



# Discipline and Resistance—A Foucauldian Approach to *Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street*

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## Abstract

Herman Melville, renowned for his literary prowess in the 19th century, showcased a unique sensitivity to politics in his works. Among his notable creations, *Bartleby, the Scrivener*, published in 1853, stands as a pivotal work that delves into societal power dynamics and individual agency. Positioned as Melville's first major work following his iconic masterpiece, *Moby-Dick*, it has garnered acclaim both in literary circles and on the stage. While scholars have extensively analyzed the novel from various angles, including Marxian alienation theory and existentialist perspectives, few have explored its themes of discipline and resistance through the lens of Foucault's power theory. This paper aims to fill this gap by employing Foucault's approach to investigate the construction of power, discipline, and resistance in *Bartleby, the Scrivener*. By examining the protagonist's tragic fate, the paper aims to uncover the internal mechanisms that contribute to his plight and proposes strategies for challenging passive submission within power structures. Through this analysis, the paper not only provides a new interpretation of Melville's work but also encourages reflection on disciplinary power mechanisms prevalent in contemporary society.

## Keywords

Melville, *Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street*, Michel Foucault, Discipline, Resistance

## Introduction

Herman Melville (1819-1891), a prominent figure in 19th-century American literature, is often compared to Nathaniel Hawthorne and revered as the "American Shakespeare". Despite initial neglect, his work, particularly *Moby-Dick*, has attained global recognition and solidified his legacy. Melville's literary journey, marked by seafaring experiences and a diverse body of work, culminated in the publication of *Bartleby, the Scrivener* in 1853. This novella, set against the backdrop of Wall Street, portrays the enigmatic Bartleby's passive resistance to societal norms, drawing attention to themes of isolation and nonconformity.

Michel Foucault (1926-1984), a renowned French philosopher and social theorist, significantly influenced literary criticism, philosophy, and sociology with his theories on power. In *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1975), Foucault delves into the evolution of disciplinary mechanisms in modern society, emphasizing the pervasive and subtle nature of power. His analysis highlights the internalization of disciplinary power within individuals, leading to docility and conformity.

This paper seeks to explore the themes of discipline and resistance in *Bartleby, the Scrivener* through a Foucauldian lens. By examining Melville's portrayal of Bartleby's silent rebellion and Foucault's theories on power, the paper

aims to elucidate the dynamics of control and resistance in the novella. Through this analysis, we aim to shed light on the societal implications of disciplinary power and the individual's struggle for autonomy in a conformist society.

## 1. The Construction of Power

Foucault's examination of micro-power emphasizes the significance of space in power dynamics. He argues that power cannot operate without a spatial context, shifting focus from macro-level state power to micro-level institutions like schools and hospitals. By scrutinizing space, Foucault uncovers the hidden power dynamics inherent within it. Additionally, discourse plays a crucial role in power construction, shaping individuals' behavior and values. In *Bartleby, the Scrivener*, Melville portrays characters frozen within specific spatial confines, illustrating the influence of discourse on their actions.

In Melville's narrative, the depiction of specific locations, notably the chambers within the Wall Street law firm, underscores the influence of spatial dynamics on individual experiences and interactions. Foucault's insights on space, though not expounded in a dedicated monograph, shed light on its intricate relationship with discourse and power. According to Foucault, space serves as a locus where knowledge, discourse, and power intersect.

The construction of power in *Bartleby, the Scrivener* is intimately linked to spatial configurations. The law firm's physical layout, characterized by brick walls and segregated office spaces, reflects an architectural design aimed at maintaining power relations. Foucault suggests that architecture functions as a mechanism for regulating movement and symbolizing hierarchical relationships, thereby influencing individuals' behavior.

In essence, the portrayal of the law firm's spatial environment underscores the pervasive influence of power dynamics, wherein physical spaces serve as conduits for the exercise of authority and control.

The strict division of geographical space establishes the pattern of internal space construction. In *Bartleby, the Scrivener*, the whole large space is made up of many smaller spaces. The office is separated by ground-glass folding doors:

I should have stated before that ground-glass folding doors divided my premises into two parts, one of which was occupied by my scriveners, the other by myself (Bartleby, 10).

