Distinctly Different

“Bartleby, the Scrivener,” Sula, and Disability Studies

Ane Gilje

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Distinctly Different:

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Ane Gilje
Abstract

This thesis seeks to explore how we as readers perceive literary characters who communicate differently than the society they are situated in. By analyzing Herman Melville’s “Bartleby, the Scrivener” and Toni Morrison’s *Sula* in light of disability studies, we may be able to see how Bartleby and Sula are alienated from the societies they live in, because they do not fit into the norm of their surroundings. Claiming that Bartleby and Sula suffer from physical or mental impairments gives us a new frame of reference in which we can better understand literary characters that differs from what we see as “normal” behavior and communication patterns. The analysis will show how Bartleby and Sula’s utterances and actions in particular may point us in the direction of their being different from the larger society around them. Placing these characteristics within a disability perspective will show that marginalized characters are fully capable of taking care of their own life, as long as they are approached and understood in light of their own way of communicating and ethical standpoint.
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1 Introduction

In my first year of studying to become a teacher, I took an introductory course in American Literature. Among the many texts on the syllabus, Herman Melville’s short story “Bartleby the Scrivener” and Toni Morrison’s novel *Sula* both struck me as impossible to forget, and have followed me since. To me, Bartleby and Sula both have something very mysterious about their presence, as they constantly act differently from the people surrounding them. As a natural consequence, even the people who are closest to Bartleby and Sula do not seem to really understand them. This causes Bartleby and Sula, in many ways, to be alienated from the societies they live in, because their mindset and actions are difficult for others to comprehend. The same can be said for anyone who reads a text for the first time. The perception of the words in front of you will spring to life in a different way than for the person next to you. The individual perception of a text is what I want to approach, and challenge, through my thesis. I want to look at what the short story “Bartleby, the Scrivener” and the novel *Sula* may tell us about how we as readers perceive literary characters that stand out as different from ourselves, because of their nonnormative behavior and utterances. By challenging the conventional understanding of Bartleby and Sula, I hope to broaden the understanding of the differences portrayed through these two characters. In doing so, I hope to shed light on how we may discover and approach literary characters that are alienated from the societies they are situated in.

Why did these particular texts stand out to me among so many others? When Sula, towards the end of the novel, asks why Nel believes that she is the one who has taken the right choices in life, Sula raises the existential question of how one should live a life. When Sula says: “How you know it was you?” (146), she challenges Nel’s perception of the world. Through her utterance Sula flips Nel’s world view upside down by claiming that “Maybe it was me” (146), thus implying that her own life may have been just as right as Nel’s. This question made me see the text in a whole different light. How could it be that Nel was so sure she had lived a more true life than Sula? When I took a closer look at Bartleby, I found my answer. Bartleby’s repetitive phrase “I prefer not to” (1102) struck me as both odd and comic the first time I read it. The second time around I realized that the reason it seemed so comic, was because people rarely speak in such terms. This made me question how we as readers perceive literary characters who communicate differently from the norm we are used to. If we search for the definition of the word “communication,” one of the explanations given is “a
process by which information is exchanged between individuals through a common system of symbols, signs, or behavior” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary). To me, both Bartleby and Sula stand forth as characters who communicate differently from the societies they are placed in, as they are using another system of symbols and behavior than the people around them. What happens when we meet people who do not have the same common system of communication that we have? How are we then to understand these characters which may communicate so differently from ourselves?

In order to understand each other as human beings, we need to communicate. But communication does not always function through utterances; it may also be presented to us through signs, silence, or actions, as they can be utterances in themselves. When we are presented with literary characters like Bartleby and Sula, who do not communicate their thoughts and ethics out loud, we also meet the problem of having to interpret their actions, or their lack of speech, as communication. Both Bartleby and Sula lack the ability to justify their actions and life choices to the people closest to them through utterances. This causes Nel and the lawyer to assume that they are the ones who make the right choices, and who have the right understanding of the world. The problem with their assumption is that the lawyer and Nel base their understanding of the world on their own way of communicating with people. In doing so, they fail to approach Bartleby and Sula on their own terms. This in turn causes Bartleby and Sula to stand forth as characters in need of care and so different from the norm presented in both texts, that they cannot possibly fit into the society they live in.

Throughout the last century, there has been a tendency to place literary characters in two boxes: the ones who are normal and those who are not. The characters we as readers define to be normal are often part of a larger group of characters with the same morals and values. The characters we see as less normal are often defined by being different from the majority; they are not understood by the other characters, or they have personality traits that make them less suited to fit into the society around them. What people overlook when viewing literary characters as either normal or less normal is why we see them as different, alienated or queer, compared to the other characters in literary works. By analyzing Bartleby and Sula’s utterances and actions, I will try to show how their way of communication and personal ethics simply show that they are different from the norm. By acknowledging their difference from the rest of the characters they are contrasted with, I would argue that they stand forth as responsible adults who simply behave in another way than the society around them expects. The main goal throughout the dissertation is to answer the following question:
What personality traits do Bartleby and Sula show us as readers through their utterances and actions, and how can disability studies function as a frame of reference for us to see these traits as different from the society such characters are situated in?

Up until today, “Bartleby, the Scrivener” and Sula have been analyzed in very different ways. Scholars like Sheila Post and Giles Gunn have interpreted Bartleby as a metaphor of Wall Street in the 1850s, and what devastating effects the heavy workload could have on the workers during this period. Others, like Robert E. Abrams, have claimed Bartleby’s behavior to be a result of depression, thus seeing his repetitive behavior and monotonous appearance to be signs of severe emotional distress. The lawyer’s role in the story has often been the main focus when analyzing the text. Many scholars, like Kari Nixon, have claimed the lawyer to be cruel in his actions by pressing Bartleby into a box of conformity, and they have claimed the lawyer to be responsible for Bartleby’s death. What is interesting to note is that very few scholars seem to have interpreted the story from Bartleby’s perspective. The main focus throughout the last century seems to have been on the relationship between the lawyer and Bartleby, and the emphasis on the lawyer’s ethical standpoint towards his employees. The lack of emphasis on Bartleby and his personality is what I want to bring to the table by analyzing Bartleby from a new perspective.

Sula has, on the other hand, a longer tradition of being interpreted with emphasis on Sula and her actions. The main tradition has been to analyze Morrison’s novel within the race perspective, and scholars like Karen F. Stein have emphasized the novel as a “Black Woman’s Epic.” Other themes that have been explored are motherly love and female friendships, which appear in all of Toni Morrison’s literary works. Morrison herself places the novel in light of female freedom, claiming in the introduction of her novel that “The sexual freedom of Hannah Peace was my entrance into the story,” (Morrison xi). In this tradition, several scholars have argued for analyzing Sula and Nel as one person. Terry Otten has enhanced the idea that by analyzing the two women as one, the novel sheds light on the dualism of good and evil in the human soul. Before becoming a renowned writer of novels, Morrison researched the phenomenon of alienation in William Faulkner’s works. Lorie Watkins Fulton has explored how alienation as a theme may be present through Morrison’s own work, and how Sula may be a representation of the alienated mind who chooses to remove herself from society. Also, the ethics of Sula has gained more attention in recent years. Scholars like Axel Nissen has shed light on Sula’s point of ethics, and how the story’s narrative may reveal the ethics of the characters.
I have, however, chosen to analyze the two texts in light of disability studies, a fairly new theoretical field. Lennard J. Davis, one of the field’s founders, claims disability to be “the missing term in the race, class, gender triad” (*Enforcing Normalcy* 1). He thus claims his place among literary scholars, who for years have spoken for the minority groups in literary world. What Davis and the disability scholars want to explore and explain is how any impairment, be it physical or emotional, may affect our view of literary characters. The field has in that sense strong connections to the psychological, medical and special education’s fields, which makes disability studies suitable to capture the essence of marginalized groups in literary works.

How can it be that my immediate thought when meeting with Bartleby and Sula was to see them as different from the other characters, instead of just seeing them as simply characters? Why do we as readers not see the people in the Bottom; or the lawyer, as the ones who are different from Sula and Bartleby? According to Davis, “The concept of a norm, unlike that of an ideal, implies that the majority of the population must or should somehow be part of the norm” (*Introduction* 3). Further on, he elaborates: “So, with the concept of the norm comes the concept of deviations or extremes” (*Introduction* 3). What happens in the Bottom is that, for the most part, the inhabitants behave so similarly, that none of them stand out as individuals. The majority of the village people do not stand out by communicating differently from the others, which creates a large group who follows the set norm in the village of how one should communicate and behave. Sula’s behavior differs from the norm set by the larger group, and the result is an experience of alienation and misunderstanding. The same thing happens with Bartleby in the lawyer’s office, where he becomes the one who behaves and communicates differently from the others.

Davis’s ideas show us that where there is a development of a norm, any deviations from this norm will cause the smaller part of the characters involved to be viewed as deviants, or simply different from the others. In order to understand the idea of the norm, we need to look at the historical implications for Davis’s ideas. Davis claims in his book *Bending Over Backwards: Disability, Dismodernism and Other Difficult Positions* (2002), that “With the development of statistics comes the idea of the norm” (105). The historical implications for the development of disability studies is important to note in order to understand how I will use Davis’s ideas throughout my analysis. During the 1830s, the interest in collecting statistics about the human body increased, which in turn created a large amount of statistical material on the population. By collecting data about people, the scientists gained knowledge on the
prevailing physical features in the population, creating a separation between majority and minority features. By doing so, the physical bodily features which were now seen in the larger group of the population, would now be categorized as “normal” physical traits.

The physical features that appeared among a smaller part of the population would be categorized as less normal, or deviant physical appearance (Davis, Introduction 3). The earliest members of this statistics movement were eugenicists, which naturally caused white, Anglo-Saxon to appear as the most apparent example of the human norm. Later on these racial parameters have been reduced, and physical differentness, such as disfiguring of body parts or reduced mental capacity, has become the prevailing templates for categorizing who is considered to be more or less “normal” (3). The development of the norm can be seen as an explanation for why the differences between the lawyer and Bartleby, and Nel and Sula, become so apparent. If we compare Bartleby and Sula to the larger group, they fall short. Their communication skills and actions differ from the norm, thus leading the people around them to view their behavior as deviant behavior, or simply different from what the lawyer and Nel sees as normal.

An important thing to note is that it is not just the body that may be measured within the idea of the norm; the measurement of the mind is just as important within the disability field. Joseph N. Straus explains that “psychiatric disorders are often a pathologically excessive version of some trait that, in its cultural context, is considered socially desirable” (461). In Western society today, there is a tendency to embrace the ability to be social and outgoing. People with these abilities are therefore considered to be popular and successful in the social circles they appear in. However, if the same group of people developed an excessive social appearance where they would constantly seek attention without regard for others, their outgoing behavior would be considered to be outside the norm. As a result, they would eventually risk being classified within a psychiatric disorder, simply because their behavior would be considered as “too much.” To put it simply: any kind of behavior that is understood by a larger group as too much over a certain amount of time will eventually classify the smaller group as disabled, or as unable to act according to the rules set by the majority in a certain society. These social rules may vary from society to society, and they may also pertain in small groups of people. This means that in situations where the majority of a group of people choose to do the same thing, the people in opposition are at risk of experiencing that they are different from the larger group. I would claim that disability studies may help us as readers to see beyond what the larger group would see as deviant behavior. By
doing so, we may be able to see marginalized individuals in literature as characters who behave differently for a reason. One of the problems that appear when classifying people to be part of either the larger group of people or the smaller group of people is the tendency of wanting to belong to the largest social group. Most people are able to adapt into a version of themselves that will fit into such a group. The problem arises when you are unable to adapt to the group’s expectations, or when you simply do not wish to be a part of a larger group. With a mental disability, you might not even be able to play by the society’s (or majority’s) rules, which may eventually marginalize you as a human being in that specific social setting.

Davis defines disability in the following way: “Impairment is the physical fact of lacking an arm or a leg. Disability is the social process that turns an impairment unto a negative by creating barriers to access” (Bending Over 12). By moving away from the image of the body as a norm, or as average, Davis wants us to recognize that disability is a constructed term. If we categorize disability as something that is “rooted in the body” (13), Davis claims that we immediately diminishes the disabled person. Disability should not be a label given to you marking your identity; it is an impairment which makes you disabled as long as the environment is not adjusted to your specifications. Davis thus claims that if someone in a wheelchair moves around in an environment adjusted to him or her, this person cannot be defined as disabled anymore. Instead, he or she would simply have an impairment (12). However, if the person moves around in an environment without any adjustments, the person becomes disabled. By shifting the image from the society specified to the norm, or the average citizen, disability scholars want to propose that if we view physical or emotional impairments as simply a difference from the norm, disability is a socially constructed concept.

In “Bartleby, the Scrivener,” this comes to show through communication. If Bartleby had been allowed to talk the way he did, and do his job in the way he preferred, I claim that he would no longer have appeared as disabled in the conventional sense of the word. He would then simply have been executing his tasks in a different way than other people did them, thus having a communicative impairment. The problem appears as soon as he needs to do the assignments according to the lawyer’s specifications. If he does not want to, or cannot, execute them in the expected sense, he appears to be unwilling, or disabled, as an employee in the office. With Sula, the same thing happens. When she spends time alone with Nel, she is able to be herself to some extent, playing and having the time of their lives. But as soon as Nel starts to compare Sula to the rest of the people in the Bottom, Sula falls outside the norm. Sula is not willing to create a family and settle down as a housewife as a young woman, as
Nel does. Sula chooses to go to college and live out her dreams, and through her frank utterances she is alienated by the village people and eventually, Nel. In light of Davis’s ideas about the norm, Sula simply falls outside it. She is different, and I will later claim that she has an emotional disability. The main problem with both Bartleby and Sula is that they do not fit into the norm set by the larger group in the societies they are placed in. Why do they not fit in? I would argue that they do not fit in because they both have an impairment.

Through this dissertation, I will show how their impairment only becomes a disability, and thus a problem, once the people around them start to question why Bartleby and Sula’s behavior is different from their own. In light of disability studies, I will try to show how both Bartleby and Sula may stand forth as able and responsible adults in the same way as the people around them. By analyzing their utterances (or lack of utterances) and actions, I will try to show how we as readers may be able to understand their behavior, instead of viewing them as disabled characters. I want to show that they have a reason for their difference, which will cause them to behave differently than the larger group and show a different ethical mindset than their surroundings. If the village people in the Bottom and the employees in the office of the lawyer would recognize this, they could approach Bartleby and Sula on their own terms, instead of just viewing them as deviants that needs to be protected and placed outside society. This does not necessarily mean that the lawyer and Nel have to treat Bartleby and Sula as people in need of care. It simply means that they have to recognize that they may never be able to fully understand the other, and thus acknowledging that they have to respect their differences and use them as abilities, instead of viewing difference as a disability. This approach creates an equal mindset between the two groups, instead of letting the larger group claim to have the “right” way to live. It also enables Bartleby and Sula to be read and understood on their own terms, thus giving us as readers a new pair of glasses through which we may better understand them.

Analyzing “Bartleby, the Scrivener” and Sula from a disability perspective has not been done by many scholars before. A reason for this may simply be that disability studies is a fairly recent theoretical field. Bartleby, however, has been analyzed by disability scholars in the last decade, where the focus has been on claiming that he suffers from autism. This is an argument I will use as well throughout my analysis. By claiming that his actions and utterances bear strong resemblance to characteristics used in the medical field for diagnosing people within the autism specter, I will argue that Bartleby stands forth as simply having an impairment. Bartleby’s impairment does in turn make him disabled in the eyes of the larger
group around him, as he differs from the rest of the people in the lawyer’s office when it comes to appearance and way of communication. Analyzing Sula within the disability field may be seen as more controversial. Still, I believe that both Bartleby’s and Sula’s differences in behavior and speech make them great examples for the disability studies field. In deciding what literary works to use throughout this dissertation, I found it to be fruitful to have both a male and a female character represented, and I also wanted two different racial backgrounds represented. There is quite a time gap between the two texts, nearly 150 years, but I see this as a good way to show how literary characters may exemplify the diversity in the human population through the centuries. The goal with this analysis is not to diagnose Bartleby and Sula, but simply to point to traits within the medical and psychological area that might explain their difference of mind, particularly when compared with Nel and the lawyer. I will suggest that Bartleby and Sula both suffer from impairments of some sort, but this is not the main goal of my dissertation.

