Lacanian Real does not refer to the external or observable world; rather, it designates what escapes representation and resists integration into language, images, and symbolic structures. The Real emerges precisely at the point where systems of meaning fail, where language becomes incapable of fully expressing an experience or stabilizing its meaning (Evans, 2006, p. 21). Therefore, the Real is not an external reality beyond the subject, but the internal limit of symbolization itself. In Lacanian theory, the Real is associated with lack, impossibility, and the failure of representation. Unlike the Symbolic, which organizes experience through language and law, the Real appears as what cannot be fully articulated within this system (Chiesa, 2014, p. 44). Similarly, unlike the Imaginary, which constructs meaning through images and identification, the Real cannot be stabilized through visual or conceptual representation. It returns precisely when symbolic and imaginary structures fail to contain an experience, appearing through moments of rupture, repetition, silence, anxiety, or confrontation with meaninglessness. In this sense, the Real is connected with Lacan's notion of "the impossible"—not something merely unrealized, but something that cannot be accommodated within the existing structures of meaning (Ahmadzadeh, 2007, p. 95).

From the perspective of literary criticism, the Real becomes visible not as a specific element within the text, but as a disruption in

the process of meaning production. Moments of silence, unexplained behavior, repetitive expressions, and failures of interpretation can reveal the presence of the Real because they expose the limits of language and representation (Fink, 2018, p. 66). Thus, the critical question is not to identify a particular object as the Real, but to examine the points at which the narrative structure encounters an inability to produce stable meaning. The Real appears where the Symbolic order cannot classify an experience and where imaginary constructions fail to provide coherence (Hendrix, 2019, p. 7). In *"Bartleby, the Scrivener"*, the concept of the Real provides the central framework for analyzing Bartleby's silence and refusal. Bartleby's repeated statement, "I would prefer not to", represents a moment in which language remains present but loses its expected communicative function. His response neither follows the logic of obedience nor constitutes direct rebellion; instead, it creates a rupture within the symbolic relationship between command and response. Through this repetitive phrase, Bartleby exposes the inability of the legal and administrative language of the office to fully determine his position as a subject. His gradual movement from refusal toward complete silence further intensifies this rupture, as language itself becomes unable to explain his existence. Therefore, in this study, the Real is examined as the point where Bartleby's silence, repetition, and withdrawal reveal the limits of symbolic meaning and demonstrate the inability of language to fully contain subjective experience.

3.4. The Relationship Between Lack and the Ineffable in Jacques Lacan's Theory of the Subject

In Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, the concept of "lack" is not understood as a temporary absence or a deficiency that can be eliminated; rather, it constitutes the fundamental condition through which subjectivity emerges. Unlike approaches that consider the subject as a unified and self-transparent entity, Lacan argues that the subject is formed through entry into language and the Symbolic order, a process that simultaneously enables identity and produces an irreducible division within the subject (Johnston, 2017, pp. 76–77). Thus, lack is not something external to the subject but an internal structural feature that shapes desire, identity, and the subject's relation to the Other. Because the subject is constituted through language, it is always separated from complete access to its own experience. Language provides the subject with a position within the symbolic network, but it can never fully express the subject's truth or totality. Consequently, desire emerges from this fundamental incompleteness, as the subject continuously seeks what cannot be completely recovered within the system of signification (Homer, 2016, pp. 41–43). In this sense, lack becomes the basis of the subject's divided condition rather than merely a sign of deprivation. The concept of the "divided subject" further explains this structural incompleteness. Lacan represents the subject with the symbol \$, indicating that the subject is internally split and never fully identical with the conscious self that speaks. What appears through speech represents only a partial expression of the subject, while unconscious desires and meanings remain beyond direct awareness (Nezhadmohammad, 2018, pp. 107–109). Since the unconscious itself is structured through signifiers, it appears indirectly through repetitions, silences, and disruptions within discourse rather than through transparent self-expression (Johnston, 2017, pp. 88–89).