These folding doors are made of glass to block off space but still make it easy for the lawyer to observe his employees. Likewise, the lawyer noted that it was up to him whether the doors were folded or not. So that's the distribution of this space. Each person is confined to his own space -- and this distribution of space is a kind of rational space with certain rules and order. This reason requires obedience of all individuals, and it binds and normalizes all behavior.

In the novel, each employee is assigned to work every day by the lawyer, who can also decide whether to assign them morning or afternoon work. The area where the office helps lawyers better block out the light so that employees won't be aware of what's really happening outside, even if the occasional glimmer of light is small. In this office, the desk in front of the employees is the only space they can use freely. Employees enclosed in this small space can only do what they are assigned to do each day.

Unlike his fictional utopia, Michel Foucault creatively recreated a new location he called "differential space". In Foucault's opinion, the space of difference is real, which contains another real space of every culture and civilization. This is the kind of fruitful utopia where this fictional utopia exists and it is a real space where perfect societies are presented, competed, or reversed. In other words, differential space is a structured space that accommodates what people are unwilling to see in real society and transforms things that people refuse to see. It seems that perversion is pushed into the so-called normal and ordinary by the restraint of power.

It no longer simply sees space as a concept in the physical sense but puts it into practice. In different social cultures, this opens a new window for the study of spatial discourse. In *Bartleby, the Scrivener*, in addition to ground-glass folding doors, there is also a folding screen, a prop used to bring Bartleby and the lawyer together. It's also an important clue to what separates space into differential space. There are a lot of descriptions about the green screen in the article:

(1) I procured a high green folding screen, which I might entirely isolate Bartleby from my sight, though not remove him from my voice. (Bartleby, 11)

(2) One object I had, in placing Bartleby so handy to me behind the screen, was, to avail myself of his services on such trivial occasions. (Bartleby, 11-12)

(3) "I would prefer not to," he said and gently disappeared behind the screen. (Bartleby, 13)

This folding screen also acts as a partition or domination of space. Employees' privacy no longer exists, they are

always in a state of observation and control.

## 2. The Discipline of Power

In the book *Discipline and Punishment: The Birth of Prison*, Foucault expounds on three perspectives of discipline: the docile bodies, correct training, and panopticism. Foucault believed that these three disciplinary approaches can “make” individuals (Foucault, 1995, p. 327).

In every society, the body is under the control of power, which imposes various restrictions, prohibitions, or obligations on individuals. In classical times, the earliest construction of the “observatory” was the diversity of mankind (Foucault, 1995, p. 329). Therefore, in order to limit the scale of individual power, object, and form can be used to control the level of individual active mechanism, active time, and active space. These tame controls over individuals are called discipline, and the realization of “discipline” depends on the enforcement mechanism of observation. As the center of power, the observatory sets strict rules and powers in a specific area. Hierarchical observation is a form and follows a principle of embedding. In the layered observation, the building is no longer a space for people to live in, but an observatory that clearly and precisely controls and limits the individual.

In *Bartleby, The Scrivener*, the whole firm is like a poster child for hierarchical observation. The firm is located in a building on Wall Street. From one section of the chambers, the white interior wall can see a large patio, and the wall runs from top to bottom throughout the building. At the other end of the chambers, a tall brick wall could be seen out the window, unprotected. Such a setting isolates the entire chamber from the outside world, making it impossible for employees working inside to see out the window. All they could see was the wall, dark with age, and only ten feet from the glass windows. Because the surrounding buildings stood tall and the lawyer’s chambers were on the second floor, the wall was separated from the chambers like a large square reservoir. In Foucault’s view, architecture can transform people and act on the people in it, helping those at the top control their behavior, understand them, and even change them. In this book, the closed chambers space does just that, helping lawyers better understand their employees and their behavior to control them. This kind of enclosed building helps the lawyer to better gaze at the employees and helps him to better manage affairs and improve work efficiency. At the same time, employees sit at separate desks, so they lose the chance to communicate with each other, making it easier for lawyers to monitor and control them individually. This constant observation forms a complex, automatic force built on the lawyer’s top-down grip on power.