This dissertation contains two chapters, one for each primary text. The first chapter will point to different understandings of how previous scholars have read and interpreted Bartleby. I will continue by explaining terms within the disability studies field that I find important, in order to understand how the field may be a contribution when analyzing both Bartleby and Sula. The rest of the chapter will consist of an analysis of Bartleby’s behavior and speech, in order to show how analyzing him in light of disability studies can make us as readers understand his utterances, silence and actions as a way of communication. In this way, I will point to how Bartleby stands forth as both capable of action and responsible for living the life he sees as best for himself. In chapter two, I will approach my second primary text, Sula. I will spend a greater amount of space on my analysis of the title character, as the novel is greater in length than the short story. I will start by explain how Nel can be seen as the template of the norm created in the Bottom, and how her and Sula’s friendship shows us important aspects of Sula’s personality. Further on, I will go into an in-depth analysis of Sula’s behavior and utterances, where I will refer back to the theoretical terms from disability studies explained in chapter one in order to better understand her personality. By viewing her in light of disability studies, I will argue that we may see her as emotionally disabled. Through Sula’s choice of leaving the village in order to search for a life where she does not have to be constantly contrasted with the norm Nel exemplifies, I will argue that Sula is able to take action in her own life. Only in light of the norm does Sula become disabled, but when she steps out of the norm drawn up in the Bottom, she becomes an active agent in her own
life. Towards the end of chapter two, I will also approach the existential question Sula asks Nel towards the end of the novel, where she questions Nel’s understanding of how one may know what a life should be. In order to explain Sula’s ethics, I will use the ideas of Irvin D. Yalom, the renowned psychotherapist, to explain how her mindset and point of ethics appears to us as readers. I will also use Yalom’s ideas to question if Bartleby and Sula have ever really needed help at all.
2 Melville`s “Bartleby, the Scrivener”

Giles Gunn describes Melville as an author who was convinced that “art could tap into and mine some of life`s deepest and richest veins of experience” (4). His vivid description of Bartleby, the peculiar scrivener who copies legal documents all day long, proves Gunn`s statement. In 1853, the short story “Bartleby, the Scrivener” came to life through a serial in the magazine Putnam`s Monthly (Milder 36-37). The story of Bartleby and his monotonous behavior has been subject to discussion and fascination for readers of all ages throughout the last 150 years. In the story the following dispute between Bartleby and the lawyer takes place: “‘I would prefer not to’. ‘You will not? ’ ‘I prefer not. ’” (Melville 1102). The scrivener`s repetitive utterances are almost impossible for the lawyer to decompose and understand, which has caused people to ask the question: What is wrong with Bartleby? In this chapter I will take a closer look at Bartleby and his way of communication, in order to see if his utterances can tell us something about his mindset and personality. Instead of questioning what is wrong with the scrivener, I will question why his different way of communication makes us as readers view him as peculiar, odd, or different from the rest of the characters.

Sheila Post explains that “Melville`s insights into the literary uses of magazine conventions and their impact on reader`s perspective of society […] produced one of the most widely read and discussed tales in American literary history” (127). One of the reasons for this may be the complexity of the characters, as the story has been interpreted in numerous ways. In the second half of the Nineteenth century Bartleby was mostly read as a story of Wall Street, questioning the lawyer`s moral and wish for efficiency. Critics claimed Bartleby`s death to be an example of the failure of care from the lawyer; as he never figured out what was wrong with Bartleby, he had no idea how to rescue him from an inevitable death. Many different interpretations have been applied since, but in the later years Bartleby as a literary character has been analyzed several times in the light of disability studies. Scholars within the field have questioned the short-story`s autobiographical traits, as Melville describes his scrivener`s personality traits with such detail and consistency that you almost feel the scrivener comes to life before you while reading. According to Fitzgerald (50-56), Amit Pinchevski points to a study claiming that Melville himself might have suffered from Asperger syndrome, which he sees as a reason for Melville`s precise insight into the rigid behavior of people with an autism specter diagnosis (31). According to Straus` findings, this seems unlikely, as he sheds light on the problematics of writing authentic stories portraying
autism specter diagnoses. He argues that a person with an autistic mind will have great trouble writing down stories that may be understandable to readers, which makes it difficult to see how Melville himself would have suffered from a diagnosis like this (Straus 469). I see it as much more likely that Melville observed or knew people with traits of autism, and based on his observations managed to describe the autistic mind with such precision.

2.1 What is wrong with Bartleby?

From the moment “Bartleby, the Scrivener” was printed in 1853, there have been numerous accounts of what is wrong with him. The list of interpretations of the story is so long that it has developed into what Kari Nixon refers to as the “Bartleby industry.” One of the most important interpretative traditions focuses on the ethical questions raised by the lawyer’s relationship with Bartleby. The lawyer’s attempts at trying to help Bartleby in his supposed misery has raised ethical questions as to whether or not the lawyer fails the scrivener. Nixon asks the inevitable question: “Is the narrator/lawyer cruel in his actions?”. Many critics have claimed the lawyer to be cruel, especially considering the parts in the text where Bartleby is forced to do the tasks Ginger Nut is supposed to do. Still, Nixon argues for an interpretation of the lawyer as simply being naïve; he believes that he knows best how to guide Bartleby through life in order to help him become more “normal” or “humanlike,” so that the scrivener can more easily fit into society. The lawyer’s naivety, or wish to do good towards someone he deems to be unable to take care of himself, becomes an ethical dilemma where the good will arguably kills Bartleby in the end. The lawyer’s ethical choices may be seen as a good or a bad thing - depending on which theoretical background you draw on when reading the text, but many scholars have chosen to analyze “Bartleby, the Scrivener” as a story of morality where the lawyer can be seen as the “bad guy”.

Corroborating the impression of the lawyer as the bad guy is the interpretation of Bartleby as a metaphor of Wall Street. This interpretation was probably most acknowledged in the years following the publication of “Bartleby, the Scrivener,” and it reflects Melville’s critical gaze on the upper-class society in New York during the mid-nineteenth century. As the full title of the short story is “Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall-Street,” it immediately guides us towards an interpretation of the story as a portrayal of how the environment was among workers on Wall Street. Sheila Post argues that Melville’s story portrayed the devastating effects of Wall Street on those “pallidly neat, pitably respectable, incurably forlorn” individuals like Bartleby” (125). Such an interpretation points to an
understanding of the scriveners as being exhausted creatures, a result of a heavy workload in the challenging environment Wall Street produced. As Melville was familiar with the environment among workers in the financial districts in New York, his story has been seen as a stark critique of the exhaustion and depression Wall Street produced among its workers (Milder 38). Well informed of the social conditions in his time, Melville was not afraid of using his literature to question the social hierarchy and challenge the heavy workload society put on its hard-working employees (22).

Bartleby as depressed is another well-known interpretation that gives us a key to the scrivener`s strange and anomalous behavior. Robert E. Abrams has argued that Bartleby`s monotonous behavior and lack of motivation to do anything else than copying is a clear indication of a depressed man. In his article “"Bartleby" and the Fragile Pageantry of the Ego,” he claims that Bartleby`s death is one of the main proofs of such an interpretation. When Bartleby is put in prison, the lawyer`s guilt and compassion make him arrange for his former employee to be served a proper meal every day (1116). As one may guess, Bartleby does not accept this kind of food. When the lawyer comes to visit the scrivener, the prison guard asks the lawyer the inevitable question: “does he live without dining?” (1117). Even when placed in a situation where he cannot get a hold of his preferred food of the day, Bartleby holds on to his rigid eating pattern. By refusing to eat anything other than ginger nuts, even in prison, Abrams argues that being put into jail and losing control of his own life becomes the main event pushing an already depressed Bartleby over the edge and into a state of apathy, which eventually leads to his death (494). The text itself also argues for such an interpretation by referring to Bartleby`s behavior as “his morbid moodiness” (1105). The most convincing textual evidence appears as the lawyer gives the reader a possible explanation of Bartleby`s behavior in the epilogue of the story. He elaborates on a rumor of Bartleby being employed at an office handling dead letters, and argues that handling these troublesome fates must be the reason for Bartleby`s gloomy appearance (1117): “Conceive a man by nature and misfortune prone to a pallid hopelessness, can any business seem more fitted to heighten it than that of continually handling these dead letters” (1117). The constant meeting with death is the lawyer`s explanation for Bartleby`s tragic fate, and to the reader`s satisfaction this does indeed give a good explanation for Bartleby`s tragic destiny, which correlates with the signs of depression Abrams presents.

The three interpretations of “Bartleby, the Scrivener” are only a few among the huge Bartleby industry, but they seem to be the most recognized interpretations of Melville`s story.
They all point to distinct features in the relationship between Bartleby and the lawyer that broadens our perspective on the scrivener and give us an understanding of the human mind. However, during the last 20 years there have been several scholars approaching the text from the perspective of disability studies, claiming that Bartleby can be read as a character with a mental disability. I would argue that analyzing Bartleby within the framework of disability studies gives us a new understanding of the scrivener`s mind and behavior, because we as readers then understand the frustration of the lawyer when he cannot read the mind of Bartleby. And more importantly, it gives Bartleby much more credibility and allows us to see him as a responsible adult with opinions and an ability to take charge of his own life. Applying the disability perspective onto the short story not only gives us a broader understanding of Bartleby as a character, but in many ways removes the question of why the lawyer was not able to save Bartleby from dying. Assuming such a perspective, we cannot question the failure of care for Bartleby, but rather question the failure of communication between the scrivener and his employer. I will try to elaborate and argue for this perspective throughout the following pages by explaining how the diagnostics of Asperger`s syndrome and autism may help us towards a broader understanding of Bartleby`s behavior and mindset.

2.2 Bartleby in light of disability studies

In this thesis, it will be important to differentiate between what Straus describes as “the medical model” and “the social model”. The medical model refers to the pathological aspect of autism where we categorize it as an illness or impairment that has to be treated. “If the pathology cannot be cured – if the abnormal condition cannot be normalized – then the defective body should be sequestered lest it contaminate or degrade the larger community,” Straus points out (462). The medical model is closely linked to the development of the average, or “ideal” citizen during the early 1900 (Davis, Bending Over 108). The social model (also referred to as the British Model, see Davis, Bending Over 12), sees disabilities as “socially constructed rather than biologically given” (Straus 462). This does not mean that you from the perspective of disability studies disregard pathological diseases, but it means that the diagnosis or the impairment in the body described in literature is not defined as something that needs to be fixed. Within the social model, one considers the human being just as able as any other “normal” person; the impairment is not a hindrance for being just as valuable to society as any other person with a well-functioning body and mind. Pinchevsky`s argument embraces the concept of the social model in a brilliant way: “Disability is a socially
constructed concept” – the “normal” people might just as well be considered disabled if they were the smaller part of the population (31-32). In the following analysis of Melville’s story, the social model based on disability studies will be applied in order to analyze Bartleby. I will not go into detail in trying to diagnose Bartleby’s behavior and communication from a pathological perspective, but I will analyze him in light of what disability studies may tell us about him as a literary character.

“No: at the present I would prefer not to make any change at all” (1114) Bartleby responds when asked if he would like to work in another occupation than being a scrivener. In 1943, Leo Kanner described a group of children who had an “anxiously excessive desire for the maintenance of sameness” (Kanner quoted in Straus, 460), which are characteristics that correlates with the utterance of Bartleby above. Kanner had researched children with behavior that differed greatly from the standard child development, thus trying to give an explanation for this behavior. At the same time, Hans Asperger discovered similar tendencies in a group of children on the other side of the Atlantic. He claimed that “human beings normally live in constant interaction with their environment, and react to it continually. However, ‘autists’ have severely disturbed and considerably limited interaction. The autist is only himself (cf. the Greek word autos) and is not an active member of a greater organism which he is influenced by and which he influences constantly” (Asperger quoted in Straus, 460).

Diagnoses concerning the mind have often been described as “female madness,” “schizophrenia” or different specters of hysteria – diagnoses from a medical era where the research was based on less physical evidence than we use today. Because of this there was little acceptance for Kanner and Asperger’s diagnostics up until 1980, when autism was acknowledged as a medical and psychological diagnosis, almost 40 years after Kanner and Asperger’s first presentation of their findings (Straus 461). Naturally, their findings was not known to Melville and his contemporaries. However, Clarice J. Kestenbaum argues that “individuals with these symptoms have been among us throughout human history and probably before” (280). Pinchevski also argues for such an interpretation, and according to him, Melville’s detailed portrayal of Bartleby can be seen as strong empirical evidence for autistic traits being present in the human being long before it was accepted as a medical diagnosis (30). Literature can tell us a lot about how society and social interaction has taken place before our time, and seeing texts like “Bartleby, the Scrivener” in the light of a medical diagnosis like autism sheds light on Bartleby’s utterances and behavior.
Leo Kanner described the children he observed and diagnosed with autism in the following way: “All of the children’s activities and utterances are governed rigidly and consistently by the powerful desire for aloneness and sameness” (Kanner quoted in Straus 460). These characteristics seem to me like they were custom made for describing Bartleby. The scrivener’s desperate wish for stability and order seems much more understandable when reading him with an autism spectrum diagnosis in mind. When the lawyer first hires him, he describes Bartleby’s somewhat strange appetite for copying papers: “As if long famishing for something to copy, he seemed to gorge himself on my documents” (1098). The wish to do a good day’s work is admirable compared to his somewhat lazy co-workers, but when the lawyer continues to observe his new employee he sees that “he [Bartleby] ran a day and night line, copying by sunlight and candle-light” (1098). This excessive wish to do the same task over and over again may be seen as an example of the children Kanner described in 1943 (Straus 460). Straus points out that the medical definition of autism spectrum diagnosis has been drastically broadened and developed the last 30 years, and today people of all ages may be diagnosed with such a disorder. He also stresses the fact that what Kanner referred to as “extreme autistic aloneness” (Straus 464) is not consistent with today’s understanding of the diagnosis; autistic people have a strong need for social contact, but they tend to express themselves very differently than people without the diagnosis. Autists often need to seek social contact on their own terms, as many are unable to adapt to and play by social rules that are not explicitly spoken out loud by people around them. The updated understanding of autism gives room for seeing Bartleby’s social sides as well as his need for aloneness, as we see that he is able to communicate to the office boy what he wants to eat: “The boy would then leave the office jingling a few pence, and reappear with a handful of ginger-nuts which he delivered in the hermitage, receiving two of the cakes for his trouble” (1100). Bartleby gives the boy two cakes as payment, and this underlines his ability to understand some social rules – in order to receive his food, Bartleby has to pay the office boy in some way. This exemplifies how we may see Bartleby in light of today’s diagnostics field. As more research has been done on autism and mental diagnoses, we as readers may use this information when interpreting literary characters like Bartleby. Seeing Bartleby as a human being who needs social contact in the same way as all the other characters, we may be able to see his interaction with Ginger Nut as an attempt at social contact. With the knowledge of how the autistic mind works, we may be able to read the ginger-nut passage as an example of how
Bartleby reaches out to other people. This again is to me strong evidence of how analyzing Bartleby with an autistic diagnosis in mind makes sense to modern readers.

The problem with mental diagnoses is the fact that they are often linked to incommunicability. Reading literature where the characters have autistic traits gives us a unique perspective on how the autistic mind works, but the problem with such literature is the authenticity. Straus remarks that in fiction, the problem of narration often occurs in literature concerning mental disorders and diagnoses within the autism spectrum, as people with such disorders often communicate so very differently from the majority who will read the story (Straus 462). However, as we in later years have gained more knowledge of mental diagnoses, several authors without a mental disorder have chosen to write stories where the main character bears traits of being autistic, like Mark Haddon’s acknowledged story The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Nighttime. Such stories have given a voice to people who fall outside the norm in society, and they give us insight into how it is to be part of a marginalized group. Still, we cannot fully comprehend autistic stories, as there has to be another literary character present to describe or interpret the autistic character, in order to let the readers understand what happens inside the autist’s mind. In “Bartleby, the Scrivener,” the lawyer figures as an interpreter regarding how we are to see and interpret Bartleby. “What my own astonished eyes saw of Bartleby, that is all I know of him, except, indeed, one vague report which will still appear in the sequel” (1093). This is the first description we get of Bartleby, and throughout the story we see him through the mind and eyes of the lawyer.

