

# DEATH INSTINCT MANIFESTED THROUGH PASSIVE AGGRESIVENESS AND ITS SOCIAL EFFECTS IN MELVILLE'S "BARTLEBY THE SCRIVENER"

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**Abstract:** *Death instinct is a lifeless drive in human mind that certainly can affect behavior. This instinct can be manifested through passive aggressiveness that is not easily noticed but will slowly bring loss to everyone involved. In deeply understanding this matter, this paper attempts to analyze the death instinct manifested through passive aggressiveness by depicting a short story entitled "Bartleby the Scrivener." To do that, this paper will first examine Bartleby's behaviors that indicate passive aggressiveness. Furthermore, it will explore how Bartleby's passive aggressiveness affects people around him. The result of this analysis shows that Bartleby's death instinct which leads him into death is caused by his persistence to have a static life. This form of passive aggressiveness kills his social life and brings anxiety, confusion and anger to people who interact with him.*

**Keywords:** *death instinct; passive aggressiveness; behavior; effect.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Psychology is a complex issue for it brings mystery and curiosity in studying the mind and the behavior of human being. There are various things to be considered in understanding the nature of human and its complexity. As "humans are highly social beings, we like to be surrounded by friends and share our personal experiences with others" (Vrticka, 2013). In the process of those interactions, the outcome may be either positive or negative.

One of the interactions that brings problems in society, both physically and psychologically, is passive aggressive behavior. According to Daniel K. Hall-Flavin, M.D, "Passive aggressive behavior is a pattern of indirectly expressing negative feelings instead of openly addressing them" (2013). It can be encountered in all sort of relationships, "from friendships, intimate partners, school and the workplace" (Omur, n.d.) and it "never serves anyone well, and will only harm the passive aggressive persons themselves, and those relationships they truly wish to cultivate" (Omur, n.d.). Some people realize that they have this disorder behavior, but most of them do not until it is too late for them to fix. Many people are also aware that their friends or their family's members have passive aggressiveness. However,

their ignorance of how to handle passive aggressive people kills their relationships. Either way, this disorder behavior certainly brings negative results.

As the psychological issue, passive aggressiveness, can be experienced in social interactions between individuals, it is also reflected in some literary works, one of them is "Bartleby the Scrivener" written by Herman Melville in 1853. In the article written in 1998, "Bartleby the Scrivener, A Tale of Wall Street," it is mentioned that "Most have viewed it as a work of social criticism dealing with the psychological effects of capitalism as it existed in the 1850s. Others have viewed it as a philosophical meditation on the human condition, or as a religious parable on religion itself. However, one interprets its ultimate meaning, the story provides an exploration into such universal issues of the human experience as alienation, passivity, nonconformity, and psychological imprisonment." The highly depicted psychological issue in "Bartleby the Scrivener" is also asserted by Jane Desmarais that "'Bartleby, the Scrivener' (1853) is a story of passive resistance. And as the narrator is forced to admit, 'Nothing so aggravates an earnest person as a passive resistance.' He declines to do what is asked of him over and above the basic task of copying documents." (2001:02).

This paper attempts to analyze the death instinct manifested through passive aggressiveness shown by Bartleby and its effect toward his surroundings. To do that, this paper will first examine Bartleby's behaviors that indicate passive aggressiveness. Furthermore, it will explore how Bartleby's passive aggressiveness affects people around him. This analysis will hopefully present information and knowledge of passive aggressiveness that is usually difficult to notice. Thus, by having full knowledge of this matter, people involved may respond to this properly.

## **2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

In expressing negative feelings, people who suffer passive aggressiveness unconsciously demonstrate death drive. According to Sigmund Freud, "...the unconscious, which is the part of the mind beyond consciousness which nevertheless has a strong influence upon our actions" (Barry, 2002:70). This unconsciousness in human's mind is basically dominated by both "Eros (the Greek word for 'love') which roughly means the life instinct and the opposite of which is Thanatos (the Greek word for 'death') which roughly means the death instinct" (Ibid). Thanatos or death instinct "represents the organic need to return to lifelessness and stasis, the ultimate calm of lifeless non-conflict" (Chalquist, 2001).