In *Bartleby, the Scrivener*, lawyers, and employees form a network of different levels of supervision. The three employees, except Bartleby, are easily controlled by the power of lawyers, and all perform their obligations well, and naturally observe and supervise each other. Foucault once proposed that:

the disciplinary gaze did, in fact, need relays. The pyramid was able to fulfill, more efficiently than the circle, two requirements: to be complete enough to form an uninterrupted network—consequently the possibility of multiplying its levels, and of distributing them over the entire surface to be supervised; and yet to be discreet enough not to weigh down with an inert mass on the activity to be disciplined, and not to act as a brake or an obstacle to it (Foucault, 1995, p. 320).

On the one hand, disciplinary gaze needs a complete and continuous network with increasing levels, and different levels of gaze should be distributed on the supervised surface. On the other hand, staring also requires a reasonable structure to enable surveillance functions. The lawyer, as the boss of the firm, naturally belongs to the highest level of supervision. In the novel, the old lawyer’s surveillance of his employees is practically ubiquitous. Just as Foucault thinks that the implementation of discipline must have a mechanism of enforcement by means of surveillance. In this mechanism, surveillance can often induce the absolute obedience of the monitored to power, and this seemingly invisible coercive means can often make the monitored controlled inadvertently. In the novel, the old lawyer’s dominance over his employees is apparently unassailable. This is illustrated by his intimate knowledge of each employee’s behavior. He carefully observes the habits and productivity of each employee, and even has a good understanding of their personality and emotions. In this novel, he knows a lot about his buddy’s work habits:

I saw no more of the proprietor of the face, which, gaining its meridian with the sun, seemed to set with it, to rise, culminate, and decline the following day, with the like regularity and undiminished glory. (*Bartleby*, 4)

He knows exactly when Turkey is most productive, when he is most prone to mistakes when he is grumpy, and will leave ink stains on papers in the afternoon. That’s why he knows how to use the most productive hours of the day to help him get his work done while keeping the bird happy. Employee Nippers, for his part, is described by lawyers as a combination of two evil forces, concerned about associating with strange people and sometimes having

a temper tantrum due to indigestion. But up to a point he doesn't make any serious mistakes and his decent attire sometimes works for the good of the firm. Monitoring the employee Ginger Nut is even easier. His task is to buy cakes and apples for other employees and do odd jobs. The real complication is the monitoring of Bartleby, for what the lawyer really cannot know is Bartleby's habits and character. The old lawyer's first attempt to keep an eye on Bartleby begins by giving him other work:

(1) "In this very attitude did I sit when I called to him, rapidly stating what it was I wanted him to do—namely, to examine a small paper with me." (Bartleby, 12)

(2) "I repeated my request in the clearest tone I could assume; but in quite as clear a one came the previous reply," (Bartleby, 12)

(3) "The copies, the copies," said I, hurriedly. "We are going to examine them. There"—and I held towards him the fourth quadruplicate. (Bartleby, 13)

Other employees, especially Turkey, should be the supervisor of the middle layer because it is mentioned in the book that the key to the law firm is not only in the hands of the lawyer himself and the lady cleaning the building but also in the hands of Turkey. It can be seen that the lawyer still trusts Turkey and gives him part of the power. Supervision is integrated into employees' daily lives and helps lawyers keep order and avoid chaos in the firm. As for Bartleby, there was supervision, not only from lawyers but also from other employees, because he was clearly a different kind of employee. When layers of discipline are exercised, power is not a possessive object or a transferable property. It works as part of the mechanism. At this point, Bartleby's refusal is actually an act of alienation, because the implementation of his necessary work is virtually assisting the operation of the monitoring mechanism of the old lawyer. So even though at first the old lawyer was very angry with Bartleby, at first he chose to put up with it because he wanted to keep his surveillance mechanism going. But later, lawyers grew tired of Bartleby's eccentricity. It's clear that Bartleby is not recognized by the group, as the book shows when lawyers ask other employees:

"With submission, sir," said Turkey, in his blindest tone, "I think that you are."

"Nippers." said I, "What do you think of it?"