2.3 Bartleby’s differentness

“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, pitiably respectable, incurable forlorn! It was Bartleby” (1097). I believe everyone who has read “Bartleby, the Scrivener” may agree to the fact that Bartleby is a peculiar figure. The first meeting with Bartleby may result in anything from annoyance, to curiosity or fascination over this character that is so different from any other character you meet in American literature from the nineteenth century. Throughout the text, we are presented with this odd figure who appears as a mystery to the people around him, and who, towards the end of his life, remains a mystery for the reader to ponder when closing the book. We never really get to know Bartleby, and as the quote above suggests, all we know about him are the observations and conclusions drawn by the lawyer, who also functions as the narrator of the story.
One of the main indicators of Bartleby’s differentness is his lack of speech, or maybe more accurately, his refusal to communicate through speaking to the people surrounding him. When literary characters are seen and described by others, what they say or how they are described gives us as readers a clear indication of their personality and character. Bartleby’s main response whenever asked to do anything other than his assignments as a scrivener is “I would prefer not to” (1098). Naturally, this becomes one of the lawyer’s main reasons for assuming that there is something wrong with Bartleby. “Language usage, which is as much a physical function as any other somatic activity, has become subject to an enforcement of normalcy, as have gender, racial identity, national identity, and so on” Davis states (Bending Over 104). Speech as communication is one of the core methods we as humans use in order to present our thoughts and ideas to the world. We are born with an exceptional ability to learn language, and interaction with others is crucial for the human mind in order to develop. Davis points to an important aspect of human communication: Speech as a communication form is crucial in order to understand each other. This means that the lack of speech, or difference in oral communication, quickly becomes an indicator on differentness between ourselves and the other human we are trying to interact with. Davis’s observation raises an important question: What happens if we lose the ability to communicate? Are we still equal as humans, or does the lack of communication become a barrier that makes us unable to approach the other person? Davis argues that the lack of communication becomes a clear indicator of how people fit into a norm. The norm of language is determined by social convention in observing and measuring how certain words and ways of communication are used by people throughout a certain period of time. As Davis points out, the development of the average man during the nineteenth century was a great influence towards defining the normalcy of language (108). By using statistics to measure and define the average human being, scientists defined the measurements and looks of what a “normal” human being should look like. The same can be said for language. By looking at how the majority of the American citizens talk to each other and use their language to communicate their needs, you may use this information to define what “normal” communication is. All types of communication forms, or lack of communication, that does not fit into this frame, will then be considered part of a deviant or disabled communication. That is what happens when Bartleby responds with silence or “I would prefer not to” whenever the lawyer talks to him: The communication method is not known to the lawyer, and he therefore deems his new scrivener to be different from the norm.
Pinchevski argues that “What is at stake here is the status of communication itself within social life. In the medical science view, the social is underpinned by reciprocal interaction, and thus any deviation or contravention is to be regarded as pathological – and then treated until cured” (34). Pinchevski’s statement points to an important distinction in Melville’s character gallery. The open communication between the larger group of the characters is easy for us as readers to follow and understand. The lawyer appears as “normal,” because he uses well-formulated words and communicates with his other employees in a way that we as readers may recognize and relate to. The lawyer is used to people who explain their mindset and why they choose to behave like they do, like when Turkey explains how his drunkenness can be seen as an advantage: “In the morning I but marshal and deploy my columns; but in the afternoon I put myself at their head, and gallantly charge the foe, thus!” (1095). Turkey argues for how his brilliant work in the mornings makes up for the blots he makes on the papers in the afternoons, and in this way the lawyer is persuaded to keep him in the office. The lawyer understands why Turkey and Nippers act the way they do because they explain their behavior to him. Bartleby, on the other hand, does not explain any of his actions in words: He just does what he is hired to do, and leaves the rest up to the other employees. The lack of explanation and cooperation makes the communication between the lawyer and his new scrivener so different from the norm that the lawyer is confused. He often ends up asking why the scrivener is so consistent in his actions: “Why do you refuse?” the lawyer bursts out at one point, and Bartleby’s laconic answer is as always “I would prefer not to” (1099). As Pinchevski points out, the deviation, or differentness we encounter when meeting someone who communicates so very differently from us, becomes an impossible obstacle we often struggle to accept. As a result, the deviant who behaves differently and does not express himself is often alienated from the larger group and becomes a person no one understands. Bartleby’s behavior crashes with the lawyer’s image of what understandable behavior should be, and this makes him look for a solution to a situation he sees as impossible. His solution is to cure Bartleby – to figure out what’s wrong with this peculiar character.

The indications of Bartleby’s differentness are presented to us in two ways: Through the lawyer’s expectations of Bartleby, and through the lawyer’s descriptions of Bartleby’s behavior and speech. From the beginning of the text, we are presented with the lawyer’s expectations of his new employee. Bartleby has been hired as a scrivener primarily because the workload in the lawyer’s office demands more employees, but secondarily because he hopes Bartleby’s “sedate” behavior can make a good contrast to the two other scriveners’
moody behavior (1097). Also, we quickly learn that Bartleby has been hired because of his excellent qualifications, which gives us two clear expectations in the lawyer’s mind that he believes Bartleby will fulfill. First, he believes Bartleby to have the ability to interact with the other employees in such a way that their behavior will be more balanced and predictable. Second, he believes Bartleby to be efficient and qualified for his job. For this reason, he places Bartleby near his own desk “so as to have this quiet man within easy call, in case any trifling thing was to be done” (1097). From what we read, we might interpret the lawyer as wanting an employee who may be his right hand when needed and taking on extra responsibility around the office, though this is never stated in words to or about Bartleby. The lawyer even admits that he believes “the easiest way of life is the best” (1093), which implies his hopes for Bartleby’s ability to help him with the employees already working in the office.

The lawyer’s expectations of Bartleby’s efficiency are soon fulfilled, as he observes the scrivener’s ability to work: “At first Bartleby did an extraordinary quantity of writing” (1098). His effective copying strategy is exactly what the lawyer has been looking for. Bartleby never stops writing during the day, and the lawyer observes that he “never went anywhere” (1100). Still, his expectations are not completely fulfilled, as the lawyer also wants Bartleby to be a cheerful worker: “I should have been quite delighted with his application, had he been cheerful industrious. But he wrote on silently, palely, mechanically” (1100).

According to Kanner and Asperger’s descriptions of the autistic mind, the social expectations the lawyer believes Bartleby will fulfill are unrealistic and impossible for the scrivener to act on. Unless the lawyer asks Bartleby a direct question, Bartleby does not do anything other than the specific tasks of a scrivener. This kind of behavior is unknown to the lawyer, and it immediately causes confusion and irritation the first time Bartleby responds with “I prefer not to” (1098). We are then let into the lawyer’s mind as he looks at the reluctant scrivener before him:

I looked at him steadfastly. His face was leanly composed; his gray eye dimly calm. Not a wrinkle of agitation rippled him. Had there been the least uneasiness, anger, impatience or impertinence in his manner; in other words, had there been any thing ordinarily human about him, doubtless I should have violently dismissed him from the premises. But as it was, I should have as soon thought of turning my pale plaster-of-paris bust of Cicero out of doors. (1098-1099)

The lawyer’s comparison with the bust of Cicero exemplifies the role Bartleby takes in the office: He sits still all day, doing exactly the same thing without making a sound, as if he were in fact a sculpture. The comparison seems to awaken something in the lawyer’s mind; he
starts to understand that Bartleby is different from himself, both in speech and behavior. This is a crucial moment in the story; as the lawyer becomes aware of the difference between himself and the scrivener, he believes that such a difference has to be erased. In his mind, the only logical explanation to Bartleby’s behavior is that there is something wrong with him. It never occurs to him that the difference between them does not have to mean that there is something wrong with Bartleby’s mind, but rather that Bartleby’s way of communicating differs so greatly from the lawyer’s that he will never fully comprehend the mindset of his employee.

Linton states that “disabled people are to be acted on, shaped, and turned out as best as can be done to fit into the existing social structure” (quoted in Nixon). The lawyer takes on the role as a kind of father figure towards the scrivener, seeing their difference in communication as proof of there being something wrong with Bartleby. At one point the lawyer asks his employee “But what reasonable objection can you have to speak to me? I feel friendly towards you” (1105). The lawyer’s utterance exemplifies his world view: If Bartleby refuses to answer or explain what he means, the lawyer sees this as an example of Bartleby’s wish to not include him in his life. He is disappointed by the scrivener’s behavior, considering “the undeniable good usage and indulgence he had received from me” (1106). The lawyer sees himself as Bartleby’s rescuer from whatever horrible life he has lead before, and, as the lawyer sees it, Bartleby’s “perverseness seemed ungrateful” (1106). Still, the lawyer believes Bartleby can be reasoned with, considering his “forlorn” (1106) state, so he tries to speak to Bartleby as if he were a child that needs to understand what the adults are saying:

“Bartleby, never mind then about revealing your history; but let me entreat you, as a friend, to comply as far as may be with the usages of this office. Say now you will help to examine papers to-morrow or the next day: in short, say now that in a day or two you will begin to be a little reasonable: - say so, Bartleby.” “At present I would prefer not to be a little reasonable,” was his cadaverous reply. (1106)

The lawyer’s indefatigable attempts towards finding the key to Bartleby’s mind can only be described as admirable, though Bartleby’s response is even more sublime. One may laugh at the response, seeing it as assertive sarcasm towards the lawyer’s condescending attempt at trying to force Bartleby to do as he wants. However, from a disability perspective the scrivener’s response makes perfect sense to an autistic interpretation of the text. Straus explains that “Autistic thinking tends to be concrete rather than abstract” (469). Bartleby’s response seems to me as a concrete and demurring utterance, which simply states that he does not want to do what the lawyer asks him to do. However, the lawyer, colored by his own
abstract way of thinking and communicating, sees Bartleby`s response as yet another evidence of his employee`s difference. Bartleby`s utterance becomes the lawyer`s proof of the scrivener being someone who needs to be cured, rather than trying to understand Bartleby`s way of communication.

Rosemarie Garland-Thompson has argued that “ability and disability are not so much a matter of the capacities and limitations of bodies but more about what we expect from a body at a particular moment and place” (quoted in Nixon). Nixon continues by saying that “violation of such expectations, she [Garland-Thompson] adds, often leads to a fetishized and feverish search for cures for abnormality.” This is the lawyer`s crucial mistake: He has a set a standard for what he expects a scrivener`s abilities should be, which includes both social capability and abilities to do the specific work of a scrivener. He is not willing to change his expectations in order to let Bartleby set a new standard for how he can best do the tasks at hand. As a result, he categorizes Bartleby as different from himself by thinking that “the scrivener was the victim of innate and incurable disorder” (1105).

The lawyer`s view of Bartleby as different from the majority in the office appears through his descriptions of his employee. Bartleby`s speech is described to be “flute-like” (1099), indicating a monotonous way of speaking which is one of the characteristics in diagnosing people with autism (Straus 460-61). He describes Bartleby`s behavior as “disarming” (1099), and how it “in a wonderful manner touched and disconcerted me” (1099). Such characteristics enhance an understanding of a lawyer who sees himself as a father figure towards Bartleby, viewing his scrivener as a childlike person without the ability to take care of himself. Utterances like “Are you looking for the silent man?” (1117) from the turnkey in prison underlines the understanding of Bartleby behaving and acting differently from the rest of the people around him.

The lawyer consistently refers to Bartleby`s desk as “the hermitage” (e.g 1100, 1102, 1106), indicating Bartleby`s wish for isolation, aloneness and peace to work at his own pace. He does not want to befriend the other workers in the office, and he seems to communicate with the others only when he needs something, like the arrangement he has made with the office boy, Ginger Nut, who delivers ginger-nuts to him every day (1100). Though Bartleby has been hired to do the work of a scrivener, the lawyer`s descriptions indicates his wish for the scrivener to partake in the social life in the office. “Meanwhile Bartleby sat in his hermitage, oblivious to every thing but his own peculiar business there” (1100). Describing the scrivener`s work as “his own peculiar business” indicates the lack of trust on the lawyer`s
side; the unfamiliar behavior of Bartleby seems to make the lawyer skeptical towards his employee, raising doubts about Bartleby’s ability to actually do a good job. However, the lawyer soon learns that his new employee’s ability to work pays well in regard to the enormous amount of work he is able to do compared to Turkey and Nippers, who only work a couple of hours each every day. Bartleby’s ability to work is under no circumstances disturbed by the noise from his co-workers: “His steadiness, his freedom from all dissipation, his incessant industry…his great stillness, his unalterableness of demeanor under all circumstances” (1102). These descriptions tell us that the scrivener’s mind and behavior remain the same throughout the day, giving us as readers an indicator towards seeing that Bartleby is different from other people – he is not disturbed by anything. Only once are we shown a slight change in his stable mood: “during which his countenance remained immovable, only there was the faintest conceivable tremor of the white attenuate mouth” (1106). Nixon points out that the “tremor of the mouth” occurs after the lawyer has tried to force Bartleby to talk about his background. She argues that such an approach from the lawyer seems “off-putting” to Bartleby, as “this depiction of his resistance to the narrator's method of approaching him also implicitly indicates that Bartleby might be more communicative if approached differently.” Taken together, the descriptions of Bartleby given to us by the lawyer create a picture of the scrivener which is colored by the lawyer’s prejudice against his employee. The lawyer has seen the physical evidence of his employee’s behavior, he has tried to understand his point of view, and he has deemed him to be different based on his own judgement of the case.

2.4 Bartleby’s personality

I will point to three important character traits that together dominate Bartleby’s personality throughout the short story: His repetitive behavior, his silence, and his ability to speak when needed. Throughout the short story Bartleby utters a variation of the phrase “I would prefer not to” 24 times (Nixon). The phrase stands out as so different from any other utterance in the text, and Straus argues that the consistency in which Bartleby claims his preference is commonly known among people with autism as “echolalia” (Straus 468). Kamran Nazeer describes echolalia as “the constant, disconnected use of a particular word or phrase” which is an “example of rhythmic or repetitive behavior, a trait common among autistic people” (quoted in Straus 468). Echolalia is most commonly observed as a tool diagnosed autists use to create order in their own mind when faced with situations that are stressful or create
confusion (468). The repetitive phrase can then be seen as Bartleby`s way of communicating on his own terms when faced with the lawyer`s commands or spoken needs. According to Pinchevski, the phrase “expresses neither defiance nor compliance but a negative preference” (35); it is simply an utterance stating what Bartleby himself prefers if he were to choose freely. The phrase also gives room for an understanding of the lawyer`s ethics: If he were to demand the scrivener to do a job he preferred not to do, the lawyer becomes the bad guy. Knowing the negative preference of his employee makes it more difficult for the lawyer later on to push him to do a task he clearly does not want to do.

Bartleby`s repetitive phrases are also linked closely to his desire for automanism: Behavior which gives no room for doing things differently from one day to another (Abrams 492). Abrams explains that Bartleby`s automanism “stands out nakedly as intrusive and intractable behavior welling up deafly from within” (492). The two clerks Turkey and Nippers relieve each other by working in shifts. As their personalities make one of them work most effectively in the morning, and the other one in the afternoon, they are able to use their personality traits for the common good in the office (1094-1095). They work together almost like a symbiosis, where the first one`s bad mood relieves the next one`s worsening mood. As Abrams argues, this kind of automatism works for the common good of the people employed at the office, as the clerks work their personality into functional behavior that adapts to the rhythm of the office (492). However, Bartleby`s personality stands out in such a system. His personality cannot be used for the common good, as he is unable to understand the social rules Turkey and Nippers silently agree to. Where the behavior of the clerks can be adapted into the system, Bartleby`s behavior cannot. The silent scrivener needs his strict schedule and tasks to be concrete and alike; he does not agree to do anything else than what he was hired to do. The clerks are aware of the lawyer accepting their bad mood swings as long as they do not push their moodiness. There is a silent understanding in the office that as long as their moods can be used to cooperate, they are allowed to behave the way they do. “I was willing to overlook his eccentricities” (1095) the lawyer explains when talking about Turkey`s ability to work, and he argues that since “their fits relieved each other like guards” (1096), he chooses to use the employees unstable condition during the day as an advantage, instead of seeing it as a reason to fire them.

