

# The Interweaving of Resistance and Submission Under the Walls - A Stylistic Analysis of “Bartleby, the Scrivener”

Junpeng Huang

Department of Foreign Languages, Jiangxi Normal University, Nanchang, Jiangxi, China. 1816503976@qq.com.

## Abstract

The combination of literary stylistics and narratological stylistics provides a broader perspective for reading literary works. Taking the short story “Bartleby the Scrivener” by the 19th century American writer Herman Melville as an example, this paper explores the scriveners’ resistance and submission in the novel from the lexical, syntactic and rhetorical levels of literary stylistics and the point of view of narratological stylistics respectively. The results present that the scriveners all show the resistance to different degrees, but the submission of Turkey and Nippers prevails over resistance; only Bartleby’s resistance finally gives the old lawyer a sense of crisis and awakens the soft side of the old lawyer’s heart.

**Keywords:** “Bartleby, the Scrivener”, literary stylistics, narratological stylistics.

## 1 Introduction

“Bartleby, the Scrivener” is a short story embodied in *The Piazza Tales* by 19th-century American novelist Herman Melville, which mainly tells the story of Bartleby, the scrivener, who refuses to do the job required by his employer and ultimately dies in prison. The protagonist of the novel, Bartleby, has won the favour of many scholars at home and abroad with his catchphrase “I’d rather not” and the bizarre behaviour. Criticist Zlogar made a quite comprehensive and incisive summary of the study of “Bartleby” in the West, arguing that the interpretation of “Bartleby, the Scrivener” mainly includes the following aspects: 1) Bartleby represents writers who do not want to pander to the popular commercial novels, and Bartleby is the reproduction of the writer Melville in the novel; 2) Bartleby is an “alienated” worker who expresses his extreme dissatisfaction with exploitation in capitalist society; 3) Bartleby is a schizophrenic who isolates himself from the incomprehensible “normal” society; 4) Bartleby is the embodiment of Christ, demonstrating opposition to the excessive charity of Christian doctrine in order to show loyalty to the Lord [1]. In recent years, “Bartleby, the Scrivener” has also triggered a wave of domestic researches : 1) many scholars have analyzed Bartleby from a philosophical level, realizing the

interaction between philosophical ideas and literary characters; 2) the characters in “Bartleby, the Scrivener” have a proximity to the characters in Bleak House; 3) the wall in the novel blocks communication between the employer and the employees, resulting in Bartleby’s alienation.

Among the numerous researches, there are few analyses of “Bartleby, the scrivener” from the perspective of stylistics. According to Professor Shen Dan [2], “There is a direct dialectical relationship between the ‘discourse’ of narratology and the ‘style’ of stylistics. Only by taking both, ‘discourse’ and ‘style’, into account, can we have a more comprehensive study of the novel’s formal techniques”. In this paper, the scriveners’ resistance and submission in the novel will be discussed from the perspectives of literary stylistics and narratological stylistics.

## 2 Analyses of Literary Stylistics

“Literary stylistics is a bridge between linguistics and literary criticism, which aims at the interpretation of specific texts and concentrates on how authors express and enhance thematic meaning and aesthetic effects through their choice of language.” [3] Leech and Short in their book, *Style in Fiction*, exemplify the four main levels available for analysis, namely the “lexical level, the grammatical level, the rhetorical level, and the articulation and contextual level” [4].

### 2.1 Lexical Level - Adjectives

In the beginning of the novel, it is mentioned that “the nature of my avocations” “has brought me into more than ordinary contact with what would seem an interesting and somewhat singular set of men” (1), and the set of men refer to “law-copyists, or scriveners” (1). Obviously, the quality of being “somewhat singular” belongs to not only the scriveners in the old lawyer’s chambers, but also to the group of “scriveners”. The novel foregrounds the surroundings of the chamber and a lot of adjectives are used to describe the location and appearance of the chamber. In the old lawyer’s opinion, “such description is indispensable to an adequate understanding of the chief character about to be presented” (1). This suggests that the old lawyer seems intent on implying that the singularity displayed by the scriveners in the chamber are somehow related to the surroundings.

