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THE SADISTIC READER:
GENDER AND THE PLEASURES OF VIOLENCE IN THE NOVEL

by

Pamela Burger

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in English in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

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dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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Abstract

THE SADISTIC READER: GENDER AND THE PLEASURES OF VIOLENCE IN THE NOVEL

by

Pamela Burger

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This project seeks to explain the prevalence of narratives that feature sexual violence against women in the tradition of the Anglophone novel. To this end, it posits the existence of a sadistic reading practice that coincides with readers' sympathetic identification. A sadistic reader takes pleasure in the bodily violation of the woman at the center of a novel; such a reader enters the text expecting violence, and experiences a sense of narrative gratification when the inevitable violation plays out. These expectations emerge from repeated interactions with a literary tradition in which victimized heroines are routine. To explore such sadism, I follow two lines of inquiry. The first examines the literary mechanisms that create meaning and pleasure from textual violence, and determines what devices exist within the text to engage the reader in a virtual complicity with that act. The second explores how violent representations implicate the culture at large: to what extent do these texts reify cultural attitudes towards violence against women, to what extent do they code sexuality, and to what extent do they react to existing sexual norms?

Combining historical theories of the novel, reader response theory, and psychoanalysis, I trace the uneasy relationship between readers and female protagonists. Although readers sympathetically identify with a novel's heroine, her bodily vulnerability

makes her a fraught site for such identification, and, in the moment of her violation, she is easily maneuvered from the position of the sympathetic “me” to the abjected “not-me.” Thus readers can enjoy identifying with the heroine throughout her narrative, while still rejecting her vulnerability. I explore this seeming paradox by analyzing the works of Angela Carter, Joyce Carol Oates, and J.M. Coetzee. These authors self-consciously examine the rape narrative as it operates in the literature of the postmodern era. Their respective novels *The Magic Toyshop*, *Blonde*, and *Disgrace*, consider both the influence of literary history on the self-perceptions of the modern heroine and demonstrate the complex, shifting form of identification through which readers interact with novelistic heroines.

This dissertation is dedicated to Karen Starr,
without whom it never would have been written.

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Preface

While working on this project over the past few years, I have dreaded the regular question from friends, colleague, and acquaintances, who ask, out of politeness or basic curiosity, “What is your dissertation about?” It is not easy to bring phrases like “sexual violence” or “sadistic pleasure” into casual conversation. And yet I have been surprised that so many of these questioners, after an initial silence, want to offer a sample text for me to consider. Many replies begin with, “That makes me think of...” and end with a variety of well-known contemporary texts. Frequently such suggestions include popular genre fiction, usually including *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, *Fifty Shades of Grey*, and, oddly, *The Hunger Games*. Just as often, I hear sensational crime-oriented TV programs like *Law and Order: SVU* and *Criminal Minds* suggested as exemplars of sadistic audience involvement. Recently after I presented a paper on this topic at a conference on women in crime fiction, an audience member asked me why I thought people click on links from news feeds to online videos that show women being stoned or beheaded in the Middle East.

There are, of course, countless examples of gendered violence depicted in the media we regularly consume. The variety and range of texts suggested to me signal not only this prevalence but also a general consumer anxiety that surrounds such graphic depictions of violence. This work, however, is not a study of such horrifying representations. It is instead my purpose to examine a more normalized, even acceptable, form of violence against women as it plays out in the late-twentieth-century Anglophone

novel. Although there are more obvious examples of literary violence in genre fiction or in the avant-garde, I have chosen texts that fall under the general category of mainstream narrative fiction—that is, not “genre”-specific novels like detective or noir fiction—precisely because they are not so explicitly graphic. Although I discuss literary rape at great length, I apply the term to scenes of sexual violence that might not, in either the courts of law or public opinion, be considered “Rape” writ large. The rapes presented here might require all manner of prefixes: date, spousal, fantasized, threatened, or play-acted. As in real life, concepts of consent and violation are blurred by circumstances and by the characters’ conflicting gestures. Indeed, when scenes of physical rape do occur, they are brief, whereas the looming threat of violation lingers throughout the novels, as the women inhabit precarious situations without easy routes for escape.

What I find troubling in these representations is no different from what I find troubling in more sensationalized depictions. The violence I examine is normalized, constructed as a natural, or at least inevitable, part of women’s narratives. The threat of violation that haunts heroines in more mainstream fiction reflects such naturalization within the culture: we can easily accept that women are violable creatures who, upon reaching sexual maturity, are continuously cast as potential victims. Even as we condemn overtly sadistic acts or extreme brutality, we accept subtler forms of violence that affect women on a daily basis as normal facts of life.

There is perhaps something puritanical in a study that questions how and why we derive pleasure in novels, as though any attempt to scrutinize pleasure necessarily condemns it. However, I have chosen to explore this very question because, in so doing, I hope to point out the subtle violence that is integral to the construction and enjoyment of

the Anglophone novel, and to consider how, in consuming such fantasies, we continue to normalize the threat of violence as a natural aspect of female experience.

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Chapter One

What is a Sadistic Reader?

The term sadistic reader, which titles this work, is in many ways destabilizing: as readers, we tend to view ourselves as empathic beings, depending upon our humane impulses to identify with fictional characters as though they were real beings. It is difficult for most of us to admit that we can take pleasure in the pain of another, and yet the presence of violence against women in the novel remains a troubling point of contention for authors, critics, and readers. In this project, I examine the reader's role in representational violence against women by positing the presence of sadism in the tradition of the Anglophone novel. A sadistic reader, as I formulate him/her, takes pleasure in the bodily violation of the woman at the center of a text; further, such a reader enters the text expecting violence, and experiences a sense of narrative gratification when the inevitable violation plays out. These expectations emerge from repeated interactions with a literary tradition in which victimized heroines are routine. Sadistic readers are made, not born: they are trained through exposure to certain generic conventions to take pleasure in literary acts of violence against women. Although this readership exists within a larger culture of gender inequity and sexual violence, it is not necessarily complicit with such misogyny. By identifying a sadistic reading practice, I do not mean to infuse an act of fantasy—that is, engaging with a work of art—with moral culpability. Rather, this project has two distinct goals. The first is to examine the literary mechanisms that create meaning and pleasure from textual violence: How does the reader's interaction

with the text animate the violent act? What devices exist within the text to engage the reader in a virtual complicity with that act? Secondly, I wish to determine how violent representations implicate the culture at large, as I question to what extent these texts reify cultural attitudes towards violence against women, to what extent they code sexuality, and to what extent they react to existing sexual norms.

The term “sadistic” might imply a bloodthirsty readership, a cold-hearted audience only interested in easy pleasures, yet my conception of the sadistic reader is in many ways quite the opposite. The sadism at play here is not a simple psychological structure. In the pages that follow, we will see that the practice of reading sadistically relies on a multivalenced and multilayered process of identification. Readers’ pleasure in the heroine’s suffering stems not from love of sexual violence, but rather from an uneasy relationship to systems of power that derive from—and perhaps even spur on—a violent culture. The sadistic reader must identify with the suffering heroine, see him/herself in the powerless figure, in order to find eventual pleasure in her eventual suffering. The reversal process—the move from identification to repudiation—is an essential step in the consumption of violence narratives that soothes readers’ anxieties regarding their own vulnerability within the culture at large.

Borderlands: Defining Violence

One problem in critical discussions of violence arises, quite naturally, from the ambiguity of language, as “violence” does not refer to a specific act but to a subjectively defined category of behavior. Violent acts are those that transgress bodily borders, that invade another individual’s physical and/or psychic space. Thus what constitutes a

violent act depends upon one's understanding of individual boundaries. To operate in excess of socially acceptable borders is to commit violence, but borders are not uniform to all individuals, and can be ambiguously defined.

Because violence implies physicality, borders often coincide with the body's literal corpus. Violence engages with the corporeal self and is therefore intimate, even, as Georges Bataille points out, erotic. Bataille equates "the domain of eroticism" with "the domain of violence, of violation" because each of these domains transgresses the limits of "our discontinuous being" (16). Eroticism is violent in that it "entails a breaking down of established patterns, the patterns...of the regulated social order basic to our discontinuous mode of existence as defined and separate individuals" (18). For Bataille, this is the link between death and sensuality: both move towards the dissolution of the autonomous self; to give oneself over to another is to die, to forego life as it is consistently lived through individual delineation of the body.

Yet we see in Bataille's work a false universalism common to discussions of violence and the body: the "regulated social order" does not treat all bodies as equally discontinuous, and the way we understand bodily borders depends upon myriad categories, including age, race, and, as this study will explore, gender. To speak of the female body as a complete category in and of itself is again to speak in false universals, as women's bodies occupy numerous subcategories based on such determining factors as class, sexual orientation, or geographic location. Although this project does engage in some degree of universalizing the "female body" as a categorical whole, I am aware that the violability of the female body depends upon that individual body's social identity.

When I write “women’s bodies,” then, I do speak to women as a unilateral group, but as a group that contains within it numerous variations.

However, I take as a given that women’s bodies, as a categorical whole, have variously operated as a social signifier in Western art and culture. This fact complicates the delineation of individual borders: if the body exists to be looked at, or to publicly signify, it is no longer individual. As we will see in the chapters three and four, the body that signifies does not belong to its owner, but rather to the viewing public. As any Westerner living in a capitalist democracy knows, a citizen can treat his property however he wishes. If we consider the female body public property, we the public can poke, prod, use, and abuse that body however we deem fit. Further, the adult female body, unlike its male counterpart, is often understood as a violable object. The borders of the female body are easier to transgress than the male, as many women learn at an early age they have a higher potential to be victimized than men. Although not all women in our society are raped, all women are deemed, at the level of biology at least, rapable. As feminist philosopher Ann Cahill has pointed out, the pervasive possibility of rape shapes the contours of women’s bodies.

The threat of rape, then, is a constitutive and sustained moment in the production of the feminine body. It is the pervasive danger which renders so much public space off-limits, a danger so omnipresent, in fact, that the ‘safety zone’ which women attempt to create rarely exceeds the limits of their own limbs, and quite often falls short of that radius. Women not only consider their flesh to be inherently weak and breakable, but also violable. The truth inscribed on the

woman's body is not that, biologically, all men are potential rapists. It is, rather that, biologically, all women are potential rape victims. (Cahill)

Cahill suggests the threat of rape "produces" the female body by creating nebulous borders; a woman's permeability, as it were, limits her mobility and restricts her agency.

The assertions above are not meant to deny felt experience. A real woman probably does not view her own body as a social signifier, nor might she consider herself in a constant state of risk. However, the abstract ideas that the female body is both "owned" by the viewing public and is always at risk of violation informs how we conceive of violence against women, which is different from how we think of violence against men. Sexual violence, for example, is a term usually applied to women: it is something that is done to women by men.¹ For children, the term often employed is "sexual abuse," which denotes a different power relationship than "sexual violence"; we know that "sexual abuse" is not gender specific and is something that is done to children by adults. In the latter, the power differential between child and adult is clear; in the case of rape, however, the question of power and dominance is complicated by cultural perceptions of gender difference. In our contemporary moment, sometimes called "postfeminist," it is somewhat difficult to identify power differentials: we no longer accept that men naturally command authority, nor do we deem women powerless to men's will. The backlash against so-called "victim feminism" has shifted the feminist conversations regarding rape away from a critique of patriarchy and towards the social

¹ In my research on this topic, I have found that the vast majority of the literature on rape and sexual assault discusses violence against women, and much of the statistical data shows that rape outside of prison is far more commonly male-on-female. The discussion of male-on-male rape is largely focused on prison assaults, and the literature on male sexual assault always identifies itself as a separate, unique category, one that has perhaps been neglected and requires its own parameters of study.

and sexual empowerment of women. As the recent collection edited by Jessica Valenti attests, the rallying cry has gone from “no means no” to “yes means yes.”

And yet, despite the open dialogue regarding rape, sexual violence persists at a staggering rate, and the statistics negate our national pride in gender equality. Although the data on sexual assault rates are notoriously unreliable, the consistent trope of statistical reports is that American women are regularly raped and beaten. For example, the Centers for Disease Control reports that one in five women and one in seventy-one men have survived sexual assault in their lifetime (U.S. Centers for Disease Control); the Department of Justice’s National Crime Victimization Survey reported that in 2010 nearly 170,000 women (and 15,000 men) were sexually assaulted (U.S. Department of Justice). My concern here is not the precision of statistics, but the effect of their collective knowledge. The numbers, as variable as they may be, establish a credible threat that declares women’s bodies are *accessible*. That women are considered biologically and statistically predisposed to attack presents a paradox of an egalitarian society. We claim women are equal in all aspects of life, but we willingly accept that their status as potential victims is a persistent and inevitable aspect of the social order.

Active Reading and the Consumption of Violence

Our cultural relationship to sexual violence, then, must come under scrutiny if we wish to understand our current dilemma. This project examines violence in one particular context—the contemporary novel—as a means of exploring both a prominent literary trope and its cultural implications. Literary history is rich with narratives based around a rape; from Leda to Lucrece, from Clarissa to Tess, heroines often find themselves the

center of a story more focused on their sexual violability than their agency. In the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, rape narratives have proliferated, both in canonical literature exemplified by *A Passage to India*, and in popular and genre fiction, perhaps most famously exemplified by the international best-selling *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo*. By examining literary violence, we can dissect the construction, in narrative form, of bodily borders. Novels in particular are fit for this study, as they teach us how to think about our culture while simultaneously revealing our preconceived notions regarding that culture. This simultaneity exists because novels encourage readers to operate at multiple levels of interpretation, thereby enabling us to absorb the images while we deconstruct them. Fiction is reflective in both senses of the word: it mirrors and meditates upon the real world.

To question if a reader is complicit in fictional violence is to court controversy. If the novel is by definition fictional, how might a reader be said to “take part” in its violence? After all, readers are not responsible for what authors write, or what happens to nonexistent women in fabricated situations. Readers open a book anticipating some escape from reality. Nevertheless, in the following chapters, we will see that the reader does take an active role, extracting meaning from words that lie lifeless on the page. While the text creates scenes of violence, it is up to the reader to make meaning from that violence. At the crossroads of reality and fantasy is the reader, who makes sense of fiction through recourse to real-world experience. As Robert Scholes points out in *Protocols of Reading*, no work of art carries universal meaning. Rather, meaning emerges as the reader mines the work to determine what the author meant to say. Scholes claims that we read “centrifugally” and “centripetally”; we read to determine authorial meaning,

all the while assessing whether that meaning coincides with our own experiences. In other words, reading is a two-way street. We do not passively absorb texts as solitary meaning-making machines: we bring to the text personal experiences, which are then placed in the new context of the novel.

Wolfgang Iser further explains how reading is active and strategic. A reader must “organize and reorganize the various data offered us by the text” by filling in gaps and blanks, places where connections are not explicit in the text. (*The Implied Reader* 288). The reader depends upon an independent understanding of the world, the extratextual reality that is needed to make sense of the world of a novel. Iser notes, “If the literary text represents an act of intentionality directed towards a given world, then the world it approaches will not simply be repeated in the text; it will undergo various adjustments and corrections” (*Prospecting* 227). The act of reading is where the perspectives of text and reader come together in the reader’s mind; upon emerging from the experience, the reader has an adjusted view of the world at large.

If we accept that reading is active, it follows that we are at some level participating in literary scenes of violence by reading them, and that, having consumed such texts, we emerge with a perspective of violence in the world that has undergone “adjustments and corrections.” The act of reading about violence draws upon a confluence of previous encounters, both empirical and novelistic, with violation. In her thoughtful work *Intimate Violence*, Laura Tanner has explained how representations of violence can be “intimately connected to violence in the world” and yet remain recognizably false, as the novel suspends a reader between poetics and politics: “Although literary language is never simply referential, the act of reading a

representation of violence is defined by the reader's suspension between the semiotic and the real, between a representation and the material dynamics of violence which it evokes, reflects, or transforms." (6) The mimetic qualities of fiction mediate between the text and the "empirical subtext drawn from the reader's assumptions about violence" that stem from extratextual realities. I would add that the reader's assumptions about violence come from their real-world experience as well as from previously encountered fictional representations.

Dissecting the reader's interaction with textual violence can reveal how literary matrices construct readers' conceptions of female violability. As Michelle Massé points out in her study on masochism and the Gothic novel, "unless we work at understanding how the structures of domination we most loathe in our world are part of ourselves also, we risk replicating them even in our denial and resistance" (6). These words apply to my project as well as Massé's, though I am perhaps asking us to look at a more troubling aspect of desire. It is no easy feat to admit to sadistic impulses. In claiming a sadistic element of reading, I am examining an aspect of reading that is in some ways taboo, as reading is traditionally perceived as empathetic. In fact, when I explain my project to colleagues, many of them are initially insulted, outraged at perceived accusations of unsympathetic reading. Recently I suggested to a professor that she might take some pleasure in Tess Durbeyfield's suffering, she looked at me as though I were accusing her of killing a dog. "I love Tess!" she exclaimed. "I feel terrible for her, and I hate to see her suffer!" Indeed, we all love Tess, but we do not exactly hate to see her suffer. If we did, we wouldn't return to this novel so often or so proudly. The novel bears witness over and over to her suffering, and if we truly hated seeing it, we would look away. Though I

would never suggest that a reader doesn't feel pain or sorrow as she witnesses Tess's trials, I am suggesting that our relationship to her is more complex than complete identification and empathy; beneath our love for Tess lies an expectation that she ought to suffer, and pleasure at the meeting of these expectations. To recognize this urge is not to say we are evil, that we are secret rapists, or even latent misogynists; it is to say that familiar structures of domination are at play in our reading processes, and that, as readers, we might get a rare chance to play the dominator, to look from a place of power, to enjoy the subject-position of the victimizer.

Sadomasochism: Defining Pleasure

I employ the language of sadomasochism because it simultaneously invokes social codes of power, of pleasure, and of gender; sadomasochism is a psychoanalytic, sociological, literary, and erotic term. It thus provides a framework for this study to explore both social adherence to hegemonic power structures and the idea of "play"—that is, of safely experimenting with those power structures for pleasure. Sadomasochism is at once intimate and social, personal and political, as it refers to private relationships and societal structures of power. Think, for example, of S/M sex as a cultural trope, with its easy reference to an "ordinary" couple's bedroom habits as reflecting societal power binaries. Popular depictions of S/M often represent sex partners play-acting not just master/slave, but employer/servant, teacher/student, and human/animal (to name a few among many). In these depictions, individuals overtly inscribe societal codes into intimate sexual practice, and wrest pleasure from the drudgery of institutionalized authority.

My discussion of sadism, however, will not examine sadomasochistic sex, and, though it does infer an erotics of reading, is not explicitly sexual. I will not enter the debates of the past three decades surrounding S/M within the feminist community, not because those debates are insignificant, but because I examine neither individual sexual acts nor pornography. At stake here, rather, is the power dynamic between reader and literary text. Sociologist Lynn Chancer has described sadomasochism as a dynamic between self and other that plays out in various aspects of our daily lives. For Chancer, sadism and masochism are ever-present social codes that shape personal and institutional relations, and it is within this framework that I will examine the literary mechanisms of sadism and sadomasochism as gendered phenomena.

A critical reader enters the playing field of the text primed for intimate engagement, eager for writing that speaks to his or her own personal experience; yet critical reading also examines socio-political paradigms—of power, gender, race, and so on—as the narrative reconstructs them. The semiotics of sadomasochism combines social codes with intimate language, and thus provides room to examine reading as a private pleasure that is informed by and informs us of hegemonic power structures.

Significantly, by operating within this discourse we can also keep in mind the element of fantasy and imagination—of play—that runs throughout this study. Although the issues raised by the novels are serious, the novels themselves can safely experiment with how to approach those issues, and so allow us to consider our own involvement in mechanisms of violence.

Scenes of sexual violence in a novel inspire various affective responses in a reader that range from revulsion to arousal, from nervousness to joy. Because violence

can inspire certain displeasurable affective states—i.e. feeling queasy at a graphic depiction—the frequency of such scenes demands explanation. Why do readers return to the scene of the crime over and over? These questions have inspired various critics to take up the discourse of sadomasochism as a way to discuss pleasure, usually ascribing a masochistic pleasure to the reader. In these formulations, when we identify with the heroine, we *feel her pain*, and if we take pleasure in that pain, we must then be masochists. I admit that there is a masochistic element to this identification, but there is simultaneously a separate sadistic impulse driving reader to actively witness violence.

The interdependence of sadism and masochism has been a subject of debate since Richard von Kraft-Ebbing coined the neologism “sadomasochism” in *Psychopathia Sexualis*. Freud, more interested in masochism than sadism, claims that these two “perversions” emerge from the same drive, and that the subject is free to shift subjectivity between the two positions. Gilles Deleuze notably disagrees, declaring that sadism and masochism are separate structures operating independently. My approach falls somewhere in between Freud and Deleuze’s. I recognize that sadism functions as a counterpart to masochism, that, as Chancer asserts, a sadist and masochist require one another for mutual recognition. Yet an individual can maintain a sadistic stance related to but separated from masochism. In the moment of sadistic impulse, the masochistic drive can fade away.

According to Freud, masochism is “the most common and most significant of all the perversions” (*Three Essays* 157). It is ironic that so much literature classifies sadism and masochism as “perverse” yet simultaneously comments on their “commonness.” To deem something so frequently occurring a perversion seems a contradiction of terms.

Perhaps, then, the term “exaggeration” rather than “perversion” would better fit this obsessive categorizing of sadism and masochism, as they locate, amplify, and even unsettle quotidian instances of dominance and submission. It is equally fair, however, to note that extreme instances of sadism and masochism—rape and torture—distort common social codes and subvert humanistic drives for compassion and self-preservation. Nevertheless, such “perversions,” if we understand them as exaggerations of institutionalized power, can reflect the perversity of those very institutions. The revulsion one might feel at witnessing repeated torture scenes—as in a text like *120 Days of Sodom*—offers us insight into the pleasure we might feel at witnessing Clarissa’s terrible predicament or Tess’s martyrdom. Invoking the term “sadism,” I aim to connect extreme/Sadean and familiar/novelistic violence, not to shame or blame readers for consuming violence, but to recognize and therefore shed light on our participation in a paradoxically “perverse” yet normalized paradigm of gendered violence.