In literary analysis, these concepts provide a framework for examining characters whose identities cannot be reduced to stable psychological or social categories. In *"Bartleby, the Scrivener"*, the concepts of lack and the divided subject are applied to analyze Bartleby's gradual withdrawal from the symbolic positions available to him. Although Bartleby initially appears as a recognizable subject within the occupational structure of the office, his repeated refusal and eventual silence reveal a growing separation between his physical presence and his participation in the network of social meanings. His refusal does not simply represent opposition to work or authority; rather, it exposes a subject whose relation to desire, language, and the Other has become fundamentally disrupted. From this perspective, the concept of the ineffable is connected to Bartleby's position as a subject who cannot be fully interpreted by the narrator. The narrator repeatedly attempts to explain Bartleby through psychological, moral, or social categories, yet each attempt encounters an unresolved remainder that escapes representation. This remainder does not indicate a lack of information alone; it reflects the structural impossibility of fully translating subjective experience into language. Therefore, lack and the divided subject provide a theoretical link between Bartleby's silence and the emergence of the Real, showing how the character embodies the limits of symbolic representation and the persistence of what cannot be completely articulated (Chavoshian & Sokhanvar, 2018, pp. 67–68).

3.5. Summary of the Story "Bartleby, the Scrivener"

Herman Melville's *"Bartleby, the Scrivener"* is narrated by an elderly lawyer who manages a Wall Street office organized around legal documents, professional duties, and administrative order. Within this symbolic environment, Bartleby enters as a new scrivener and initially appears as a disciplined and efficient employee. However, the structure of the office begins to collapse when Bartleby responds to the narrator's requests with the repeated phrase, "I would prefer not to." Unlike ordinary refusal or open rebellion, Bartleby's response creates uncertainty because it neither accepts nor directly rejects the authority of the symbolic system. As the story progresses, Bartleby gradually withdraws from his professional responsibilities, eventually refusing even to write. His silence and passive resistance challenge the established relations of work, communication, and obedience within the office. The narrator repeatedly attempts to understand and categorize Bartleby through moral, psychological, and social explanations, but these efforts fail to provide a complete interpretation of his behavior. Bartleby's continued presence in the office, despite his refusal to participate in its functions, transforms him into a figure of ambiguity and disruption.

After the narrator moves his office to another location, Bartleby remains behind and is eventually removed from the former workplace and taken to prison. There, he refuses assistance and food, leading to his death. The story concludes with the narrator's reference to Bartleby's possible former employment in the Dead Letter Office, reinforcing the themes of absence, failed communication, and the impossibility of fully understanding his subjectivity (Melville, 2024).

4. Discussion

4.1. The Imaginary, the Ambiguous Other, and the Failure of Knowledge

In *"Bartleby, the Scrivener"*, Bartleby emerges as an ambiguous Other who challenges the narrator's attempts to construct a stable image and interpretation of his identity. From a Lacanian perspective, the Imaginary refers to the process through which the subject establishes knowledge of the self and others through identification, representation, and relations with the Other. However, such knowledge is never completely objective, as it is shaped by images, assumptions, and projections that may produce misrecognition

rather than genuine understanding. In Melville's narrative, the narrator repeatedly attempts to interpret Bartleby by placing him within familiar categories and recognizable patterns of behavior. Yet Bartleby's unusual silence, passive refusal, and resistance to explanation prevent him from becoming a fully comprehensible figure within the narrator's imaginary framework. Unlike the other employees in the office, whose identities are defined through their social roles and observable characteristics, Bartleby remains outside the boundaries of conventional representation. His presence therefore exposes the limitations of imaginary identification, revealing that the image constructed by the narrator cannot fully capture the complexity of the subject. Through this disruption, Bartleby becomes not simply an unknown individual, but a figure who reveals the instability of the very process through which knowledge of the Other is produced. However, this knowledge is always accompanied by misrecognition, because the subject sees the other not in his real totality, but through images, presuppositions, and his own desire. In the story of Bartleby, the narrator is precisely in such a situation. He wants to understand Bartleby, to find a reason for his behavior, and to place him within one of the familiar ethical, psychological, or social patterns, but Bartleby constantly escapes this process of knowing. From the very beginning of the narrative, the narrator emphasizes his inability to present a complete image of Bartleby. He can provide an account of the lives, behaviors, and personal characteristics of many scriveners, but with regard to Bartleby he is faced with a lack of information. The first textual example in this regard is as follows:

"Such a thing is not possible with regard to Bartleby... Bartleby was one of those people about whom nothing definite exists, except for official sources, which in his case are very few" (Melville, 2024, p. 166).

This statement is the starting point of the failure of knowledge. From the outset, the narrator declares that Bartleby cannot easily be placed within the framework of biographical narrative, administrative knowledge, or character description. Unlike the other employees, he does not have a clear and reconstructable past. As a result, the narrator's Imaginary, which usually makes the other understandable through image-making and narration, is disrupted in the encounter with Bartleby. This inability to know does not mean the absence of image; on the contrary, the narrator constantly tries to construct an image of Bartleby. The problem is that this image never turns into definitive knowledge. At first glance, Bartleby is described through his face, bodily posture, silence, and appearance. The second textual example concerns his first presence in the office:

"A young man stood motionless. Now I can imagine him with that clean and faded clothing, pitiable politeness, and incurable sadness. He was Bartleby" (Melville, 2024, p. 169).