Milder has suggested that Turkey and Nippers can be seen as examples of manic-depressive characters, which in turn gives sense to the interpretations of Bartleby as depressed (38). The two clerks do in many ways remind us of Bartleby with their moodiness,
eccentricities and need for doing things their own way, but the difference is that Bartleby has a stable moodiness which cannot be seen in the two clerks. With descriptions like “His eyes looked dull and glazed” (1107) and “like a very ghost […] he appeared at the entrance of his hermitage” (1102), Bartleby appears as the opposite of the eccentric mood swings of Turkey and Nippers. These descriptions all make sense of Milder’s argument towards labeling the two clerks as manic-depressive and Bartleby as depressed, but when we take a look at Ginger Nut’s description of Bartleby as being “luny” (1100) in response to the lawyer’s question of Bartleby’s ability to cooperate, the argument begins to waver. If we draw the conclusion that Turkey and Nippers both suffer from manic depression, why does Ginger Nut not address them as being “luny” (1100)? The only reasonable answer seems to be cooperation. Both Turkey and Nippers are able to cooperate at their preferred working hours, Turkey being sober before lunch (1094), while Nippers works best after lunch (1096). More importantly, they are able to cooperate whenever the lawyer needs them all to partake in copying jobs that requires more than one person, like when he at one point need a quadruple team to examine a testimony from the High Court of Chancery (1099). He calls on Turkey, Nippers and Ginger Nut, and they all come forth, ready for action. When he calls out Bartleby’s name and adds “quick, I am waiting” (1099), we read the mild response “What is wanted?” (1099). And after hearing the lawyer out, there is the habitual “I would prefer not to” (1099). Bartleby’s inevitable refusal of cooperation with the rest, marks him as different from his co-workers. Based on their eccentric behavior, which Milder refers to as manic-depressive, we could easily have placed Turkey and Nippers in the same category of difference as Bartleby. Still, I would argue that as readers, we choose not to because we see that Turkey and Nippers accept cooperation when needed. By doing so, I would claim that we may see them as part of the larger group in the office, as they are able to adapt to the society they are placed in. Bartleby is not willing to, or maybe not even able to move outside his automanism and set standards, which deems him to be left alone inside his hermitage, and thus outside society.

Bartleby’s repetitive phrase “I prefer not to” has received so much attention that scholars have forgotten to take a look at Bartleby’s less famous pattern of response: His deliberate and determined silences. Nixon has argued that the scrivener’s silence should be given just as much attention as his preferences, as the silences in themselves become valid communication at the same rate as Bartleby’s utterances of speech. Bartleby’s silence is most often a response to some of the more harsh commands or comments from the lawyer, like when he tries to force Bartleby to quit his job which the scrivener clearly “prefers not to”
The lawyer’s response is “you must,” and Bartleby’s response is to remain silent. Nixon argues that “Thus, Bartleby’s silences represent an intriguing dualism of an apparent innate difference as well as a stubborn insistence upon speaking and being spoken to according to his preferences, rather than according to the demands of the majority. In this insistence, Bartleby's silences become powerful acts of assertion”. Nixon’s argument leads us towards an interesting question in analyzing Bartleby: Is his silence deliberate? I would argue that it is not. From a disability perspective, and based on the characteristics I have described earlier, I would argue that Bartleby’s silence is simply an inevitable reaction due to his autistic diagnosis. Kanner argued that the children he investigated “shared an ‘inability to relate themselves in the ordinary way to people and situations’” (quoted in Straus 460), which to some degree undermines Nixon’s argument. I would claim that Bartleby would simply not be able to deliberately not respond to the lawyer’s utterances as a way of upsetting the lawyer on purpose. The scrivener would simply not have the social and emotional skills to do so.

Another piece of evidence towards such an interpretation concerns the situations in which the silent responses occur. Bartleby’s silence often appears when he is given a demand without a following question, as people with a diagnosis within the autism specter often respond better to clear and concrete questions than to implicit questions. In the situations where the scrivener is given demands without a question following, he simply does not respond (or appear, for that matter). The same thing happens if the lawyer gives him too many questions to answer at the same time, then silence becomes the automatic answer from Bartleby. When the lawyer asks him “Will you, or will you not, quit me?” (1110), Bartleby responds with “I would prefer not to quit you” (1110), with emphasis on “not” in order to give the most accurate answer possible to his employer. This correlates with Kanner’s description of the autistic mind having an “anxiously excessive desire for the maintenance of sameness” (quoted in Straus 460); Bartleby does not want to leave the premises or his co-workers. The lawyer follows up the answer by giving Bartleby four questions that only underline the lawyer’s reasons as to why he believes Bartleby is unfit to work in the office. To this, Bartleby responds with silence, as he cannot give a correct and reasonable answer to the questions. In this way, we may see Bartleby’s silent utterances as metaphors for his understanding of the world. If the lawyer provides no clear question for him to answer, Bartleby remains silent. Nixon claims that Bartleby chooses not to speak to the lawyer on the lawyer’s terms. I would, however, argue that from a disability perspective he simply cannot speak to the lawyer, as he does not know how to communicate on the lawyer’s premises.
The will to speak has hardly ever been in focus when analyzing Bartleby as a literary character. Seeing him as someone who refuses to act according to expectations, he has been seen as a childlike character with an inability to express his own wishes and needs. I would argue that there are several passages proving Bartleby’s ability to speak when he wants to and needs to. One of the few times Bartleby speaks to the lawyer on his own initiative without being forced, is in prison. When the lawyer visits him in prison and calls out his name, Bartleby’s immediate response is “I know you” (1116). His recognition of the lawyer is somewhat surprising, as he throughout the story has refused to speak on his own initiative and only responds to what the lawyer has said to him before. What follows next is even more surprising, as he utters “and I want nothing to say to you” (1116). I would claim that this clearly shows Bartleby’s ability to express his own ideas and wishes whenever he wants the world around him to know about what goes on in his mind. He acknowledges the lawyer’s presence by stating that he recognizes his voice, and he expresses his own wish not to speak to him. Earlier in the story, he has chosen several times not to speak as the lawyer approaches him, but here he chooses to talk. I would argue that his choice to speak here is a strong argument towards seeing Bartleby as a responsible adult.

Another argument comes forth as we look back on how the lawyer perceives the scrivener. At one point, when trying to figure out what is wrong with Bartleby, the lawyer says “I remembered that he never spoke but to answer” (1104). This statement clarifies the lawyer’s understanding of an utterance. When he claims that Bartleby never spoke unless a question was asked, the lawyer implies that communication should consist of cheerful conversation without a goal, as well as utterances in response to direct questions. And more importantly, I would argue that his utterance shows us the lawyer’s ethics. Through his statement, he implies that he is better and more successful than Bartleby, thus reducing Bartleby to a person without his own will and ability to speak for himself. But the lawyer is wrong. Bartleby does speak on his own initiative, it just happens so seldom that the lawyer has never reflected upon it. And more importantly, he has never given Bartleby room for speaking on his own terms as he has pushed him towards communicating within the frames of how the majority in the office speak to each other. Straus explains that the autistic mind’s need for “orderliness, system, and rituals” often creates private meanings only the autist himself may be able to understand (Straus 468). With this in mind we may see Bartleby as a person with the ability to speak just as well as the people surrounding him, as long as he is allowed to speak on his own terms. When the lawyer offers to pay for Bartleby’s dinner in
prison Bartleby says “I prefer not to dine to-day” (1116). He elaborates by saying “It would disagree with me; I am unused to dinners” (1116). Here Bartleby clearly states that he does not want to eat dinner, and by saying so he also implies his continuing wish to eat his preferred meal – ginger nuts. Bartleby was able to communicate to Ginger Nut that he wanted him to buy him ginger-nuts for dinner when Bartleby worked in the office. Also when in prison, Bartleby communicates his elementary need for food. His ability to communicate this underlines the fact that Bartleby does not need anyone to take care of him. He is fully able to take responsibility for his own life and needs, and I would claim that only when accepting that Bartleby’s mind works differently from the lawyer’s mind can we see Bartleby’s resources.

2.5 From disability to ability

“To will, ostensibly, is to choose,” Abrams writes (490), and Bartleby’s ability to choose is what eventually leads to his death. Critics have claimed that the lawyer is cruel, that he does not understand Bartleby, and that he fails to care adequately for him. Nixon claims that as readers we are left with “a sense of never knowing what might have ultimately aided Bartleby” when closing the book. However, I would say that from a disability perspective the question we should try to answer is not the question of what might have aided Bartleby. Analyzing him in light of an autism specter diagnosis, Bartleby does not need help or care from the lawyer or others. Bartleby can provide for himself, which he has exemplified through all his actions from his first encounter with the lawyer. Bartleby’s appearance in the office gives evidence towards seeing him as an responsible adult as there is no evidence suggesting that he is not doing his job properly. The lawyer even states that “I felt my most precious papers perfectly safe in his hands” (1102). Still, despite all of Bartleby’s good qualities, the lawyer simply cannot accept their difference in communication. One morning the lawyer comes into the office seeing Bartleby standing, looking out of the window. As the lawyer asks him why he is not writing, the following conversation unfolds between the two:

L: “do no more writing?”
B: “No more”.
L: “And what is the reason?”
B: “Do you not see the reason for yourself”, he indifferently replied.
L: I looked steadfastly at him, and perceived that his eyes looked dull and glazed.

(1107)

In this passage, the differences between Bartleby and the lawyer culminates into an inevitable crash. The lawyer has seen his scrivener, the strange creature he has tried to tame for so long,
become more and more different from what he sees as “normal” behavior. His immediate thought when he sees the glazed eyes in Bartleby’s face is that the scrivener has worked so hard that his eyesight has been adversely affected. I would however argue, that the “dull and glazed” look in Bartleby’s eyes points us towards an interpretation of a misunderstood man who has given up. He has tried to do the job he was hired to do, but as his communication has become the focus of attention, evidently diagnosing him as the deviant in the pool of normal workers, he gives up.

Many have claimed the lawyer to be responsible for Bartleby’s death. I will, however, claim that Bartleby’s death is a deliberate choice on Bartleby’s part. The scrivener may be seen as autistic, but that does not mean that he is without a will to decide what is best for himself and his life. He has shown throughout the text that he is able to choose for himself through his negative preferences, he has shown his ability to work with an eagerness and diligence greater than any other worker in the office, and when he is divested of the possibility of “gorging himself on the documents” (1098), I believe that he experiences that he has nothing more to live for. He is not willing to compromise his own assurance in order to fulfill other’s expectations of him. As I have argued earlier, the autistic mindset often provides “locally coherent networks of private associations” (Straus 468). From such perspective, we might see Bartleby’s death as a choice of his own, as his logic may be seen as different from that of the people surrounding him.

Nixon claims that “Melville's portrayal of Bartleby is meant to illustrate vividly the costs and casualties of a society that fails to embrace diversity in a never-ending quest to describe and define the world around it according to reductive, deterministic categories.” The lawyer’s need for definition and understanding causes him to constantly try to fit Bartleby into a category he can comprehend and relate to. Only once in the text is the lawyer able to approach Bartleby on Bartleby’s own terms: “come here; I am not going to ask you to do anything you would prefer not to do I simply wish to speak to you. Upon this he noiselessly slid into view” (1105). Such an utterance works very well for Bartleby, and I will try to explain why. First, the lawyer gives Bartleby a command (“Come here”) which Bartleby may be able to follow, as it speaks to his wish for order and system. Second, the lawyer clarifies from the onset that he will not force Bartleby to do something he does not wish to do, creating a safe zone in which Bartleby can be assured that he is not to be targeted with unforeseen demands. Third, the lawyer states that his intention with the utterance is neutral conversation; not making demands on Bartleby that he cannot fulfill or satisfy. Such an approach shows
how communication between the two is possible, as long as the lawyer follows the principles of organized, predictable communication with a clear intention. In response to such utterances, Bartleby immediately “slides into view” without hesitation and complaint. When communicating within these frames, Bartleby does not have to be afraid, as the lawyer has clarified in advance what he expects of him. This is the perfect example of how Bartleby should be approached by the people around him. The textual evidence shows how a disability inspired reading of Bartleby may give him a more dignified role as a character.

Pinchevski argues that “The figure of Bartleby equally serves both sides, the one taking the scrivener as a model for the abnormal, the other making him the model for challenging the normal” (34). When we see Bartleby in light of disability studies, I would argue that he appears as the main character. In many other interpretations he becomes the object of care, the deviant who diverges from the norm. When reading Bartleby with the idea in mind that he is not simply depressed, a symbol, or an immature adult, he appears as a human being who does not fit the norm. If we as readers are able to embrace that fact, I would argue that we may read “Bartleby, the Scrivener” as a story of a man who was not understood by the people in his time and surroundings. The distress of never being accepted for his differentness, or what I would choose to call his autistic diagnosis, he eventually gives up trying to communicate with the people around him. I would argue that Bartleby could have chosen to tell the lawyer that his preferred meal in prison was ginger nuts, as the text clearly indicates Bartleby’s ability to express his wishes when he has to. However, he chooses to sleep with “kings and counsellors” (1117), as he realizes that his way of living is not compatible with the demands placed on a Wall Street scrivener in the mid-nineteenth century.
3 Morrison`s *Sula*

To be true to your own convictions is one of the main themes Toni Morrison explores in her novel *Sula*. First published in 1973, *Sula* is Morrison`s second work of fiction (Morrison x). The novel revolves around the ethical question of who lives the “right” life: Sula or Nel. The two girls grow up together, becoming the best of friends, but their lives are separated when the question of how you should live your life arises. Should you live according to conventions and tradition, or should you live a life based on your own understanding of what is best for you? The two girls do not see eye to eye on this matter, as Sula evolves into an independent woman with her own way of living her life, while Nel develops into a conventional, timid woman who believes that her quiet life as a housewife is the right way to live. Their shared youth is shattered, as Sula chooses to break free from the expectations of a conventional life in the Bottom. When they meet for the last time, Sula questions Nel`s way of life, asking her why she can be sure that her life choices were better than hers: “How you know it was you?” ‘What you mean?’ ‘I mean maybe it wasn`t you. Maybe it was me’” (146). Sula`s question raises an ethical dilemma: What is the right way to live your life? And how can we define what a good life is for others than ourselves?

Throughout this chapter, I will look at how Sula`s ethics and life is questioned by Nel and the inhabitants of the village. Sula`s question of who lived the “right” life indicates that there is a right and a wrong way to live in the Bottom. Sula is clearly placed in the category of making the wrong choices, and this ultimately deems her as different from both Nel and the village people. Throughout this chapter I will take a look at how Sula`s actions and communication alienates her from the rest of the village, and how the miscommunication between Sula and Nel may be seen as an indication of Sula`s differentness. In the novel, the village people claim Sula to be different (118), and based on their claim I will try to show how Sula`s differentness may be explained through viewing her as emotionally disabled. In light of an emotional disability, I will argue how she may appear as a responsible adult who does, in fact, make the right choices for herself when seen in light of her own mindset.

Sula`s ethical compass points in the opposite direction from that of Nel and the people in the Bottom. In contrast to the timid and emotionally controlled Nel, Sula appears as emotionally disabled in the eyes of the village, as she always acts upon her feelings and lives her life according to what *she* wants, and not what the world expects her to want. Her way of life is judged and looked down upon by Nel, who sees Sula as uncontrolled and without any
direction in her life. But if we look at Sula from the disability perspective, she may appear different to her readers. By using Lennard J. Davis`s ideas to question how we view characters that communicate differently than the people surrounding them, Sula`s differentness may stand out as an ability. By reading her actions and difference in communication in light of disability studies, I will argue that she comes across as a character with rational ideas and actions, instead of being the “witch” of the village (150). Terry Otten argues that in *Sula*, “she [Morrison] centers full attention on the complementary relationship between Nel and Sula as a divided self” (26). Morrison is well known for her use of the “divided self” as a theme in her novels, and reading Sula and Nel in this light gives an interesting and widened understanding of the novel. I will, however, analyze the two characters as if they are separated individuals, as I believe their appearance and development throughout the novel argues for a separate reading of the two.