First of all, the two adjectives, “tame” and “deficient”, are used to describe the visual perception of the surroundings respectively. The word “tame” here means “not interesting or exciting”; However, “tame” also contains another meaning, namely “willing to do what other people ask”. Here the rhetorical device of pun is used for “tame” is not only a description of the surroundings, but also implies the old lawyer’s expectation of the scriveners’ being docile and submissive. “Deficient” is understood as “not having enough of something”, which means “lack of life” in the context; Another meaning of “deficient” is “not good enough”, which alludes to

the fact that there are various shortcomings of the scriveners. So they are not the ideal scriveners of the old lawyer's chamber. Secondly, the wall is depicted as "white" and "black". "White" contains a special meaning in American literature and culture. Melville's most famous novel *Moby Dick* also contains the color, "white", which not only brings a sense of emptiness, but also creates a sense of fearsomeness [5]. The stark contrast between the two colors of black and white gives the readers a sense of depression, mystery and horror, which, to some extent, also accounts for the scriveners' singularity. Finally, the adjectives, such as "spacious", "lofty", "great" and "huge", are used to describe the surrounding buildings and brick walls. The contrast between the big buildings and the small scriveners working within them, which provides effective evidence to account for the scriveners' loneliness.

## 2.2 Lexical Level - Nouns

If the cause of the singularity of the scriveners can be explained from the lexical level of adjectives, then the resistance of the scrivener Turkey is portrayed by several nouns. According to the old lawyer, "There was a strange, inflamed, flurried, flighty recklessness of activity about him." (4)

"He would be incautious in dipping his pen into his inkstand. All his blots upon my documents, were dropped there after twelve o'clock, meridian." (4)

"He made an unpleasant racket with his chair; spilled his sand-box; in mending his pens, impatiently split them all to pieces, and threw them on the floor in a sudden passion; stood up and leaned over his table, boxing his papers about in a most indecorous manner." (4)

The nouns in italics are used to express Turkey's frustration. When Turkey is irritated, he takes it out by "tormenting" objects related to copying, such as "pens", "documents" and "sand-boxes", leading to ink on the documents and pens being broken into pieces. At the same time, he makes an unpleasant racket with his chair.

The noun "table" (sometimes "desk") recurs in the portrayal of Turkey, Nippers and Ginger Nut. Turkey "stood up and leaned over his table" (5); Nippers "seizes the whole desk, and move it, and jerk it, with a grim, grinding motion on the floor" (8); While Ginger Nut "had a little desk to himself, but he did not use it much". The table may be regarded as the embodiment of the old lawyer: Turkey nearly conforms to him; Nippers is battling against him; Ginger Nut does not care about him.

## 2.3 Lexical Level - Verbs

If the resistance of Turkey is expressed through nouns, the resistance of Nippers is presented by a series of verbs. Nippers in the office always seem restless.

"Nippers would sometimes impatiently rise from his seat, and stooping over his table, spread his

arms wide apart, seize the whole desk, and move it, and jerk it, with a grim, grinding motion on the floor..." (8)

"...Nippers could never get this table to suit him." (6)

"...for the sake of easing his back..." (7)

"If now he lowered the table to his waistbands, and stooped over it in writing, then there was a sore aching in his back." (7)

Nippers in the office would always feel a vague pain in his back. Whenever he feels irritated, he makes adjustments to the desks and chairs in the chamber to make himself be in the most comfortable position. In the old lawyer's opinion, "In short, the truth of the matter was, Nippers knew not what he wanted. or, if he wanted any thing, it was to be rid of a scrivener's table altogether." (7) It is apparent that Nippers has been tired of endless copying. The adjustment to the arrangements of the chamber alludes to his challenge to the lawyer's power.

It is not difficult to find out that whenever Turkey feels agitated, he expresses his resistance by torturing the objects related to copying, while Nippers by adjusting the arrangements of the tables and chairs in the chamber. In the novel, the old lawyer gives a detailed description to the layout of the chamber. He also purchases a green screen to isolate Bartleby from sight and regards it as "a satisfactory arrangement" (11). According to Foucault [6], power exists in space. The old lawyer hides his power in the layout of the chamber, and once the layout is changed, his power are challenged. Therefore, from this aspect, Nippers' resistance presented by the adjustment to the chamber's arrangements of desk and chair is more powerful than that of Turkey.