This description is significant from the perspective of the Imaginary because Bartleby initially enters the narrator's perception not as a fully knowable subject, but as an image constructed through the narrator's gaze. Before Bartleby's actions and speech reveal any independent dimension of his subjectivity, the narrator organizes his presence through visual and emotional signs such as "faded", "pitiable", and "incurable sadness." These descriptions therefore reveal less about Bartleby's inner reality than about the narrator's own interpretive framework. In Lacanian terms, the narrator's perception functions through the mechanism of the Imaginary, in which the Other is transformed into an image that appears coherent and understandable but is ultimately shaped by projection and misrecognition.

Through this process, Bartleby becomes an "ambiguous Other": a figure who is visible and present within the narrator's field of perception, yet remains resistant to complete identification. The narrator attempts to stabilize Bartleby's identity by assigning him recognizable qualities, viewing him as calm, polite, suffering, isolated, and harmless. However, these imaginary constructions are gradually disrupted because Bartleby's behavior cannot be incorporated into the categories through which the narrator understands others. His refusal, expressed through "I would prefer not to", creates a rupture in this imaginary framework because it prevents the narrator from establishing a consistent relationship between Bartleby's appearance and his meaning. Bartleby is neither an obedient employee who conforms to the symbolic order nor an explicit rebel who opposes it. Therefore, the failure of the narrator's imaginary identification does not result simply from a lack of information about Bartleby; rather, it reveals the structural limitation of the Imaginary itself, namely its inability to fully capture a subject who exceeds the images through which he is interpreted.

"I immediately thought that my ears had not heard correctly, or that Bartleby had entirely misunderstood what I meant... I looked at him. His lean face was composed and his gray eyes were calm. Nothing was visible in his face that would indicate any anxiety in him" (Melville, 2024, p. 189).

This scene is one of the most important moments of the failure of imaginary knowledge. The narrator expects to see in Bartleby's face some sign of anger, anxiety, stubbornness, fear, or disobedience, because in the logic of the Imaginary, the face and body of the other should reveal his inner meaning. Yet Bartleby's face offers no definitive sign. The calmness of his face neither confirms obedience nor explains disobedience. As a result, the narrator encounters an image that, instead of clarifying meaning, increases ambiguity. The importance of this scene lies in the fact that the Imaginary relies on the connection between image and meaning. The narrator wants to reach Bartleby's psychological truth through his face, gaze, bodily posture, and tone, but all these signs are insufficient. Bartleby, through his stillness, calmness, and apparent indifference, disrupts the usual mechanism of knowing the other. Instead of offering an interpretable image, he becomes a level of ambiguity that leaves the narrator wandering among pity, anger, curiosity, and astonishment. Therefore, Bartleby resists not only the administrative order, but also the narrator's visual and cognitive order. From a Lacanian perspective, the failure of the narrator's knowledge indicates the limitation of the Imaginary. The narrator assumes that if he places Bartleby's appearance, behavior, habits, and words beside one another, he can arrive at his meaning. But Bartleby escapes this system of image-making. Every image that the narrator constructs of him collapses through Bartleby's next action or silence. If he considers him a useful employee, his refusal disrupts this image; if he considers him sick or in need of pity, the calmness and firmness of his responses make this understanding inadequate; and if he considers him disobedient, the absence of anger and open conflict makes this image uncertain. On this basis, Bartleby, at the level of the Imaginary, is an other who is seen but not known. The narrator describes him through his face, color, bodily posture, silence, and speech, but these descriptions, rather than clarifying Bartleby, reveal the narrator's inability to understand him. For this reason, an important part of the narrative tension is formed not only in Bartleby's behavior, but also in the narrator's gaze.

Bartleby functions as a reflective surface through which the limitations of the narrator's own interpretive framework become visible. Throughout the narrative, the narrator repeatedly attempts to transform Bartleby into a comprehensible figure by relying on familiar categories of identity, behavior, and social role. However, each attempt is disrupted by Bartleby's refusal to conform to these

expectations. His calm appearance suggests passivity, yet his repeated refusal challenges the assumption that appearance can provide access to inner meaning. Likewise, his silence does not offer the narrator a stable explanation of his motives; instead, it intensifies the uncertainty surrounding his identity. Therefore, Bartleby does not simply remain an unknown Other because of missing information, but because the narrator's imaginary methods of recognition prove insufficient for understanding a subject who exceeds established images. In this sense, the Imaginary in the story does not produce complete coherence or certainty; rather, it reveals the processes of projection, misrecognition, and interpretive instability through which the narrator attempts to understand the Other.