### 3.1 Nel and Sula: An intertwined friendship

The text gives us clear indications that Sula is not an ordinary woman like the rest of the women living in The Bottom. The village people unanimously agree that “Sula was distinctive different” (118), but in order to point to the distinct features which mark her difference, we need to take a look at what she is different from. As Sula is seen and described for the most part through the eyes of Nel, her childhood friend, it is important to look at how Nel`s background and personality develops throughout the novel. Nel becomes the personification of the prevailing norm in the Bottom, and her view and description of Sula often matches that of the village people. Nel is born into a legacy of obedience and dominance from her mother. Helene Wright is described as “an impressive woman” (18) by the people around her, and after giving birth she silently admits that “the great beauty that was hers” (18) is not reflected in her daughter`s face. These are the circumstances under which Nel grows up, producing an oppressed child with little room to form and develop her own mind and self-esteem. There are indicators in the text pointing towards an interpretation of Helene wanting a better future for herself than what she would have if she had stayed in the town where she grew up (17, 19). By shaping her daughter into a calm, quiet girl, Helene seems to believe that the child will help her keep the Bottom`s image of Helene as the town`s great beauty, which will in turn lead her into a position of integrity and importance among the other inhabitants. This result in Nel being a suppressed little girl: “Under Helene`s hand the girl became obedient and polite” Morrison writes (18), giving us as readers an image of the
prevailing conditions under which Nel lives. She is not given space to develop her personality the way she wants: “Any enthusiasms that little Nel showed were calmed by the mother until she drove her daughter’s imagination underground” (18). Nel is shaped into a girl who spends her first childhood years trying to fit into the norm of her mother, as she believes that Helene’s will and wishes exemplifies how the world should be.

Yet, there are a few times during her early childhood years in which Nel sees her mother from the outside, questioning Helene’s choices and demands. Helene is open about her abusive nature, and descriptions like “she loved her house and enjoyed manipulating her daughter and her husband” (18) seem to awaken something in Nel at one point. She realizes that some of her mother’s behavior is not good, and especially not in her favor. During a train ride back to Helene’s childhood home, we are shown some of Nel’s uncertainty about her mother’s behavior. As they walk into the carriage reserved for white people, they are approached and reprimanded by the conductor. Nel, who has always seen her mother as the one who never agrees to being suppressed, sees a whole new side of her: “Then, for no earthly reason, at least no reason that anybody could understand, certainly no reason that Nel could understand then or later, she smiled” (21). Nel is embarrassed by her mother’s smile, as the smile in itself becomes a silent utterance of Helene’s agreement to the racial segregation they experience. Nel realizes that by smiling, her mother submits to white supremacy, which she is not comfortable with for several reasons: First, Nel is used to see her mother as the strong, independent woman she is back home, the woman who is not willing to submit to anyone. Second, the incident reveals Nel’s awareness of skin color. Even though she is young, she must have realized throughout the train ride that by being black the two of them are immediately looked down upon by the white passengers. The negative emotions which come forth in Nel reflect her ethics, as she does not agree with such segregation.

This awakening in Nel brings forth questions of existence and of who she is raised to be. As a child, she has willingly followed her mother’s wishes and demands, but as she now becomes older, she is struck by questions concerning who she wants to be and how she views the world. Her mother’s willingness to submit to white supremacy is in conflict with Nel’s picture of the world she knows, which starts a process of finding herself in between her mother’s ideals and the world’s ideals. As they return from the trip, Nel has to remind herself of her newly found personality as she says to herself: “I’m me. I’m not their daughter. I’m not Nel. I’m me. Me” (28). By stating that she is “Me”, she gives the reader a clear signal of wanting to change into a person more true to herself, and further away from the ideal daughter
her mother has tried to shape her into. The statement is never uttered towards her mother in particular, but I would say that something in it gives Nel the inspiration to approach Sula, the girl with the “sooty” mother who she is not allowed to talk to (29): “The trip, perhaps, or her new found me-ness, gave her strength to cultivate a friend in spite of her mother” (29). I believe that Nel sees Sula as a girl who has already found her me-ness, and that Sula might be so strong and independent in herself that she is able to support Nel’s intense wish to remain in her newfound self. The need for support and affirmation in herself as an individual, and not as a daughter with an oppressed and impeccable behavior, is what constitutes the chief motif for the friendship from Nel’s point of view. Their oppositeness ties an inextricable bond between them, as “their meeting was fortunate, for it let them use each other to grow on” (52).

Whereas Nel grows up in a home with structure and order, Sula’s home represents the total opposite. Nel gives the following description of the Peace-women’s house, which sums up the wonderful chaos in which Sula grows up: “where the mother, Hannah, never scolded or gave directions; where all sorts of people dropped in; where newspapers were stacked in the hallway, and dirty dishes left for hours at a time in the sink, and where a one-legged grandmother named Eva handed you goobers from deep inside the pockets or read you a dream” (29). The home is constituted by three generations of Peace women; the grandmother Eva, and her daughter Hannah, who gives birth to Sula. Sula’s father dies when she is three years old, which results in Hannah and her daughter moving back into her mother’s home, with all its tenants (41). In this environment of strong females, Sula learns to live her life. One of the things Sula becomes familiar with in her home is the constant flow of men frequenting the house: “The Peace women all loved maleness, for its own sake” (41). Eva allows this to happen in order to fulfill Hannah’s constant wish for male attention (42). This is the image Sula is given of how a household should be. As she observes her mother’s “sweet, low and guileless” flirting (42), Sula learns that this way of living does not represent any harm. Hannah is so popular among the men in the Bottom, that people gossip about her ability to “break up a marriage before it had even become one” (44).

“Outside the house, where children giggled about underwear, the message was different” (44). In Nel’s home this kind of behavior would be banned immediately, or never even talked about. But for Sula, this is her image of what normal family life is. Growing older and being faced with the judgement from the outside world, Sula might have suffered under the prejudice of the rest of the village. But as Sula observes her mother’s life, she only sees happiness and pleasure. “Seeing her step so easily into the pantry and emerge looking
precisely as she did, only happier” (44) convinces Sula that her mother’s life and ethics cannot be as bad as the village claims it to be. “So she watched her mother’s face and the face of the men when they opened the pantry door and made up her own mind” (44, my italics). Sula’s upbringing constitutes an ethical standard so strong and stable that she keeps it for the rest of her life. Unlike Nel and the rest of the village people, she has observed how happy the frequent male visitors make her mother. As Hannah treats them well, without any intentions of making them divorce their wives for her sake, Sula sees no harm in this either. Her upbringing teaches her to make up her own mind in all situations she encounters. In doing so, she develops a self so strong that it overshadows all social conventions. In conversation with her grandmother, she states that “I want to make myself” (92). This is what constitutes her ethics, as she chooses to follow her own inner compass towards a meaningful life. Sula’s me-ness opens up for the development of a cynical mind with total disregard for what other people may say about her and her life choices, but in her friendship with Nel, Sula is able to show love and discard her own wishes and needs to some extent.

The oppositeness between Sula and Nel is what composes their friendship. Nel lacks a place or a person who gives her the freedom to be herself and develop her own personality; a me-ness that she can be comfortable with and accept. In meeting Sula, she sees elements of this, which becomes the key to their friendship. “So when they met . . . they felt the ease and comfort of old friends” (52). Both girls come from a home where they to a great extent have been left to themselves, which has created a need and want for someone who may help them feel less lonely. “Nel, an only child, sat on the steps of her back porch surrounded by the high silence of her mother’s incredible orderly house, feeling the neatness pointing at her back” (51). “Similarly, Sula, . . . spent hours in the attic behind a roll of linoleum galloping through her own mind on a gray-and-white horse tasting sugar and smelling roses in full view of a someone who shared both the taste and the speed” (51-52).

Lucille P. Fultz argues in her book *Toni Morrison: Playing with Difference* that “Instead of the proverbial ending in which young people are brought to their senses by the wisdom of an elder” (100), Morrison often chooses to let her characters explore and develop themselves through difference. “By unfolding structures that explore the ethics of understanding through the aesthetics of difference” (100), Morrison explores how characters will come to a greater understanding of themselves if they are matched with characters that have something in common with themselves. Sula and Nel’s backgrounds are totally different, but this is what draws them together. They see something in the other that they believe will
help them into becoming a truer version of themselves. Nel explains that “talking to Sula had always been a conversation with herself” (Morrison 95), which explains how Sula has the ability to let Nel be herself, and not the perfect girl her mother wants her to be. This tells us a lot about Sula`s personality. She is able to let the people around her relax and put away their mask of perfectness, which indicates personality traits like being trustworthy and selfless in meeting with the people she cares for. Morrison writes that “during all of her girlhood the only respite Nel had had from her stern and undemonstrative parents was Sula” (83), which is a strong utterance of love for another person. Not even with Jude, Nel`s husband, does Nel feel so at ease as she does with her childhood friend. This gives us an even stronger indicator that Sula is a person who is able to go to great lengths in order to make people happy and confident in themselves. Sula seems to simply want Nel to be the best version of herself, and she wants people to see the beautiful person she sees when she looks at her friend. Even in the process of finding a husband Sula wants to help Nel out. When Jude’s attention towards Nel grows stronger, Sula does whatever she can to help Nel towards becoming Jude’s girlfriend: “Sula made the enjoyment of his attentions keener simply because she seemed always to want Nel to shine” (83-84, my italics).

The only problem is that on her quest towards emphasizing Nel, Sula diminishes her own importance in their friendship. Sula tries to do all that is in her power to let Nel shine, while Nel does not seem able to do the same towards Sula. Morrison writes that “Except for an occasional leadership role with Sula, she (Nel) had no aggression” (83). “Only with Sula did that quality have free reign” (83). The text strongly suggests that Nel seems to believe that she is the only one of them who is able to lead and take action. She does not see Sula`s glorifying of her as a tool towards helping Nel to become more secure in her own skin; Nel simply sees Sula`s “elusiveness and indifference to establish habits of behavior” (127) as a proof of Sula`s inability to take action in life. In this way, Nel sees her own actions and decisions as more reasonable than Sula`s, which may derive from Helene Wright`s prejudice towards Sula`s “sooty” mother (29). Nel becomes friends with Sula with the understanding that she is the moral agent who takes charge in their friendship. In doing so, Nel implies that Sula is different from her and the rest of the people in the Bottom. In this lies an implication that Sula has to be monitored to some extent, in order to adapt to the society she is placed in. As Nel becomes an image of the norm in the Bottom, Sula is viewed as different from this norm.
3.2 Sula’s personality

“There would appear to be in Sula an implicit claim that the only way one may attain perception--however imperfect--is through conversation. The only way ‘to see the world as others see it’ is through dialogue” Axel Nissen claims in his article “Form Matters: Toni Morrison’s Sula and the Ethics of Narrative” (277). As with Bartleby, speech, or communication in general, is the main indicator of difference between Sula and the people she interacts with. Late in the novel, Nel utters that “conversation would be difficult” (139) as she talks to Sula, and she has a point. Sula’s way of communication is distinctly different from that of the people around her. She lacks the ability to express her emotions with words and utterances and for the most part expresses her emotions through actions observed by those around her, mainly by Nel. This can be seen through an episode where the two girls play with Chicken Little, one of the local boys in the village. Sula swings him around and around by his arms, but suddenly Chicken Little loses his grip and flies into the water. Both girls are unable to react at first, but then Nel takes charge: “Nel spoke first: Somebody saw” (61). Sula says nothing, she only glances back at Nel, and then her reaction becomes visible in her face: “Terror widened her nostrils” (61). While Nel is the one observing the person who may have seen them and stating it, Sula is the one who acts on Nel’s observation. She does not say anything out loud, but her actions speak clearly as she runs towards Shadrack’s house, the only person who might have seen the incident from his porch. “Her running was swift and determined” (61), as she takes action towards finding a solution to their problem. By standing still, Nel implies that Sula is the one responsible for what has just happened, and the determination in Sula indicates the same. She realizes that she was the one who held the boy’s hands as he slipped into the water, and because of this she is also the one who has to take action towards making sure no one has seen them. The text itself argues for such reading when Sula comes back to Nel: “There she collapsed in tears” (62). Now that Sula has secured them against being punished for their unfortunate actions, she can react to what has just happened. The reaction also underlines the conscience of Sula; she is clearly upset by the drowning of Chicken Little, as she realizes that she has been part of a little child’s death.

The reaction in Nel is more difficult to understand, as she remains silent on the shore, letting Sula take charge of cleaning up their mess. As Sula lets her emotions flow, Nel comforts her friend: “Nel quieted her: Sh, sh. Don’t, don’t. You didn’t mean it. It ain’t your fault. Sh. Sh.” (63). Nel instantly draws the conclusion that because it was Sula who held Chicken Little’s hands, she has the full responsibility for the drowning. At the same time she
adds “Did he see?” (63), to make sure Shadrack is not going to reveal the incident to anyone else. In saying so, Nel reveals her inner conscience, admitting to her guilt in the incident. She knows that she is an accomplice in the drowning, but her choice of words separates her from the guilt and the incident, implying that Sula should take full responsibility for the drowning. As Sula does not reply in words, Nel seems to believe that Sula silently agrees to such an accusation, because she does not say anything that contradicts Nel’s utterance.

Nissen claims that “She [Sula] does not have Eva’s power to represent her own ethical position and to justify her actions to others” (276). Nissen touches upon something important in his article: Sula seems unable to express in words why she chooses one way of action instead of the other in difficult situations. Her lack of spoken utterances causes the people around her to draw their own conclusions to why she does things. This causes trouble, as we as readers are let into Sula’s mind where we see that she has a clear agenda in her actions. Towards the end of the novel, Sula reflects on what personal traits she appreciates in her best friend: “Nel, she remembered, always thrived on a crisis. The closed place in the water; Hannah’s funeral. Nel was the best” (141). Nel’s ability to always do what is considered right, or more importantly, to always be cool and rational in situations where emotions may fog your mind, seems to Sula as the ultimate good. Nel’s coolness is something Sula has always wanted to imitate, but her personality is not compatible with such behavior: “When Sula imitated her, or tried to, those long years ago, it always ended up in some action noteworthy not for its coolness but mostly for its being bizarre. The one time she tried to protect Nel, she had cut off her own finger tip and earned not Nel’s gratitude but her disgust. From then on she had let her emotions dictate her behavior” (141, my italics). What Sula describes here is the very core of her personality and emotional reaction pattern. Throughout the friendship with Nel, she has always looked up to her friend, wanting to be more like her. As the text suggests, Sula has always understood that she is different, and that her difference comes from her lack of coolness or the difficulty she experiences in situations where Nel suggests that she should restrain herself. Instead of being cool in the situation with Chicken Little, Sula’s immediate reaction is to show emotions and act upon them. She does not know how to express her emotions in words. Instead, she reacts in a way she knows how to handle: Action. During her childhood, she wanted to constrain herself in order to fit into the norm of the quiet, conform girl that Nel is, but from observing her friend, Sula learns from an early stage that she will never be able to pull off the coolness Nel shows. It is simply not compatible with her nature. As Sula becomes aware of this, she chooses to act upon her natural behavior by
“letting her emotions dictate her behavior” (141). This observation and insight into her own mind is to me the main reason why Nel, and eventually the people in the Bottom, view Sula as so very different from themselves. Nel has been the template of how a young girl should behave during their upbringing. Oppressed and carved into the stencil her mother has put her in, Nel has become the very image of the normative young woman people want to see in the village. By not talking too loud, going to school, agreeing to marrying young and having children, Nel becomes the image of her mother’s dream child.