## 2.4 Syntactic Level - Repetition

As Bartleby's catchphrase, "I would prefer not to," the phrase appears in more than a dozen major scenes throughout the novel. In different scenes, the phrase is either repeated or appears in its variants "I prefer not to" or "I prefer not". At first, Bartleby just refuses to examination and other errands, but eventually, he even objects to do the basic task, writing. In Deleuze's view [7], Bartleby's constant repetition of this catchphrase actually harbours linguistic violence, a "violence" embodied in a syntactic formula that belongs to Bartleby alone, which causes "catastrophe, and destroys everything in its path". For Bartleby, this destructiveness and devastation make Bartleby prefer not to write, which leads to the pragmatic old lawyer's decision to fire him; they also make Bartleby prefer not to move out of the chamber, which results in his incarceration in prison; and they make Bartleby prefer not to eat, which contributes to his death in prison. The destructiveness of the catchphrase for the old lawyer and the other scriveners is reflected in the fact that the old lawyer and they also start to use the seemingly odd word "prefer" unintentionally. Bartleby resists the rules and orders represented by the old lawyer by repeating the catchphrase "I

would prefer not to”, which ultimately awakens the old lawyer’s conscience “Ah, Bartleby! Ah, humanity!” (49) On this level, Bartleby’s resistance is successful.

## 2.5 Syntactic Level - Short Sentences

“In literature, short sentence is a common technique that is direct, clear, forceful, and lucid, which is used to emphasize or highlight facts stated or concepts expressed.” [8] Whenever the old lawyer seeks the opinion of the three scriveners, they uniformly use short sentences as responses.

“With submission, sir.” (10, by Turkey)

“I think that you are.” (15, by Turkey)

“I think I should kick him out of the office.” (15, by Nippers)

“I think, sir, he's a little lunny.” (15, by Ginger Nut)

If “I would prefer not to” is Bartleby’s catchphrase, then Turkey’s catchphrase is “With submission, sir.” This catchphrase appears seven times in the novel. Whether it is to face the old lawyer’s accusation or to judge the old lawyer’s behaviour, Turkey always obeys unconditionally.

It is clear from the answers of the three scriveners above that all of them approve of the old lawyer’s behaviour, or to some extent, of the orders and regulations in Wall Street as represented by the old lawyer. Although they all show resistance more or less, their submission prevails over resistance.

Interestingly enough, of the four employers (it should be noted that the old lawyer calls Turkey, Nippers and Bartleby scriveners, while Ginger Nut an office-boy), the old lawyer prefers Ginger Nut, considering him “quick-witted” (9) and “promising” (3). Ginger Nut is the youngest, about twelve years old. He will neither challenge the old lawyer’s authority by destroying his copying objects like Turkey, nor attempt to change the layout of the chamber like Nippers. He sits in one row with Turkey and Nippers when examination is required, and in his spare time, he can help with errands. This innocent boy has become the most capable assistant for the old lawyer.

## 2.6 Rhetorical Level - Symbolism

“Bartleby, the Scrivener” is filled with the imagery of wall [9]. The title of the novel, “Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street”, suggests that the story is not only about Wall Street, but also about the wall. So far, the scholars have reached a consensus in interpretation of the high walls: not only do they create a sense of desolation and oppression, but they also represent confinement and restraint. “In ‘Bartleby, the Scrivener’, the wall is an external force. It binds and represses people, causing the characters in the story to undergo personality changes.” [10] The imagery of the wall recurs throughout the novel. If a closer glimpse is given to Bartleby’s several major shifts of his behaviors, it is obvious that the wall demonstrates “thing- power” [11], which “completely engages Bartleby” [12]. For examples, as the old lawyer tries to make sense of

Bartleby's "quiet mysteries", it is found that Bartleby is never seen to read in his spare time and "never went anywhere" but "would stand looking out, at his pale window behind the screen, upon the dead brick wall" (24); And before Bartleby refuses to write, the old lawyer "noticed that Bartleby did nothing but stand at his window in his dead-wall revery" (28). In Leo Marx's opinion, "it is the proximity of the colorless dead-wall which has incapacitated him" [13]; and after Bartleby "prefers not to dine to-day", he "took up a position fronting the dead-wall"(47). The walls outside the chamber and the prison are described as "dead-walls", which allude to Bartleby's eventual death in the end. As the old lawyer says, "Rather would I let him live and die here, and then mason up his remains in the wall" (39).

### 3 Analyses of Narratological Stylistic

"When analyzing the discourse of a novel, what narratologists are concerned with is the narratological technique on the structure." [14]. Narratological stylistics can be divided into four aspects: characterization, setting arrangement, spatial form and point of view [15]. Here takes point of view for instance.

