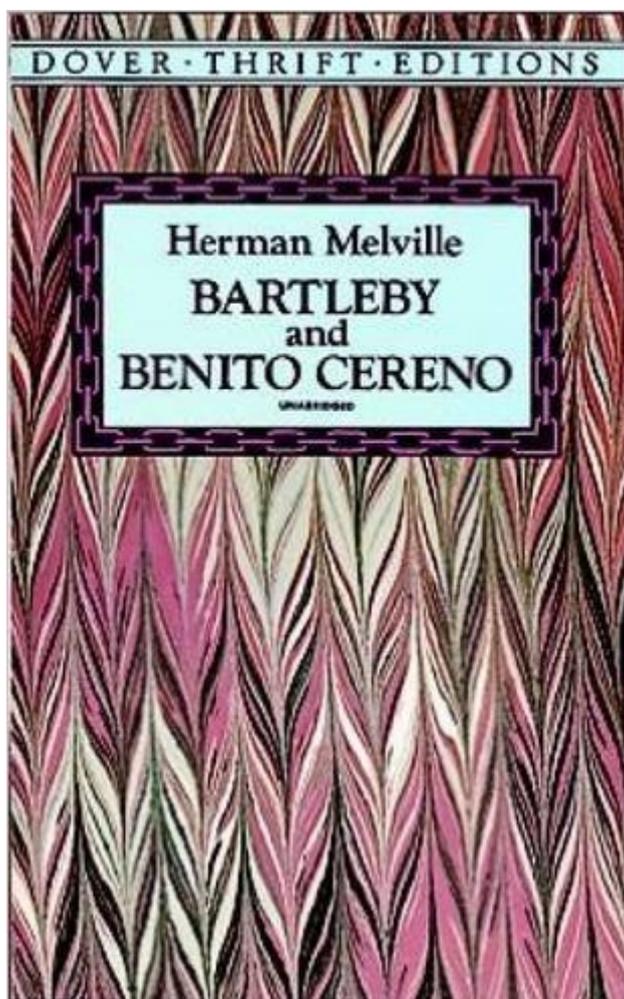


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Bartleby And Benito Cereno



Synopsis

Herman Melville towers among American writers not only for his powerful novels, but also for the stirring novellas and short stories that flowed from his pen. Two of the most admired of these "Bartleby" and "Benito Cereno"; first appeared as magazine pieces and were then published in 1856 as part of a collection of short stories entitled *The Piazza Tales*. "Bartleby" (also known as "Bartleby the Scrivener") is an intriguing moral allegory set in the business world of mid-19th-century New York. A strange, enigmatic man employed as a clerk in a legal office, Bartleby forces his employer to come to grips with the most basic questions of human responsibility, and haunts the latter's conscience, even after Bartleby's dismissal. "Benito Cereno," considered one of Melville's best short stories, deals with a bloody slave revolt on a Spanish vessel. A splendid parable of man's struggle against the forces of evil, the carefully developed and mysteriously guarded plot builds to a dramatic climax while revealing the horror and depravity of which man is capable. Reprinted here from standard texts in a finely made, yet inexpensive new edition, these stories offer the general reader and students of Melville and American literature sterling examples of a literary giant at his story-telling best.

Book Information

Paperback: 112 pages

Publisher: Dover Publications; Unabridged edition (July 1, 1990)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0486264734

ISBN-13: 978-0486264738

Product Dimensions: 5.2 x 0.3 x 8.4 inches

Shipping Weight: 3.2 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.2 out of 5 stars See all reviews (41 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #41,483 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #84 in Books > Literature & Fiction > United States > Classics #715 in Books > Literature & Fiction > Short Stories & Anthologies > Short Stories #1449 in Books > Literature & Fiction > Classics

Customer Reviews

Herman Melville spins a great tale that's easy to read. It's a story about five men, and the main character is just as much the narrator as it is Bartleby. The narrator is an attorney who hires three people to work for him, and each one is a real character. All the men are described in great detail, and they are terrific thumbnail character sketches that will stay in your memory bank for years to

come! The last man employed is Bartleby, and he is really a strange duck! Bartleby is an excellent copier of legal documents, and initially he does a fine job. However, as the story progresses Barleby acts very strange. He responds with the words, "I'd prefer not to," when asked to proof-read manuscripts, and this response continues whenever the narrator, his boss, asks him perform the usual office tasks such as going to the post office or doing small errands. The climax of the story comes when the narrator finds Bartleby in the law office getting dressed one Sunday morning. It appears that Bartleby is using the office for his lodging, and the narrator later comes across his personal belongings and shaving kit. As the story progresses, Bartleby does less and less work, and soon he's nothing more than a fixture in the law offices. When the narrator dismisses him and pays him a salary plus a tip, Bartlby refuses to leave. Finally, the narrator is about ready to go crazy -- the man won't leave. So, the narrator moves his law practice to another location and leaves Bartleby at the former work site. The end of the story describes Bartleby in the Tomb, and asylum. Rumor has it that Bartleby was once employed as a clerk in a Dead Letter Office, and this seems to explain his forlorn state.

These two tales are very different, but both of them are deep and acute penetrations into the human psyche. The first one, "Benito Cereno" is about a mutiny on board of a ship. This ship is navigating astray, off the coast of Chile (which is NOT in Central America, as other reviewers have embarrassingly said), when Captain Delano, an American sailor, observes it. He gets near the suspicious ship, gets on board of it, and finds an extremely tense and enigmatic situation. Wonderfully, Melville chose to describe the situation only through the senses of Captain Delano. As the narrator is not omniscient, we only know what Delano knows, so we understand his confusion and amazement at the strange facts he observes. We share his vacillations, speculations and changes of opinion before the disconcerting behavior of Captain Benito Cereno. This makes the reader stay interested all through the story, like he was there being part of it. The unexpected ending will solve the mystery, but only partially. What's best about this story, even more than the smart plot, is the author's technique. He puts the reader right in the middle of the action. Just like in life, where we have no narrator telling us what the rest of the characters are doing "meanwhile". We only know what we learn from our senses, hopefully processed through reason. The second tale, "Bartleby the scrivener" follows a technique similar to that of "Benito Cereno", but within a very different context and plot. It's narrated in first person by a good-hearted and charitable Wall Street lawyer (I guess times have changed) who hires a young and silent man as a copyist (that is, before Xerox, the guy who made manual copies of legal documents).

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