Sula, however, becomes the very opposite. She develops in her home without boundaries, with a family of women who teach her that living a life based on pleasure and doing what you want in the moment you want it may be just as good as any other way of life. Earlier in the text, Sula observes her mother with other men and “makes up her own mind” (44) of what she sees. Together with the realization of being the truest version of herself when she lets her emotions overflow and guide her behavior, this constitutes her personality. The only problem with these insights is that she does not communicate them to Nel or any other people surrounding her. This is a crucial point, as it means she is instantly deemed as different by the people in the Bottom. If she had communicated why she lets her emotions run off with her, or why she chooses to sleep with Jude, people might have perceived her differently.

When analyzing literary characters, Davis argues that “as readers, we must be willing to enter the state of mind of the players involved” (Bending Over 121). In order to understand what Sula thinks, we need to analyze her utterances and actions on her own terms, and not according to the terms of Nel or the village people. In order to do so, Davis argues that “along with saying that we need to know something about narrative to analyze these cases, we also need to know a lot about psychology” (121). Davis actually juxtaposes these two perspectives by claiming that in analyzing literary characters “he or she will have the same problem as psychotherapists have – problems of interpretation, transference, and so on” (121). The problem of interpretation arises when the inhabitants of the Bottom are faced with Sula’s terseness. Sula rarely utters her thoughts and ideas out loud to anyone, unless on the rare occasion when she explains her train of thoughts to either Nel or Eva. The few times she talks to others, her utterances are so frank that the people around her perceive her as rude. Her frankness has no explanation or reason, which causes confusion among the village people, and the meeting with Sula’s choice of words becomes an obstacle which disables her from being accepted and welcomed at social gatherings. One time she visits a church supper where
she “bought their steaming platters of food and merely picked at it – *relishing nothing, exclaiming over no one’s ribs or cobbler*” (114-115, my italics). The text suggests that if Sula had made an effort to compliment the food, she would have a way into the conversation with the other guests. By not doing so, she makes the village people struggle to understand why she does not instantly applaud the food or try to adapt to the people around her.

As I have explained earlier, disability studies bases itself on the idea of the “norm,” or the “ideal” human being (Davis, *Bending Over* 108). Any abnormalities which do not fit into this scheme are viewed by society as different, disabled or not fitting the norm, which instantly deems such a person as someone who needs to be fixed (Straus 462). In this theoretical field, Sula fits right in. She appears as so different from the majority of the people around, her that they deem her to be someone they need to shield themselves from. Her way of communication thus becomes evidence for their understanding of her “distinct differentness” (Morrison 118). It is interesting to note is that there are several representations of physical and emotional disability in the novel, which in many ways could have suffered a greater threat of being labelled as different by the village people. Shadrack, the war veteran returning to the Bottom, is first seen as crazy by the village people (15). Eventually, “once the people understood the boundaries and nature of his madness, they could fit him, so to speak, into the scheme of things” (15). As humans, we need schemas in our minds to create order through which we understand the world. In Shadrack’s case, there is a physical and psychological reason for his strange behavior. He has been to war and has returned a victim of shell shock or other emotional trauma. This instantly “frees” him from being labelled as strange, because there is a clear reason for his behavior. The same goes for Eva, Sula’s grandmother. She becomes the only representation of physical disability in the novel, as she appears after 18 months away from her children with only one leg (34): “Unless Eva herself introduced the subject, no one ever spoke of her disability; they pretended to ignore it” (30).

According to the medical model described earlier, there is no way to normalize or cure the abnormal body or mind: “the defective body should be sequestered lest it contaminate or degrade the larger community” (Straus 462). In many ways, we might say that both Shadrack and Eva suffer under the village people’s sequestering of them. Eva spends most of her days in her house after losing her leg (Morrison 37), while Shadrack stays in his house and only appears once a year on National Suicide Day (15). In this way, the larger part of the village does not have to interact with them, and Shadrack and Eva do not disturb the peace and quiet in the Bottom. Their disabilities also help their fellow townspeople explain the otherwise
deviant behavior in both characters: “Her dresses were mid-calf so that her one glamorous leg was always in view as well as the long fall of space below her left thigh” (31). With Eva they can blame her eccentric behavior on her lost leg, and in this way normalize her behavior by categorizing her as “sick” or “disabled”. By labeling Eva and Shadrack, the majority can separate themselves from the physical impairment which could otherwise threaten the stability and normality of their lives.

The problem with Sula is that the townspeople cannot explain her frankness to be the result of a physical impairment. She is not so different from Nel and the rest of the women around her that she immediately stands out as different, but through episodes as the one with Chicken Little, and her frank behavior at the church supper, I would say that she appears as both rude and forward in a way that clearly differs from Nel’s controlled behavior. Her frankness seems to have no cause, and I would argue that this “unexplained differentness” causes the townspeople to, in some sense, feel threatened by her. In the novel we can read that “When she [Sula] had come back home, social conversation was impossible for her because she could not lie” (121). This may be an utterance from Sula, or a comment from the narrator itself, but regardless of who the statement belongs to, I would strongly suggest that it unravels an important aspect of how Sula appears to others. When she speaks, she appears to communicate so differently than the people around her, and this makes the village people perceive her utterances as frank or rude. If her rudeness could be explained by a physical impairment, such as her having been to war, or suffered from some sort of abuse which would cause her to develop an emotional disability, they might have justified her frankness. Shadrack can be put into a schema of mental disability because of his war traumas, which allows the village people to be more generous towards him and his arrangement of National Suicide Day. To the village people, Sula does not have any explanation for her frank behavior, and I would claim that this is the reason why the townspeople become offended by her rudeness and thus draw away from her. She is then alienated from the village people in the same way as Shadrack and Eva, but since no one can point to any distinct physical impairment to be the reason for her behavior, she is just deemed as different, and labeled as someone the townspeople do not want to interact with.

Sula’s unexplained difference can thus not be explained by any physical impairment. But what if her difference of behavior is caused by an unidentified emotional or mental impairment? If we look upon the textual evidence I have laid out, it becomes clear that her lack of communication is evidence to the people around her that her mind works differently
from the people surrounding her. The village people are so biased with their idea of what is normal that they have no interest in trying to understand Sula’s behavior and way of communication from her perspective. Even Nel falls short in this regard. What happens if we were to flip the scene around and see Sula from her own perspective? As I have earlier explained, Davis and other influential scholars within the disability field have proposed the medical model to be followed by the social model. The social model wants readers to shift their focus from conventional ideas about the norm by seeing that “disability is a socially constructed concept” (Pinchevsky 31-32). In saying so, Pinchevsky points to the idea that it is our own society that decides whether or not we view people that speak, behave or appear differently than ourselves as disabled. If we are to disclose disability as a social construct, I would argue that we also need to disclose the ethics of the person society views as disabled. Nissen has argued that Sula never reaches her grandmother’s ethical standards (275), which might in turn indicate some sort of emotional disability. I would argue that if we claim Sula to have an invisible emotional impairment, it adds a whole new frame of reference in which we as readers may perceive and understand her utterances and actions. In light of her own ethical standard, Sula’s utterances and actions then become rational and understandable. I would argue that her point of ethics becomes apparent through the episode where Sula witnesses her mother burning to death.

3.3 Sula as different from the norm

“She rolled up the window and it was then she saw Hannah burning. The flames from the yard fire were licking the blue cotton dress, making her dance” (75). When Eva watches her daughter burn up, she instantly reacts by throwing herself out of the window despite her one leg, which will be of great hindrance in helping her daughter (76). As Eva is recovering from her injuries at the hospital, she starts to ponder what she saw during her attempt to rescue her beloved daughter: “She knew that as she lay on the ground trying to drag herself through the sweet peas and clover to get to Hannah, she had seen Sula standing on the back porch just looking” (78). When mentioning what she saw to some friends, they instantly reply with the explanation that “Sula was probably struck dumb” (78), as the sight of her own mother burning must have been so shocking to watch that she could not move. Eva does not immediately agree with her friends’ interpretation of the incident: “Inside she disagreed and remained convinced that Sula had watched Hannah burn not because she was paralyzed, but because she was interested” (78). Here Eva’s moral conscience is revealed. I believe that Eva
sees a great deal of herself portrayed through her granddaughter`s actions. Eva has earlier been asked by Hannah if she ever loved her children (67), to which Eva replies: “No. I don`t reckon I did. Not the way you thinkin” (67). In continuation, Eva becomes furious, as she seems to realize that as a mother she should have been able to answer a clear “yes” to such a question. Instead, she chooses to be honest, and in her honesty I would argue that she reveals her ethics. Eva has never chosen to live a conventional life, as she left her children early in order to provide for them financially and has constituted a household so untraditional and different from any other household in the Bottom (32). She has created a family run by strong women, including herself, and in the lack of conventional rules and family life Hannah now questions her mother`s love for her children. Faced with such a question Eva trembles, as she realizes that she has showed her motherly love for her children through actions, not emotions. Eva bursts out with a furious “Well? Don`t that count? Ain`t that love?” (69) in reply to her daughter`s accusations. Eva`s reply constitutes her personality and moral conscience; she has loved her children by taking the actions she saw as necessary in order for them to grow up in a home where there would always be food on the table. By taking such actions, her children may have lost the emotional and physical love from their mother that Hannah now searches for, but Eva`s choices and personality made it impossible to choose any other way of loving her children.

I would argue that Eva`s personality and behavior is thus reflected in her grandchild, and that she sees something of herself in Sula. When Eva observes Sula standing still on the porch looking at her mother burn, she seems to realize for the first time that the two of them have much of the same behavior and understanding of the world. In the text, Eva states that she “was never one to hide the faults of her children” (78), which is probably why she feels the need to tell her friends about what she saw. Still, by choosing not to press her friends into hearing her interpretation of Sula`s actions, she seems to silently accept her grandchild`s behavior as fair. We may also read Eva`s silence as her not wanting to put her grandchild in a bad light in the community, but I will suggest that Eva already here sees that Sula is not like any other child. Eva has thrown herself out of the window with great risk of death, which proves that her way of loving her children is to take action when they are in great danger. Her observation of Sula`s passive reaction to her mother`s death seems to prove to Eva that her grandchild has a different moral code, which makes her emotional reactions different than those other people around her might have. Unlike Nel, who sees Sula`s behavior as deviant because she does not understand why Sula does not take action, Eva seems to accept that Sula
might never tell her why she was just standing there. I would argue that Eva foreshadows something in Sula when she observes her standing on the porch, something unrecognizable which she cannot fully grasp. Sula’s gaze of curiosity may be seen as an indicator of a mindset stirring in Sula which is so different from that of other girls her age that I would claim it to be an indicator of an emotional impairment in Sula. It is almost like her mind goes back to a childlike state, as if she is mesmerized by the sight of the burning Hannah.

“Munro has observed that Sula ‘never really comes to terms with the limitations of her approach to life’” (Nissen 276). What is essential to an ethical position, and that which Sula lacks, *is an understanding of and empathy with the other*” Nissen writes (276). His argument shows us something important in unraveling the lack of empathy in Sula. As I have pointed out, Sula has tried to learn how to behave according to society’s expectations by imitating Nel’s coolness in difficult situations. One may claim that based on her close friendship with Nel, Sula has succeeded. Sula is willing to go to great lengths for Nel to be happy, and this show us that Sula is capable of being both emphatic and loving towards other people when she makes an effort. However, when we are let into Sula’s mind, the text reveals how Sula thinks and feels when watching her mother burn: “I stood there watching her burn and was thrilled. I wanted her to keep on jerking like that, to keep on dancing” (147). The beauty of the scene unraveling before her, with the flames enclosing her mother into some sort of magic flame, is so mesmerizing to Sula that she cannot disentangle herself from the view. The image appearing before her eyes seems to have greater meaning to her than saving her mother from the flames. I believe this scene shows us how Sula’s mind works from her perspective. Her mindset is so very different from the norm Nel has set up for them that the only thing Sula notices, is the beauty of death revealed in front of her. I would claim that this scene proves to us that Sula’s mindset bears traits of an emotional impairment shown through a lack of empathy with the other. Her lack of a reaction, either emotional or physical, seems to me as lack of an empathic mindset in Sula, rather than her being in shock. As we learn earlier in the novel, Sula reacts to the death of Chicken Little by simply crying. Why does she not react in the same way here? I would claim that Sula cannot feel empathy in the same way as other people around her do. She seems to be incapable of relating herself to other people’s feelings, though she proves through her friendship with Nel that she is able to act with kindness and take care of the people around her. Still, her core personality does not have room for an immediate empathic mindset, and in situations where Sula cannot prepare herself for how she should react, her real emotions come forth. I would claim that the mesmerizing view Sula sees
is so beautiful to her that she totally forgets that it will result in her mother`s death. She is struck by the beauty, and the beauty in turn discloses Sula`s lack of empathy. In this situation her impairment *does* become a disability, as her inaction may be one of the reasons why her mother dies. Still, I would argue that in Sula`s mind, the death of her mother is not comprehensible for her. Sula`s lack of empathy shields her from being destroyed by grief over losing a person she is so close to. I believe that the novel`s lack of references towards Sula`s mother after the death proves such a reading of Sula. Had Sula been capable of an emphatic mindset, I believe she would also have mourned her mother`s death to a greater extent throughout the novel.

While Nel only has eyes for the horror and finite aspect of death, Sula`s understanding of death is different. She sees the beauty of it, which is shown towards the end of the novel. When Sula lies in her bed, ready to die, she remembers the word “always”. At first she cannot remember who said it, but soon it dawns upon her that these are the words uttered by Shadrack in order to comfort her as she arrives at his cottage after the drowning of Chicken Little. “Who was it that had promised her a sleep of water always?” (149), she asks herself. Yes, it was Shadrack. Sula compares death to the image of Chicken Little disappearing into the deep water. Lying on the bed, she is longing for death to take her away, as “she would curl into its heavy softness and it would envelop her” (149). The only image of death Sula has is, the image of the little boy disappearing into the water. Sula is young when witnessing this, and therefore this incident becomes the natural way for her to envision death. When reaching adulthood most people would put such an image into the concept “death”, and understand that death can appear in multiple ways. However, to Sula death seems to be tantamount with drowning, or being enveloped by water. This may be an explanation of why she does not move when she sees her mother burning. To her, the image of death has a positive and comforting connotation. She envisions it as something she may be longing for in the future, something that will comfort her and take away her pain. As Hannah is burning up, water would be the only solution to saving her in the state she is in. I would argue that based on the literal understanding Sula has of death as “a sleep of water” (149), she is waiting for someone else to bring the water to envelop her mother in, in order to extinguish the flames.

Another interpretation would be that she sees the sleep of water as such a comforting image that she would rather have her mother experience death than to live on in pain from the burns. This interpretation is to me a very clear proof of seeing Sula as emotionally disabled. As Nissen points out, Sula clearly lacks an empathetic mindset, and I would argue that these
two parts of the text underline such an argument. To Nel and the others in the novel, the only reasonable thing to do as they watch Hannah burn is to help. But Sula stands back, admiring the vision in front of her without showing any empathy or pain over her mother’s destiny. One might claim that this is a sign of her wicked mind, or evidence of sadism, but I would argue that in Sula’s mind, this is the only reasonable thing to do. She knows logically that she can do little to help. As she seems emotionally unable to put herself in her mother’s place and feel her pain, she stands still. In my reading of the text, I would argue that this only shows us that Sula’s mind has a more literal understanding of the situations and utterances from the people around her than others have. She seems unable to act according to conventional and expected patterns of reactions, and in this way she becomes emotionally unmoved by tragic experiences around her. Though Sula bears little resemblance to Bartleby’s rigid behavior, his lack of emotional reactions can be seen as similar to Sula’s reactions in the burning scene. As with Bartleby, Sula seems to have no need to explain to Nel or Eva why she chose not to do anything, which also underlines the aspect of Sula’s ethics: She simply does not see that she has done anything wrong in the episode of her mother’s death. Assuming that Nissen is correct, I would claim that Sula’s total disregard for other people’s feelings becomes strong evidence for labeling Sula as emotionally disabled. This in turn would explain, and in some sense justify, her passiveness and ethical stance.