Masochism is an unsettling yet somewhat alluring “perversion” for critics to explore in literature, because masochism, as writers like Leo Bersani, Kaja Silverman, and David Savran have discussed, can serve as a tool for political subversion. Sadism is a more difficult sell. Aside from the questionable image of the female dominatrix, few images of politically persuasive cruelty exist. Politically motivated art that aims to unsettle the audience—of which Antonin Artaud’s Theatre of Cruelty is the clearest example—might be considered sadistic, but here the cruelty is overt, self-conscious, and intended to open “consciousness towards an inordinate, inexhaustible feasibility” (Artaud 69). Artaud resisted the term sadism and asserted that his “cruelty” was a form of political expression. However, savvy readers need not dismiss artistic violence as

“above” or “beyond” sadism. The drive to shatter a worldview, to release the audience from bourgeois illusions, is born of radical politics but maintains a kind of pleasure in inflicting pain. (It is useful to note here, too, that Sade’s work was also born of a radical politics.) Art that aims to unsettle bourgeois audiences through violence may also contain an element of anger, frustration, and desire to manipulate and control those who maintain, through sheer mass if not force, cultural dominance. But whereas this anger is self-consciously expressed as “cruelty” in avant-garde art, brutal scenes in mainstream art intend not to jar readers out of complacency but instead to entertain them. Whereas the avant-garde pushes boundaries to make cosmic unknowability more knowable, mainstream literary fiction reiterates or re-presents more quotidian experience.

That audiences take pleasure in mainstream representations of pain is not a new idea, though in critical application “sadism” has more often been the purview of cinema studies. Laura Mulvey’s “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” sparked a cottage industry of film criticism focused on the sadistic (male) gaze. Mulvey contends that the language of film adheres to the unconscious libidinal drives shaped by patriarchy, drives that seek to control and punish the female body by subjugating it to the voyeuristic gaze. In opposition to Mulvey, critics including Kaja Silverman, Linda Williams, and Gaylyn Studlar, have posited that the viewer’s primary pleasure is masochistic. Yet Mulvey’s sadistic gaze remains an important point not merely for critiques of visual culture but for literary study as well. Not surprisingly, it is more difficult to accept a sadistic reader than sadistic viewer, because the identificatory process is necessarily different in literature. The novel in particular permits access to the interiority of its main players, which creates a sense of immediacy, of closeness, to those characters. Reading a psychological novel

might indulge a voyeuristic desire to “see” into another and to have complete access to her life; yet by identifying with a heroine, readers relinquish the independence required of a voyeur. A reader looks at a heroine not for titillation, but to see aspects of him/herself embodied, figured through an other. Nevertheless, the process of identification is complex, richly layered, and its intersubjectivity prevents clear delineation between self from other.

“A Child is Being Beaten” and Intersubjective Identification

Freud’s “A Child is Being Beaten” explains the intersubjective nature of fantasy, and is therefore helpful in unpacking readerly identification. The essay describes three stages of sadistic fantasy. First, the fantasist imagines a child being beaten by a father; the beaten child is the hated sibling, and the subject is pleased to see that her father does not love this child and thus beats him. In the second, the child being beaten is the fantasist. In the third and final stage, an unrelated adult beats an unrelated child while the fantasist observes. Freud explores the relationship between the three stages to tease out what the primary drive might be: is a beating fantasy sadistic or masochistic? “There seems to be a confirmation of the view that masochism is not the manifestation of primary instinct but originates from sadism which has been turned round upon itself—that is to say, by means of regression from an object to the ego.” The fantasist’s “guilt and sexual love” conspire to turn the violence inward. The second-stage beating “is not only the punishment for the forbidden genital relation, but also the regressive substitute for that relation.” The pleasure of the third stage is then derived from the repressed second, as it was in that masochistic moment that pre-genital (anal-sadistic) stimulation began. Freud contends

that while the final fantasy is sadistic, its pleasure is masochistic, emerging from the repressed second stage.

Yet even this assertion is later muddled. Freud remains ambivalent towards the fantasy's point of origin: his essay peels back the layers of the beating fantasy to reveal a murky nucleus, a primal scene that is alternately classified as nonsexual or incestuous, as fantasy or recollection, as active or passive. He cites sadism as the primary drive, but a sadism born of an even earlier sensation of jealousy. Sadism, then, is not a drive but a reaction to the drive for love or connection with the father. The pleasure of seeing a child being beaten is both sadistic and masochistic, for, as Freud points out, the child is a stand-in for the fantasist as well as for siblings and peers.

The fantasist's conflation of self and other points out the multivalenced nature of fantasy, and the capacity for the reader to identify with a stand-in while simultaneously acting out a sadistic desire to see that stand-in as an other, as a rival, as someone who could be beaten. But just as Freud parses the separate goals of the fantasy into sadistic and masochistic stages, so we too must separate out the masochistic pleasures of literary violence against our stand-ins, and the sadistic pleasure we take in watching a heroine being beaten. Though the two impulses are clearly intertwined, are even different points in the same fantasy, it is useful to look at the sadistic stage on its own in order to comprehend how readers make sense of violence.

Freud's child is motivated by jealousy, and later a desire to be punished and cared for; the reader is motivated by a troubled relationship to the female body, and to the process of identifying with that body. In "A Child is Being Beaten," Freud notes the significance of reading in fantasy-creation: "Though in the higher forms at school the

children were no longer beaten, the influence of such occasions [of watching children being beaten] was replaced and more than replaced by the effects of reading, of which the importance was soon to be felt.” Novels accessible to children (*Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and *Les Malheurs de Sophie* are Freud’s examples) stimulate beating fantasies as “the child began to compete with these works of fiction by producing his own phantasies and by constructing a wealth of situations and institutions, in which children were beaten” or disciplined. That written fantasies beget auto-erotic fantasies attests to literature’s influence over individual imaginative acts. At an earlier stage, witnessing an event—a peer suffering corporal punishment—gave form and shape to the fantasy; these events dissipate as the child grows more physically independent, and thus less susceptible to authoritative violation, and fictional scenes rather than memories define the fantasy.

“A Child is Being Beaten” is significant in large part because it encourages us to view the act of fantasy as multilayered: contained within the fantasy at large are several stages of imaginary play, in which the fantasist can move between active and passive positions, can serve both as witness and as object, and, as Freud ignores, as author. What Freud does not make explicit is the creative nature of the one who invents the fantasy. Indeed, fantasy is imaginative and self-derived; it requires active engagement. A reader is a creative fantasist who enters the author’s imaginary world only to reinvent it: readers visualize and interpret, becoming co-authors who must re-imagine the narrative. Within literary fantasy, a reader moves between subject-positions, becoming alternately the author, the literary figure, and the witness. None of these three roles is without a sense of guilt and confusion, in large part because sadistic fantasy is so different from sociopathy, from a lack of empathy or from a lack of recognition of the victim as a subject. In fact,

sadistic reading emerges from empathy with a heroine: identifying with a heroine threatens the reader's sense of agency and authority, as that heroine is so open to violability.

Uncanny Identification: The Reader and the Female Body

Two psychoanalytic theories of border-crossing are of particular use in exploring the reader's ambivalence towards a heroine: Freud's "uncanny" and Julia Kristeva's "abject." Identifying with a violable young heroine is uncanny precisely because it crosses socially acceptable borders and enters the realm of abjection as Kristeva defines it. To understand what is so unsettling about identifying with a heroine, I turn to Freud's essay "The Uncanny," which describes the unsettling experience of finding ourselves at home—or identified—with that which disturbs us most: the womanly form.

Freud deconstructs the word "heimlich" ("homelike") until it dissolves, or in his words "extends," into its opposite, "das Unheimlich" (the "uncanny," literally the "unhomelike"). He concludes that the uncanny "is in reality nothing new or alien but something which is familiar and old—established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression." The uncanny is discomfiting because it returns to us that which should remain hidden, that which is overly familiar. This "return of the repressed" recalls to the subject primal fears previously banished to the unconscious.

At the center of Freud's essay is E.T.A Hoffman's short story "The Sandman." Within the story, the sandman appears as a figure at once fictional and real; he is a mother's warning tale for children who refuse to go to bed, and he is an actual murderer

who haunts the protagonist. Freud finds the Sandman's most uncanny aspect lies in his threat to peck out the hero's eyes. In Freud's libidinal metaphor, eyes are a metonym for penis, and the sandman's uncanny effect belies the child's castration complex. Freud repeatedly insists that one organ (eyes) stands in for another (penis) simply because it must, and yet an alternative reading might suggest that the bodily anxiety at the heart of "The Sandman" refers to fear of penetration. Eyes are sensitive and vulnerable; the act of pecking them out literalizes the losses that often stem from forced penetration. Authority, control, and autonomy are aspects of sight lost to the Sandman, and are all aspects of the self lost during moments of sexual violation. Castration anxiety reflects fears surrounding loss of authority, whereas penetrative anxiety is uncanny; forced penetration violates the body's borders and reminds the victim of primal knowledge that s/he is not a discontinuous, self-controlled being.

Yet the uncanny is not merely an anxiety-producing machine. It returns to us repressed desires as well as fears, as is the case with Freud's "double," who reminds us of an earlier state in development when we once believed we could cheat death. The uncanny occurs at the moment when "the distinction between imagination and reality is effaced." It is a liminal space between fantasy and reality. The border between states is unsettling primarily because it represents a disintegration of a self-made world in which the borders of the self are kept intact. Narrative realist fiction in general, and the novel in particular, occupies just such a liminal space, as the boundaries between what is "real"—or at the very least, what signifies a real-world object—and what is fantasy dissolve.

The heroine of a novel is herself a liminal character, at once real and fictive, at once subject and object, in large part due to the identificatory structure established

between reader and text. As a reader begins to identify with a sympathetic heroine, s/he understands her to be a subject as the reader is a subject: a thinking, feeling, psychologically complex entity motivated by human desires. Yet while a reader can love, emulate, even analyze this character, s/he also casts her as the object on which to project desires and fears. She may feel real, alive in the reader's imagination, but ultimately she is inanimate, an invention, a doll. She may appear psychologically complex, but she is also a receptacle for the reader's thoughts and feelings. The heroine is an uncanny figure who bridges two worlds: the extratextual reader who is meant to identify with her, and the textual fantasy, the narrative space she occupies. She draws the reader into the writer's world. Such is the nature of a novelistic hero, the site of identification. However, the abused heroine occupies a particularly liminal space, because she is always already doomed to her own violation, and we as readers are in on this dirty little secret. We know her as subject, but we also know she will inevitably become an object. Our identification with her is always haunted by this knowledge; as a thinking subject, she represents us, her readers, but she is also an object who cannot represent us, for we are intact subjects. We are "real."

The uncanny is home and not home at the same time. It disturbs us because we recognize within the uncanny something familiar, yet horrifying and grotesque. Reading the female figure as uncanny requires a simultaneous identification (she is me) and rejection (she is not me). The same schism occurs when confronting the scene of sexual violence. The scene of the other's violation is pleasurable precisely because it emphasizes otherness: she is hurt, so I cannot be hurt. The repudiation is made complete through the sadist's pleasure: her pain is my pleasure; therefore, I am not in pain, *I am*

not her. However, just as the uncanny reminds us that what is unsettling is also what is ordinary, or familiar, so, too, does the violated female remind us at some level of our own vulnerability. This does not make us masochists: we do not take pleasure in our vulnerability, but rather in the way the text extracts that vulnerability from the reading self and displaces it onto an other—onto the female heroine.

The violated heroine's body is a prime example of the uncanny. It is a stark reminder of our own primal anxieties about violability; it represents to us the ultimate border-crossing, the violation of the body's boundaries. In the moments of the character's violation, the reader detaches from identifying with her, for to continue being her would require a dissolution of the self. We can witness her trauma without experiencing that trauma firsthand. Yet the abrupt splitting off from a character we have identified with throughout the text calls into question the very nature of readerly identification. If the borders of our stand-in are so fluid, how can the reading subject remain intact?

The imaginative self-preservation at work relies on what Kristeva calls the *abject*, a state that emerges from the uncanny. "A massive and sudden emergence of uncanniness, which, familiar as it might have been in an opaque and forgotten life, now harries me as radically separate, loathsome. Not me." To recognize it as "me" would "annihilate" the self because this recognition admits that the self will die. The "home" that Kristeva points to as our universal home, the place whence we all came, is the mother's reproductive organs. The abject reminds us of our forced rejection from the mother's womb. Ego development for Kristeva begins earlier than for Freud; it starts even at the moment of birth, when the body emerges from the mother and finds new

borders in its freshly independent corpus. Physical separation excludes the mother, yet her threat is never completely banished: the abject always remains at the periphery of consciousness, threatening to collapse borders and destroy the intact self. Kristeva, like Freud, claims we are “harried” by female genitalia, though she differentiates the reason from castration anxiety and argues instead that we suffer from penetration anxiety: we are afraid that the maternal will enter the borders of the self and thereby collapse the meaning of that self.

Whether or not one accepts either psychoanalytic reading of the fears surrounding female reproduction, their influence in literature has been widespread. The twentieth century was Freud’s century, and his influence over popular conceptions of psychology is undeniable. Is it any wonder then that twentieth century postmodern literature repeatedly explores, albeit self-consciously, the grotesqueness of the female form? Graphic depictions of sexual violence punish the female for unsettling us all by heading straight to the perpetrator of the crime: her sex. But these depictions also reassure us that the abject form can be rejected, for as we watch it suffer, we cannot know it as our own selves, which sit comfortably in a chair reading, at rest.

Like Freud, Kristeva employs literature to illustrate her concept. For Kristeva, literature is catharsis; it represents an attempt to cast out the abject, yet constantly threatens “apocalypse,” an intrusion of the abject. “The narrative web is a thin film constantly threatened with bursting. For, when narrated identity is unbearable, when the boundary between subject and object is shaken, and when even the limit between inside and outside becomes uncertain, the narrative is what is challenged first” (141). For the narrative to continue beyond such challenge, it shifts from narration to “crying out”

(141), to a language of violence or obscenity.

She further claims that “on close inspection, all literature is probably a version of the apocalypse that seems to me rooted...on the fragile border where identities (subject/object, etc.) do not exist” (207). Narrative fiction might mark an attempt to draw borders around a subject—the hero/ine or protagonist—but it also contains a threat to that subject. Identification allows us to live within the narrative’s borders, which are the strictly delineated confines of page, text, syntax, plot, setting, etc. These borders, as Kristeva suggests, are always threatened with bursting as the limit between internal and external becomes uncertain: is the heroine me? What does it mean to be in a woman’s story, to be embodied as female? The moment her body intrudes on the psychic connection between reader and text, when the physicality of what it means to be a woman becomes present, she must be cast out as abject: she is subject to violence against her person, which means she must be refuted as “not me.” The horror of the moment in which a heroine is threatened is personal, and relief comes when that threat is safely stored in the body of an other. According to Kristeva, the abject threat must lead to a scapegoat. In her example, Céline’s loathed object of the Jew provided a repository for abjection; in much of literature, that loathed object is the female body subject to predation and violation. While that body might not be spoken of as abject—it is often, in fact, presented as beauty’s paradigm—that which is subject to pursuit, capture, and violence is nevertheless abjected. The anxiety that surrounds her body reflects readerly anxiety regarding the borders of selfhood.

Learning to Read Violence

This troubled identification with the heroine in the novel is reinforced by repeated encounters with the narrative of the pursued maiden. The field of Reader-Response criticism offers several explanations for how we learn to read collectively. Though reading is a private act, we grow conversant in literature communally, in classrooms, discussions, debates, and, of course, through exposure to canonical texts. When students of Anglophone literature are repeatedly exposed to narratives of sexual violence or the threat thereof, the reading community provides instruction on how to respond to representational violence. Thus, our responses are not entirely private, but are culturally informed, not merely by social codes but through reading codes as well. We have a cultural relationship to violence, but we also have a literary relationship to violence learned from our, to use Stanley Fish's term, interpretive communities.

Fish posits that readers learn how to understand texts in their "interpretive communities," which are dominated by cultural institutions such as schools and the Academy. Every subsequent encounter with a text reinforces the reading values reproduced in classrooms. Readers will look to find a particular meaning in a text that coincides with the interpretive methods learned in school, and they will inevitably find it there; thus literary analysis can be a self-fulfilling prophecy. Fish's reception theory requires a kind of blind acceptance of poststructuralism, a strict denial that any essential meaning can be attached to any language system, including literature. Although such dogmatic adherence to poststructuralism has fallen out of fashion, we need not reject Fish's interpretive communities outright, as his theory is useful in exploring how specific reading practices are reproduced. In *Is There a Text in this Class*, he describes an exercise in his classroom in which he told students that an arbitrary list of names written on the

board was a religious poem (323). The students then analyzed the words accordingly, and found religious meaning where it was neither clear nor intended. Fish uses this exercise to demonstrate how students who are comfortable with a particular reading process, such as exploring words for their symbolic or associative meaning, can reproduce that same process anywhere.

As his exercise in poetic interpretation demonstrates, “the properties of the text are the product of certain ways of paying attention”; that is, the elements that make up the text rely as much on the words themselves as on how the reader makes meaning from them. Iser’s concept of the reader’s “repertoire” similarly invokes the reader’s enculturation in the process of understanding a text. The repertoire is “all the familiar territory within the text. This may be in the form of references to earlier works, or to social and historical norms, or to the whole culture from which the text has emerged” (*Act of Reading* 69). The repertoire is different from an individual reader’s personal associations or experiences. Rather, the repertoire is a schema or framework where the text and reader can meet on common ground. Through the repertoire, the reader organizes his or her knowledge and can then reassess the viability of that knowledge. Iser, unlike Fish, suggests a pre-existing system of knowledge present in the text, but it is the reader who chooses how to put that schema to use. The concepts of the interpretive community and the repertoire are useful here as ways to consider the cumulative impact of exposure to narratives that concern the raped or pursued heroine. The more readers come across such narratives, the more primed we are, when entering a new text, to expect a violation.

The reading “we” I invoke is gender neutral: reading about violence against women is not an exclusively male activity, and both genders can read sadistically. A

reader's sadistic posture emerges from what feminist critic Judith Fetterley calls the "immasculation" of the female reader. In *The Resisting Reader*, she writes, "As readers and teachers and scholars, women are taught to think as men, to identify with a male point of view, and to accept as normal and legitimate a male system of values, one of whose central principles is misogyny" (xx). Since Fetterley first published these words in 1978, readers and teachers and scholars have reconsidered the traditional privileging of male readership. The novels discussed here, however, question how twenty-first century readers continue to be "immasculated" when confronted with suffering women. Within the context of violence, "immasculation" takes on new meaning, as both male and female readers are "immasculated" when taught to identify with a point of view that takes pleasure in female violation. Sadistic reading performs an extreme variation of heteronormative power structures, and in so doing perhaps allows readers a safe place to examine their own relationships to those structures. Throughout this work I examine how the texts under discussion attempt to perform the act of resistance Fetterley calls for: by refusing to be an "assenting reader," the feminist critic will "begin the process of exorcizing the male mind that has been implanted in us... While women cannot rewrite [historical] literary works so that they become ours by virtue of reflecting our reality, we can accurately name the reality they do reflect" (xxii-xxiii). The works discussed in the following chapters reconsider the literary traditions from which they emerge, and attempt to point out the normalization of violence against women present within this tradition.

Gender Trouble and the Tradition of the English Novel

If readers learn through their interpretive community—their “immasculating” institutions, as it were—how to seek out familiar tropes in novels, it makes sense to briefly look at the history of the genre as it pertains to issues of gendered anxiety. It has been more than fifty years since Ian Watt published the seminal work *The Rise of the Novel*, and yet the link he drew between the epistemological, social, and economic shifts of the eighteenth century and the emergence of the novel remains relevant to the genre’s historiography. Watt notes that the eighteenth century saw a new focus on the individual over the communal, and interior experience, or psychology, became a fresh concern among Enlightened thinkers.

As this focus on the individual’s internal experience was reflected in the novel as a literary form, a growing middle class and changes in leisure led to a larger reading public, which was, Watt explains, primarily female. Women had more private leisure time during which they could indulge in novels, and as a result the early novel addressed issues germane to the female public, particularly that great source of womanly anxiety, marriage. Marriage during this period was also in a process of transformation, notably among the middle class. Watt attributes the growing emphasis on conjugal romantic love to the Puritan movement, with its focus on the individual spiritual relationships between spouses. And yet, this same historical moment “witnessed a tremendous narrowing of the ethical scale, a redefinition of virtue in primarily sexual terms” (159). Women, long considered the fleshy, bodily sex, became vessels for higher things, now possessing “total immunity from sexual feelings.” They were now the keepers of communal virtue, as “the pieties of the marriage and family were safe only in their hands” (160). Women—or at

the least middle and upper class women—were now expected to aspire to a bodiless, spiritual ideal, immune to sexual desire and wholly consumed with their own virtue.

Michael McKeon also cites the changes in discourses regarding women's bodies and definitions of virtue as a motivating factor in the creation of the novel. McKeon attributes these changes not to Puritanism but rather to the move away from a traditional rule of the aristocracy and the destabilization of traditional categories such as gender, marriage, and class. "The instability of generic and social categories in the period from 1600 to 1740 is symptomatic of a change in attitudes about how truth and virtue are most authentically signified" (20). Virtue was no longer signaled by an aristocratic title but rather through the performance of deeds. The emerging middle class, then, had opportunity and means to demonstrate virtue, and McKeon points to the virginal daughter, the unpenetrated and impenetrable young woman, as an increasingly important signifier for familial and personal virtue.