As expressing negative feelings in indirect way, passive aggressive people may convey many forms of behaviors which include "(1) passively resists fulfilling routine social and

occupational tasks; (2) complains of being misunderstood and unappreciated by others; (3) is sullen and argumentative; (4) unreasonably criticizes and scorns authority; (5) expresses envy and resentment toward those apparently more fortunate; (6) voices exaggerated and persistent complaints of personal misfortune; and (7) alternates between hostile defiance and contrition” (Frances, Pincus, & First, 1994:735). Those forms of behavior can cause negative atmosphere among those who are involved and “can interfere with relationships and cause difficulties on the job” (Hall-Flavin, 2013).

### **3. DISCUSSION OF THE MAIN THEMES**

In the following discussion, the quotations of the short story is taken from *Bartleby the Scrivener* by *Herman Melville, A Penn State Electronic Classics Series Publication*.

#### **3.1 Bartleby’s Form of Passive Aggressiveness as Manifestation of Death Instinct**

Bartleby, one of the scriveners in the story “Bartleby the Scrivener,” shows death instinct which is manifested in rather peculiar forms. Seen from the point of view of the narrator, the man who hires Bartleby, Bartleby’s behavior in the first few days working as scrivener is not as strange as later days. Although he is viewed as not lively or friendly as his other colleagues, he is still considered as demonstrating normal behavior, “In answer to my advertisement, a motionless young man one morning stood upon my office threshold, the door being open, for it was summer. I can see that figure now — pallidly neat pitifully respectable, incurably forlorn! It was Bartleby” (p.10).

In the first two days of working, Bartleby frequently does the copying as one of the scrivener’s job. This activity is accepted delightedly by his boss because he is very helpful in the performance of the job. This also indicates that Bartleby does the human activity as other people do. However, there is a sense of oddity and worrisome in that situation for Bartleby does the copying without a pause. It means that there is no change in the life of Bartleby as he does the same activity continuously.

At first, Bartleby did an extraordinary quantity of writing. As if long famishing for something to copy, he seemed to gorge himself on my documents. There was no pause for digestion. He ran a day and night line, copying by sunlight and by candlelight. I should have been quite delighted with his application, had he been cheerfully industrious. But he wrote on silently, palely, mechanically (p.11).

“Passive Aggressive Personality Disorder as a pervasive pattern of negativistic attitudes and passive resistance to demands for adequate performance as indicated by passively resists fulfilling routine social and occupational tasks” (Kelly, 2010). On the third day, Bartleby shows a particular form of passive aggressiveness for the first time. When asked by his boss

“to examine a small paper” (p.12) together, “without moving from his privacy, Bartleby, in a singularly mild, firm voice, replied, “I would prefer not to” (p.12). Since then, Bartleby refuses to do any tasks proposed to him such as “step around to the Post Office” (p.18), call the other scriveners as demanded by his boss, or “to be dispatched on the most trivial errand of any sort” (p.19). He even does not want to tell his life story when asked by his boss (p.24). He prefers to do the document copying only.

This odd behavior accompanied by more peculiar response are performed by Bartleby ceaselessly. Whenever he is asked or demanded to do anything, Bartleby always replies ‘I prefer not to.’ It takes quite a while until one day he no longer answers such statement, but he refuses to answer. His rejection to answer to anything is then followed by his discontinuation of copying, a job he has been doing without a pause.

The next morning came. “Bartleby,” said I, gently calling to him behind his screen. No reply (p.24).

“At present I prefer to give no answer,” he said, and retired into his hermitage (p.24). Still added days went by. Whether Bartleby’s eyes improved or not, I could not say. To all appearance, I thought they did. But when I asked him if they did, he vouchsafed no answer. At all events, he would do no copying. At last, in reply to my urgings, he informed me that he had permanently given up copying. “What!” exclaimed I; “suppose your eyes should get entirely well — better than ever before — would you not copy then?” “I have given up copying,” he answered, and slid aside (p.27).

While Bartleby always refuses to do any job as other scriveners do, he also seems to limit his interaction with his fellow co-workers or his boss. He declines the task to examine the copies together with his co-workers.