“We were friends,” Nel exclaims. “And you didn’t love me enough to leave him alone” (145). In Nel’s mind, Sula’s having an affair with Nel’s husband Jude must mean that their friendship did not mean as much to Sula as it did to Nel. She sees the betrayal as unforgivable, disregarding everything she knows about Sula’s way of behavior and ethics earlier in life. Sula, however, sees Jude as someone who does not really love Nel. According to her ethical barometer, she can sleep with him because, as she later says to Nel: “If we were such good friends, how come you couldn’t get over it?” (145). Sula does not see her actions as a betrayal; she proposes through her utterance that Nel has always been her closest friend, companion, and partner; the undefined closest relationship she will ever experience. In Sula’s travels around the country, all she ever looked for was a friend (121), one who could fill the void in her the same way as Nel had done. Based on her own emotions, she automatically expects Nel to feel the same closeness to her. Another suggestion may be that Sula sees that, though Jude has been good to Nel, he does not love her enough to stay with her after the affair. If the love between them was that strong, Sula seems to imply that he should have stayed to fix their relationship no matter what. Because he chooses to walk away after the
affair, she sees this as evidence that he was not willing to fight for their relationship. Sula, on the other hand, has always been willing to fight for Nel. She even lets us know that “Nel was one of the reasons she had drifted back to Medallion” (120). As the other reason was boredom (120), this passage underlines Sula`s lack of communication through words. When Sula does not explain to Nel that she sees her as the closest and most important person in her life, Nel is left with her own impression of the situation, deciding that Sula`s action is the ultimate betrayal. In doing so, she fails to understand Sula`s logic of mind. From Sula`s perspective, an affair is a perfectly natural thing, which should not cause sorrow for anyone. She has observed her mother do this over and over in her childhood, and to Sula an affair is not a betrayal, it is simply part of everyday life. This may also be seen as an explanation for why Sula does not apologize to Nel for having partaken in the affair; she simply does not see her actions as wrong. Her ethics do not necessarily justify her actions towards Nel, but this explains why she sees Nel`s reaction as unjust towards her. Sula has spent her life trying to let Nel “define herself” (95), and now she silently expects Nel to understand her view of the world. Sula thinks to herself, that “it had surprised her a little and saddened her a good deal when Nel behaved the way the others would have” (120). But as Sula does not speak her mind and explain in words how her mindset works, Sula`s ethics are unfathomable to Nel. Nel only sees Sula`s actions as a betrayal, and is unable to see all the good things Sula has supplied her with during their friendship. The affair ends up separating the two women, becoming yet another reason for Nel and the village people to alienate Sula and view her choices as bad.

3.4 Sula`s movement from disability to ability

Morrison`s novel revolves around the ethical question of who lives the right life. Helene Wright`s firm hand shapes Nel into the template of the perfect woman, thus indicating that anyone who does not bear resemblance to her girl is not good. Even their surname, Wright, strongly suggests the family`s correct lifestyle. But who is fit to decide what a good life is? Is it the actions we show, the words we communicate, or the way we adapt to a larger society? After the burning scene, Nel says to Sula that “she [Eva] almost died trying to get to your mother” (101). By putting it this way Nel, implies that Sula should have taken action in a situation where everyone else tried to help, thus implying that Sula is partly responsible for her mother`s death. This reminds us of Nel`s reaction to the death of Chicken Little, where Nel, also through her spoken utterances, implied that Sula was the one to blame for the accident. Nel`s implied allegations towards Sula show us the ethics of the society in the
Bottom: If you do not take action in trying to be good to the people around you and help them from being hurt, this equals that you are a bad person. This is my understanding of Nel’s utterance, and Sula never questions Nel’s allegations towards her, she simply accepts that Nel thinks she is the better of the two. Only once is the question of right or wrong raised, as Sula is dying at the end of the novel:

She opened the door and heard Sula’s low whisper. “Hey, girl.” Nel paused and turned her head but not enough to see her. “How do you know?” Sula asked. “Know what?” Nel still wouldn’t look at her. “About who was good. How you know it was you?” “What you mean?” “I mean maybe it wasn’t you. Maybe it was me.” (146)

This is the only time during their friendship that Sula questions Nel’s decisions and opinions. By doing so, she raises an important existential question: How do we know that we are the one who lives the right life? In Sula’s question lies an implicit claim that she believes that she, Sula, is the one who has been good, by living a life true to her own convictions. Throughout the novel, Nel has constantly been the wordsmith of the two, and by doing all the talking she has forgotten to take her friend’s means of communication into account. It was their differences that first brought them together. As young girls, the “woolly” house (29) in which the Peace women were rulers, became a place of freedom for Nel. This seems to have been forgotten in the years following her and Sula’s separation. Otten claims that “In all her novels innocence assumes the nature of a crime against the self, and only by confronting and somehow assimilating the Other can Morrison’s protagonists achieve a degree of existential freedom” (28). When Sula questions Nel’s goodness, she also justifies her own ethics and life choices. She has never justified her actions towards Nel, but through this question I would argue that Sula silently shows the reader and Nel that she finally considers herself free from any allegation Nel has ever made about her. In Nel’s eyes, the drowning and the death of Hannah are partly Sula’s fault, because she has silently agreed to the crimes which she has been on trial for. By questioning Nel, Sula also questions us as readers in our perception of what is right and wrong. In doing so, she reveals her own ethics in which she clearly states that she does not see herself guilty of any crime.

When viewing Sula from a disability perspective, I would argue that she goes from being a passive bystander without a will of her own, and evolves into an active participant in her own life. Throughout the whole book, the analysis and observations of Sula are conducted on Nel and the village people’s terms. This does not ultimately show us how Sula’s ethics and mindset work, because she does not make clear whether Nel and other people have the
right understanding of her or not. Davis claims that “we are all nonstandards” (Bending Over 32), and in saying so, he opens up for viewing Sula’s actions and difference in communication as just as normal as those of the majority. Pinchevski approaches the same question by claiming that “Disability comprises the various discourses – medical, political, legal, literary, cultural – by which the dominant paradigm of normalcy marginalizes its deviations” (32), thus claiming that disability is a socially constructed idea. Through her questioning of Nel, Sula creates a shift in the reader as well, making us question what terms we use to assess Sula and people with the same characteristics as her in real life. Nel has seen Sula`s passiveness as proof of her inability to take action and to help the people around her. What she has forgotten in doing so, is that Nel`s conclusions are only based on her own understanding of Sula`s mindset; she has never actually asked Sula what she thought about the incident with Chicken Little. By uttering that “maybe it wasn`t you. Maybe it was me,,” I would strongly suggest that Sula is removing herself from the implication of guilt. Before she dies, she wants Nel to know that she has lived a life where she does not view herself as the one who did something wrong. Her statement becomes an act of affirmation as she claims that her different mindset and approach to life is not synonymous with living the wrong life. Her silent claim would then be that she has lived right by herself, as she has accepted her partial guilt in the death of Chicken Little and then moved on in life.

In his existential lifework Man`s Search for Meaning, Viktor E. Frankl has stated that “Man does not simply exist but always decides what his existence will be, what he will become in the next moment” (133). Through her questioning of Nel, Sula implies something important; she has lived the life she wanted based on the ethics and values she found to be important in her life. Up until the death of her mother, Sula has in many ways let Nel dictate their life together, as Sula has chosen not to stand up to her friend. Unlike Nel, who slowly glides into a relationship with Jude and lets the idea of marriage and children become her purpose in life, Sula makes an active choice in life by deciding to go to college (Morrison 99). Making such an unconventional life choice by leaving her home and everything familiar, Sula chooses a life without boundaries where she can live out her me-ness to the fullest. As Bartleby chooses to die in order to live his life without the boundaries of others, Sula also realizes that the ethics and decisions of her life do not match the social rules in the Bottom. In order to live a life where she can be herself, she has to do something which seems drastic to Nel and the people around her; she has to leave the Bottom in order to make herself. Sula states that “The real hell of Hell is that it is forever” (107), thus strongly underlining her
personality; she needs change, and she needs to be in charge of her own life in order to find meaning. In contrast, “hell is change” (108) to Nel. Stability and conformity is Nel’s ultimate happiness, and she sees the departure of Sula as unnecessary when she could have stayed in the Bottom and become a housewife. In conversation with Nel, Sula justifies her life to her after traveling around the country for ten years. Sula claims that the colored women she knows have spent their whole lives exhausting themselves as housewives. She then points to the inevitable result of every life – that we are all going to die. Sula claims that though she chose an unconventional life, she is happy with her decision: “the difference is they dying like a stump. Me, I’m going down like one of those red-woods. I sure did live in this world” (143). Sula is happy with what she got out of her life, as she chose it herself and lived according to her own dreams and desires. Nel cannot understand that Sula can be happy with a life which has not included children or a husband and says:

N: “Really? What have you got to show for it?”
S: “Show? To who? Girl, I got my mind. And what goes on in it. Which is to say, I got me.”
N: “Lonely, ain’t it?”
S: “Yes. But my lonely is mine. Now your lonely is somebody else’s. Made by somebody else and handed to you.” (143)

Sula’s last statement is crucial in order to understand her ethics; her loneliness is hers, which also means that she has embraced her life to the fullest. Frankl has stated that “He [man] will have to acknowledge the fact that even in suffering he is unique and alone in the universe” (86). When Sula is on her deathbed, explaining to Nel what she has gained from life, and comes up with the claim that her “loneliness is hers,” she also shows the reader her ability to choose her own life and experiences. By acknowledging that she is alone in the world she is able to live her life to the fullest. Her me-ness comes from her ability to be true to her own convictions. By doing so, she has nothing to fear when she dies, as she has then come to terms with her own choices in life. Sula is the one who gives Nel freedom to be herself in spite of her mother’s demands and wishes, and she helps her come in touch with the me-ness Nel is longing to find. By being able to help Nel in finding her me-ness, the text indicates that Sula must already have found her own me-ness in order to help others. Through their childhood friendship Sula has helped Nel into becoming the me she wanted to be, but with their separation this has shifted. As Sula argues, Nel’s “lonely is somebody else’s. Made by someone else and handed to you” (143). Sula implies through her statement that by marrying Jude, Nel has simply followed the path laid out for her by her mother, who now causes her to stop and think about where she lost herself and her personality along the way.
Irvin Yalom has through his masterpiece *Existential Psychotherapy* described one of his patients who struggled with depression in the following way: “To a great extent life was a mystery, something, ‘out there’ happening to her, something raining upon her” (39). Yalom’s ideas are applicable to Nel’s life as well as to that of his patient. In many ways, life is only “happening” to Nel; she silently obeys her mother, she accepts Jude’s marriage proposal because she knows it will make her comfortable, and she discards her friendship with Sula when she finds out about the affair between her best friend and her husband. When faced with the affair, she falls into a state of passivity, of not being able to actually react to what has happened. One of the things she does is to lock herself in the bathroom in order to create a space narrow enough to capture her grief and distress (108). Lying on the bathroom floor, Nel waits for her emotional reaction to the betrayal, “but it did not come” (108). Even in her painful state, Nel does not understand that she herself can take action over her situation; she can choose to let out “a cry for one’s pain” (108). According to Yalom’s ideas, Nel’s wait for a reaction can be seen as some kind of emotional disclaimer, as she places the responsibility for having a reaction on something outside herself. In describing one of his young, depressed patients, Yalom writes that by placing responsibility and decisions on others, “she had been trying to avoid the loneliness and the death that accompany adulthood” (40). In this way, she would not have to face the distress that follows when we as adults realize that we infinitely are, no matter how many people we have close to us, alone in the world. In contrast, Sula does accept that she is alone in the world.

In the eyes of Nel, Sula’s disappearance from the Bottom becomes yet another evidence of Sula’s irresponsible behavior, and she utters in frustration that “You can’t do it all” (142). “You can’t be walking around all independent-like, doing whatever you like, taking what you want, leaving what you don’t ” (142). In her argumentation, she becomes the speaker for the norm in the Bottom, as she claims that as a young woman, Sula has to follow the norm and the set rules in the society around them; she has to marry and have children, because that is what Nel is taught to do. In her accusation also lies an insecurity which in many ways gives us the answer to the ethical struggle between Nel and Sula: If Sula sees herself as totally free to live her life as she pleases, and free from any social boundaries, does this mean that Nel has lived the wrong life? Nel cannot accept such an idea, as it would mean that the me-ness she believes she has acquired through her adult life would have disappeared in the blink of an eye. She believes that she chose to marry, but in meeting with Sula I would argue that she secretly begins to question her own life choices, wondering if she ever chose
her life at all. If she did not choose, that would mean that Nel let life happen to her, while Sula was the one who actually chose to take life into her hands and did what she pleased with it. Such thoughts are so frightening to Nel that she simply walks away from her friend, convinced that Sula “can’t do it all” (142). But Sula can do it all as she shows through her decision to place Eva in a nursing home. “When the word got out about Eva being put in Sunnydale, the people in the Bottom shook their heads and said Sula was a roach” (112).

Upon returning to the Bottom, Sula finds her grandmother more and more ill in her mind. Though Sula’s intentions are questioned when she chooses to send Eva to a nursing home, she takes action in a situation that has to be resolved. She could have chosen to go directly to Nel for advice, or to live together with Eva in fear of what the old woman would do, but instead she steps up to the challenge and does what she sees as right (94). I would argue that Sula’s encouragement to take action is a strong argument against Nel’s perception of her. Nel sees Sula as weak and immature, because she always comes to her for advice, but this perception is only built on Nel’s understanding of the situation. Sula placing her grandmother in a nursing home becomes to Nel a proof of her belief that Sula is unable to make mature and rational choices in life.

Nel keeps on reflecting upon how Sula has behaved when faced with challenges as they grew up: “And when fear struck her, she did unbelievable things. Like that time with her finger” (101). Nel thinks back to the time Sula saved her from the bullies at their school. In order to demonstrate to the bullies how far she would go to protect her friend, Sula cut off the tip of her finger, as a warning of how much she would hurt them if they did anything to Nel (54-55). Nel sees Sula’s action as somewhat crazy, instead of seeing it as an action of care. If Sula had not done this, Nel might have risked being bullied during her years at school, but this does not come to her mind as an adult. When she now reflects upon Sula’s actions, all she can think about is that “when it came to matters of grave importance, she [Sula] behaved emotionally and irresponsibly and left it to others to straighten out” (101). What Nel forgets to think about is Sula’s lack of communication. As stated earlier, Sula rarely expresses her emotions in words, and she rarely explains why she does what she does. As Sula asks Nel for advice about how to procure the medical aid her grandmother needs, she places herself in a position in which Nel sees her as insecure and immature. I believe that Sula does this on purpose in order to make her best friend feel important and uplifted. Nel has earlier described Sula as a person who “never competed; she simply helped others define themselves” (95). I believe this is just what Sula does in conversation with her friend. She sees Nel as the
wonderful woman she is, and she wants Nel to see this for herself. Sula`s solution is to place herself in a position where Nel can give her advice, though Sula has already taken action and chosen to send Eva away. I would argue that Sula does this as an act of care for her friend, because she knows that she is not capable of expressing in words how much she values her friend. This becomes a strong act of love towards Nel, in the same way as Sula has always tried to take action towards lifting up her friend. The only problem is that with so many years apart, Nel is not able to remember that this is the way Sula shows her love for others, and she interprets the action as an example of her friend`s immaturity and disregard for her grandmother. Sula`s ability to show love and compassion through actions is totally disregarded by her friend, and therefore becomes yet another disability in the eyes of the conventional village people. Had Nel fully understood and accepted Sula`s personality, and seen her as an adult with the ability to make rational and well-thought-through decisions, she could have supported Sula in her choices. Sula is judged as being “a roach” because the village and Nel deem her tendency of “behaving emotionally” (101) as not compatible with making rational decisions. Sula`s ability to take action over her own life is ignored and misunderstood by Nel, because she has forgotten to see Sula in light of Sula`s values and way of behavior. When Nel tries to fit Sula into the norm of the village, Sula dissolves into a character of care – someone who needs guidance and help. By doing so, she fails to see Sula`s actions in light of Sula`s ethics and beliefs, and what Sula sees as acts of love comes across as selfishness in Nel`s eyes. Only when we see Sula in light of her own ethical compass, and remember that her background and ethics are different from the norm, does Sula appear as a responsible adult who is fully able to take care of herself and her life.