It would seem that just as women were ideologically disembodied, turned from flesh to spirit, their bodies took on even more social significance. In a starkly Foucauldian turn, the repression of female sexuality so crucial to middle-class Puritan ideology inspired a veritable obsession with that same topic. At this same moment, the scientific discourse of the female body was also in flux. Helene Moglen has demonstrated that the scientific movement from a one-sex model to a "sex-gender system" of difference precipitated a crisis in gender identity that required a promulgation of strict new gender roles. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, women, long considered biologically the same as men, were newly classified into a separate physical category.

The novel form grants access to psychological conflicts and drama, and because this access appears unfettered, naturalized as it is through realist prose, these fictional texts could perform an educational function. The early novel served an important ideological function in imposing new models. Moglen writes that the novel is the site where “the social and psychological meanings of gender difference were most extensively negotiated and exposed.” Novels “demonstrated how the ideals of masculinity and femininity were translated into social roles, and they established norms for that translation. At another level, they expressed resistance to the wrenching system of differentiation and revealed the psychic cost they incurred” (4). The newly developed interest in the individual legitimized such a practice. As Terry Eagleton explains, “The genre of the novel can be understood comprehensively as an early modern cultural instrument designed to confront, on the level of narrative form and content, both intellectual and social crisis simultaneously.” (22). Social crisis is of course not limited to the eighteenth century, and the narrative that arose during this period has been reused and remolded during other periods of social anxiety, morphing as women’s roles have changed in society. Contemporary novels that address rape and violation do not merely reflect current crises regarding gender; they continue to reflect their forerunners. If the rape plot is the result of an historical accident, emerging at a time particularly suited to developing both the novel and such women’s stories, it has continued to influence subsequent stories, as new writers arise from reading the texts that have come before.

In “Rape and the Rise of the Novel,” Frances Ferguson argues that the psychological novel is at least in part predicated upon the indeterminacy of rape trials. Ferguson connects the need to determine psychological states in rape trials—to determine

if a woman truly wanted to consent, or a man understood lack of consent—to the internal struggles catalogued in Richardson's *Pamela* (published in 1740) and *Clarissa* (1748). Often considered the first novel in English, or at least the first psychological novel, *Pamela* catalogues a beautiful servant's continual flight from her employer's sexual advances. Pamela's virtue eventually wins the heart of her pursuer, and their marriage promotes her social and economic station. The titular heroine of *Clarissa* does not fare so well. After hundreds of pages in which the rakish Lovelace readies himself to rape her, she is inevitably ravished, and finally succumbs to madness and death as a result of the attack. Watt, who considers *Pamela* the "first true novel," described the text as "a work that could be praised from the pulpit and yet attacked as pornography, a work that gratified the reading public with the combined attributes of a sermon and a striptease" (173). Though the question of "firsts" is contestable, certainly *Pamela* presents an originary example of the novel's peculiar ability to unite anxiety about and desire for the female body. *Pamela* is a prime example of Foucauldian repression, as, in seeking to categorize virtue through the act of resistance, it turns its entire focus onto *Pamela's* sexuality.

Pamela instructs women that, by safeguarding their "innocence," they will be rewarded with love and money. The perpetual anxiety permeating the first two thirds is fear that Pamela's body, her sole commodity, will be compromised. Hinted at, however, is the suggestion that her psyche is closely tied to her sense of virtue. As we see more explicitly in *Clarissa*, rape is a threat not merely to the body but to the mind as well. After her attack, Clarissa loses even the ability to write coherently, so fractured is her psyche. As Watt, McKeon, and Moglen have all demonstrated, the shift in gender roles

is reflected in Richardson's novels, but they cannot account for why rape, or “seduction,” became the focal point for the psychological intricacies of this burgeoning genre. Rape was of course not a new threat, nor was the maintenance of a girl's virginity a new activity, and yet Richardson does provide something new: he demonstrates the psychological effects of this anxiety on women. In the pursuit of an ideal marriage, they must overcome the obstacles of men's desires. The novel developed as a psychological genre, and Richardson's interest is in the internal effects of violence against women on women. He examines the heavy psychological toll of a woman's responsibility for maintaining chaste virtue. Pamela is near hysterical when her employer attempts to seduce her and falls into swoons and fits at the thought of sexual depravity. Thus the novel is an ambivalent genre: it instructs women to remain virtuous at all costs, but it also explores the problems these strictures create for women. It simultaneously objectifies and humanizes women.

Violence and the Novels of Carter, Oates, and Coetzee

The characters of Pamela and Clarissa are not necessarily models for modern heroines, but their stories remain archetypal to the novel as a genre. As the following chapters explore, the story of the heroine repeatedly placed in perilous, sexually threatening situations is an entrenched narrative that continues to shape readerly interactions with female protagonists. The works of Angela Carter, Joyce Carol Oates, and JM Coetzee self-consciously examine the rape narrative as it operates in the literature of the postmodern era, and the novels explored here all consider the influence of literary history on the self-perceptions of the modern heroine. The particular novels analyzed in

the subsequent chapters are not meant to serve as paradigms of how the novel treats sexual violence; rather, I have chosen them as particular iterations that will elucidate the process of sadistic reading. Because they self-consciously examine the audience's perceptions of textual violence, *The Magic Toyshop*, *Blonde*, and *Disgrace* will each aid in further exploring how readers can interact both sympathetically and sadistically with fictional women.

Angela Carter's *The Magic Toyshop* is the earliest work explored in this dissertation, and, emerging at the dawn of the second-wave feminism, it marks the beginning of self-reflective investigation into the erotic violence that plagues so many of literature's great heroines. Whereas later works can draw upon readers' familiarity with poststructuralist hermeneutics, *The Magic Toyshop* relies more overtly, or, rather, more ostentatiously, on postmodern tropes of self-consciousness. *The Magic Toyshop* serves as a perfect jumping-off point to explore the concept of the sadistic reader in part because its characters stand in for each player in the complex system of identification detailed above. The novel lays out the roles of heroine, author and reader in the form of three characters—Melanie, her puppet-master uncle, and a voyeuristic love-interest respectively—operating within a gothic household. Melanie, a fifteen-year-old orphan, views herself through a pointedly literary lens; she is an avid reader who does not know how to self-identify: is she the doomed heroine? The author constructing her doomed fate? Or is she a passive witness to the story that plays out around her? Her internal struggle both to construct and to interpret her own coming-of-age story offers fertile ground for Carter to deconstruct the sadism at play in novelistic heroine-ism.

Joyce Carol Oates's biographical novel *Blonde* turns the focus away from the intimate, domestic space of literature and considers how mass-market audiences fetishistically consume the eroticized, doomed heroine, here embodied in Marilyn Monroe. The novel's (in)famous heroine lacks agency or selfhood—indeed, she seems barely capable of responding to her victimization—and yet what she lacks in characterization she makes up for in iconography. Giving a fictionalized account of Marilyn Monroe's life, *Blonde* draws readers into the luscious fantasy of the film star while implicating consumers of such fantasy. Oates allows readers to exploit Norma Jean and, at the same time, to witness her exploitation at the hands of the men around her; as a result, the text forces readers to confront their own role in the paradoxical celebration of and violent reaction against female sexuality. As readers slowly recognize their own lust for Norma Jean's destruction, they can identify their participation in and complicity with pop-culture, rather than literary, forms of reading.

Chapter four steps back even further to consider the sadistic reader within a globalized literary marketplace. This chapter, which examines Coetzee's *Disgrace* and the body of literary criticism it has generated, attempts to understand rape's contribution to textual constructions of gender and race in the emerging global literary market. The reader discussed here is not the implied reader constructed by the text, as in the previous chapters, but real book and literary critics who have written about the novel across the English-speaking world. As a South African work widely read internationally, and made even more famous by Coetzee's winning the Nobel Prize shortly after its publication, *Disgrace* provides a good illustration of the international politics of reading. The novel's protagonist who is a white male writer/critic conversant in Western culture, but who fails

in his ability to read the complex interplay of sex and race that makes up his daily life. David Lurie is in a sense a stand-in for the novel's own reader, who is forced, through textual omission and misdirection, to "misread" the rape of Lurie's daughter. Lucy's rape is a personal trauma that becomes encoded as collective trauma: it marks the racial strife of a nation still struggling with its own history. Thus readers can take pleasure in making meaning out of Lucy's rape, and her suffering is the site of hermeneutic pleasure.

By looking at novels from Britain, the United States, and South Africa, I hope to demonstrate that the process of sadistic reading is not limited by national borders, and is perpetuated in the literatures that have been most influenced by the early English novel. Moreover, English-language novels currently circulate globally: the international publishing market allows books that do not need translation to travel between Anglophone nations with relative ease, and as a result there are still common points of influence on authors who partake in a globalized literary culture. Each novel takes on a national characteristic, and interacts with the culture of its own place and time. However, as the novels, set in 1960's London, 1950's Hollywood, and post-Apartheid Capetown, reflect the violence within their given milieus, they also consider the artistic and literary traditions that helps structure their violent narratives. The classic literary heritage so significant to the British setting of *The Magic Toyshop* gives way to the American mass-culture examined in Oates's pseudo-pulp depictions of Marilyn Monroe in *Blonde*. Coetzee in turn examines the transnational movement of literary tropes and political voices. Taken together, these novels demonstrate how sadistic reading plays out for contemporary readers of Anglophone literature.

Chapter Two

Authorial Sadism and the Ambivalent Reader

in Angela Carter's *The Magic Toyshop*

British author Angela Carter (1940-1992) is perhaps best known for the revisionary fairy tales she wrote in the 1970's and 80's. In her most famous work, *The Bloody Chamber* (1979), Carter retells the classic French *contes de fées*, drawing upon the tradition's darker themes to illuminate the latent sexual violence inherent in classic stories of heroineism. *The Magic Toyshop*, written in 1967, is in many ways a precursor to Carter's later retellings—Carter called the story a “baleful fairy tale”²—in its self-reflexive examination of gender narratives and sexual politics. *The Magic Toyshop* presents a classic narrative of the young heroine thrust out into the world and forced to confront those who would do her harm; by employing familiar fairy-tale conventions, Carter exposes the literary influences that young female readers might use to shape their own coming-of-age narratives. The novel's heroine calls on her extensive knowledge of literary heroineism to construct meaning from the sexual dangers that become present as she enters adolescence.

Allegorically representing the triangulated relationship between reader, author, and heroine, *The Magic Toyshop* explores the sadomasochistic elements of the reading process. The story follows Melanie, a fifteen-year old girl who is abruptly orphaned and, along with her younger brother and sister, sent to live with her estranged uncle on the outskirts of London. In Uncle Philip's cavernous, dilapidated home lives an unhappy family made up of Philip's wife, Maggie, and her two younger brothers, Francie and

² See *Notes on the Gothic Mode*

Finn, all of whom suffer under the thumb of the tyrannical toymaker. Melanie is horrified at the home's squalor and is terrorized by her uncle, but soon grows close to her in-laws and even begins a reluctant romance with Finn. In the following chapter, I examine how the novel's central characters fit into the reading allegory: Melanie plays the heroine always aware of her representational status; Philip is the puppet-master author who controls the actions around him; and Finn is the reader who witnesses Melanie's journey and, eventually, becomes a key actor within the narrative. By examining how these three characters represent the comingling of author, reader, and text, I elucidate a complex process of identification that allows for a reading pleasure that is at once sympathetic and sadistic.

Angela Carter's Sadeian Women

Angela Carter's thematic preoccupation with sadism and Sade is well documented. Her works treating sexuality and violence have received attention from feminist critics ranging from anti-pornography activists who accuse her of perpetuating misogynist filth to third-wave deconstructionists who champion her gender play. In *The Sadeian Woman and the Ideology of Pornography*, published the same year as *The Bloody Chamber*, Carter notoriously confronts depictions of sexual violence through a re-evaluation of the Marquis de Sade's works. Carter ambivalently celebrates Sade for his frank representation of sex as a form of domination, an expression of power. In the "polemical preface" Carter invents the concept of the "moral pornographer," an artist who represents a "world of absolute sexual license for all the genders, and projects a model of the way such a world might work. A moral pornographer might use

pornography as a critique of current relations between the sexes” (19). She goes on to suggest that in *Justine* Sade presents just such a model by creating a woman whose body exists for reasons beyond giving pleasure to and bearing children for men. Sade successfully breaks down myths surrounding the female body by disavowing the equation of female sexuality with its reproductive function. In depicting a shocking egalitarian sexuality, *Justine* perhaps unintentionally unveils the inequality that exists between men and women.

The Sadeian Woman offers insight into Carter’s oeuvre as a whole. Much of her work depicts violently erotic encounters in lyrical prose, representing an aestheticized brutality that inspires both pleasure and disgust for readers. *The Magic Toyshop*, published in 1967, was Carter’s second novel, but in it we already see the themes of violation and morbid eroticism that appear throughout her later novels. As is true of the entire oeuvre, *The Magic Toyshop* is invested in what Carter famously called the “demythologizing business,” that is, the enterprise of shattering long-held beliefs about gender and sexuality.³ In this sense, the novel’s foray into sadism—its terrorized heroine and inevitable “rape”—are “moral” because they are intended to unsettle an oppressive status quo.

The Sadeian Woman drew heat from anti-pornography activists like Andrea Dworkin and has been used as a basis for accusing Carter of celebrating misogynist sadism in her own works. Though her work is explicitly feminist and, as Carter repeatedly claimed, intended to dismantle gender constructions, Carter has been accused of actively reconstructing the patriarchal sexual mythos she seeks to destroy. Robert

³³ See *Notes from the Front Line* p. 38 for Carter’s explanation of the “demythologizing business.”

Clark describes her writing as “feminism in male chauvinist drag” which cannot offer any alternative to patriarchal violence. Clark takes issue with

her fascination with violent eroticism and her failure to find any alternative basis on which to construct a feminine identity. In so far then as Carter’s novels offer a knowledge of patriarchy they may be said to do so in ways that reproduce the consciousness they recognize as unhappy...Many of Carter’s readers will therefore find themselves becoming what they are in everyday life, distraught witnesses of depravity, and encouraged to get what pleasure they can from their own sickness.

(159)

For critics like Clark, all representations of sexualized violence are pornographic because they depict the same fundamental act as Sade’s works; context does not change the result.

The problem articulated in this debate is at the heart of my dissertation: if a writer depicts sexualized violence for the purpose of analysis rather than arousal, will s/he inevitably create a work that exploits the woman’s body, and if so, is bodily exploitation always inexcusable? As Clark demonstrates, the reader is implicated in this issue because the potential for an audience’s pleasure is present regardless of authorial intent. Readers do, as Clark states, find themselves in the position of witness, and our learned response to erotically charged violence, or threats of violence, is to take pleasure in the narrative tension produced. Although such literary pleasure may not be as disturbing or politically charged as sexual arousal at the sight of a woman’s violated body, it nevertheless derives gratification from that same problematic scene.

When Clark complains that Carter refuses to find an alternate female identity that is not predicated on victimhood, he articulates a wider feminist discomfort with any

return to the misogynist canon. For Carter, however, there is a chance to dismantle the master's house using the master's tools: self-conscious literature—texts that present awareness of their own status as a literary object—has liberating possibilities if it reflects upon its own oppressive mechanism. *The Magic Toyshop* is by no means a pornographic, or even explicitly erotic, work, but Carter's idea of the "moral pornographer" applies here because the text recycles patriarchal tropes to provide pleasure for the reader while critiquing the representation of female sexuality in British literature and art.

Self-Consciousness and the Female Gothic

In her effort to uncover the assertions of power inherent in literary sexual representation, Carter creates a Gothic genre pastiche, for while *The Magic Toyshop* features intertexts alluding to a variety of literary traditions, the entire novel follows a classic Gothic structure. In a 1975 essay entitled "Notes on the Gothic Mode," Carter humorously laments the label critics thrust upon her after *The Magic Toyshop* was published. "I could be conveniently categorized as 'Gothic' and thus outside the mainstream, which at that time in Britain seemed to concern itself entirely with the marital adventures of television producers" (131). Working against the mainstream, Carter views her authorial role as political, her prose a forum to critique those prosaic, and oppressive, "marital adventures." Obviously disdainful of the conservatism in contemporary literature, Carter claims that the Gothic, with its hysterical pitch and deep history, is an ideal tool to mirror back the grotesqueries hidden within social order. Its shrill notes ensure that the Gothic is always self-conscious of its own literariness, and is therefore always subversive.

I am interested, then, in a fiction that takes full cognizance of its status as non-being—that is, a fiction that remains aware that it is of its own nature, which is a different nature than human, tactile immediacy. I really do believe that a fiction that is absolutely self-conscious of itself as a different form of human experience than reality (that is, not a logbook of events) can help to transform reality itself. DAF de Sade: “Art is the perpetual immoral subversion of the established order.” (*Notes on the Gothic* 133)

In *The Magic Toyshop*, Carter builds upon the Gothic self-consciousness expounded here to create a novel that presents itself as something wholly literary, a work of fiction that does not intend to mimic reality but rather to reflect upon literary form and function. That Carter names the Gothic mode an ideal style for her postmodern project can explain her reliance on this tradition; and though Carter did not view this work as a “truly Gothic novel” (*Notes on the Gothic* 132) *The Magic Toyshop* mimics all the conventions ascribed to what Ellen Moers, nearly a decade after this novel was published, coins the “female Gothic.”

The female Gothic originated with Ann Radcliffe in the eighteenth century and often adheres closely to Radcliffe’s original formula. Robert Miles perfectly sums up the female Gothic plot as “an orphan heroine in search of an absent mother, pursued by her feudal (patriarchal) father or his substitute, with the whole affair monitored by an impeccable but ineffectual suitor” (43). Radcliffe’s writings feature the “explained supernatural,” a brand of horror in which seemingly paranormal phenomena always find a rational explanation. Perhaps the most famous example of the explained supernatural, made notorious in Jane Austen’s *Northanger Abbey*, appears in Radcliffe’s *The Mysteries*

of Udolpho when young heroine Emily St. Aubert peeks under a black veil and sees what she believes to be a rotting corpse. Many pages later, she discovers this body is only a wax figure. Emily's initial response is one of terror followed by persistent dread, a state that prevents the reader from completely dismissing the entire episode as ridiculous or farcical: Emily's fear is based on a misunderstanding, but her terror is real enough and, given her position as prisoner of her uncle's tyrannically ruled castle, understandable. Radcliffean horror is thus psychological, based on the heroine's fears as she finds herself in compromising circumstances. The threat of rape permeates both male and female traditions of the Gothic, but within the latter, the combination of sexual peril and explained supernatural expresses how terrifying the prospect of sexual assault is for young women. The haunted castle and the threatening patriarch create a claustrophobia in readers that mimics the dread of what inevitably will happen when the young virgin is forced to grow up.

The dread spreads beyond bodily anxiety to fears over the nature of reality and the woman's place within her social orbit. It is this situational horror that renders the female gothic a useful jumping-off point for feminist critical inquiry. Moers's original analysis of the female Gothic focused on the genre as an expression of women's fears of entrapment within their bodies and within domestic spaces. Miles has explained that Radcliffe's writings give voice to a voiceless population, as she "projects the struggle to maintain her voice, as a female writer, into the body of her texts in the displaced form of the heroine under threat" (45). In other words, the female gothic details the struggle of the eighteenth-century woman to exert control over her own representation. "The poles of her heroines' lives are poetic expression and live burial," (45) two complementary

extremes that demonstrate the precarious position for a woman who wishes to assert her own will.

Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik have noted that in the latter half of the twentieth century, the female Gothic migrates from the foreign castle to the domestic space, the horror of which expresses certain middle-class women's anxieties about "live burial within the family unit" (100). *The Magic Toyshop* is a prime example of the twentieth-century female gothic. Like Radcliffe's heroines, the innocent and virginal Melanie is orphaned at the tender age of fifteen and banished from her bourgeois idyll to the haunting, dark home of her tyrannical uncle Philip. Melanie and her oblivious younger siblings, Jonathan and Victoria, are left penniless and alone, and so Melanie has no means of escape. Although Philip does not directly pursue Melanie, his threat is clearly sexual. The novel's "ineffectual suitor" is Finn, an unwashed and uncultured apprentice to Philip who suffers from Philip's brutality more than any other family member.

Within this Gothic setting, Melanie struggles with fears over what her future will bring, knowing that she is on the brink of entering sexual adulthood but terrified of the events that will lead to her marriage and subsequent deflowering. Early in the novel she thinks, "I wish I was forty and it was all over and I knew what was going to happen to me!" (6). The future Melanie frets over does not extend beyond her imagined life as a wife and mother, but her connubial visions consistently foreground the claustrophobia of domesticity, just as they indicate that, for her, the idea of marriage is always entwined with the loss of virginity. She prays, "Please God, let me get married. Or let me have sex" (8), not sure how to separate the two. As desperate as Melanie is to lose her virginity and

become a wife, the shadowy future scares her; she fears sexual maturity even as she daydreams about its approach.

Melanie's initial explorations of her burgeoning sexuality end in what she refers to as her "wedding-dress night," when she secretly tries on her mother's bridal wear. Sarah Gamble has explored Carter's representation of the wedding dress as a Gothic ornament. The dress, while signifying purity, "acquires meaning only in the context of its imminent defilement, becoming emblematic of endings rather than beginnings." (Gamble Ch. 3). Melanie expresses this idea when she considers the dress a "strange way to dress up just in order to lose your virginity." The gown also seems to be a shroud to Melanie, who wonders whether her mother would "be laid out in it or wear it up to heaven?" (12). That night Melanie wanders the garden at midnight while wearing the dress and locks herself out of her home, indicating that, by donning the bride's clothes she has begun her separation from her family's idyll. Scrambling up a tree to get back inside, Melanie falls, ripping the dress and staining it with blood that symbolizes both her future deflowering and her mother's death: her parents perish in a plane crash on the same night she puts on the wedding dress. According to Gamble, Carter exposes "the apparatus of power that underlies the institution of marriage, demonstrating that...the wedding dress really is a shroud, since its assumption signals the death of an autonomous female subjectivity." In other words, marriage is equated with sex, which in turn is equated with death.