4.2. The Wall Street Office and the Establishment of the Symbolic Order

In "*Bartleby, the Scrivener*", the Wall Street office functions as a manifestation of Lacan's Symbolic order, where subjects acquire meaning through language, law, professional roles, and institutional structures. The narrator's office is organized around documents, ownership, legal discourse, and administrative practices; therefore, individuals are defined less by personal identity than by their position within this system. The scriveners, for instance, are recognized through their occupational functions of copying and reproducing legal texts, reflecting the regulatory logic of the Symbolic.

The spatial and institutional structure of the office establishes a controlled order based on repetition, obedience, and clearly defined roles. This symbolic framework becomes significant because Bartleby's refusal emerges within precisely such a system. His statement "I would prefer not to" disrupts the expected relationship between command and response, revealing the limitations of a symbolic order that attempts to organize subjects through fixed meanings and social positions:

"My office was on the second floor of building number ... Wall Street... However, in the pleasant calm of a secluded corner, and among title deeds, ownership documents, and mortgages belonging to wealthy people, I enjoyed a comfortable business." (Melville, 2024, pp. 160–161)

This statement is the reader's point of entry into a world in which place itself becomes a sign of law and administrative power. The office is the place where bodies, papers, desks, windows, and human relations are ordered.

The Symbolic order is further manifested through the narrator's profession and the function of legal language within the office. As a lawyer, the narrator operates within a system where documents, ownership records, and official texts determine social relations and establish meaning. From a Lacanian perspective, these written forms are not merely administrative tools; they function as signifiers through which subjects and their positions are recognized within the social structure. Thus, the authority of the office depends on the symbolic power of language, documentation, and legal classification rather than direct personal experience. The role of the scriveners reflects this symbolic mechanism. Their task is not to create new meanings but to reproduce and preserve existing signifiers through copying and comparison. By defining employees according to efficiency, productivity, and professional function, the office reduces individual identity to socially assigned positions within the institutional order. Therefore, the characters are initially understood through their relation to the Symbolic: lawyer, employer, and scrivener. This structure is significant because Bartleby's refusal later challenges this system of fixed positions and meanings precisely. His rejection of expected duties disrupts the symbolic logic in which language, work, and obedience are assumed to operate in a stable relationship.

"Of course, an essential part of a scrivener's work is to compare his own copy, word by word." (Melville, 2024, p. 172)

The function of copying in the office provides a significant example of how the Symbolic order operates within the narrative. The scrivener's task is not to produce an independent interpretation of a text, but to reproduce existing signifiers with accuracy and conformity. The requirement to compare copies with originals demonstrates a system in which meaning depends on repetition, consistency, and adherence to established forms. From a Lacanian perspective, this process reflects the logic of the Symbolic, where subjects and meanings are positioned within pre-existing networks of signs, rules, and social codes. The distinction between the original document and its copy is therefore significant because it reveals how the office constructs reality through written signs rather than direct experience. Legal documents gain authority not because of their material existence, but because they are recognized within a symbolic system of signatures, records, and institutional validation. Consequently, the scrivener becomes an agent of this order by maintaining the continuity of established signifiers through repetition.

This symbolic structure also explains why Bartleby's refusal creates such a profound disruption. His rejection of the repetitive function assigned to him challenges the very mechanism through which the office produces meaning and maintains order. By refusing to continue copying, Bartleby does not merely abandon a professional task; he interrupts the symbolic process that defines his position as a subject within the institutional system. Any disruption in this process can create tension within the entire administrative system. The narrator, as the head of the office, is the representative of this same Symbolic order. He is responsible for organizing the employees, controlling their behavior, protecting the documents, and maintaining the flow of work. Even his tolerance and calmness have meaning within the framework of this order. He gets along with Turkey and Nippers because, despite their strange habits, they are still manageable within the network of work. The Symbolic order does not necessarily mean the complete elimination of disorder; rather, its ability lies in absorbing and controlling limited disorders. As long as the employee, even imperfectly and irregularly, performs his duty, he can remain within this system. Therefore, the strange behaviors of the previous employees are not a fundamental threat to the office, because they are still defined in relation to work, usefulness, and relative obedience.