When we read Sula in light of disability studies, one may start to question if anyone really understands her. It is important to note that we do find someone who seems to have the key to understanding Sula, without alienating her. “Her real pleasure was that he [Ajax] talked to her. They had genuine conversations” (127). Upon Sula`s return to the Bottom, she meets Ajax. Through her relationship with him, Sula`s movement from disability to ability becomes apparent to us as readers. In light of the norm set by Nel and the village people, Sula`s way of behavior and frank utterances alienate her from participating in society. In meeting with Ajax, Sula finally meets someone who accepts her for who she is. As Sula states that their conversations are genuine, this implies that Ajax have accepted Sula as she is, and we may even read this passage as an example of Ajax being one of the few who actually understands Sula. Together with Eva, Ajax seems to accept Sula on her own terms, either because they
have the same understanding of the world, or simply because their conversations are good. Considering that the village has already alienated her because of her frank utterances and unconventional actions, Ajax could have chosen to simply follow their lead and participate in alienating Sula, as Nel chooses to do. Instead, Ajax must see something in Sula that he believes to be good, or maybe he simply does not care about other people’s opinions. He is able to see her without the limitations the village people ascribe to her, and in doing so, he gives her the space to be herself. I would argue that in the eyes of Ajax, Sula does not appear to be disabled. There may be several reasons for this, one being that Sula’s difference in communication is not reflected in him because he understands what she is saying. Even if her utterances do appear to be an impairment in his eyes, I would claim that he chooses to look beyond this aspect of her and simply accept all of her, instead of comparing her with the surrounding community. I would argue that the text strongly suggests that Ajax seems to be the only one who accepts Sula’s actions and speech without questioning her mindset and ethics. In doing so, he is able to visualize for the reader that when Sula is approached on her own terms, being allowed to demand the space she needs, her frankness and unconventional behavior do not appear as a disability. Then it simply shows us her personality.

3.5 Sula’s ability to live according to her own convictions

Meeting with death so early on in life does something with you as a human being, and Sula is no exception. Yalom claims that “the idea of death saves us. Recognition of death contributes a sense of poignancy to life, provides a radical shift of life perspective, and can transport one from a mood of living characterized by diversions, tranquilization, and petty anxieties to a more authentic mood” (40). I would argue that Sula’s meeting with death twice in her childhood gives her a perspective on life that the people around her do not share. In her meeting with the death of Chicken Little, she approaches Shadrack, the lonely war veteran. He does not mention whether or not he saw the drowning, but he does utter the word “always” to her (Morrison 62). Later on Morrison explains that “He (Shadrack) had said ‘always’ to convince her, assure her, of permanency” (157). To Sula, this utterance is part of a greater meaning that Nel does not recognize or understand when she tells her about it. Lorie W. Fulton has argued that “Shadrack thus assures Sula of the inability of death to conquer all” (70). Nel is only concerned with whether or not anyone saw them and what consequences their involvement in the drowning will have. Sula does not see any of this, and I would argue that her encounter with death, and then the reassurance from Shadrack, confirms her ethical
standpoint of viewing death as a natural part of life. By recognizing death`s presence in the world, Sula is able to see that as long as she is in this life, she has to live it according to her own values and beliefs, as life will eventually end. At the same time, death becomes part of a dualism; her image of death is visualized through a “sleep of water” (Morrison 149), a picture so comforting to Sula that she cannot concern herself with the practical implications Nel sees as so important. In her meeting with death, we see the very core of Sula`s personality and ethics portrayed: She acknowledges death`s presence. By acknowledging death`s finite nature, she chooses to live her life on her own terms because she realizes that death is swift and present and may appear at any time, and in any shape or form. Nel, on the other hand, chooses to distance herself from the idea of death by letting life happen to her. Sula`s acceptance of death gives her the opportunity to relax and live the life she wants on her own terms, as she seems to realize that when life is over, she will have to remain in the sleep of water forever.

This explicit choice of life also becomes apparent in Shadrack. When he returns from the war he also acknowledges death through “National Suicide Day.” By acknowledging death`s presence, he takes a stand in life as to choosing his own existence. In many ways we may see National Suicide Day as Shadrack`s main purpose in life. As with Bartleby, this purpose seems strange and unnoticeable for the people in the Bottom, but for Shadrack, this gives his life meaning. It is a task small and comprehensible enough for his scattered mind, and thus it becomes his meaning in life. If the meaning is removed he has nothing to live for anymore, as we see with Bartleby, when he is removed from his job as a scrivener. When he can no longer work at the task he loves and sees as his great mission in life, he loses the motivation and will to live, and therefore makes the choice to die. Fulton argues that “Shadrack achieves his purpose and makes a formal acknowledgement of death a part of life” (70). In the same way, death becomes Sula`s way of seeing that she cannot pretend to lie and adapt to the conformity of the Bottom. She has to go somewhere else in order to live life to the fullest, because if she does not, she will regret it the day death arrives. And as Sula has experienced, death may come when you least expect it.

Nissen claims that “while Sula's sense of self is strong, maybe too strong, it borders on solipsism because she has little sense of how she appears to the world around her” (276). I disagree with the idea Nissen proposes here. I would say that it is exactly because of her strong sense of self that Sula knows how she appears to the world around her. In the eyes of Nel and the people around her, Sula`s passivity appears as a disability. Nel sees the burning scene as yet another proof of Sula`s inability to take action, and her lack of empathy.
However, if we flip the image around and view the burning scene in the light of Sula’s mindset, I would strongly suggest that her passivity becomes proof of Sula’s difference of mindset. We might disagree with her ethics, and we may even go so far as to claim that she has an emotional disability, but in the end it does not matter. The important thing to note here is that in light of the social model proposed by Straus (461-462), Sula had the same possibility to save Hannah as any of the other people surrounding her, but she chose not to act. Why did she make this choice? We cannot know for sure, but as I have proposed, her logic simply works differently and she chose to act upon her own conviction of what was right, instead of what the society around her believed that she should have done. This simply proves her ethical standpoint and strong self, where Sula shows that she is not willing to let others dictate her behavior, even in extreme cases. When Sula realizes that her ethics are not compatible with the ethics and norms of the village people, she simply chooses to leave. Choosing to go to college at a time where the norm tells her to get married and have children, is to me a proof stronger than any other that she does know how she appears to the world around her. In conversation with her grandmother, Sula states that “I don’t want to make somebody else. I want to make myself” (92). In saying so, Sula shows her ethical standpoint, as she claims that she does not want to rely on anyone else. Sula is both able to, and willing to, live a life only dependent on herself and her own needs. Eva continues by saying “Selfish. Ain’t no woman got no business floatin’around without no man. ” Sula says; “You did.” “Not by choice,” Eva replies. Sula continues by saying “Mamma did.” “Not by choice, I said. It ain’t right for you to want to stay off by yourself” (92). This part of the text becomes strong evidence for Sula’s active choice to be alone. Through her conversation, Sula implies that both her mother and grandmother have let life happen to them in a way they did not choose themselves, and Sula is not going to let that happen to her. “Whatever’s burning in me is mine!” (93), Sula replies in anger to her grandmother. Through her utterance she reclaims her “me-ness,” which she has chosen not to act upon when she is together with Nel. From the day she goes off to college and until the day she dies, she chooses her life, instead of letting life happen to her.

Terry Otten states that Sula and Nel’s “tragic alienation illustrates with increasing perception the potentially destructive consequences of innocence and ambiguity of good and evil” (26). I would say instead that their tragic alienation illustrates the potentially destructive consequences of differences of mind. In meeting with people who we eventually learn to be different than ourselves, the idea of shaping them into something or someone more familiar to ourselves becomes evidently tempting. This is to me the greatest crime of innocence in the
friendship between Sula and Nel. When the two women are separated for ten years, Nel slides into the society she once tried to free herself from, and forgets to view Sula’s actions and utterances in the light of Sula’s own parameters. Nel forgets to let the “other” come forth as a subject, and places Sula in the category of incomprehensible people she cannot understand. She even fails to put Sula in the category of “craziness,” where Shadrack has been placed by the community, and this ultimately causes Nel to misunderstand everything Sula says and does. If Nel had chosen to view Sula as crazy, she would at least have had an opening for a reconciliation with Sula, as she then could have blamed the affair on Sula’s craziness. But in lacking a category in which to place Sula’s difference, Nel is not able to simply accept that Sula is “distinctly different” (118), and that there is no other explanation for her behavior than a difference of mind from herself. In light of disability theory and existential psychotherapy, Sula is the one who appears as the winner in this equation of right and wrong. She does not have to address the question Nel struggles with, as she simply accepted from an early stage in life that she would always be different from the society she was placed in. By doing so, she was able to live her life to the fullest without the boundaries Nel experienced from her home, making life choices which were in line with her ethics and understanding of what a life should be. As readers, we may claim her actions and utterances to be proof of her being emotionally impaired, as her lack of empathy towards others becomes something that alienates her from the people around her. Her impairment is, however, not of hindrance for Sula, as she has already understood that her actions and utterances make her disabled in the eyes of others. What Sula sees as a good life is in contrast with what Nel believes to be right, but I would claim that based on Sula’s understanding of her own impairments, she is able to live a life fully in line with her ethical barometer. In talking about Bartleby, Abrams argues that “To will, extensible, is to choose” (490), and I would strongly suggest that this is just as applicable to Sula. She chooses a life on her own, and thus can leave her life in death’s hands, knowing that she got the most out of it.
4 Conclusion

I started out by questioning what it is about Bartleby and Sula that made me aware of their difference from their surroundings. When we meet Bartleby, his repetitive phrases, silences and monotonous behavior function as signposts for us as readers to view him as different from the larger group. In *Sula*, both the description of Sula from Nel’s perspective, the village people claiming her difference, and Sula’s refusal to speak and act conventionally are the main markers pointing towards her difference. These actions and communication of these characters, whether it is their utterances or their silence, are what we notice as different from the actions and communication of the larger group around them.

The aim of my study has been to point out what personality traits Bartleby and Sula show us through their utterances and actions, and how disability studies may function as a frame of reference in which we can understand why they appear as different from the society they are situated in. I have argued that they both bear traits of having some sort of disorder: Bartleby appears to be autistic, while Sula’s lack of empathy towards others makes her emotionally impaired. My main argument has been that only when we start to compare Bartleby and Sula’s behavior to the people around them do they stand out as disabled. It is important to note that their impairments only become disabilities in the eyes of others. Their impairments in themselves do not harm their surroundings, nor do they keep Bartleby and Sula from being able to make life choices that are right for them. The result of their impairments do, however, cause suffering for the people surrounding them. For the lawyer, Bartleby’s death in prison causes him distress and guilt for why he was not able to help Bartleby. In Nel’s case, Sula’s affair with Jude caused a marriage to break, though Sula did not mean to do so. In this way, their impairments become disabilities when faced with the norms of the society around them, as Bartleby and Sula’s behavior do not fit in with what the larger group around them believe to be the right way to live and behave. Davis’s ideas about the norm thus shows us how Bartleby and Sula’s impairments become disabilities when their utterances and actions are compared with the society’s expectations. The lawyer and Nel both seem to believe them to adapt to what they consider to be “normal” behavior at some point. When this does not happen, both Bartleby and Sula are alienated from the societies they have been part of.

The question we need to ask ourselves when encountering characters like Bartleby and Sula is not what is wrong with them, but what we can do to understand them. If that means
that we will have to use a different approach towards them in order to fully understand their mindset, that is what we need to do. As we have seen, both Bartleby and Sula appear as fully able to take responsibility and action in their own lives; they are simply not credited with such abilities by their surroundings, as the lawyer and Nel in particular do not understand their choices and priorities. We need a key to understand characters that communicate differently than ourselves, and I will propose that the key may be disability studies. By acknowledging that characters like Bartleby and Sula are different, we may start to analyze them in light of having an impairment, either physical or mental. The impairment in itself is not the reason for their difference, as their difference only become apparent when viewed in light of the larger group of people around them. The impairment may, however, explain why Bartleby and Sula behave differently from the set norm. This in turn may help us understand them better. If we have the key to how we should approach Bartleby and Sula in order to understand their mindset, we see that what the people around them see as disabilities becomes abilities in these two characters. By claiming Bartleby to bear resemblance to people with autistic traits, we are able to see that his actions are indeed legitimate when seen in light of his own ethics and understanding of the world. His repetitive behavior is then simply part of his personality, and must therefore be taken into account when addressing him. This also means that his death may be a choice of his own, and not an example of cruelty in the lawyer. In my reading of the text, losing his job means that Bartleby also loses his only passion in life. When he cannot continue to do what he loves, he chooses to leave. In that way he may live a life where he takes action, instead of letting others dictate his life.

In Sula`s case, Eva may be the key to shedding light on Sula`s behavior and personality. Seeing Sula as emotionally disabled, we may be able to view her utterances and actions as legitimate according to her own ethics. Her choice not to act when watching her mother burn seems to me to be the ultimate example of her emotional impairment. When she realizes that her actions and way of speaking will never fully be understood by Nel, she chooses to leave. By making such a choice, she also silently states that she is not willing to adapt to the norm in the Bottom. I would claim that in meeting with the women in the village she also realizes that she is unable to adapt to their image of what a life should be. Her disability is what makes her embark from the Bottom in order to look for a life where she may belong with all of her character traits, instead of trying to create a life inside a norm she has never fit into. Both Bartleby and Sula seem to accept that they are alone in being different from the people around them, and by doing so they also accept that they are alone in the
world. Yalom`s ideas about death give them credibility as responsible adults. The two of them have from an early stage in life understood – and accepted – that they are infinitely alone, and therefore mortal. I would claim that as mortal human beings with responsibility for themselves alone, they choose to live a life according to their own beliefs and dreams. In that sense the alienation they experience may to some extent have pushed them into taking charge over their own life.

We must not forget that there are people who interact with Bartleby and Sula on their own terms in the texts. Both Ginger Nut and Ajax accept Bartleby and Sula as they are, instead of questioning their differences. They simply accept Bartleby and Sula`s behavior, and act accordingly. Ginger Nut brings Bartleby his preferred meal of the day in exchange for a few cakes which he may have for himself. In doing so, Ginger Nut exemplifies how the scrivener should be approached in order to appear as a responsible adult in a larger group. Being able to act on his own terms, the scrivener and the office boy have no trouble with arranging for the food to be bought and consumed. In Sula`s meeting with Ajax, the same thing happens. With him, she finally meets the person with whom she can be her whole self. When Morrison describes their relationship, she writes that “he did not speak down to her or at her” (127-128). This description explains that Sula, as well as Bartleby, is able to form relationships with others, as long as they are made on her own terms. When approaching Sula and Bartleby through communication according to their mindsets, they appear as adults who are fully able to take care of themselves, instead of being viewed as characters in need of care.

I wanted to challenge our perception of the world through this thesis. How are we to understand literary characters who communicate within different parameters than their surroundings and differently from ourselves? The lawyer and Nel both perceive Bartleby and Sula as different, because they live their lives according to what they believe to be the right way to live, and not according to what the larger group around them believes to be right. Bartleby and Sula never justify themselves, and never try to change others` perceptions of them, except for one time. Towards the end of both stories, Bartleby and Sula question their surroundings; Bartleby in jail; Sula on her deathbed. In doing so, I would argue that they also question the reader`s perception of the text. When meeting with characters who represent a difference from the norm set by the larger group, how do we want to approach them and interpret them? Are we willing to accept their differences as simply an example of the uniqueness each human being is born with, or do we need an underlying cause for the deviant behavior? Through my dissertation I have argued that we have to look beyond the characters
we meet. By examining their utterances and communication, we may reveal why they appear as different from the rest of the characters displayed. In taking a closer look at their difference from the norm, we may discover their uniqueness and how their perception of the world may help us see other literary characters in a new light. In that way, I believe that we as human beings also may be able to acknowledge and value the differences that appear in the people we meet in our daily lives.
Works cited