David Punter, who has written extensively about the Gothic genre, best describes Carter's use of the form: "Carter ironically suggests that the Gothic vision is in fact an accurate account of life, of the ways we project fantasies onto the world and then stand back in horror when we see them come to life" (398). Taking over her mother's role as

bride only to find herself bloodied and terrified, Melanie projects her fears about leaving her parents behind; this nightmarish usurping of the maternal role then magically makes her mother disappear. The rest of the novel confronts Melanie's fears about the end of childhood and the start of a sexually mature life in which she will be reduced to either a sexual object or, worse, a housewife. We see this terror in her "prophetic vision" of a life with Finn after marriage: "There would always be pervasive squalor and dirt and mess and shabbiness, always, forever and ever. And babies crying and washing to be done and toast burning all the rest of her life" (177). Her daydreams and her nightmares converge at the same endpoint of marriage and sex, both of which are as alluring as they are terrifying. But Melanie has nothing beyond her imagination to construct her sexuality, because her knowledge of the world is limited to what she has read. As we will see, Melanie perfects Carter's mandate for a literature that is self-conscious; she is a heroine who invents her own identity based on the culture from which she emerges, a world of books and women's magazines that conspire to predict her coming of age.

The Self-made Heroine

Readers' relationship to Melanie is always mediated; from our first introduction, we view Melanie through the veil of literary and painterly poses. "The summer she was fifteen, Melanie discovered she was made of flesh and blood. O, my America, my new found land"(1). The novel's first sentences place Melanie's masturbatory self-discovery within an English literary tradition, as the quotation from John Donne's "To His Mistress Going to Bed" is not set apart or highlighted as a quote *per se*. The palimpsest created when Donne's words are subsumed into Melanie's narrative breaks down the boundaries

between text and intertext; the novel declares that it emerges from and is entwined with the British literary canon. On her “wedding-dress night,” Melanie decides to go outside into an “enchanted land, where the corn was orient and immortal” (14). Here, yet another metaphysical poet, Thomas Traherne, scripts Melanie’s fantasies. Her internal monologue occurs in the words of masterful authors she has read in school, where, typically self-romanticizing, “all the young girls adored Donne” (193).

Elizabeth Gargano has connected Melanie’s literariness with Carter’s demythologizing project:

As Melanie discovers her sexuality, then, she also unwittingly uncovers her “textuality.” Enveloped in a dense network of allusions, her encounter with her own physicality is less an individual discovery than a cultural rite of passage, illuminating what Carter has called in another context, “the social fiction of . . . femininity.” (62)

Melanie does uncover a hegemonic inscription into femininity, but she is less aware than Gargano would suggest. Melanie has so thoroughly appropriated the language of the male gaze that her adolescent process of identity-formation becomes a parody of Western art history. She poses “in attitudes, holding things,” dressing herself up as a Pre-Raphaelite muse, or a Toulouse-Lautrec chorus girl. “After she read *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, she secretly picked forget-me-nots and stuck them in her pubic hair” (2). She is a cultured student without original ideas; she spends the entire summer in her room fantasizing about her “phantom bridegroom” and their wedding night, her sexual imagination limited by the middle class values of her bourgeois upbringing. Sex will occur only after her walk down the aisle in a white dress, most likely on a honeymoon in Cannes or Venice.

She insists that her future “must be fancy” (7), but she does not express visceral desire, only the romanticized fantasies of a stereotypical schoolgirl.

Told in the limited third person, the narrative often blurs the lines between narrator’s voice and Melanie’s thoughts, particularly when describing Melanie’s desires. “Melanie was fifteen years old, beautiful and had never even been out with a boy, when, for example, Juliet had been married and dead of love at fourteen” (9). Here it appears that Melanie is narrating her own story, as the comparison to Juliet clearly comes from the girl and not from an impartial third person. Blurring the boundary between narrator and heroine, the novel emphasizes Melanie’s self-dramatizations; she is a self-invented heroine starring in an eclectic series of fantasies constructed from her own life. Just as she later performs the role of Leda, Melanie is always performing the role of main character in a coming-of-age story. The narrator’s voice is essentially Melanie’s voice, and Melanie’s storytelling ability depends entirely upon the literature she has read.

Melanie is thus a heroine born from the reading act; while she is of course the protagonist of this novel, she invites us to view her through the literary culture that she loves. Stuck in her new, unhappy home, “she read and read and read” the books of her childhood, which she “clung to as if they were her lifebelt.” Her passion for books and art establishes her as a model for her audience, the readers of *The Magic Toyshop*. She projects herself into the stories she reads, identifies with the representations of women, and in turn makes sense of her own life through theirs. By posing as different heroines, she performs the reciprocity of reading, the interplay between the text and the readers’ fantasies and projections. Ironically, as a portrait of the reader, Melanie becomes less sympathetic to the reader, or at least more difficult to identify with, because she provides

a shifting set of fantasies in place of fixed characteristics. She is the heroine-as-heroine, a girl enacting the coming-of-age story rather than a girl who is, in fact, coming of age.

In this way, Melanie is reminiscent of the reading girls Simone de Beauvoir describes in *The Second Sex*:

When a girl comes to grasp herself as a woman in a patriarchal world, that her world is therefore limited, she responds by indulging in “morose and romantic daydreams.” Little girls “look on themselves as heroines in novels, admire themselves, and complain.” Their narcissism is so tied to romantic playacting that they even “cry in front of a mirror in order to double the pleasure.” (310-311)

Melanie’s morose girlish fantasies are better understood if they are seen as a response to her growing awareness of her gendered position within the larger social order. Her limited opportunities as a young woman in 1960s London translate into her limited models for self-construction. And, as in De Beauvoir’s model, Melanie indulges in one of the only fantasies available to her, that of the victimized, weeping girl. As Paulina Palmer explains, “The roles to which Melanie is introduced, in her uncle’s toy theater or in other episodes in the novel, include wood-nymph, bride, or victim of rape. In representing them Carter ... foregrounds the ambiguities between the romantic images of femininity reproduced in culture and art, and the facts of sexual violence.” (Palmer 184) Those romantic images suggest a narrow scope of possibilities for Melanie, and, further, they aestheticize violence by turning the morose heroine into a beautiful creature.

Girls like Melanie, who gain self-esteem by fashioning themselves after literary figures, begin to fetishize their own pain because they understand that pain increases their beauty, and beauty is their most valued feature. The reality of sexual violence is alluded

to but conveniently avoided in the romantic narratives Melanie encounters, and so by playacting the wood-nymph/rape victim, Melanie can approach her fears without actually encountering them. This aestheticization of pain makes Melanie's real-life difficulties seem desirable, and so her stories become a tool for managing unfamiliar circumstance. On her first morning in Philip's home, she awakes in confusion. "Melanie opened her eyes and saw thorns among roses, as if she woke from a hundred years' night, *la belle au bois dormant*, imprisoned in a century's steadily burgeoning garden. But it was only her new wallpaper, which was printed with roses." (53). The dream-state in which Melanie imagines herself Sleeping Beauty occurs even in the waking hours; as Melanie begins her new life, she draws on literary models to clarify her burgeoning identity. Lamenting her life in her uncle's home, Melanie thinks, "Eve must have felt like this on the way east out of Eden. And it was Eve's fault" (94). Again, Melanie expresses desire through culturally familiar narratives that highlight the despairing, romanticized woman. Like Juliet or Eve or the imprisoned Sleeping Beauty, Melanie sees herself as a heroine bound to suffer, and with each allusion the reader is instructed to do the same. Presumably the reader is familiar with the same narratives as Melanie, and we, too, know how the story goes for the likes of Eve. Melanie's punishment is never a doubt, for she herself tells us she is stuck in Bluebeard's castle.

Carter admitted that Melanie was always meant to suffer, telling one interviewer, "She's a bourgeois virgin, a good screamer, like the Hammer films I enjoyed as a child...She's quite silly and over privileged, there seems no reason she shouldn't find out about real life" (Kenyon 27). Carter's disdain is obvious: Melanie is a fatuous girl whose innocence and complacency inspire contempt in the author. The Gothic—indeed, all

horror fiction—might be seen as masochistic for women readers, who find their textual counterparts often featured as victims. Carter’s quote suggests a more sadistic desire inherent in the form; she wants to make this bourgeois virgin scream, to force her protagonist to confront the violent and unpleasant realities of adult life. Why a young woman’s innocence evokes such violent anger remains a difficult question to answer, but the familiarity of Melanie’s violent induction into adulthood suggests that Carter’s sentiments are far from idiosyncratic.

As Melanie finds herself more and more threatened by the Gothic horrors of the house, she falls into a hysteria that culminates in one hallucinatory image, as Melanie opens a kitchen drawer to find a severed hand.

It was a soft-looking, plump little hand with pretty, tapering fingers the nails of which were tinted with a faint, pearly lacquer. There was a thin silver ring of the type small girls wear on the fourth finger. It was the hand of a child who goes to dancing class and wears frilled petticoats with knickers to match...it appeared the hand had been hewn from its arm with a knife or axe that was very blunt.

“I am going out of my mind,” she said aloud. “Bluebeard was here.” (118)

This scene is reminiscent of Emily’s peek under the veil in Radcliffe’s *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, the aforementioned moment of psychological horror in which the protagonist projects her own fears onto the wax figure. The hand Melanie hallucinates is the hand of her previous life, of the girl she once was, that child who went to dancing class and dreamed about her wedding band. Melanie has been bluntly severed from her family home, and this gory phantom hand represents her grief and anxiety at having lost any

physical connection to her childhood. Invoking Bluebeard as the culprit, Melanie places herself in a fairy tale told to children, though she assigns herself the adult role of Bluebeard's bride.

Paulina Palmer argues that the severed hand symbolizes "the elements of violence at the heart of the patriarchal family unit" (184). It is true that the "real life" Carter insists Melanie learn about is a world in which rape and assault occur within the home, but the severed hand also marks Melanie's shift in perspective, a decisive cutting off from her previous identity. Taking comfort from the event in her new family, she begins to identify with Maggie, Francie and Finn despite their lower class Irish background. After this scene, Melanie adopts a more practical attitude towards her surroundings and indulges less in idle fantasy. The hand's horror thus marks a violent shift into adulthood, where Melanie must defend herself from the very real horrors of the patriarchal family unit.

Melanie and Sexual Fantasy

The novel begins with Melanie's first sexual exploration and continues to follow her growing awareness of what it means to be a sexually mature woman, a journey that traces the gap between the narratives she has encountered and her real-life experiences. Melanie wants to play the romantic heroine but continuously confronts the unpleasant reality of what it means to be an adult woman; with each new prosaic encounter, however, she clings to the artistic ideal. When Finn first kisses Melanie, in the pleasure gardens Finn allusively names "the Waste Land," she tempers her revulsion by imagining herself in a scene out of a new-wave British film. "She wished someone was watching

them, to appreciate them, or that she herself was watching them, Finn kissing this black-haired girl, from a bush a hundred yards away. Then it would seem romantic” (106).

With her “phantom bridegroom” still in mind, Melanie rejects the unwashed and unkempt Finn but uses his kiss to imagine a cinematic alternative. It is striking that Melanie would prefer to view her life from the outside than live it in the moment. Catherine Martin’s analysis of Melanie helps explain this distancing: “Melanie is constantly objectified by male discourse, and her body appropriated by other people’s fantasies. Her own pleasure is mediated by male fantasy, as she understands her body through artistic and literary representations of women” (16). Rather than dwell on her physical response—either positive or negative—to this kiss, Melanie focuses on the image the kiss projects to an unnamed viewer, and so reveals her allegiance to the male gaze. The events that comprise Melanie’s life are only meaningful to her if they seem romantic to an observer, and any pleasure she finds in sex stems from how much pleasure her image provides for that observer. As Martin points out, Melanie views herself through the fantasies she has already learned in art and literature, and she seems less like a self-infatuated school girl when juxtaposed with the men around her. Philip and Finn construct out of Melanie their own fantasies that disregard who the real girl is. In some ways, it is unimportant who this “real” Melanie might be, because, as she has already learned, her role is to enact the fantasies of those around her.

Philip’s fantasy represents the dominant male discourse that Melanie is subjected to and, as we see in her early playacting, that she herself enjoys. Asking Melanie to dress up as Leda for his puppet reenactment of her rape, Philip recreates in his niece the idealized virgin. She wears his costume with relish: “Melanie would be a nymph

crowned with daisies once again; he saw her as once she had seen herself. In spite of everything, she was flattered” (141). Finn, too, offers his interpretation of Melanie, which he expresses in his secret portraits. In his paintings, Melanie

looked very scrubbed. She looked like a virgin who cleaned her teeth after every meal and delighted to take great bites from rosey apples. Her black hair exploded about her head in great Art Nouveau ripples...He did not see her precisely as she saw herself but it could have been very much worse. (153-154)

Neither interpretation accurately describes Melanie the girl; instead the two men rely upon their respective artistic traditions to exaggerate the characteristics that suit their own desires. Melanie has her own romantic fantasies that do not accord to a high art tradition, but these are disdained by Finn—and thus, in effect, by the reader—as being trite or bourgeois. Melanie’s attempts to express her conflicted feelings for Finn sound artificial, pushing Finn to note that she “must have read it in a woman’s magazine.” When Melanie attempts again to speak her mind, claiming, “I think I want to be in love with you but I don’t know how,” Finn repeats, “There you go again, talking like a woman’s magazine” (155). Finn’s words demonstrate contempt for Melanie’s naiveté, the same contempt Carter expressed towards the screaming heroines of Hammer films. Melanie’s pretensions at maturity are coded as silly and girlish, as opposed to artistic and male, because they stem from feminine popular culture. In this moment of dismissal, when Melanie’s attempts at communication appear fatuous, Carter allies herself and her reader with the masculine tradition that forces Melanie back into the role of the object, rather than subject, of sexual fantasy.

Authorial Sadism in Philip's Tyranny

Though Melanie relies upon fantasy to make sense of her world, Philip is the novel's fantasist *par excellence*, unable to recognize a difference between reality and fiction, between his puppets and the humans that surround him. Seeking to control every aspect of his household, Philip populates his home with automatons more life-like than the human inhabitants. Filled with *trompe l'oeil*, toy creatures, and masks, his London house represents a made-up universe of which Philip is the god-creator. Even his wife's mysterious affliction—she is struck mute on her wedding day—seems a response to her husband's extraordinary powers of control: he likes silent women, and suddenly his wife loses all capacity for speech. Melanie notes that the distinction between reality and fantasy strains under Philip's masterful hand. During her first visit to his workshop, she suffers grim visions of “men dwarfed by toys and puppets.” As Finn turns cartwheels to amuse her, “he made a whizzing plaything of his devilish masked self... landing on his hands before her, his upside-down false face obscured by hair *both false and real*” (68, my italics). The toyshop's titular magic is its ability to unite truth and fiction, to make playthings of people, to transform the inhabitants into creatures simultaneously false and real.

Philip is an author in the very real sense that he scripts plays to showcase his puppets. Performing only for his family, he is uninterested in audience, and instead creates art for art's sake, which is to say, to gratify his own artistic impulses. Preferring puppets to people, his reactions to human failure are outsized: in one moment of rage he maims his assistant, Finn, for not correctly maneuvering a puppet. Forcing Melanie to

play Leda to his puppet Zeus, he meets Melanie's human characteristics with derision and anger: "I wanted my Leda to be a little girl. Your tits are too big," he tells Melanie while fitting her costume (143). Her human form—perhaps more tellingly, her womanly body—poses a threat to his carefully constructed fantasy and thus to his authoritarian control over his environment. His resentment reaches its peak when Melanie responds to her play-acted rape with real terror; smacking Melanie, he accuses her, "You were melodramatic. Puppets don't overact. You spoiled the poetry" (167).

Melanie, however, is doomed to spoil the poetry. Sadistic fantasy operates as a cycle that continually repeats the moments leading to punishment: it is anticipatory rather than truly punitive, its pleasure lying not in an end result but rather in the promise of still more pain to come. Melanie is always violable but never completely violated; she lives under constant threat of violence, but evades the worst. Caught in a recursive cycle that reinforces her powerlessness, she continually encounters strange, frightening scenarios that terrify her without doing real harm. One evening while walking up the stairs, she is immobilized by her fear of the dog, which may or may not be a toy. "She wondered insanely, 'Which dog is it, the real one or the painted one?' At last she stepped over it and went down, half thinking it might snap her leg off in passing. But it stayed stock still. It watched her, unwinking..." (83). As the border between Philip's puppet theater, toy shop, and home blur—the theater and shop are the basement and first floor of his house, the toys and puppets litter his home—he converts the domestic space into the site of fantasy. Within this home at once real and imaginary, the violent threats Melanie senses are always imminent but never occurring. In this sense, she dwells in the house of sadistic

fantasy where the moment of punishment is a constant anticipation, the mounting tension never satisfied.

Even when Melanie's punishment does occur, it is only playacted. As she is "raped" by the puppet-swan, the climactic moment of her deflowering both does and does not occur—she experiences a traumatic violation, but she remains intact and, essentially, unharmed. As Melanie waits clueless (and cueless) on stage, Philip reads aloud stage directions that Melanie must follow: he literally scripts her actions. After ordering her about, he unleashes his enormous puppet-swan, which is harmless and silly, a ridiculous toy, but which nevertheless presents a terrifying menace. The swan "mounts" Melanie in a simulation of rape that feels to her real, and her dissociative reaction follows a course familiar to real trauma survivors.

She was hallucinated; she felt herself not herself, wrenched from her own personality, watching this whole fantasy from another place; and, in this staged fantasy, anything was possible. Even that the swan, the mocked up swan, might assume reality and rape this girl in a blizzard of white feathers. The swan towered over the black-haired girl who was Melanie and who was not. (166)

The strangely constructed phrase "she was hallucinated" indicates Melanie's shifting sense of subjectivity. Both hallucinating and hallucination, she imagines herself outside her body while recognizing that that body is, at the moment of the "rape," her uncle's invention. Enacting the rape scene, she becomes a fictional character subject to the whims of the fantasist, the director/author who is her uncle. Finally transformed into the wood nymph she dreamed herself to be, Melanie can acknowledge the horror of a role that leaves her powerless.

At the tea following the show, Melanie views her uncle as an alchemist: “He could also turn wood into swans...He was heavy as Saturn” (168). Her planetary simile invokes the Roman god of gods, the father of her fictitious rapist. Philip consumes space like a menacing deity. “Everything was flattened to paper cut-outs by the personified gravity of Uncle Philip as he ate his tea. She felt she cast no shadow” (169). No longer content to be an artistic creation or “paper cut-out” without weight, Melanie has begun to understand what it means to be a feminine icon invented by a man.

Here Carter portrays that author as a domineering figure so invested in art he disregards humanity. Because the author cannot tell the difference between art and cruelty, he cannot assess the effect of his work. Melanie experiences her play-acted rape as a traumatic event that, while not “true”, is nevertheless a real moment of fear in her life. All Philip sees in her response is “overacting,” but Melanie’s histrionics call attention once again to the blurred line between fiction and reality as it applies to scenes of violence; though art is representational, it can have a real-world effect on those who take part in its creation and reception. For Melanie (and, as we will see, for Finn) the puppet show demonstrates Philip’s complete control over the construction of their reality. Melanie is defined by the cultural artifacts she consumes, using those narratives as a mirror to reflect her developing sense of self; in turn, when she enters the realm of fiction, she experiences real terror.

“Go up and rehearse a rape:” Trauma and Melanie’s Sexual Coming-of-Age

Melanie’s response to her playacted rape offers insight into the difficulty of identifying with the victimized heroine. She has been acculturated to identify with the

wood-nymph Leda, and her adolescent fantasies surrounding this identity are reconfirmed by her uncle's "flattering" costuming. During the swan's attack, however, Melanie dissociates and becomes her own spectator, watching the scene from outside her body. The pseudo-rape constitutes a very real trauma for Melanie, and she is unable to process the events while they occur. Traumatic events are those that cannot be metabolized into one's understanding of the world, and rape survivors often report dissociating during the event.⁴ As Melanie demonstrates, one cannot *be* the abjected body, even if one is, in fact, being abjected. Melanie, who has thus far projected herself into the heroine's role, can only survive this climactic moment by adopting the role of witness. A reader's mechanism of identification follows a similar trajectory; no matter how intensely the reader projects him/herself into the heroine, at a moment of abject violation, the reader can no longer imaginatively occupy the protagonist's body. A reader recognizes his/her own bodily integrity as a witness, as an intact bystander sitting in a chair comfortably reading, and so self-identifies as different from a protagonist undergoing the traumatic violation.

There is perhaps a question of why this moment is so traumatic for Melanie. Her "melodramatic" response is best understood when compared to her earlier reaction to Finn's kiss in the pleasure gardens. That moment is similarly theatrical, a scene staged by Finn, who takes on bird-like characteristics as he closes in on Melanie. He "raised his black p.v.c. arms and flapped them, cawing like a crow. Everything went black in the shocking folds of his embrace. She was very startled and near to sobbing" (105). Melanie

⁴ The trauma-response of survivors is covered in more detail in chapter four, in my discussion of Lucy's rape in J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*.

has a panic attack the moment the kiss turns slightly sexual: when Finn inserts his tongue in her mouth,

she choked and struggled, beating her fists against him, convulsed with horror at this sensual and intimate connection, this rude encroachment on her physical privacy. She swayed to and fro; she almost slipped on the ground but Finn kept hold of her no matter how hard she struck at him, lightly clasping her shoulders so that she would not fall. (106)

In both scenes, Melanie is overcome by a bird-like figure and physically revolts against the moment of bodily intrusion. Finn allows her to escape, whereas Philip's swan mounts her, pecks her, and terrorizes her until she faints, and yet the horror of the latter scene informs the former. Her outsized anxiety in both situations reminds us that the Gothic horror of the novel concerns her dread of sexual adulthood and is not linked to a realistic threat. Philip does not injure Melanie so much as exacerbate her anxieties by scripting menacing scenarios. Although he may not be present at each new terror, his authorial presence lurks in the background, most notably in her sexual interactions with Finn. Before the puppet production, Philip instructs Finn to rehearse with Melanie, thereby setting the scene for their consummation. But Finn fights back: he interrupts their erotic encounter, explaining,

Suddenly, I saw it all, when we were lying there. He's pulled our strings as if we were his puppets, and there I was, all ready to touch you up just as he wanted. He told me to rehearse Leda and the swan with you. Somewhere private. Like in your room, he said. Go up and rehearse a rape with Melanie in your

bedroom. Christ. He wanted me to do you and he set the scene. Ah, he's evil!