The importance of Bartleby's entry becomes clear precisely in this context. At first, he enters the structure as a desirable scrivener and, through his silence, precision, and diligence, appears compatible with the needs of the office. But the symbolic structure of the office expects him not only to write, but also to participate in the complete administrative process, namely copying, comparing, obeying orders, and accepting his occupational position. Therefore, the main issue in this section is not yet Bartleby's refusal as the Real, but rather the ground within which this refusal gains meaning. If the Wall Street office were not a symbol of law, work, and administrative obedience, Bartleby's response would not create such a strong effect in the narrative. His sentence gains meaning in a space where everything is organized on the basis of command, duty, document, and repetition. Therefore, the Wall Street office in the narrative "*Bartleby, the Scrivener*" is the scene of the establishment of the Symbolic; a scene in which legal language, law, ownership, documents, wage labor, and administrative hierarchy place subjects in specific positions. The narrator, as lawyer and head of the office, is the guardian of this order, and the scriveners, as agents of writing, are responsible for reproducing it. The three textual examples concerning the location of the office, legal documents, and the duty of comparing copies show that before the story encounters

Bartleby's crisis, it constructs a completely symbolic and law-governed world. It is this very world that, later, with the entry of Bartleby's refusal, is disrupted and thrown into crisis.

4.3. The Lacanian Manifestation of the Real in Silence and the Collapse of Meaning

In a Lacanian reading of Herman Melville's *"Bartleby, the Scrivener"*, what becomes central to the analysis is not merely the character of Bartleby, but the moment in which language ceases to function in its ordinary capacity and the subject is positioned at the point of "the Real"—a point at which full symbolization is impossible, and meaning cannot be stably fixed. The Real, in Lacanian theory, is a dimension that resists entry into language and continuously manifests itself as a rupture, silence, or disturbance within the symbolic order of meaning. In the story, Bartleby, through his repeated phrase "I would prefer not to", occupies precisely this boundary. He speaks within language, yet simultaneously undermines its function from within. From this perspective, Bartleby's silence and refusal are not merely simple psychological acts, but rather the manifestation of the "divided subject"—a subject caught in the rupture between language and desire and no longer able to align himself with symbolic roles such as clerk, writer, or legal subject. The narrator, as the representative of the symbolic order, persistently attempts to translate Bartleby's refusal into the language of law, logic, or psychology, yet each attempt ends in failure. This failure marks the very point that Lacan identifies as the emergence of the Real: the moment when meaning collapses while experience nonetheless persists. At the primary level, the Wall Street legal office functions as a complete embodiment of the symbolic order, where language, law, and social roles are fully stabilized. Within this space, every linguistic act is expected to result in a command, a response, or a clearly defined function. However, Bartleby's arrival disrupts this order. He neither openly resists nor argues nor remains in absolute silence; rather, he produces a form of "non-functional language." His utterance is simultaneously a linguistic response and a refusal of linguistic function. When Bartleby responds to the narrator's request for proofreading by saying, "I would prefer not to", the statement appears to remain within language, yet functionally it halts language itself (Melville, 2024, p. 173). At this moment, the relationship between command and obedience—the foundation of the symbolic order—is fundamentally disrupted. The narrator expects a binary response of "yes" or "no", yet encounters a structure that exceeds binary logic. Language, instead of producing meaning, becomes the suspension of meaning.

Throughout the narrative, Bartleby repeatedly uses the same phrase, "I would prefer not to", in response to different requests and situations (Melville, 2024). This repetition should not be understood merely as a habitual linguistic pattern or a form of personal stubbornness; rather, it represents a disruption within the symbolic function of language. In Lacanian theory, repetition is closely related to the return of what cannot be fully integrated into the symbolic order. The subject repeats certain signifiers not because they simply communicate a fixed meaning, but because repetition reveals a point of persistence where meaning fails to become completely stabilized. From this perspective, Bartleby's phrase interrupts the ordinary relationship between command and response: it resembles an answer, yet it refuses the expected function of language by neither accepting nor directly rejecting the demand.