"I think I should kick him out of the office."

"I think, sir, he's a little lunny," replied Ginger Nut, with a grin. (Bartleby, 15)

Although these employees have their own responsibilities, but in order to complete their work as soon as possible, get due pay, naturally in order to maintain the peacetime order to contribute. In the process of work, this kind of supervision responsibility is constantly enhanced, naturally formed a hierarchical supervision structure. In short, the other employees are expected not only to do their own work but also to supervise the maverick Bartleby. This kind of supervision exists on a broad scale, and other employees become members of the hierarchy of supervisors, who share the goal with the lawyers to keep the firm running. This is their duty and a symbol of a lawyer's power. Bartleby becomes the lowest level of supervised existence in this system.

### 3. Power Resistance

Foucault believed that people resisted through their own efforts. He was opposed to individuals being controlled and constrained by others, but he advocated people taking care of themselves and pursuing true freedom. In addition, in Foucault's view, the use of power is never "power" or "resistance", just as the subject status is never "hegemony" or "anti-hegemony". Resistance means the act or force of resisting, resisting, or resisting. In *Bartleby the Scrivener*, although the lawyer tries to control and subtly manipulate his employees by communicating and seeming to be considerate of his subordinates, his approach always fails to control all of them. Bartleby could never really be controlled by a lawyer because he thought differently, so he rebelled in his own way.

The quest for real identity is an expression of power resistance in *Bartleby, the Scrivener*. Living by lawyers' rules from day to day, other employees unconsciously follow the rules set by lawyers, so the rule of lawyers is very successful in a sense. To the rest of the firm, defiance seemed an unfamiliar word, even if sometimes they felt that what the lawyer was saying was not quite right. But because lawyers are in the role of bosses, they don't think and doubt further. Moreover, lawyers are the ruling class in the novel. In the eyes of the ruling class, they always want to control everyone to dispel the threat of dissent to the proper functioning of their power, and they want to be turned into a rigid, docile, but useful machine by themselves. But Bartleby, a newcomer, is quietly awakening to self-awareness without any sign of it. Perhaps because he kept his mouth shut, at first the lawyer didn't even aware that the upheaval going on inside such a quiet man.

In addition to the pursuit of self-identity, the challenge to rules is also a form of resistance.

“Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power” (Foucault, 1995).

The disciplinary power, though for the most part very powerful, is a given. Independent individuals do not appear because of power, each individual is the subject of power practice. Therefore, individuals can respond to or resist the practice of power.

In *Bartleby, the Scrivener*, Bartleby not only expressed his dissatisfaction in his behavior, but also reflected the individual’s spiritual resistance. While other employees did express a little disquiet in their behavior, Bartleby was more of an independent thinker. In a disciplined society, keeping one’s mind clear is a rare thing. A person with an independent spirit is less concerned with the authority of others and more concerned with problems from his own point of view. Spiritual resistance, therefore, is an attitude of ignoring others and focusing on one’s own beliefs. Like Bartleby, he was never willing to give in to his lawyer’s demands, and other employees were easily persuaded by the lawyer’s spirit. Overall, the contrast between Bartleby’s mental defiance and that of other employees is striking.

#### 4. Conclusion

In *Bartleby, the Scrivener*, Melville provides a microcosmic portrayal of societal power dynamics, reflecting his concerns about the growing contradictions within capitalist society. Through Foucault’s lens of disciplinary power, this paper explores the interplay between space, discourse, and power dynamics in the novel. Melville’s creation of controlling chambers symbolizes the operation of power construction, while concepts like hierarchical observation and panopticism illustrate the disciplinary mechanisms at play. Bartleby’s resistance serves as evidence of individual attempts to reclaim agency within a system of control. While this paper has made strides in analyzing power dynamics, limitations exist due to the complexity of the novel and the author’s knowledge constraints. Further research could delve deeper into the interpretation of disciplinary power in the novel. Foucault’s theories prompt critical reflection on societal discipline, urging individuals to challenge norms and exercise independent judgment. In today’s society, understanding and deconstructing disciplinary power is essential for navigating conflicting social norms and making informed choices.

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