(152)

Finn's observation that Philip has "pulled their strings" places Melanie's sexuality within her uncle's all-consuming orbit. Philip tries to take Melanie's virginity by proxy twice, first through Finn, then through his puppet swan. In both instances his objective is, in Finn's words, to "pull her down," to "change and destroy" her.

It is in this exchange that Melanie presents Finn, and the reader, with an important question: Why? Why would Philip, who barely notices his family, want to indirectly rape his niece? Through his relationship to Melanie, the very flat character of Philip begins to round out, if only slightly. Philip's obsession is not his niece but his dead sister who abandoned him, and Melanie, like Finn, is merely the proxy. Resentful of his sister's socio-economic ascension after marriage as well as her subsequent flight to the suburbs, Philip punishes the daughter for the sins of the mother. His wife's incestuous relationship with her brother Francie doubles Philip's desire for his sister: within the Flowers family romance, brothers belong with sisters.

Philip's need for control is a foundational component of his sadism, and yet, as the narrative closes, Philip learns that he does not have absolute rule over his family. Striking terror in those around him through brutal violence allows him to maintain a sense of omnipotence that orders his life; in the absence of this power, Philip cannot go on. Philip's wife is carrying on an incestuous affair in his own home without his knowledge: his social and sexual control is an illusion, an elaborate game in which the players pretend to exist only for him. Upon discovering that his omnipotence is merely another fiction he has created for himself, he sees no other option than to burn down his

home, his life's work, and those who have betrayed him. If we think of Philip as an author, this loss of control is inevitable once a work has been completed; when a narrative closes, when the characters disappear and their continuing stories are unknown, an author relinquishes authority over his/her creation. *The Magic Toyshop* does not tell us what becomes of Melanie's extended family, and we can only guess if they have survived the fire. At the novel's conclusion, control shifts from the author to the reader, who now holds in his/her mind the characters' fates.

The sadistic impulse within Philip may be psychologically founded in his grief over his sister, but he never becomes a psychologically complete character. Like a shadowy author who looms over an artistic creation, Philip moves in and out, always a controlling presence but never a complete, realistic figure. Philip is an unsympathetic villain, and as such can demonstrate the authorial sadism without implicating the reader—we, after all, share no commonalities with this brute. Finn, however, offers us a site of sympathy, approval, and even outright identification. He thus takes on the role of the reader figure, a spectator who watches the action—watches Melanie—with a mix of curiosity, affection, and desire. The question surrounding Finn is to what extent he is complicit in Melanie's suffering, and, by extension, to what extent we as readers are complicit. Witnessing Melanie's new life in her uncle's house, he takes pleasure in looking at her, but how much pleasure does he find in her suffering, and how responsible is he for perpetuating her subordinate position? Caught between the all-powerful Philip and the clueless Melanie, Finn is something of a cipher, but in his ambiguity, he offers an opportunity to examine the ambiguous role of the reader as witness to the heroine's suffering.

Finn and the Ambivalent Reader

Perhaps because Finn remains an ambiguous figure, much of the critical debate over *The Magic Toyshop* concerns Finn's place in the social hierarchy. Whereas some critics read him as a patriarch-in-the-making, a young Philip, others see him as a victim of the status quo, allied with Melanie against his bellicose brother-in-law. How one interprets Finn defines his/her interpretation of the novel as a whole; those who see him as Phillip's true apprentice tend to read the novel pessimistically while those who identify with him interpret the novel as hopeful for a more gender-egalitarian future. Lucie Armitt, taking the former stance, writes, "All signs point towards Melanie's life with Finn following the same pattern as the other transactions. Finn and Philip...share a fascination with women as spectacular commodity...Right from day one, Finn controls Melanie's movements and appearance" (200). Indeed, Finn feels comfortable managing Melanie as soon as they arrive at Philip's home. He instructs her never to wear trousers because Philip will not like it, but it is still Finn, not Philip, making the demand. He is Philip's apprentice in more than toy-making, as he enforces Melanie's compliance with gender norms.

He put his hands on her shoulders and inspected her face closely; nodded as if he approved of it and began to unfasten her hair. Burning, she held her breath. She had never been so close to a young man before...He shook out her hair for her, took his own comb from his pocket (a gap-toothed, black comb, threaded with red hairs) and combed it out. He concentrated...

“Now you look pretty,” he said approvingly, running the palm of his hand over her head to give it a final shim. “We can have supper, now, and you’ll be the belle of the ball.” (46)

Finn demonstrates for the inexperienced Melanie how a young woman should interact with the opposite sex. He assumes authority over her body and she, in turn, passively allows him to dictate her hairstyle, dress, and comportment. And yet even in this scene a sense of equality develops between the two as his red hairs mingle with hers. He explains that he wants her to remove her hair from its “tortured plaits,” perhaps to liberate her from her uptight middle class strictures. Critic Jean Wyatt sees in Finn the possibility of alternative masculinity that can forge an “egalitarian and reciprocal” relationship to its feminine counterpart. Finn, equally a victim of Philip’s patriarchal tyranny, takes the first step towards revolution: after witnessing Melanie’s “rape,” he drunkenly chops up the puppet swan. Wyatt calls this beheading a symbolic castration in which Finn severs the phallic authority of patriarchal rule. He “refuses the masquerade of masculinity” and thereby “subverts the power relations of patriarchy” (562).

Finn’s subversion of patriarchy, however, is complicated by his desire to “have” Melanie. Not long after arriving at her uncle’s house, Melanie discovers a peep-hole in the wall between her room and Finn’s, through which Finn admittedly spies on her in various states of undress. Finn appears to be yet one more threatening masculine presence, playing out a stereotypically adolescent violation (peeping), but a violation nonetheless. Because he watches her undress while she is unable to consent, he asserts control over her: he dictates this sexualized activity, playing a Philip-esque omnipotent subject to her clueless object. Melanie, though, is no hapless victim. She, too, spies

through key-holes on her new Irish family. Upon discovering the hole in her own wall, she gazes into Finn's room to watch him walk on his hands. The reciprocal spying performs a similar feat, turning Finn's proprietary gaze on its head and allowing the reader to interpret a mutual objectification between prospective lovers. The difference between their reasons for spying, however, reminds us of the gendered bent to their interactions. Finn looks "because you [Melanie] are so beautiful," Melanie because she is overwhelmed and frightened by her unfamiliar surroundings.

Whether or not Finn is a subversive figure relies on his recognition and subsequent rejection of the "masquerade of masculinity" Wyatt describes. He, like Melanie, is a victim of a patriarchal imperialist culture that has left him powerless, but victimhood does not necessarily equal an alternative masculinity. To overthrow what Philip represents, Finn must knowingly relinquish his male privilege in favor of a reciprocal relationship with Melanie. Melanie does note from the beginning that Finn is adept at performing gender: "It was as if he had put on the quality of maleness like a flamboyant cloak. He was a tawny lion poised for the kill—and was she the prey?" (45). Any rejection of masculine authority depends upon a self-awareness of this performance; Finn demonstrates such insight when he refuses to kiss Melanie while rehearsing Leda's rape and thus repudiating the traditional role of male aggressor. The rehearsal, which culminates in the two toppling over one another and tumbling into each other's arms, is a parody of traditional seduction scenes that feature an innocent virgin chastely dodging her pursuer but expected to succumb to his power and her own desires. Finn interrupts the moment because he understands its threat to Melanie. He tells Melanie Philip sent him to fuck her so that "maybe you would have a baby and that would spite your father"

(153). Finn here recognizes that the predictable, theatrical seduction is not a moment of intimacy between two youths, but a dance choreographed by one patriarch (Philip) in competition with another (Melanie's father) for control over the family.

The playacting of a male predator/female prey seduction scene is clear enough to both parties, and neither is particularly eager to take part. Joanna Trevanna has noted that the prevalence of gendered performances in Carter's novels has led to a critical [Judith] "Butlerification" of Carter's work. Trevanna argues that, unlike Butler, Carter presents gender as a performance rather than as performative. "Carter theatrically presents the process of gender acquisition as being like that of an actor playing a role and thereby suggests a subject position prior to gender acquisition" (269). Melanie and Finn are prime examples characters who "put on" their masculinity and femininity but who do not wholly identify with their own performances. The characters self-consciously act out the prescribed roles of the male aggressor and female receptor, but these roles are not intrinsic to how they see themselves. This is true of Melanie, who begins the novel by trying on different feminine poses, but after seeing how Finn and Philip recreate her in art, concludes that, while she can play at the different facets of her gender, these fantasies do not reflect her internal experience. Finn, too, begins the novel trying on different masculine poses, among them apprentice to Philip and seducer of Melanie. Like Melanie, he seems to reject these initial attempts at self-definition, but at the novel's end, we can never be sure if he wants to break free of Philip or become him.

Ultimately, *The Magic Toyshop* does resolve the questions it raises regarding gender equality. Melanie and Finn find themselves outside the burning house once again orphaned and alone, and the final line leaves an ambiguous impression: "At night, in the

garden, they faced each other in a wild surmise” (200). Here Carter brings her allusions full-circle: just as she opens the novel with a reference to John Donne’s pioneer, so she ends with another allusion to New-World explorers, this time from Keats’s “On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer”

Or like stout Cortez, when with eagle eyes
He stared at the Pacific—and all his men
Look'd at each other with a wild surmise—
Silent, upon a peak in Darien.

Melanie began her story as an adolescent self-explorer mining new sexual territories. At the novel’s end, Melanie has been initiated into the violence of sexual maturity and is ready to explore beyond herself. Looking back at the destroyed toyshop, Melanie reflects that she has lost her beloved teddy bear, a sentiment that turns the burning house into a symbol of the end of childhood. Similarly, by escaping that home, Melanie escapes a future locked up within a patriarchal marriage. Like Cortez’s men staring into the horizon and imagining an unknown future, Melanie now faces an adult life without any clear model to follow. The Keatsian “wild surmise” suggests the infinite power of the imagination to create new worlds.

However, in ending with yet another allusion, the novel also implies that the two young lovers will not, indeed cannot, start anew; they are simply recreating a familiar narrative that, though Romantic, is not revolutionary. Melanie and Finn may have escaped the Gothic horrors of their own familial past, but they remain contained within the matrix of representation that has haunted their interactions. In other words, Melanie still cannot escape the cultural representations that have framed her throughout the

narrative. Two critics, Aidan Day and Linden Peach, express the two possible interpretations of this ending. Day views Melanie and Finn's escape from the burning toyshop as an escape from traditional modes of representation: The fire that consumes Philip leaves "the young adults free on the threshold of a world that will not be constrained by an archaic mythology. The toyshop was not divinely ordained. Neither was it magic. It was, like Uncle Philip's swan, which Melanie at one point describes as a 'ludicrous thing,' a *ludicrous* representation of the way things are" (31). Conversely, Peach notes that the end of the novel implies "that the fall was fortunate, but also that Melanie and Finn are trapped by the Genesis myth. It is ironic that in the fire 'everything is gone' but the myth remains" (84-85).

The novel's final scene is ambiguous enough to accommodate both Day and Peach's opposing interpretations. *The Magic Toyshop*, like *The Sadeian Woman*, does not satisfyingly answer the familiar problematic central to representations of violence: can a writer represent violence without recreating it? Carter leaves her heroine trapped in the same semiotic system that oppresses her, but with a hope that a new, liberating identity can be forged in the wake of that system. *The Magic Toyshop* critiques a British literary tradition that it chooses to be a part of, a tradition represented by Philip, who reifies gendered violence in his art. The reader, like Finn, is neither wholly aligned with nor set in opposition to this tradition. In a sense, each of the three characters represents one side of the reader: like Melanie, the reader identifies with and projects him/herself into the protagonist; like Philip, the reader asserts a position of omniscience and dominance over the heroine; and like Finn, the reader is an ambivalent witness whose existence hovers somewhere between heroine and author.

Chapter Three

Reading Like a Voyeur:

Identification and Visuality in Joyce Carol Oates's *Blonde*

In a 2001 interview, Joyce Carol Oates explained that *Blonde*, her epic novel fictionalizing the life of Marilyn Monroe, was conceived from a desire to write the untold story of Norma Jeane Baker and thus “give life to this lost, lone girl, whom the iconic consumer-product ‘Marilyn Monroe’ would soon overwhelm and obliterate” (“Blonde Ambition” 16). The novel Oates did write, however, has little to do with the authenticity and humanity she claims to have intended. On the contrary, *Blonde* “gives life” to the Norma Jeane of public imagination, the shifting, multiplying icon-behind-the-icon. Oates’s Norma Jeane is not a realist character but an amalgam of the fantasies that surround Marilyn Monroe; she is not “overwhelmed” by her consumer counterpart, but instead takes on the plethora of roles required to become the paramount symbol of female sexuality. Even Oates’s contention that she could reach a “real” Norma Jeane behind Marilyn is just one more of the many fantasies that the novel explores in its multiple depictions of Norma Jeane. Embodying the sexual fantasy that was Marilyn, Norma Jeane becomes a site of hermeneutic investigation: with *Blonde*, Oates turns biography into a study of female representation.

It is not surprising that Oates, a long-time chronicler of America’s sometimes-violent-sometimes-sweet sexual proclivities, would draw on Marilyn’s life to recount popular fantasies of female sexuality. By the end of the millennium, Marilyn Monroe was no longer a sex symbol, but, in a postmodern turn, a symbol of the sex symbol; one might

even construct of her a semiotic mise-en-abyme in which the signifier (of sex) always refers to itself as the signified (the sex object). Her dramatized simpering—that goo-goo-baby-doll quality—seems dated, if delightfully so, to a twenty-first century audience. When, in the film *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, she calls her would-be lover “Daddy,”—as Marilyn famously called her real-life lovers—the effect is creepy rather than coy. To watch footage of her sultry “Happy Birthday, Mr. President” might be arousing to contemporary viewers were the grainy black-and-white footage not so glaringly outmoded. Although her image remains a pleasurable one to look at, that pleasure is no longer uniquely sexual: Marilyn is now anachronistically amusing rather than explicitly arousing. But she still contains all the right sexual cues, and we know what we are supposed to be thinking about when we look at her. We also know she is not merely dead but canonized; she is a historical fixture, a symbol of twentieth-century Americana, a reminder of the 1950’s feminine mystique. Difficult as it is to feel attracted to a dead woman, it is harder still to feel aroused by a woman who carries with her the weight of American History. It is this same symbolic weightiness, however, that makes her a fertile site for semiosis. Now that Marilyn Monroe has become more symbolic than sexy, she can be deconstructed, thereby revealing how her image makes meaning even as that image continues to please.

The Norma Jeane of *Blonde* is not precisely Marilyn Monroe, but rather a personification of the multiple fantasies Monroe embodies for the public. This chapter examines how *Blonde* takes up a heterosexual discourse in American mass culture that is violent and sadistic. The novel overtly engages this discourse and asks the reader to approach it from the position of the fantasist, the male voyeur who objectifies and

dehumanizes Norma Jeane. *Blonde* further provides an opportunity to explore the ambivalence readers may feel when identifying with a vulnerable woman as a heroine precisely because the narration holds Norma Jeane at a distance, allowing readers to view her only through an ostentatious display of erotic language and an alienating veneer of vulgarity.

The novel's explicit language may be incidentally titillating, but its main function is to point out the mechanism of the erotic object. When Oates writes about Norma Jeane's sexuality she at times adopts the tone of trashy romance or, as one reviewer claimed, "the book equivalent of a tacky television mini-series" (Kakutani). But if her pastiche turns the reader on it also has a repelling effect, in part because of its grotesque exaggeration and in part because of its violent overtones. As the container of female sexuality, Norma Jeane is saturated in violence, surrounded by exploitive men and the cruelties of Hollywood culture. Even the narrator describes her in derogatory, often sadistic or even necrophiliac terms. And yet as much as the reader cannot avoid association with the language of sexualized violence, neither can s/he view this character as a complete object.

Blonde's exploration of Norma Jeane's interiority—her thoughts, emotions, self-perceptions—grants the heroine a degree of subjectivity; she is the protagonist with whom a reader could identify. Yet her subjectivity is fractured and incomplete, often shifting out of focus only to be replaced by the musings of an observer outside Norma Jeane's consciousness. The novel is divided into sections that correspond to Marilyn's life, and further into discrete chapters that take on varying narrative styles and points of view. The narrator's voice is never consistent throughout a given chapter, and often

shifts even within a paragraph. Italicized interjections appear without attribution, and it is up to the reader to decide whose thoughts are being expressed. The point of view shifts in and out of Norma's different personalities and intertwines monologues from other characters. The subject matter frequently returns to Norma Jeane's body, with the various voices offering multiple perspectives on what her body means at any given point in her life.

Filtered through the narrator's lascivious tone—which, even when describing Norma Jeane's point of view, focuses on her body, her bodily functions, and her sex appeal—Norma Jeane is both the protagonist and the fetish object, a heroine who inspires as much desire and disgust as empathy and inspiration. Oates here dramatizes the reader's complex relationship with female protagonists: as much as we love Norma Jeane for being our tragic heroine, we also happily take part in her exploitation and degradation. In contrast with most reading experiences, such as with *The Magic Toyshop*, the movement between identification and object-projection is constant. There is no single episode of violation that might serve as the climax or narrative catalyst. Instead, the violence is always present, not merely in the characters' actions but even in the narrator's diction. To continue reading rather than simply reject the novel outright is to actively consume the language of degradation, and therefore to be somewhat complicit in the depravity continually displayed. That is, if a reader decides to continue reading, he finds himself implicitly condoning such language. This position is a difficult one for the reader, who persistently vacillates between recognizing Norma Jeane as a thinking subject with whom to identify and a bodily object to be consumed for pleasure. By creating discomfort in the

reader, who is alternately sympathetic to, aroused by and disgusted at Norma Jeane, the text refuses to let that reader gloss over the language of violence.

The reader's shifting relationship to Norma Jeane is the direct result of shifting narratorial voice. She may be the novel's protagonist, but it is nearly impossible to find an organizing subjectivity that is "Norma Jeane." In place of a single point of view is a plethora of voices—Marilyn's, Norma Jeane's, Oates's, the public's, Marilyn's boyfriends' and husbands'—that offer a variety of interpretations of this woman. Though the story is for the most part narrated in the limited third person, the text occasionally erupts into brief monologues from various perspectives, usually one of Marilyn's lovers, directors, or even the collective "we" of her fans. She has no real self but exists only as she is purported to have existed.

Even when Norma Jeane offers her own thoughts, her character is neither unified nor realistic. At times, she is self-aware and savvy. At other times, she stammers and behaves like a frightened and vulnerable child. Still at other moments, Norma Jeane is a desperate sex kitten who wants nothing but a man's love. The effect does not make Norma Jeane appear "schizoid," as Laurence Olivier famously branded her, but rather reveals that Marilyn Monroe is an aporia. To fix the gaze on Marilyn is to construct her at the same moment she becomes unknowable. The reader of *Blonde* does not walk away with any real insight into who the woman was; instead, the text recounts the myriad of interpretations available. Each moment of reading provides some glimpse into her story, yet the overwhelming amount of and differences in information destabilize any given piece of text. Each of the many sections is meant not to educate but to pleasure the reader—reading about any one of Marilyn/Norma Jeane's images is a momentary

indulgence that, unlike traditional heroine-driven narratives, does not provide key pieces of character information that will become relevant later or will propel the heroine to epiphany. Indeed, *Blonde* is pulp for art's sake. The luscious descriptions of Norma Jeane's body or the graphic sexual encounters are given attention equal to the abstract thought-puzzles that delve into Norma Jeane's psyche; mashed together, the entire novel is both a literary pleasure garden and a deconstruction of the violence in American sexual iconography.

Marilyn Monroe and the Fantasy of Knowledge

Reading a Marilyn Monroe biography—even an admittedly fictionalized one like *Blonde*—indulges the fantasy that one can know the “real Marilyn.” Marilyn Monroe is the female-turned-commodity, a woman used to suit the needs of those who want her. Her multiple and conflicting identities—ditzzy blonde, strong actress, sexy woman, simpering child—allow consumers to identify her, or identify *with* her, howsoever she can gratify their immediate needs. There are many interpretations of Marilyn Monroe: she was a dangerous stereotype of the subservient woman, or she was a prefeminist postfeminist, in charge of her own sexual representation. She was a dumb blonde or a genius actress. Her notorious bad behavior on set (showing up hours late or not at all, forgetting lines, reshooting numerous takes) proved her to be insane, or drug-addicted, or rebellious against studios. Marilyn Monroe presents a crisis in representation: she is a blank screen upon which viewers project their own interpretation of female-ness.

In her social study of Monroe, Sarah Churchwell explores the idea that Marilyn's shifting personality is a story that we love to repeat over and over, each time as if it were

the first. The payoff of such a tale is that it allows the teller to imagine a unique knowledge of the real person behind the multiple representations.