The significance of this repetition lies in the way it empties the phrase of ordinary communicative meaning. Each repetition occurs in a different context, but the signifier remains unchanged, preventing language from producing a clear interpretation of Bartleby's intention. Instead of expanding meaning through new signifiers, the phrase creates a blockage within the symbolic chain. In Lacanian terms, this blockage indicates the encounter with the Real, not because the Real exists outside language, but because it appears at the moment when language reaches its limit and fails to organize experience completely (Evans, 2006, p. 21; Fink, 2018, p. 66). This process reaches its final stage when Bartleby withdraws into complete silence. His silence does not simply represent the absence of speech; rather, it marks the point at which even refusal can no longer be expressed through symbolic means. Having already disrupted the communicative structure of the office, Bartleby's withdrawal exposes the inability of the symbolic order to fully contain his subjectivity. Therefore, Bartleby's silence and repetitive refusal can be understood as manifestations of the Real: moments in which language reveals its own limitations and confronts the presence of what remains impossible to fully symbolize.

4.4. Loss, Isolation, and Death in Bartleby

In Herman Melville's *"Bartleby, the Scrivener"*, the sequence of loss, isolation, and death can be understood not merely as stages of social withdrawal, but as a gradual transformation in Bartleby's relation to language, desire, and the Symbolic order. From a Lacanian perspective, these stages reflect the movement of a divided subject whose connection with the network of signifiers progressively weakens, revealing the fundamental lack that constitutes subjectivity. Loss in Bartleby's experience does not simply refer to the abandonment of his professional role as a scrivener; rather, it represents a disruption in his position within the Symbolic structure of the office. Although work initially provides Bartleby with a recognizable identity, his gradual refusal to participate in copying and communication indicates a withdrawal from the system of meanings through which the subject is socially defined. In Lacanian terms, this loss is connected with lack, not as a temporary absence, but as a structural gap within the subject's relation to the Other. Bartleby's refusal reveals a subject who no longer seeks completion through participation in established symbolic roles.

This process develops into isolation, which should not be interpreted merely as physical separation from others. Bartleby remains physically present within the office, yet he becomes increasingly detached from the symbolic exchanges that organize social relations. His silence interrupts communication with the Other, while his refusal prevents him from occupying a recognizable position within the network of work, obligation, and authority. Isolation therefore represents the growing distance between the subject and the symbolic order, where Bartleby exists within society but no longer participates in its system of meaning. Finally, death in the narrative represents the culmination of this progressive dissolution. Bartleby's physical death is preceded by a symbolic withdrawal in which language, desire, and social connection have already been significantly reduced. His refusal to eat and his final silence indicate a movement toward the limit where the subject can no longer sustain a meaningful relation with the Symbolic. In this sense, death becomes associated with the emergence of the Real: a point where representation fails and the subject is confronted with what cannot be fully integrated into language. Thus, the trajectory from loss to isolation and death reveals not simply the decline of an individual character, but the gradual exposure of the limits of symbolic identification and the persistence of what remains beyond complete signification.

5. Conclusion

This study has examined Herman Melville's *"Bartleby, the Scrivener"* through a Lacanian psychoanalytic framework in order to explore how silence, refusal, and withdrawal function as manifestations of a crisis in language and subjectivity. Rather than interpreting

Bartleby solely as a figure of social resistance, psychological isolation, or individual passivity, this reading has approached him as a subject whose relation to the Symbolic order gradually becomes disrupted. The analysis suggests that Bartleby's repeated phrase "I would prefer not to" functions as more than an expression of refusal. Within the Lacanian framework adopted here, the phrase interrupts the ordinary relationship between command and response and exposes the limitations of symbolic structures that attempt to stabilize meaning. The study further indicates that the three Lacanian registers operate in a connected process: the Imaginary is revealed through the narrator's unsuccessful attempts to construct a coherent image of Bartleby; the Symbolic appears through the legal, linguistic, and occupational structures of the Wall Street office; and the Real emerges at the point where these systems fail to fully explain Bartleby's existence.

A central contribution of this study lies in moving beyond readings that examine Bartleby primarily through the concepts of alienation, resistance, or the failure of language. By emphasizing the interaction among the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real, this article proposes that Bartleby's silence should be understood as the result of a gradual breakdown in the subject's relation to representation, social position, and meaning production. In this interpretation, the movement from loss to isolation and finally death reflects not merely personal decline, but the increasing inability of the subject to remain fully integrated within symbolic networks. From the perspective developed in this research, Bartleby's final withdrawal does not simply represent absence or defeat; rather, it reveals the point at which language encounters its own limits and confronts what cannot be completely symbolized. Therefore, "*Bartleby, the Scrivener*" can be read as a narrative that explores the tension between the subject's need for meaning and the impossibility of fully expressing subjective experience. While this Lacanian reading does not constitute the only possible interpretation of Melville's text, it provides a theoretical framework for understanding how silence and refusal become literary forms through which the limits of language and subjectivity are made visible.

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