Accordingly, Turkey, Nippers, and Ginger Nut had taken their seats in a row, each with his document in his hand, when I called to Bartleby to join this interesting group. “Bartleby! quick, I am waiting.” I heard a slow scrape of his chair legs on the uncarpeted floor, and soon he appeared standing at the entrance of his hermitage. “What is wanted?” said he, mildly. “The copies, the copies,” said I, hurriedly. “We are going to examine them. There” — and I held towards him the fourth quadruplicate. “I would prefer not to,” he said, and gently disappeared behind the screen (p.13).

Not only he prefers to work alone, but Bartleby also chooses to stay at his chamber as if he feels comfortable in there. His boss refers Bartleby’s chamber as ‘hermitage’ for whenever Bartleby stays there, he does not want to be disturbed and never seems to leave that corner.

Meanwhile Bartleby sat in his hermitage, oblivious to everything but his own peculiar business there (p.15).

Like a very ghost, agreeably to the laws of magical invocation, at the third summons he appeared at the entrance of his hermitage (p.18).

“I would prefer to be left alone here,” said Bartleby, as if offended at being mobbed in his privacy (p.26).

The boss, as the narrator, has observed that Bartleby “never went to dinner, indeed, that he never went anywhere” (p.15). It seems like Bartleby lives a static life unlike other people do. This passivity is worsened by the fact that Bartleby actually lives in the office.

...the utterly unsurmised appearance of Bartleby tenanted my law chambers of a Sunday morning... (p.20).

Upon more closely examining the place, I surmised that for an indefinite period Bartleby must have ate, dressed, and slept in my office, and that, too, without plate, mirror, or bed. The cushioned seat of a rickety old sofa in one corner bore that faint impress of a lean, reclining form. Rolled away under his desk I found a blanket; under the empty grate, a blacking box and brush; on a chair, a tin basin, with soap and a ragged towel; in a newspaper a few crumbs of gingernuts and a morsel of cheese. Yes thought I, it is evident enough that Bartleby has been making his home here, keeping bachelor’s hall all by himself (p.21).

Beside the shocking fact that Bartleby lives stagnantly in his comfortable hermitage, he still prefers to live as he is used to and refuses to make an adjustment. Even when he is fired, driven out of the office and asked to change his job, Bartleby still stubbornly decides to stay the same.

“I would prefer not to quit you,” he replied, gently emphasizing *thenot* (p.32).

“Then, sir,” said the stranger, who proved a lawyer, “you are responsible for the man you left there. He refuses to do any copying; he refuses to do anything; he says he prefers not to; and he refuses to quit the premises” (p.37).

“Bartleby,” said I, in the kindest tone I could assume under such exciting circumstances, “will you go home with me now — not to my office, but my dwelling — and remain there till we can conclude upon some convenient arrangement for you at our leisure? Come, let us start now, right away” (p.39).

“No; at present I would prefer not to make any change at all” (p.39).

His stubbornness to have a fixed life that he is being so persistent not to make a change upon life slowly leads him into death. As he no longer has the same life for he is imprisoned, he refuses to do anything in jail. He always “...standing all alone in the quietest of the yards, his face towards a high wall, while all around, from the narrow slits of the jail windows I thought I saw peering out upon him the eyes of murderers and thieves” (p.41).

From the moment Bartleby works at the office, he unconsciously demonstrates death instinct through passive aggressiveness. People who are in this state, have a tendency to live a static life and avoid conflicts (Goldson, 2015). Bartleby, as indicatively, is in this condition leads his life by repeating the same things over and over and has no effort to make alterations, as seen from his answer of “I prefer not to...” He tends to avoid conflicts by not doing anything, even answering questions.

### 3.2 The Effects of Bartleby's Passive Aggressiveness Toward His Surroundings

A society consists of many different characteristics with various psychological problems. This is likely to bring influence to each other. The short story, "Bartleby the Scrivener," describes this condition in which Bartleby's passive aggressiveness affects people around him, particularly the Narrator (Bartleby's boss).

The Narrator is an elderly man. He must have experienced many things and dealt with many situations. He is used to deal with rapid and energetic law business.