This story reinforces Marilyn's supposed artificiality while pretending to uncover the real woman. It allows for a literal, and easy, split between image and reality; it is founded on a simplistic notion of reality as a stable, prior truth entirely distinct from image, projection, reproduction. But of course, images have a reality, and reality can be made. (16)

Oates's insistence that she could give a voice to the real Norma Jeane Baker who has been forgotten by history is an integral part of the Marilyn mythos. Monroe's image is so pleasing in part because it is recognizably an image, a self-conscious icon of womanhood. The idea that there is "real" woman underneath this image means that you could be the one—the only one—to grasp that woman. This fantasy reflects the dual urge to identify with, or recognize, and to own, or objectify, the woman. He who uniquely sees into "Marilyn" has a sympathetic bond with the real Norma Jeane, who is recognizably human in the way we are all human: she is complex, thoughtful, and self-serving. She does not exist simply to meet the needs of the viewing public, as her starlet alter ego does. And, unlike "Marilyn," she seems approachable and knowable; one could conceivably carry on a conversation with her, or even develop a friendship. Yet those who recognize the woman behind the Girl gain a singular authority over her. For a writer like Oates, claiming to speak to and/or for Norma Jeane means that she alone has access to, and therefore control over, this heretofore unrepresented woman. Each time Norma Jeane is created anew, her creator—who may be a biographer or a fiction writer or an insightful viewer—exerts power over this "real" woman. As Churchwell points out,

images have the power to manufacture their own reality. The notion that there is a real, knowable Norma Jeane Baker behind the obviously ersatz Marilyn Monroe is an invention in itself; it is a fantasy that allows for repeated reconfigurations, for infinite permutations of the icon.

Norma Jeane is thus less a novelistic heroine than an archetypal character, a fact made explicit in Oates's frequent fairy-tale allusions. That Marilyn Monroe has become a symbol makes her easy fodder for a narrative of American fantasy. Referring to the fairy-tale nature of Monroe's rags-to-(sort of)riches biography, Oates emphasizes that this is a novel about idealization of the female, as she explains in an essay on the genre: "The fairy tale, as a literary/cultural genre has, traditionally, been associated with women; and women have...impressed upon these tales the nature of their deepest fantasies." ("In Olden Times" 98). From early childhood, Norma Jeane engages the standard princess fantasy. She perpetually awaits her Dark Prince, a figure who takes on multiple real-life identities throughout her life but always remains the same mythic figure in her mind. Her first manager is Rumpelstiltskin, and her studio driver is the Frog Chauffeur. She is alternately the Fair Princess, the Blonde Actress, and the Beggar Maid. Joe DiMaggio is named only "the Ex-Athlete" and Arthur Miller is "the Playwright," and while these are not fairy tale characters the universality of these names imparts a fabulist quality. Norma Jeane's trajectory to becoming Marilyn Monroe is an effort to make her life into the fairy-tale fantasies repeated so often in Hollywood cinema and to make herself into the ideal woman exemplified by the glamorous film star.

In the opening chapter, we first meet the young heroine in a movie theater watching the Fair Princess and Dark Prince's final kiss. Norma Jeane projects herself

onto the screen. “*There! That’s me! That woman, that thing on the screen, that’s who I am*” (10-11). And, like magic, a scene appears in the film of the adult Marilyn Monroe, known only as the Fair Princess, sneaking into a movie theater and finding the Dark Prince waiting. The allegory is clear: as a child, Norma Jeane wants to be the princess who lives happily ever after, but her handsome prince is not a real man; it is rather the film industry, a destructive institution personified in the Sadean Dark Prince, who swoops in at the end of the movie “to claim her. Possess her” (9). As Norma Jeane fulfills the promise of the Fair Princess, we see that the fairy tale is much darker than advertised. The novel is largely a foray into the discourse of masculine sexual desire, but the references to fairy tale, which Oates notes is a genre of female fantasy, reinforce the fact that it is mass culture at large that helps create these violent heterosexual fantasies for both men and women.

Gendering the Reader

Thus far this study has considered the sadistic reader as gender-neutral; that is, any reader, male or female, can engage in a reading practice that finds pleasure in abjecting the heroine. *Blonde* presents a unique case, however, because it forces the reader to adopt a masculine posture that objectifies Norma Jeane through recognizably heteronormative language. Of course, the physical reader still might be male or female: reading is an act of fantasy in which an individual can imagine him or herself into another subject-position. As such, the reader’s real-life gender and sexuality is far less significant than the position imposed by the text itself.

Here we can return to Judith Fetterley's description of the "immasculated" reader, the woman who is taught to read from a male position. For Fetterley, the typical reader is taught to "identify with a male point of view, and to accept as normal and legitimate a male system of values, one of whose central principles is misogyny" (xx). As a second wave feminist, Fetterley focuses on the female reading experience to demonstrate that women scholars have traditionally had to forego their own gendered experience, which is deemed worthless, to adopt the "serious," masculine perspective, which is deemed universal. The extra-textual patriarchy is not alone in shaping the female reading process; in addition to educators and scholars, Fetterley sets forth canonical American literary texts as the primary agents of immascultation. Literature demonstrates, through non-inclusive language and through character and plot, the power men retain over women. Fetterley exhorts women readers to resist a patriarchal canon by identifying and repudiating instances of misogyny in literature. In a sense, *Blonde* is the exact opposite of Fetterley's feminist criticism. Rather than confront and diminish misogynist literary models, Oates apes these models so egregiously she corners her readers into consent. That is, by relying on a misogynist vernacular, she self-consciously immasculates her reader.

An examination of Norma Jeane's early sexualization explains how Oates forces us into a masculinist reading position. From the novel's start, Oates establishes Norma Jeane as the object of the male gaze. Even baby Norma Jeane is sexualized: "Men peeked and grinned. *She's a little girl, eh? Like a silk purse down there. Smoooooth*" (30). These peeking men are Gladys's friends, and they are more likely teasing Norma Jeane's mother than legitimately ogling the infant's genitals. Yet this lasciviousness establishes

the tone of Norma Jeane's relationship to onlookers: she is always a pornographic image. Oates relies on cinematic prose to recreate such an image so the reader can visualize Norma Jeane, can imaginatively construct her as an object of the gaze. When a very young Norma Jeane bathes with her mother, it is "a movie scene. Water splashing from the faucets was mixed with music you could almost hear." Soon the movie turns blue: "Gladys groped for a bar of soap and began to lather vigorously between her hands...and strange the rapt, ecstatic expression on her face, which was flushed and rosy with the heat" (33). The ritual bathing is disturbingly erotic, and Gladys's repeated exclamations of how *dirty* she and Norma Jeane are only foreground the scene's own dirtiness. Oates creates a cinematic moment so sordid it is almost a parody: the breathy, naked mother lathers herself into orgasm all the while calling herself dirty.

The chapter culminates with an unknown man interrupting the mother-daughter moment, as an ominous voice notes, "*This was not the first time. It would not be the last time*" (33). These two sentences are physically detached from any other text, and as they float mysteriously on the page they disconcert the reader. Not only are we unsure who is speaking—is it an adult Marilyn?—we are also unsure what "this" and "it" refer to. Such ambiguity asks readers to fill in the blanks, to continue creating this "dirty" scene in their own imaginations. Are there repeated scalding baths, or is it that a strange man frequently intrudes on intimate moments? Only the reader can decide. Further, this man's sudden appearance frames the erotic scene within the male gaze. Even a private exchange between mother and child must be witnessed by a looming male figure, who is, like the reader, an anonymous interloper. This will not be the last time we intrude upon a hyper-erotic moment in Norma Jeane's life; indeed, we have seven hundred more pages

of similar scenarios to encounter, each one clouded in ambiguity. As in the bathing scene, the narrator continuously shifts point of view, interrupting key moments with text breaks, ellipses, or snippets of thought. As the reader fills in the breaks, attaches a character to the unclear perspective, he actively constructs the scene, and thus becomes an active participant in the fantasy construction.

Oates masculinizes the reading position by allying readers with the anonymous male voyeur, but it is important to note that this “male” position refers to a very specific discourse of heterosexuality that Marilyn Monroe has come to represent. In his book on film stars and society, Richard Dyer demonstrates how Marilyn Monroe embodies the 1950s discourse of female sexuality. She expresses the (then-new) *Playboy* Magazine-inspired “liberated” sexuality by presenting “an image of female sexuality for men...[P]art of what makes her desirable, unthreatening, is that her image does not insist on a female sexuality for itself.” (52) What self-pleasure she does take is narcissistic, reveling in her own beauty, her own desirability for men. Monroe is then entirely defined, even to herself, by how men respond to her. A liberated female sexuality would be invested in a woman’s pleasure; Marilyn is not concerned with her own desires, but instead is “liberated” only in the sense that her body is always available to men.

Dyer fails to mention that such discourse also constructs a twin male sexuality to parallel the female; this image of Marilyn only works if there is a male counterpart who finds availability chief among his desires and female pleasure a subject best left ignored. Implied in this “*Playboy* discourse” is a fearful male sexuality filled perhaps with guilt and performance anxiety, perhaps with feelings of inadequacy and a need for omnipotence. His pleasure is in sex, whereas the woman’s pleasure is in serving him;

however, her desire to serve is a prerequisite for his desire of her. This vision of Marilyn emphasizes one of many possible heterosexual dynamics to serve as the norm; Marilyn is America's sex symbol, but she symbolizes a narrow notion of heterosexual interactions. Although discourses surrounding sex have shifted since the 1950's, Oates's revival of this particular Marilyn mythos reminds readers that this fantasy remains part of the current popular imagination, even as we are aware enough to recognize its existence.

Many feminist theorists have explained the effects of this particular discourse on the female experience. An anxious, power-seeking male sexuality demands the existence of a subservient counterpoint, and the resultant sexual matrix insists that men are the doers and women are the done-to. As a result, as Iris Marion Young contends, "the basic fact of the woman's social existence [is] as the object of the gaze of another"(39). The woman experiences her body not merely as a thing attached to her "transcending subject" but as a thing other than itself, an object to be "*looked at and acted upon.*" Young, drawing on Simone de Beauvoir's seminal work, contends that if a woman views herself as the second sex, she is never the central locus of her own space. Young contrasts the female subject with Maurice Merleau-Ponty's "generic" or masculine subject, who understands space only through its relation to the self—he views the world with himself at its center. The female subject, however, is both the primary subject constructing a world with herself at the center *and* the object situated in space by another subject who acts upon her. She is therefore never at the center of her own space, and must always behave with an awareness of how others view her. That no other individual might be present does not change the woman's comportment, as her bodily experience is always

“inhibited, and retains a distance from her body as transcending movement and from engagement in the world’s possibilities (39).”

In *Blonde*, Norma Jeane is an exaggeration of Young’s female subject. Despite the appearance of uninhibited sexuality, her body is always performing sex for the viewer’s pleasure rather than experiencing sex for her own. Several characters remark that Norma Jeane is a terrible lay; in Eddy G’s words, it is “like she never know how” to fuck (327). Norma Jeane’s conditioning in idealized womanhood demands that she ignore her own sexual urges. “Aunt Elsie had advised *Just stay out of their way, it’s that simple*. That’s how Norma Jean made love, mostly: she lay very still, smiling happily in anticipation, sweet and unassertive and hopeful and...made a gift of herself to her lover.” (411). She does not enjoy sex so much as project its ideal image, and to maintain herself as the perfect object must constantly self-monitor. Without the gaze, her body does not exist and cannot take pleasure in itself. There are very few scenes that feature Norma Jeane alone, and even when she is not before a crowd or a camera, she worries that people will see her most private moments. If she does anything unappealing,

everyone would see. For everyone was watching. Even when she wasn’t being photographed in Otto Ose’s studio beneath Otto Ose’s glaring lights and cruel unsparring gaze she was being watched. (192)

Any resultant pain is her own fault, because unlike a demure woman, “she had dared to step out of the mirror and now everyone was watching” (192). As paranoid as constant surveillance makes her, Norma Jean traffics in her own exploitation because she lives to be looked at. Thus she perfectly lives up the social ideals described in Dyer’s sexual and Young’s gender discourses: this woman always exists for a man.

The discourse of the objectified woman makes female characters difficult to identify with, and suggests that there is no place for a feminized reading experience within this novel. The hypermasculine, visual language turns the reader into a spectator, another onlooker who wants to see into Norma Jeane, but who ultimately is just one more voyeur. A clear example of how the text accomplishes this feat appears after Norma Jeane agrees to marry The Ex-Athlete. In her hotel room, she considers whether she could be happy with this man. The reader becomes party to her anxieties regarding marriage and gains brief access to Norma Jeane's complex and self-searching thoughts: "Maybe the key to happiness isn't in your own keeping but in another's." But before we are allowed more insight into her reluctance to marry, Norma Jeane moves to the window and notices a crowd of men staring up at her hotel room attempting to capture her on film:

But what image could any camera capture, in the dark, at such a distance? And what were they seeing? A naked woman, calm and radiant and still as a statue? Platinum-blond hair tousled from love. Wetted, slightly parted lips. Those unmistakable lips. Pale bare breasts, shadowy nipples. Nipples like eyes. And the shadowy crevice between the thighs. (432).

Again, a private scene is turned public, and the reader, briefly allowed access to Norma Jeane's psyche, instantly turns from identification to objectification. Rather than the human who is caught between love and practicality, Norma Jeane again becomes the fetishized object made up of body parts, the pornographic image with her wet lips parted, her legs inviting us to part them.

In a novel there is no sense of space but psychic space, and so Oates must work to create an imaginative visuality if she wants to make her readers feel complicit in objectifying Norma Jeane. Naturally, the fact that she can refer to a famous visual icon makes this task easier. Dealing in the jargon of cinema, Oates can begin to situate readers as viewers. Should we forget for a moment that Norma Jeane is to be looked at, textual clues remind us our heroine is as much a visual icon as a psychologically complex character. She is a movie star, an actor, and as such, her most important feature is her appearance, a fact that makes her especially feminine. One male co-star even feels this profession humiliates men because, “Any actor is a kind of female. The makeup, the wardrobe, the fittings. The emphasis on looks, attractiveness. Who the hell cares what a man looks like?” (293). Marilyn’s “entire life is an act, like breathing” (294), and so her entire existence is based on her outward appearance.

When Oates allies readers with the male gaze she highlights the problem of the female spectator that Mary Ann Doane discusses in her essay “The Economy of Desire.” Feminist film theory often claims that the on-screen female is a fetishized commodity, an object upon which the spectator can project fear and desire. This hypothesis leaves the female spectator without any clear point of identification, for how can one identify with a commodity? Doane resolves this issue by noting that female viewers recognize themselves to be simultaneously consumers and commodities. Here lies a key similarity between Doane’s work and Young’s; both identify the woman’s selfhood as split between subject- and object-positions. A woman recognizes herself as a conscious individual, but she is always aware that her body is a monitored object, a commodity wielded to gain status.

Doane claims that women must view their bodies with the same commodity logic that governs a capitalist society: women project all their needs onto an ever-increasing desire to own the perfect commodity, and so develop “an intensified concern with a body” which is their most valuable commodity. The consumer’s obsession becomes obtaining the best product: the perfect body. The female viewer in this way is simultaneously the consumer and commodity, effectively desiring what can be seen in the idealized self-image. “*Having* the commodified object...is displaced by *appearing*, producing a strange constriction of the gap between consumer and commodity” (131). Following Doane’s commodity logic, a female viewer responds to the woman on screen (the perfect commodity) by wishing to be her, to have what she has, to present herself as the ideal commodity. The fetishized female body, broken down into idealized body parts—i.e. Marilyn’s perfect breasts, lips, legs—inspires consumerist desire to acquire that body, either sexually or narcissistically.

Yet Oates does not make room for this kind of female spectatorship. Norma Jeane’s rosebud lips, perfect breasts, and blonde hair are all tropes that refer to Norma Jeane’s sexualization; they are not the markers of a perfect body, but rather signs of her artifice. Applying make-up, styling hair, sewing Marilyn into her clothes recreate her imagined “friend in the mirror,” an inverted Norma Jeane who never actually exists. There is no opportunity to envy Norma Jeane, as the process of becoming Marilyn, which can take up to five hours, is an agonizing exercise in discipline and never produces a contented, perfect woman. Because there is neither strict identification nor commodity logic, the female reading/spectating position never comes into play.

Further exciting a female readership, the novel cuts Norma Jeane off from any female relationships or friendships among peers. Missing from *Blonde*'s long list of characters are any of the women Marilyn Monroe developed close bonds with during her lifetime, most notably Natasha Lytess, her acting coach and close companion during the early years of her career, and her half-sister Bernice Miracle. One of the very few moments women fans are even mentioned occurs near the end of Norma Jeane's story, during the infamous singing of "Happy Birthday, Mr. President." "Women in the audience...felt in that instant not a furious rivalry with the Blonde Actress but a sisterly sympathy and a fear for her, who was so vulnerable, risking a public rebuke" (500). Significantly, the women's fear regards her public image and the protection of the Marilyn commodity; these "sisterly" impulses do not reach an emotional level or show concern for Norma Jeane's internal suffering. Even the novel's women cannot see in Norma Jeane a fully developed character. There are no textual models for a sympathetic reading, and no outward indications that the reader might empathize with the humanity in Norma Jeane. Without any room for a female observer, the novel accomplishes its complete immasculatation of the reader.

Reader Responses to *Blonde*

Perhaps the central question behind Oates's method is why she chooses to mimic and capitulate to a masculinist discourse rather than resist it. By recreating the form of misogyny, she risks alienating her readers, who might not wish to take part in Norma's exploitation. Indeed, Oates often suffers in her public reception, and though the reviews for *Blonde* were among the most favorable of Oates's career, most critics give voice to the discomfort inspired by Oates's pastiche. Rita D. Jacobs, writing for the *World Book*

Review, gives a generally positive response, but notes that “Maybe unintentionally” *Blonde* “has the effect of making the reader, who is party to the way the American public treats its stars, feel like a bit of a voyeur and consequently slightly guilty.” What Jacobs calls unintentional is, I argue, careful construction. Jacobs’s assumption is understandable, however, because a reader expects to feel insightful rather than voyeuristic when reading. Oates limits reader identification, and by dialing up the dirty language, she induces a sense of prurience and ultimately guilt. As Rachel Brownstein notes in a review from the *American Prospect*, “You come away from *Blonde* a little overexcited and sick, a little guilty and also a little pleased.”

For many readers, overexcited is not a pleasurable state. The *Kirkus Reviews* exemplifies the anger or irritation that the novel’s sexualized, exploitative language can incite. The publication calls the novel a “bloated, humorless” work “that mixes together canned US and film history, fanzine gossip, and heavy-breathing fantasy.” The review then decries the “book’s eccentric blend of sleaze and turgidity.” There are truths in these statements, as the novel does blend sleazy fantasy with myths regarding American, film, and pop-culture history. Yet this reviewer, like many of his peers, assumes that Oates’s reliance on mass-produced sexual fantasies is either naïve or lecherous, that Oates either doesn’t know what she’s doing or is indulging in her own sexual fantasies.

The latter supposition is made overt in Lee Siegel’s claim that *Blonde* is nothing more than an epic exploration of Oates’s “ruling obsession” with “people down on their luck, born in the midst of nowhere, struggling through cruelty and violence and mistreatment to advance in life.” This concern for power inequality is not political or serious, but is a wallowing in Oates’s “lurid fascinations. [*Blonde*] is not a novel; it is a

document of its author's temperament." *Blonde* represents a popular fantasy of female sexuality, but Siegel wants to shift the focus away from the public and back to Oates. These are not *our* fantasies, but *hers*. Siegel might be reacting defensively to what could be perceived as Oates's accusation, and this defensiveness belies the reader's sense of inclusion in the novel's rebuke.

Even in a laudatory review in *The New York Review of Books*, Luc Santé cites *Blonde*'s "prevailing breathlessness" which "invade[s] the rest of the text" and must be disregarded to enjoy the work seriously. Exaggeration is, according to Santé, not a literary device but a sign of Oates's panting luridness. Here the reviewer reveals a difficulty in identifying with a sexualized heroine: a reader might expect an interiority that is psychologically rich and realist, but Norma Jeane thinks as she acts, in a heightened, performative feminine pose. In fact, it is impossible to ignore, as Santé urges us, her theatrics—the "breathiness" that is so frequently referred to in reviews—because this clichéd sexiness composes so much of the novel.

Common to all the responses mentioned above is a singular complaint, a sense that the reader is unwittingly caught up in a lurid sexual fantasy that he does not wish to own. Although these readers tend to believe this phenomenon to be the author's mistake, the abundance of lurid scenes—the "laying it on a bit thick" in Santa's words—suggests intentionality. The reader's urge to challenge the novel's misogyny only increases the complexity in Oates's project as it brings us back to Fetterley's resisting reader: *Blonde* does not merely identify moments of sexism in American literature, as Fetterley instructs, but recreates these moments over and over and forces readers to participate in uncomfortable scenes. Readers must overtly confront, in heightened or melodramatic

fashion, what is in fact fairly mundane—the sexual exploitation of a young woman. As readers who find our involvement uncomfortable, we have two options: we can dismiss the novel as dime-novel sleaze, or examine the source of our own discomfort.

The Female Grotesque

One of the more uncomfortable components of reading from a masculine position is the acceptance of a male anxiety perfectly articulated by Norman Mailer in his speculative “biography” *Marilyn*.

So we think of Marilyn who was every man’s love affair with America, Marilyn Monroe who was blonde and beautiful and had a sweet little rinky-dink of a voice and all the cleanliness of the clean American backyards... Marilyn suggested sex might be difficult and dangerous with others but ice cream with her. (15)

Mailer is shockingly open with his gynophobia. For him, women represent “blood, vows taken for life, and the furies of vengeance.” His idealized Marilyn, on the other hand, is a comforting reproducible product akin to pre-fabricated suburban homes with manicured lawns. In comparison with regular (brunette) women, Marilyn is bloodless, without feeling, and therefore harmless. Her presence is completely subservient, rinky-dink and scrubbed clean, and so sex with her is completely non-threatening. By purifying his sex goddess of any real bodily threat—she is more like an empty yard to be mowed than a woman to be contended with—Mailer speaks to the great irony of Marilyn Monroe: she is on the one hand completely bodily, a representation of physical desire, but, in her idealized form articulated so clearly by Mailer, she bears no trace of bodily contamination.