#### 3.1 Point of View

The novel adopts a first-person point of view and focuses on the various strange behaviors of the scriveners as they go about their work. Here are some comments on the three scriveners, "There was a strange, inflamed, flurried, flighty recklessness of activity about him." (4, on Turkey)

"I always deemed him the victim of two evil powers--ambition and indigestion." (6, on Nippers)

"I can see that figure now--pallidly neat, pitiably respectable, incurably forlorn!" (10, on Bartleby)

The word "strange" appears for 21 times, with other words like "eccentric" for 7 times, "peculiar" for 7 times and "singular" for 6 times. Despite the fact that all three scriveners are more or less flawed, the old lawyer chooses to retain them because of their usefulness. That Turkey and Bartleby's eccentric behaviors is easily comprehensible, while Nippers's ambitions are seen as evil, which suggests the old lawyer's suppression of the employees' personal development and at the same time implies that the old lawyer's dominance is unshakable. In the novel, "The ambition was evinced by a certain impatience of the duties of a mere copyist, an unwarrantable usurpation of strictly professional affairs, such as the original drawing up of legal documents." (6) In the old lawyer's opinion, these scriveners are only required to do the job they are told to do, and anything beyond what is required will be seen as usurpation. Through the old lawyer's point of view, the story demonstrates the repressive power to resistance of the scriveners.

## 4 Conclusions

Under the walls, resistance and submission are intertwined. Whether Turkey, whose movements are “strange, inflamed, flurried flighty recklessness” (4), or Nippers that is seen as “the victims of two evil powers-ambition and indigestion” (6), or Ginger Nut, whose drawer “exhibited a great array of the shells of various sorts of nuts,” they show their resistance to the work of coping, to the identity of being a copyist, and to the avocation of lawyer respectively. However, as for Turkey and Nippers, their resistance is ineffective under the dead-walls, and they even form a “master-slave community” with the old lawyer in terms of professional values. Apparently, their resistance eventually gives way to submission. The old lawyer tries over and again to build a community with Bartleby, but he is defeated by the “I’d rather not”. At the same time, the old lawyer’s religious belief collapses during the process of constructing a community. In the end, Bartleby dies under the dead-walls, which triggers the old lawyer’s deepest exclamation, “Ah, Bartleby! Ah, humanity!”(45)

## Notes:

Quotations are from the original text: Melville, H. (2009). *Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall-Street* [M]. New York: HapperColins Publishers.

## References:

- [1] Zlogar, Richard J. (1999). Body Politics in “Bartleby”: Leprosy, Healing, and Christness in Melville’s Story of Wall Street [J]. *Nineteenth Century Literature*, 53 (4): 505-529.
- [2] Dan Shen. (1999). The state of development and interrelationship between narratology and the stylistics of fiction [J]. *Foreign Languages and Their Teaching* (10), 22-25.
- [3] Dan Shen. (1994). On the analytical modes of literature stylistics [J]. *Foreign Language Teaching and Research* (03), 7-13+80.
- [4] Leech G. & Short M. (2007). *Style in fiction* [M]. London: Longman.
- [5] Lixin Zhang. (2006). *Moby Dick: The Reconstruction of the Symbolic Meaning of Whiteness* [J]. *Foreign Literatures* (03), 61-69+125-126.
- [6] Foucault, Michel. (2003). “Geography of Power.” *The Eye of Power : Selected Interviews* [M]. New York: Pantheon Books.
- [7] Deleuze, G. (1997) *Bartleby: Or, the Formula* [A]. In Daniel W. (ed.). *Critical and Clinical* [C]. Greco, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

- [8] Juan Huang. (2002). A brief analysis on functions of English short sentence and long sentence in different styles [J]. Journal of Hefei University of Technology (Social Sciences) (02), 115-117.
- [9] [12] [13] Marx L. (1953). Melville's Parable of the Walls [J]. Sewance Review (61): 602-627.
- [10] Shicun Li & Wen Chen. (2008). The Image of "Walls" in American Literature [J]. Journal of East China University of Science and Technology(Social Science Edition) (02), 99-102.
- [11] Bennett, J. (2010). Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things [M]. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- [12] Dan Shen. (2004). A Study on Narratology and Fictional Stylistics (the third edition) [M]. Peking: Peking University Press.
- [13] Tianfang Sun. (2012). The Grass is Singing: A Narratological-Stylistic Analysis [D] Jiangxi Normal University.