I am a man who, from his youth upwards, has been filled with a profound conviction that the easiest way of life is the best. Hence, though I belong to a profession proverbially energetic and nervous even to turbulence at times, yet nothing of that sort have I ever suffered to invade my peace. I am one of those unambitious lawyers who never addresses a jury or in any way draws down public applause. All who know me consider me an eminently *safe* man (p.18).

The advent of Bartleby slowly affects the Narrator's life. In one hand, the Narrator can rely his work on Bartleby, but in the other hand, he is confused and irritated by Bartleby's behavior.

Nothing so aggravates an earnest person as a passive resistance (p. 28).

Indeed, it was his wonderful mildness chiefly, which not only disarmed me but unmanned me as it were (p. 32).

Yes, Bartleby, ... you are harmless and noiseless as any of these old chairs; ... I never feel so private as when I know you are here (p. 42).

I had a singular confidence in his honesty. I felt my most precious papers perfectly safe in his hands (p. 31).

The different way of reacting toward Bartleby's strong passive aggressiveness is a sign of anxiety. It is caused by fear of loss or failure. Because Bartleby decides to quit copying the documents and prefers to do nothing, the Narrator feels that Bartleby is a burden. This makes the Narrator tries to dismiss Bartleby.

In plain fact, he had now become a millstone to me, not only useless as a necklace, but afflictive to bear. He occasioned me uneasiness (p. 37).

"Bartleby," said I, "are you aware that you are the cause of great tribulation to me, by persisting in occupying the entry after being dismissed from the office?" (p. 46).

I could not but highly plume myself on my masterly management in getting rid of Bartleby (p. 39).

A great worry enters the Narrator's mind. He is afraid of getting bad reputation for having unemployed man in his office. His uneasiness even comes to him after he moves his office. He always thinks that Bartleby will follow him. The strange behavior of Bartleby really affects the Narrator's mind.

...a whisper of wonder was running round, having reference to the strange creature I kept at my office. This worried me very much. ....denying my authority; and perplexing my visitors; and scandalizing my professional reputation... (p. 43).

When I returned to my rooms after any little absence, I would pause at the threshold for an instant and attentively listen ere applying my key. But these fears were needless. Bartleby never came nigh me (p.44-45).

The feeling of anxiety is felt not only by the Narrator, but also by the other employees that work together in the same office as Bartleby. Because Turkey and Nippers, Bartleby's colleagues, have such troublesome, they both feel irritated and rather angry.

"Nippers," said I, "what do you think of it?"

"I think I should kick him out of the office" (p. 27).

"Think of it?" roared Turkey. "I think I'll just step behind his screen and black his eyes for him!" (p. 29).

The effect of Bartleby's passive aggressiveness also attacks the new people who rent the building. After the Narrator moves his office, the building is rent by other people, but Bartleby still lives in that building. He quite disturbs the flow of the business that happens. It brings anxiety towards the building's inhabitants. Thus, the inhabitants decide to send Bartleby to the police.

"...he now persists in haunting the building generally, sitting upon the banisters of the stairs by day, and sleeping in the entry by night. Everybody is concerned; clients are leaving the offices; some fears are entertained of a mob..." (p. 45).

...a note from the landlord lay upon the desk. I opened it with trembling hands. It informed me that the writer had sent to the police, and had Bartleby removed to the Tombs as a vagrant (p. 47).

Bartleby's passive aggressiveness hampers a social routine and brings loss to his surroundings. Bartleby's behavior not only slowly kills his social life, but also brings confusion and anxiety for the people around him. These people experience anxiety because they are confused how to react appropriately. Even though they think that they have behaved in precise manner, they still unconsciously suffer psychological problems in their mind.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

Bartleby's death instinct which leads him into death is caused by his stubbornness to have a static life and his persistence not to make an adjustment. This is manifested through his passive aggressive behaviors which are: he does the copying without a pause, he always replies 'I prefer not to,' he refuses to answer whenever people are talking to him, and he prefers to work alone although he is required to work in team.

The passive aggressiveness shown by Bartleby slowly affects his relationship with people around him, especially his boss. The good co-worker relationships are dying and this hampers the routine life in the workplace. Because of this condition, the job is disturbed. Furthermore, people who interact with Bartleby, show certain behaviors, which are anxiety, confusion and anger because they do not know how to respond in appropriate manner.

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