Throughout *Blonde*, Oates confronts the sexual anxiety Mailer (perhaps unwittingly) expresses above, an anxiety that casts the female body as constantly threatening. Marilyn is a perfect site to investigate such anxiety because she is the woman *par excellence*. As an icon she is more body than spirit, an object defined by her “perfect hourglass” figure, her blonde hair, and her open red mouth. To communicate what is so threatening about the female body, Oates writes Norma Jeane as a grotesque figure, a body *qua* body whose fleshy, juicy, oozing nature is always on display. Her sweat and odor are of constant concern, and special emphasis is placed on menstruation. Norma Jeane’s “heavy throbbing menstrual flow”(215) bleeds “like a stuck pig,” (125, 147); she calls her own vagina a “bleeding cut,” (253) or even a “bleeding-draining cut of humiliation between her legs.”(348). She dreams that between those legs is “a slash. A deep emptiness out of which blood drained (195).” Repeatedly discussing Norma Jeane’s painful, heavy periods highlights her femaleness, and the hyperbolic diction surrounding her periods only makes her extra-feminine—she is literally overflowing with fertility.

It is this overabundance that turns Norma Jeane from sexy starlet into what Mary Russo terms “the female grotesque.” The female grotesque emerges from two critical sources: Mikhail Bakhtin’s writings on Carnival, and Julia Kristeva’s work on maternal abjection. In *Rabelais and his World*, Bakhtin investigates the grotesque body that was a spectacular feature of Medieval and Renaissance Carnival. Grotesque bodies feature the base biological functions and urges and emphasize orifices and protrusions. Within the Carnival context, the grotesque is subversively liberating, as it parodies natural and unconscious biological processes that can unsettle the conscious mind. Signifying birth and death, decay and regeneration, the grotesque body is always in process, “a body in

the act of becoming . . . continually built, created, and builds and creates another body” (Bakhtin 317). Precisely because this body is transitional, it threatens the idealized classical body, which is static and contained.

Although Bakhtin does not explicitly address gender in his formulation of the grotesque, one infers that a body that is always creating another body is female. The grotesque body that suggests female birthing also suggests death and is “loaded with all of the connotations of fear and loathing around the biological processes of reproduction and of aging” (Russo 63). The cycle of life celebrated in Renaissance Carnival is, in the modern era, repressed; death is carefully hidden, as are all bodily features that suggest mortality. By evoking the relationship between life and death, Bakhtin’s grotesque recalls Kristeva’s abject body, though the abject horrifies rather than amuses. Grotesque comedy confronts and diminishes what is horrifying about the body by turning it into parody, and so accomplishes the same task as abjecting the threatening other.

As a grotesque object, Norma Jeane’s body is the ridiculed form onto which men project anxieties regarding reproduction. Early in the novel, while photographing Norma Jeane’s infamous “Miss Golden Dreams” nude, Otto Ose—himself a grotesque Jewish caricature—explains the irony at the heart of the female grotesque. “The female body *is* a joke. All this—*fecundity*. This—*beauty*” (230). Despite the pleasant connotations “beauty” and “fecundity” evoke, they also remind viewers of their own bodies and, for Otto Ose at least, excite bodily anxieties: “The aim is to drive men wild to copulate and reproduce the species like praying mantises with their heads bitten off by their female sex partners.” An alluring woman is somehow a deadly woman, and, worse still, a propagator of the species. “After the Nazis . . . ninety-nine percent of humankind doesn’t deserve to

live.” Otto hates Norma Jeane’s fertile body because it, like the female praying mantis, exerts a violent power over the male of the species. Perhaps worse, this body births something so horrifying and cruel it should not exist: mankind. And yet all this horror comes in the irresistible package perfectly exemplified in “Miss Golden Dreams.”

We return to Otto’s cruel joke later in the novel, when Norma Jeane is making her penultimate film. The fractured narration that describes the filming of *Some Like it Hot* mimics Norma Jeane’s drug-addled state. She is “so doped & drugged & terrified” that she can barely keep track of her surroundings; the disjointed language similarly confuses the reader, and so protagonist and reader both wonder what precisely is taking place on set. The central confusion of the *Some Like it Hot* scenes concern what this role means for Norma Jeane, and what Norma Jeane thinks she means to the public.

Norma Jeane has recognized that both Marilyn and Sugar Kane, the character she plays in *Some Like it Hot*, represent the same thing: “she was the female body was the female buttocks, breasts” (613). In other words, she is a collection of protrusions and orifices. As she sings “I Wanna be Loved by You” she, or perhaps the narrator, pose a series of questions that wonder, “Why was Sugar Kane funny? Why were men dressed as women funny? Why were men made up as women funny...why was female funny?”(614). The question made so explicit here—what is ridiculous about the female body?—is perhaps the central question of the entire novel. Norma Jeane is so female, so shapely and sexy and submissive, that she burlesques her own gender. She is the ultimate female impersonator. And what makes femaleness so funny is that it is not male. Sugar Kane represents everything a man should not be: weak, vulnerable, and most of all, available.

Norma-as-Sugar Kane hyperbolizes the notion of availability because she can’t

help but offer herself to every viewer. While singing “I Wanna be Loved by You,” her prominent breasts spill out of her dress and broadcast her accessibility, implying that she has no control over the borders and boundaries of her own body. “The camera is a voyeur adoring Sugar Kane’s fattish body” (615) which, by nature of its voluptuousness, cannot help but protrude into our line of vision. In this way, Sugar Kane represents a grotesque form: the grotesque is “not separated from the rest of the world; ‘it is blended with the world, with animals, with objects’”(Russo 8). This blending speaks to the desires and fears that surround eroticism, and inspires various affects ranging from horror to desire to amusement. The female body is a talisman; it is vulnerable and borderless so that the viewer can remain intact.

Yet another explanation of the female grotesque comes from Eddy G, son of a Hollywood great, who becomes involved in a polyamorous relationship with Norma Jeane and another film scion, Cass Chaplin. Cass and Eddy G adore Norma Jeane but they laughingly refer to her as “Fish” or “Fishie,” and though she hates this term she cannot figure out why. Eddy G finally has to explain the joke: "'Fish' only just means female. The sticky scales, the classic stink. A fish is slimy, y'see? A fish is kind of female no matter if it's actually a male, specially when you see a fish gutted and laid out." Eddy G’s casual tone implies that he does not see any harm in his words, because, after all, everybody knows this old gag. Women are slimy or scaly only because they are defined by their bodies, and being defined by one’s body renders that person less than human: she is only flesh. Interestingly, Norma Jeane does not take Eddy G’s explanation at face value. She thinks, “Yet Norma Jeane's strength was Female. As 'Marilyn Monroe'...she was Female.”(336). Herein lies the dilemma of being the Female: a woman is both loved

and hated for her body, she is thought beautiful or precious and yet being violated—
“guttled and laid out”—means living up to gendered expectations.

Creating the Girl

This ambivalence towards the female body reflects an ambivalence inherent in Kristeva’s abject. This ambivalence most obviously plays out in yet another Marilyn Monroe persona: the Girl. “The Girl” is the name of Marilyn Monroe’s character in *The Seven Year Itch*, and Oates uses this figure, as she does Sugar Kane, to explore audience relationships to Norma Jeane’s body. The flip side of the female grotesque, the Girl is a contained body, an idealized, aestheticized female who presents a mirage of sex without bodily contamination. With the Girl, sex is so clean that it becomes, as Norman Mailer so fondly proclaimed, “like ice cream”—that is, innocent and non-transgressive.

Norma Jeane often attempts to live up to the idealism of the Girl in her private life. Her constant attempts to contain her body, to eliminate all contaminants including odors and fluids, demonstrate primal anxieties that associate biological functions with death. Desperate to avoid her mother’s fate, she obsesses about hygiene. “*Her [the mother’s] body turning rancid by slow degrees. I will always bathe, scrub myself clean. Clean!*”(197). For Norma Jeane, sterility staves off the family’s history of mental illness, as though, if she can remove all reminders of her body, she can forget her biological heritage. For the reader, however, this attention to cleanliness reminds us of precisely those biological functions she is trying to remove. Moments of scrubbing and soaking that appear throughout the novel reinforce the presence of the fluid female body while at the same time guaranteeing its containment.

It is impossible to remain in a totalized “clean” state, and Norma Jeane shifts between her grotesque juiciness and her idealized star form. As an actress she is terrified of being thought dirty or smelling bad and spends hours in the bath to avoid any signs of uncleanness. It is as though she fears betraying that her famous body, always on display as a static object, has an internal life, that it is in fact an actual living body. To be the clean American girl Mailer extolls, she must somehow remove traces of her body while still acting as a purely physical specimen:

Between her legs, you can trust her she’s clean. She’s not a dirty girl, nothing foreign or exotic. She’s an American slash in the flesh. That emptiness.

Guaranteed. She’s been scooped out, drained clean, no scar tissue to interfere with your pleasure, and no odor. Especially no odor. The Girl with No Name, the girl with no memory. She has not lived long and will not live long (473).

The Girl is disposable precisely because she has been stripped of all reminders of her humanity. She has no odor, no innards, and no personhood. Her cleanness speaks to her Americanness and biological purity. She will not contaminate you. As an “American slash” she is pure commodity, an easily disposable mass reproduction. As Norma admits earlier, *“I’m only an American. Skin deep. There’s nothing inside me, really.”* Norma Jeane reifies the mass-produced fantasies of American popular culture. The above quote’s hawking language, its evocation of American salesmanship, implicates the advertising industry, but more significantly it accuses the reader harboring such desires. The speaker addresses the reader—she is selling her wares to *us*—and so, it follows, we are the consumers who lust after this clean, empty, disposable female.

Cleaning out the Girl's bodily contaminants enacts a violence upon her that punishes her for being porous (and therefore threatening) to begin with. Although the Girl is the anti-grotesque, the process by which she has become a fetish object is violent; she has been scooped out and drained clean. To discipline the female body, to remove its biological eruptions, requires a bodily dismantling that resembles death. Like the corpses her first husband Bucky Glazer embalmed, Norma Jean must be drained of the stuff of life. Like Eddy G's fish she is gutted and laid out. She lacks any signs of personhood, with no memories, no past, and no future. To become the Girl, the girl must be murdered and rendered a giant gaping orifice, her entire body simply a vessel that begs to be filled.

To call her an "American slash" indicates that her appeal depends upon sexual sadism. Oates's yonic imagery does not describe budding flowers or divine passages, but instead offers skin that has been slit open. Here too the assurance of sterility evokes the viscera it is meant to eliminate from our mind and provides a thrill at the implied violence necessary in manufacturing the perfect woman. The violent language suggests an anger or hatred beneath the veneer of admiration and reveals that the Marilyn icon that has long survived the woman is not so simple a signifier as Mailer would have her.

Ambivalence, Punishment, and Heterosexuality

Oates dissects the ambivalence of the Marilyn Monroe iconography in a brief, stream-of-consciousness chapter "The Collected Works of Marilyn Monroe."

tell me what you like best and I will do it I will keep every secret of yours

I will adore you only just love me & think of MARILYN sometime? Promise?

sad sick cow/piece of meat/cunt that's dead inside. (640)

It is unclear who speaks these final phrases. It could be Marilyn's self-deprecating unconscious speaking, or she might anticipate that this is how her audience, the "you" she is addressing, will respond to her. These phrases could, conversely, be an angry interruption from another voice entirely. Ambiguity blurs the possibilities, so that everybody might be suspected of hating this sad, sick cow. This verbal explosion reveals an underside to Marilyn's image: beneath her complicity and neediness is anger, and beneath the admiration of her fans is disgust. The objectified woman is infuriated—at herself, at her audience—but so too might the men she addresses be responding in anger to her for being precisely what they want: an empty piece of meat. The speaker goes on to claim, "I'm not bitter," only to later indicate she harbors deep resentment: "*Revenge is SWEET (& I need to acquire that taste).*" She knows, too, that men want to hurt her: "*break my heart, better than break my nose (you bastards).*" Although most of her "collected works" reassure readers that she loves sex and wants only to please, these occasional outbursts of anger show the cracks in that fantasy. She ends her musings by declaring, "I'm having such a good time in life, guess I'm gonna be punished!" (640). We already know that she is not having a "good time" in life and is in fact suicidal. Her claim to punishment is lighthearted in tone, but succeeding the violent italicized interruptions, it must be read as both playful and dreadful; it is a knowing wink that acknowledges the horrors enacted upon Norma Jeane.

The novel presents a series of "punishments" that assert control over Norma Jeane's body. The method of Norma Jeane's "punishments," like the reasons for them, depends upon her femaleness and targets her body: she is raped, sexually degraded and suffers through multiple illegal abortions, and the novel ends with her possible murder,

the punishment for her affair with the president. While she is repeatedly subjected to the physical, social, and psychological brutality of the men around her, Norma Jeane is always available for further pain. She emerges from each degradation still beautiful, still eager to please. To consider these episodes “punishments” is irrational outside of sadomasochistic fantasy—there is no precise reason for them, excepting the pleasure of those and those observing. As Mary Gaitskill writes, “The Monroe of *Blonde* is an ideal Sadean victim, and Oates places her in a gothic landscape built of feverish language.” In Gothic novels, the pursued maiden is often under threat because she is young, virginal, and alone. The opportunity for horror leads to its inevitability. Norma Jeane always hovers on the precipice of peril, and the novel’s action depends upon an expectation that she must be punished, if only because submitting to a man’s will is the object of her existence.

Norma Jeane’s interactions with photographers, directors, and leaders in the film industry always provide opportunity for exploitation. The moment Norma Jeane steps into studio head Mr. Z’s office, the reader knows something terrible will happen. The “casting couch” scene needs no explanation because simply by entering the room, Norma Jeane has consented to her own victimhood. She has created the opportunity for disaster, and so it must play out. Looking over Mr. Z’s aviary of stuffed birds she notes, “All dead birds are female, there is something female about being dead,” an observation that conveys her recognition of her own vulnerability. She might cry while Mr. Z sodomizes her, but she excuses him as “not a cruel man.” He is merely responding to her weakness, as “there must be the temptation to be cruel when you are surrounded by [“little people”] & they cringe & fawn before you in terror of your whim” (214). Her career depends

upon cringing and fawning before this man; she must submit to his cruelty if she wants to succeed as an actress. Since refusing him would lead to losing her contract, she must “go blind” and submit. Norma Jeane does not revolt against this misogynist system, and even excuses it as less than cruel. She is a perfect victim because she is a compliant victim, and she is compliant because she knows there are no other options for her but to give in.

Norma Jeane is thus caught within a heterosexual matrix that guarantees continual punishment for being female, for being the object of desire. The early chapters of the novel have already established that heterosexuality is always punishing to women, a contention that explains Norma Jeane’s submissiveness. As previously noted, Norma Jeane is sexualized from her infancy, and as she grown into adolescence, her admirers become increasingly menacing. To show Norma Jeane’s entrance into adult sexuality, Oates shifts point of view from the girl to surrounding characters who have no recourse to Norma Jean’s thoughts. Readers only know how she appears, and what she appears to be is an exclusively sexual object. Denied access to any interiority, the reader can only understand her as that object, and so her own sexuality is erased. In other words, we do not learn about Norma Jean’s own experience of her budding libido, how she feels about these new interactions, or what she thinks of the men who court her. Instead, we discover only that all men passionately lust after her, but her appeal is a danger to her. As Norma Jeane becomes an adult, she must understand that adult sexuality is a power struggle fraught with violence.

The chapters describing the teenage years show an innocent high school student who has already attracted a host of boyfriends but whose interactions are still relatively chaste. At fifteen, Norma Jeane has become such a sexpot no man can resist her. Desired

by schoolboys and adult men alike, she lets them take her out but not touch her; she is the consummate tease who remains innocent of her own games. She stammers and blushes, goes to church, and seemingly soaks up men's affections like an abandoned child. Yet even these seemingly harmless relationships contain a threat. "She was the kind of girl who obeys... When they put their trust in you, it's a temptation worse than when they're distrustful," her older boyfriend thinks. Her innocence and obedience inspire in men a protective demeanor that clearly belies a deeper violence. Indeed, her innocent dates carry a constant suggestion of barely-contained viciousness: on one date, a policeman Norma Jeane is seeing pistol-whip a disrespectful passer-by, a scene so disturbing that later Norma Jeane cannot remember if it was she or the other man who received the blows.

In the novel's most jarring scene, Norma Jeane's narrative is suddenly interrupted by the rape of her foster mother Elsie. This rape is the only scene to take place outside Norma Jeane's orbit. Though other characters may narrate or be given a point of view, their own lives remain off-camera, as it were, and we certainly never discover their secrets and traumas. Told in the third-person limited from Elsie's point of view, the episode's novelty begs the question of why it appears at all, and the answer lies in the context. Given the overall tone of the chapter, this scene puts into relief Norma Jean's precarious situation as potential victim surrounded by predatory men. For while the rape may be Elsie's story, it is in fact a key component of Norma Jeane's development: it signifies the imminent threats that surround the innocent girl.

This threat is framed as the natural order of heterosexual punishment, a system whereby a disobedient or undesirable woman must be destroyed. Realizing her husband

has begun “looking at” Norma Jean, Elsie decides to marry her off to avoid returning her to the orphanage. Warren, incensed by his wife’s actions, drunkenly assaults his wife in bed. Though initially it appears that Elsie’s sole interest in removing her foster daughter is to save her marriage, her motivations become murkier the more we learn about her. Her husband cheats regularly. He is physically abusive. Elsie cares about Marilyn, almost loves her, and the rape suggests she might want to protect Norma Jeane from a known abuser. As her husband pins her down, chokes and rapes her, Elsie thinks it might be “a sexual assault except *she was this man’s wife so it was all right* and she’d provoked him so there was justice in it” (127). The rape is her “punishment” for displeasing her husband, who by right can force her to submit. “*He’ll kill me if he can. Fuck me to death. Not Norma Jeane.*” In these words is a motherly protection—she will take the punishment so that Norma Jeane doesn’t have to—but there is also an avowal of satisfaction: her husband is fucking *her* instead of her foster daughter. This assault wounds Elsie; it also recognizes her as Warren’s wife, a position she considers as much an honor as an obligation. There is, then, ambivalence in the women of the novel as well as the men towards the mechanisms of a sadistic heterosexuality.

Elsie’s attack makes explicit the sadism implicit in Norma Jeane’s adolescent sexual fumbblings and augurs inevitable predation. Indeed, later Norma Jeane will echo Elsie’s fate in her own physically abusive marriage to the Ex-Athlete. Elsie takes it upon herself to educate Norma Jeane in the duties of a married woman; this scene is part of our own education into the roles of husband and wife. It is “a man’s happiness to know *I handed out my share of hurt*” (127), and so a dutiful wife must bear her share of pain.

The paradox of this dynamic lies in the multiple responses to female vulnerability. Norma Jeane will seemingly do anything to please men, and her neediness makes her desirable—who wouldn't want a beautiful woman willing to give in to any request? "If I could take off my clothes. If I could stand before you naked as God created me, then—then you would see me!" (117). She is desperate for sex because she is desperate for love, and she inspires the need, as we see in Elsie's case, both to protect and to destroy. Her vulnerability makes her desirable, but it paradoxically also arouses anger. "*When the audience sees your hunger it's like smelling blood. Their cruelty begins*" (663). Her desperation to be seen and accepted excites malice.

The Sadomasochistic Dynamic of the Disappearing Woman

It is the teasing aspect of this vulnerable sexuality that inspires particular hostility, as she toys with her public's desires. She wants to be seen, and we want to see her, but at the precise moment of revelation, she refuses to assent. The extra-textual referent here is Marilyn Monroe's visual ambiguity, the sexual boldness and cringing terror that together contributed to the star's appeal. As Wendy Lesser explains, Marilyn flaunts her body—her "swinging hips and smoochy lips"—but then retreats "behind her own body, using it as a screen with which to hide from us" (Lesser 197). It is "this quality of retreat, of disowning the body's behavior, that causes everybody to describe Marilyn as seeming 'vulnerable'." (198) Her flaunted body makes a promise to her audience: she will be completely available to everybody and will surrender to anybody. Her retreat behind that body disavows that promise and in the process paradoxically reveals both her own vulnerability—her fear of being seen—and her resisting power.

The process of disappearance followed by recapture is sadomasochistic in nature. Jessica Benjamin describes the sadomasochistic dynamic as one that requires a constant interplay of submission and self-assertion. “Since a slave who is completely dominated loses the quality of being able to give recognition, the struggle to possess her must be prolonged...new levels of resistance must be found so that she can be vanquished anew.” Were the masochist to completely relinquish any subjectivity and become a dehumanized object, the sadist could no longer derive satisfaction from the act of degradation. The tension between master and slave enacted in the moments between resistance and submission is a fundamental part of the relationship. Any relationship with Marilyn, even that between her and the viewer, engages in this dynamic—she surrenders to the gaze, tells us she’s all ours, just before asserting herself and disappearing. If her body is what she hides her true self behind, the very object that submits to us—the body—becomes the mechanism of her resistance to complete submission. Lesser points out that “being looked at was Marilyn’s essential gesture, her defining role.” Both viewer and spectacle find pleasure in this act of looking; however, as Marilyn disappears she subverts the voyeur’s will—she won’t allow herself to be completely seen. And so she must be punished, recaptured, made to submit.

Oates’s peculiar style mimics this phenomenon of revelation and retreat. As previously discussed, the frequent section breaks, shifts in speaker, and insertion of unattributed italics all obscure Norma Jeane’s “true” character. If there is no organizing subjectivity, there is no real heroine. The reader might at points believe that this chapter, this paragraph, this quote reveals who Norma Jeane is, but those moments are immediately negated. The few insertions of a first-person Norma Jeane point-of-view

promise a closeness to Norma they cannot deliver, as in this first-person account of an affair with President Kennedy.

