

Liane norman – literary criticism

Literature



The beauty about literature is that it can be interpreted in a number of ways and all those ways can be regarded as a possibility and even entirely true. No matter what angle, approach or perception a person uses to see, analyze and scrutinize a literary work, that analysis will always be considered as a “possibly correct” literary criticism.

However, this is also the problem regarding literary criticisms since there is no wrong analysis, anything can be true. Thus, an analysis does not necessarily help readers in further understanding the text, analyses just give readers the chance to look at a text in a different light.

This is what Liane Norman gives readers when her literary criticism was written regarding the famous work of Herman Melville—*Bartleby the Scrivener* with a subtitle of *A Story of Wall Street*. In Norman's analysis, “*Bartleby and the Reader*”, she gives importance on the relationship of the text, *Bartleby the Scrivener*, and the readers themselves of the text. According to Norman, the text focused on having the reader as an important character or making the reader play an important role in the structure and interpretation of the text.

This analysis of Norman is with loopholes, as with many literary criticisms. She does indeed present a rather effective and convincing judgement on *Bartleby the Scrivener* but she failed to point out the importance of the text on its own. It is as if, the text cannot exist without the role that the reader played in the creation of the text when in fact, *Bartleby the Scrivener* can be seen as a creation which is intended to point something out to the reader.

This argument is what will be contained in this “criticism” of a literary criticism wherein a premise is presented that Norman did deliver a good argument and judgement on *Bartleby the Scrivener* but she failed in delivering a good argument that should have not illicited further contestations. In Herman Melville's *Bartleby the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street*, a scrivener (or copyist or clerk in a firm), is the protagonist while the narrator is the protagonist's boss but who, it seems, wants to be the protagonist himself.

The Lawyer who is Bartleby's boss gives too much information about himself and too little information on the protagonist, Bartleby. The story starts off in the Lawyer going on about how he hired and met Bartleby but not before going to great lengths as he introduces himself: I am a rather elderly man. The nature of my avocations for the last thirty years has brought me into more than ordinary contact with what would seem an interesting and somewhat singular set of men, of whom as yet nothing that I know of has ever been written:—I mean the law-copyists or scriveners.

(Melville, 2006) The Lawyer and Bartleby soon venture into a rather harmonious and beneficial relationship with each other—that is until Bartleby decides one day that he has enough of being a scrivener and stops doing his job properly to the point that he does not do anything at all. The curious and perverse Lawyer just lets Bartleby be as the scrivener goes on with life doing absolutely nothing. Unfortunately, things get out of hand to the point that Bartleby is imprisoned for hanging out in the building when it is neither his home nor has he any rights to loiter in the place.

This ends the story: as Bartleby refuses everything—companionship, food, water—he dies a sad death in prison, all alone. Later on, the Lawyer finds out that Bartleby has been working in the Dead Letter Office wherein he sorts the mail of dead people. The Lawyer associates this previous job of Bartleby as the reason why the scrivener has become depressed and decided to one day, to just let everything go. In Liane Norman's *Bartleby and the Reader*, the role that the reader plays in giving meaning to Bartleby and the Scrivener is focused on.

According to Norman (1971), there is a “ rigorous and demanding human transaction that takes place between the reader and the story”. This transaction is the ability of the text to have meaning only when the reader wills it do so. Thus, the dialogue, lines and other descriptions in the story would be moot and pointless if the reader does not believe otherwise. In fact, the reader becomes a character in the story itself without being in it; as what Norman (1971) asserts, “ the reader is both participant and judge” in the same way that the Lawyer or the narrator of the story is also the participant and the judge.

Thus, while the Lawyer is one of the characters in the story, his way of storytelling wherein he is detached from the other characters makes him have the same role as the reader. This in turn, makes the reader as the Lawyer and the Lawyer as one of the readers. But more than this form of analysis, Norman takes the notch further by relating the text and the characters to a greater and more profound extent by juxtaposing it with Christian values or ideals and the nature of democracy—two things which are inherently, albeit subtly, presented as the themes in *Bartleby the Scrivener*.

On the other hand, the way Norman analyzed the literary text was correct in a way that she gives meaning to the context and the content but remiss in her ability to add too much interpretation and meaning to what could have been just simple or meaningless lines. This is perhaps a bigger mistake in not being able to see much meaning in a literary work, that of seeing too much—a case of overreading. Norman was not false in her analysis, but she was extreme in that too much interpretation is given from too little information.

Thus, her mistake was that she was not able to give importance to the interpretation of the literary text as a text itself but she instead, concentrated on the text as how it would be interpreted by the reader. Bartleby the Scrivener does not become merely Bartleby the Scrivener but it becomes, instead, Bartleby and the Reader. Norman placed too much emphasis and importance on the reader as being part of the literary work and literary analysis. But the reader is of course important, for who will analyze a text but that being the reader himself/herself?

However, what Norman has done is to indicate that there is but one reading presented by the reader and that is the only correct reading while at the same time the reader is no one but herself. What Norman should have done is present the analysis on the text as being Bartleby and A Reader instead of having it as Bartleby and THE Reader. For using the determiner “ the” indicates that there is only one reader and that one reader is and will always be right.

Thus, Norman's analysis gives a valid credibility to her argument—even if the argument is indeed credible, it is unfortunately not valid. Although, there is <https://assignbuster.com/liane-norman-literary-criticism/>

something which is admirable and commendable in Norman's analysis which is the last part of her article wherein she gives a profound interpretation on the implication of the Lawyer's last lines regarding Bartleby's death: The deep sense of disappointment that the story inspires in the reader is a function of the aura of America's high but impossible promises: men have not escaped their limitations simply by founding a new policy.

Bartleby is the test of democratic- Christian principle. If his resistance exposes human shortcomings, his persistence reveals man stubbornly laying claim to his humanity. (Norman, 1971) Norman magnificently gives a clear idea and interpretation on Bartleby's death while at the same time, relates its implication to humanity which is humanity's tendency to gain new insights but miserably ends in not carrying out those new "policies" or insights.

Over all, both Melville (in using the character of the Lawyer) and Norman are correct, society stubbornly believes in their humanity—even if it proves that their idealist views on humanity's "humanness" is sometimes misplaced.

References Melville, H. (2006). *Bartleby the scrivener: a story from Wall Street*. Great Short Works of Herman Melville. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc. pp. 19-38. Norman, L. (1971). Bartleby and the reader. *The New England Quarterly* 44 (1): 22-39.