His skin coarse-freckled and hot to the touch as if sunburnt. Mine smooth and thin and eggshell-pale and, where a man grips me in the forgetfulness of passion, easily bruised.

These bruises proudly worn like mauled rose petals.

This, our secret. Never will I reveal my lover's name.

He knew, he said, what it is to be lonely. In his large family there was loneliness growing up. (689)

She begins to extol their beauty-and-the-beast skin-pairing when a new voice interrupts, this second voice a poetic speaker who sounds more like Oates than Norma Jeane. The second speaker continues Oates's thematization of the willing victim, the masochistic lover, who equates bruises with passionate love. When given the opportunity to speak, Norma Jeane has never before offered signs of masochistic desire; this role has been imposed upon her by those who speak *of* her. In the following italicized line, yet another voice breaks through with an assertion of secrecy. Usually, the move to italics marks a transition to a new speaker, yet here we understand Norma Jeane still narrates; nevertheless, the voice is an interruption, a negation even of the preceding line, as though this is still a third Norma Jeane.

Finally, we return to the original subject, the primary Norma Jeane, who speaks of their shared loneliness. Here again is a tease, a false opportunity to hear the thoughts and feelings within the heroine, for, in fact, there is no single heroine to offer a singular emotional response. When the president calls her Marilyn, the word always appears in all

capital letters, to mark yet another version of Norma Jeane, this one her official title and mask to the world. Whereas a reader expects these few pages of first-person narration to offer a glimpse of Norma Jeane's interior experience, the mutability of voice subverts those expectations. In this manner, the reader experiences the same frustration as Marilyn Monroe's viewers, who could never quite grasp this ever-retreating figure.

Within the novel's logic, Norma Jeane's resistance is always met with violence, and so it might be expected that the reader, frustrated at her constant retreat from visibility, would wish to imaginatively act out violence. The novel's myriad male aggressors enact punishment in the reader's stead, just as the individual abusers act for the masculine hordes. The archotyping of male figures and the casual infusion of fairy-tale terminology create a world in which one stands in for many. When men are aroused by her, anger and desire coningle, sentiments that seem to apply to Norma Jeane-as-woman rather than the individual character. As she poses over the subway grate while filming *Some Like it Hot* a crowd of men gathers "through whom sexual desire passes like an agitated wave." Their agitation leads to a bacchanalian urge for violence: "There's a mood-to-do-hurt. There's a mood-to-grab-and-tear-and-fuck. There's a festive mood. A celebratory mood. Everybody's been drinking!" She becomes the focal point of a male ritual, a fantasy for all men. Her husband, the Ex-Athlete, can live out the fantasies of the onlookers—he gets to "do hurt" in private by beating up his wife. That his attack appears immediately after the crowd turns violent emphasizes his role as stand-in for the many. He must punish her for subverting patriarchal authority: her first sin is to show herself to the world, which in itself is a violation of her husband's authority over her, and then angers him further "because she's resisting him. Provoking him." Availability is

grotesque, but resistance is equal provocation. This beating plays out the sadistic fantasies of all of Marilyn's admirers whose sexual arousal is entwined with violence. They want to "scoop out" this "American slash" themselves.

Benjamin points out that the final stage of the sadomasochistic fantasy is the annihilation of the victim. The ever-increasing punishments must be carried out to their inevitable extreme, which is death or discarding. *Blonde* provides that endpoint of sadomasochistic fantasy within heterosexual discourse, the death of the beautiful woman. Norma Jeane's possible murder/possible suicide is the only satisfying ending because it completes the fantasy, and draws the narrative to its inevitable close. It provides narrative satisfaction at having a particular set of expectations met. Having subverted the reader's anticipation of sympathetic reading, Oates moves beyond identification with the heroine to identification *as the aggressor*, and in so doing reconfigures narrative expectations. By positioning the reader as a sadistic male voyeur, Oates demonstrates how this position is already endemic to the process of reading, the construction of female-centered narrative within a populist, consumer-based readership.

Blonde thus continues to raise the same questions raised *The Magic Toyshop*, questions we will see recur in J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* in chapter four: if a reader takes pleasure in the literary tradition that relies on a sadomasochistic mechanism, is s/he implicated in those sadistic impulses? *Blonde* presents us with a feminist paradox; it is a feminist work, but Oates's authorial voice is overtly sadistic, and seems both to derive and inspire a reader's pleasure from its own cruelty. The novel aims to reveal the process of sadistic reading, but it also ventriloquizes that sadism, placing the reader in an uncomfortable position of not quite knowing with whom to identify and how to feel about

the heroine. *Blonde*, then, asks how a reader can acknowledge the pleasure of a violent eroticism without capitulating to a culture that might treat sexual violence callously. Rather than provide answers, however, Oates shifts the onus on the reader, who must come to terms with his/her position as the imaginary aggressor.

Chapter Four

J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*:

Confronting Violence in the Global Novel

Over the past three decades, the South African author J.M. Coetzee has become a prominent figure in world literature, having established himself in the 1980s as a public intellectual whose work allegorically explores the problems of political oppression. In more recent years, his work has continued to explore the ethical dilemmas that arise from unequal power structures, as he has turned his eye towards sexual violence, animal rights, and the moral responsibility of the artist. Throughout his oeuvre, Coetzee has depended upon a variety of literary strategies, including allegory, postmodern self-reflexivity, philosophical allusion and essayistic prose, to push his own ethical concerns into the realm of the universal. And yet, his South African nationality plays a significant role in the public consumption and interpretation of his work. Published in 1999, Coetzee's *Disgrace* has become, within the globalized literary market, the canonical South African text, representing to the Western literary consumer a vision of a nation at war with itself. Such contextual reading may stem from the fact that *Disgrace* is, unlike much of Coetzee's work, a novel in realist prose with a fairly straightforward narrative. As I will explore in this chapter, however, it is ironically Coetzee's recourse to his British literary roots that enables global readers to consume this work as a paradigmatic violence narrative of modern South Africa. For the Western audience, the novel's split-identification between its African and European roots provides a foundation for exploring

our own literary traditions of sexual violence while allowing us to project those horrors into a foreign space.

At the center of this novel is a brutal rape that casts the new post-Apartheid South Africa as an unfathomable nation in which traditional forms of reading are no longer viable. Its protagonist is a white male writer/critic who is conversant in Western culture, but who fails in his ability to read the complex interplay of sex and race that makes up his daily life. David Lurie, a fifty-two-year-old literature professor at a Cape Town university, is a holdover from an older South Africa, when white professors taught students the great Western masters of literature. His first disgrace occurs early in the novel after he “seduces”—or more accurately, sexually abuses—a student. Following a public disciplinary hearing in which he refuses to cooperate, he flees the city for his daughter Lucy’s rural smallholding. At the novel’s midpoint, Lucy is raped by three of her black neighbors while her father, who has already been badly beaten, is locked in an adjacent bathroom. The latter half of the novel confronts the fallout from this second disgrace, as Lucy refuses to report her rape or leave an increasingly unsafe situation; ultimately, Lucy resigns herself to live “like a dog” in a protective arranged marriage with her neighbor.

David Lurie is a stand-in for the novel’s own reader, who is forced, through textual omission and obfuscation, to mis-read Lucy’s rape. This rape is a personal trauma encoded as collective trauma; the narrative contrives to make rape a metonym for a nation’s struggles to cope with history. *Disgrace* allows us to trace the process by which individual trauma creates social significance, and to explore the question of rape as a discursive practice within the global novel. The international politics of this novel are

especially noteworthy given two factors: the perceived responsibility of the Nobel prize-winning author to represent his nation, and the international community's judgment of his nation's history. It is important to note that *Disgrace*'s critical reception overseas differed dramatically from the response it garnered domestically. When it was initially published in 1999, the reaction within South Africa was largely negative. The African National Congress (ANC) publicly criticized the book's portrayal of rape, claiming that it played into white South Africans' racist fears of black men as virulent rapists. The ANC drew a connection between *Disgrace* and historic representations within South African media of "black peril."⁵ However, in Britain, the novel won Coetzee the honor of being the first author to receive the prestigious Booker Prize twice. Coetzee won the Nobel Prize just four years after publishing *Disgrace*, and only three years after the ANC publicly decried him.

Critical reception in Britain and the U.S. tended to praise the narrative at both the formal level—highlighting Coetzee's spare, tight prose style—and at the political level, taking the novel as a significant representation of South Africa under the ANC. While within South Africa, Coetzee's perceived critiques of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and his alleged fueling of "white paranoia" met with outrage, in Western literary circles, these critiques seem to confirm the suspicion that the new South Africa is in fact no better than the old. For example, Elizabeth Lowry's review in *The London Review of Books* explains that "*Disgrace* is about a society in the process of being

⁵ In the ANC's 2000 "Submission to the Human Rights Commission on Racism and the Media," the study's authors found that "[F]ive years after our liberation, white South African society continues to believe in a particular stereotype of the African, which defines the latter as immoral and amoral; savage; violent; disrespectful of private property; incapable of refinement through education; and driven by hereditary, dark satanic impulses" (African National Congress). Even after Coetzee won the Nobel prize, the ANC stood by its criticism. (Donadio)

overhauled, in which morality has been erased and reborn” and respect for individuality can no longer exist (Lowry). In an op-ed for *The Independent* written shortly after *Disgrace* won the Booker Prize, Anne McElvoy claimed, “*Disgrace* is a deeply, unforgivingly political book, a mirror to the fate of a country locked into required rituals of self-examination but unable to find true repentance or comfort in the process” (McElvoy).⁶ Both South African and Western readers cast the story as national commentary, and whereas the latter found the portrayal accurate and disturbing, the former called it racist diatribe; in both cases *Disgrace* is no mere novel, but rather a political critique in narrative form.

Lucy’s rape, as the central event in this perceived critique, offers insight into the representational economy of sexual violence within the literary marketplace. For readers in Europe and the United States, the broad discussion of race and national identity is predicated upon the violated woman’s body, yet the actual act of violation is elided. Lucy’s individual experience is not to be dwelt on for long, because it must immediately be interpreted within a broader context: what does this rape mean for this story? Here violation is a narrative tool that creates meaning from the female body, but never addresses the direct meaning of that body. In other words, Lucy’s violated being takes on significance for the nation as a whole, but the question of the raped body itself, or of Lucy’s traumatized personhood, is never raised. In *Lucy* we see a paradigmatic female whose trauma is not her own, but rather marks a moment of literary creation.

Coetzee is well aware of the difficulties such elision raises for readers and characters alike. David Lurie, acting for the reader, grapples with how to interpret the

⁶ For other reviews that interpret the novel as a pessimistic portrait of South Africa’s ceaseless problems with violence, see James Wood’s review in *The New Republic*, Andrew O’Heir’s *Salon.com* review or Robert L. Berner in *World Literature Today*.

rape *and* address Lucy's personhood; Lucy repeatedly informs Lurie that he fails on both counts, and in so doing she criticizes the reader's own attempts to create meaning from the traumatic event. By enacting the drama of interpretation through these characters, Coetzee asks readers to examine how consuming literary violence—reading, understanding, and making meaning from representational rape—makes them active participants in that violence.

The issue of authorial and reader responsibility is nothing new to Coetzee's oeuvre. In an essay on Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa*, Coetzee confronts the particular paradox of reading rape: it is a re-violation to return to a scene of rape, but it is also dismissive to avoid that scene or to pretend that the female body is so mysterious it cannot be represented or interpreted. Coetzee ponders why Clarissa, the prototypical novelistic heroine, must die rather than move on and put the rape behind her. Lovelace and Anna Howe voice the common assumption that the rape is simply an "affront to [Clarissa's] dignity," which can always be restored, if only Clarissa would allow it. When she refuses to restore herself, she in effect refuses to be a literary victim. "I as reader and potential re-presenter of Clarissa concede to participating in a certain violence of interpretation, a violence against which Clarissa in effect protests...when she resists the right assumed by others to interpret her." (*Stranger Shores* 31). Lucy too resists this violence, but in so doing ironically debases herself. These heroines' tragic fates suggest that the only way a woman escapes the re-violation of interpretation is through complete self-abnegation, in death or in a debased livelihood. Yet Coetzee does not let the reader off so easily. Lucy frustrates the reader's interpretive desire because she opts out of any clear narrative framework: her words and deeds prevent clear conclusions. Without tools

to make meaning of violence, the reader must look inward and confront his or her own desire to dwell, through interpretation and analysis, on the violated woman's image. These hermeneutic desires are predicated upon taking pleasure in another's debasement and finding gratification from female suffering and bodily corruption.

The Sadistic Reader on the Global Stage

The transnational distribution, consumption, and discussion of *Disgrace* create a context for examining how the current global literary market might encourage a sadistic reading practice. The twenty-first-century global reader who wishes to consume cosmopolitan literature operates in a different mode than the traditional reader whose sadism I discussed in earlier chapters; a global reader can still find pleasure in violation, but the violated woman is now geographically distant, culturally alien, and is therefore easier to abject or cast out as the troubling other. As I explored previously, a sadistic reader first psychologically identifies with the heroine and views her as "me," only, at the moment of her violation, to turn her into the "not-me" of the abject. In so doing, a sadistic reader confronts bodily anxieties surrounding vulnerability as well as social anxieties endemic to living in a culture of violence. A global novel allows readers to confront the latter anxiety by universalizing violence while simultaneously particularizing its local iterations. Western readers can identify in Lucy's rape a universal problem of sexual violence, but there remains an underlying reassurance that this scenario is far away, limited to darkest Africa. By reading Lucy's rape as a sign of the problems South Africa faces after Apartheid, *Disgrace's* Western readers unconsciously address anxieties surrounding sexual violence while maintaining the illusion that those

anxieties are the province of one distinct locale. The woman's body as public signifier simultaneously reminds and relieves readers of bodily anxieties, which are universally acknowledged and then immediately abjected onto the Third-World other.

Before examining our sadistic engagement with *Disgrace*, it is first necessary to look at how this novel, while written for and received by a global audience, is always haunted by the specter of the local. Although we may want to read the text as either universal/global *or* local/national, *Disgrace* shows that such a dichotomy is artificial. We read dialectically, shifting between global and national subject-positions. Indeed, at the narrative and formal levels, *Disgrace* has no clear allegiance to either transnational or South African status. Lucy insists that she reacts to her rape as she does because she lives in "this place, being South Africa," while her father demands that she react in accordance with the country's shifting power structure. Nationality is foundational to how the characters respond to one another and to their circumstances. However, the characters have multiple geo-political identities: Lucy is a South African and Dutch national of English heritage who can emigrate at any time, and David Lurie views himself as a South African whose heritage lies closer to British Romantics than Afrikaans settlers. Moreover, the novelistic form itself is not native to Africa, but is a genre carried over by European colonists. The protagonist's Anglo-African background and position as an English professor further emphasize the narrative's Colonial literary roots.

Most significant, however, to the novel's global identity is the author, who, at the time he wrote *Disgrace*, was already a celebrated international intellectual. The global novel cannot exist without an international economy distributing a canon of "world literature" that is determined by institutional arbiters. Francesca Orsini sums up this

global cultural market in one simple equation: “prizes + sales = international success” (87). Success is, by definition, an accrual of cultural capital that circulates within what James F. English has coined the “global economy of cultural prestige.” Within this economy, authors gain international status and recognition when they are sanctioned by elite institutions such as the Swedish Academy or Booker Prize Foundation.

Coetzee’s access to this economy of cultural prestige affects both the production and consumption of his novels: due to the author’s international status at the time of its creation, *Disgrace* was, the words of Rebecca Walkowitz, “born translated.” It was written to circulate in the global literary marketplace, to translate linguistically and culturally to readers in Europe and North America. Coetzee’s work is part of an “emergent genre of transnational fiction” that stems from “the flourishing of migrant communities, and especially migrant writers, within metropolitan centers throughout the world...It joins the renewed effort to imagine transnational and/or cosmopolitan paradigms that offer alternatives to national models of political communities” (568). With these words, Walkowitz articulates a renewed, twenty-first century faith in the “world literature” school of criticism, which posits that global distribution inspires readers to transcend the long-standing practice of interpreting works through nationalization.

Goethe is credited with creating this model of *Weltliteratur*, in which “the efforts of the best writers...[are] directed to what is common to all mankind” (qtd in Strich 13). With the ease of communication expanding in the nineteenth century, the idea of a common literature speaking to universality rather than nationality took on a new promise, one that extends into contemporary giddiness over the creation of our “global village.” It is indeed alluring to imagine a deterritorialized reading practice that matches our

emerging globalized ethos; yet we must be careful not to overstate Coetzee's universal or allegorical pull. Although his work's complex and allusive tone ingratiates a cosmopolitan intellectual community, *Disgrace*'s success in the global market depends upon its situatedness in a South African landscape. It is a novel of place, and part of its success depends upon the world's interest in that place.

Works that are "born translated" face a unique challenge in that they must represent global concerns while maintaining national markers that exoticize the text. Exotification is a draw for global novels because it allows readers to experience the familiar in an unfamiliar place; in this sense it echoes the uncanny. Reading about the African condition may carry a whiff of tourist voyeurism; more significant to this project, however, is the sense of familiarity for Anglophone readers who find in *Disgrace* a linguistic and literary similitude that is juxtaposed with an exotic situation. This unique combination eases readers into a confrontation with sexual violence that can be understood first as a universal problem and then immediately labeled "foreign." The very concept "world literature" suggests both a homogenized reading public occupying all corners of the globe and a host of national or local literatures that migrate, unchanged, across borders. Such tension between universalism and particularism suggests a false binary for readers: either the text represents universal themes *or* national interests. However, universalism and particularism are in dialogue. Readers consume a transnational text for its universal appeal *and* for its representation of more localized culture; we can take pleasure in shifting between universalism and particularism at will.

Of course, within postcolonial studies there remains a preoccupation with how literature can truly represent a developing nation if it is made in the image of Western

canonical modes (i.e. the *bildungsroman*, the psychological novel).⁷ The argument over an “authentic” literature as opposed to a postcolonial sub-canon that panders to Western audiences is significant here in as much as it suggests that the “global novel” operates within a power dynamic that privileges traditional (i.e. sadistic) reading practices tethered to British and American imperialism. Franco Moretti identifies what he describes as the center-periphery divide in global literary distribution; for Moretti, world literature is an unequal system in which the center’s symbolic economy maintains firm control over the periphery. The center’s hegemony prevents peripheral literatures from developing and expressing a thoroughly indigenous form. Moretti describes his law of literary evolution: “In cultures that belong to the periphery of the literary system (which means: almost all cultures, inside and outside Europe), the modern novel first arises not as an autonomous development but as a compromise between a western formal influence (usually French or English) and local materials.”

“Compromise” naturally suggests hybridity, a term that connotes a celebration of intersecting cultures that emerge when the center colonizes the periphery. *Disgrace* might then be a compromise between the English realist novel and the “local materials” of South African narrative, were it not susceptible to justified accusations of inauthenticity or pandering. James F. English explains that world literature “is not just a marketing niche into which formerly market-resistant (read: translated) cultural goods may be profitably inserted; it is an essentially false and touristic product, specially, if not always consciously, made for Euro-American consumption, masquerading as a representative form of indigenous cultural expression” (307). The new genre of

⁷ For an in-depth discussion of this debate see Aijaz Ahmad’s *In Theory: Nations, Classes, Literatures*.

transnational or cosmopolitan world literature is, in this formulation, not an expression of commonality and universalism but a product made for the West by authors properly trained in European literary modes. According to Orsini, international recognition comes to those authors whose work never lingers in the vernacular and does not touch upon issues too remote for Euro-American readers. Speaking of Indian fiction, she notes readers in the West are tourists disinterested in novels that explore the localized experience; rather, Western readers wish to read novels that reflect their own experiences, so that, “in the florid, sensuous, inclusive, multicultural world of the post-Rushdie, postcolonial novel, the West can settle down to contemplate, not India, but its latest reinterpretation of itself” (88). A novel written by a conscientious, English-speaking white man in the years immediately following the end of Apartheid cannot simply represent a uniquely South African condition. *Disgrace* offers the tourist a chance to come down to Africa for a while, but its recourse to Eurocentric literary and cultural history provides that tourist a new perspective on—a reinterpretation of—the Western condition.

There are, then, two ways of looking at the role of *Disgrace* in the global market. It is on the one hand a novel whose European origins and African concerns conspire to create a cosmopolitan text that transcends borders and brings the African experience to an Anglophone and European readership. Yet, if we consider English and Orsini’s contentions, Western readers do not get an authentic sense of South Africa’s condition, but instead use the text as a means to “reinterpret” their own cultural concerns. A sadistic reader is allied with both sides of this argument. To read Lucy sadistically is to think of her as a cosmopolitan object who could be “just like us” but also to use her as an African

other that helps us reinterpret what “just like us” really means.

In a 2008 essay, then-Permanent Secretary of the Swedish Academy Horace Engdahl points out that cosmopolitanism and national identification coexist as part of the uneasy truce that must exist for a global market to blossom. He first addresses complaints—which echo sentiments described above—that the Swedish Academy most often recognizes authors from developing nations who are heavily influenced by Western literary traditions, or what he terms “European literature in an exotic guise.” The migratory patterns of writers who achieve international fame should not be surprising, as “Great authors are often nomadic beings.” Ironically, the most hostile comments “usually come from the writer’s own country” (198). Engdahl defends the “global culture of prestige,” which asserts that internationally recognized authors are themselves stateless beings whose work transcends location; it is for this very reason that they are more popular in the global than domestic markets. And yet Engdahl himself acknowledges, “There is no neutral ground or transnational vision shared by all...national canon pierces the international...Yet it is evident that the Nobel Prize represents a unifying force in relation to the mass of local traditions” (212). Given that even an institution dedicated to promoting world literature must admit a reasonable doubt of cosmopolitan idealism, how do we identify what differentiates a national and transnational novel?

Coetzee’s work is, like the author, migratory and cosmopolitan, as it draws upon multiple linguistic, cultural, and literary foundations. By reading such a text for its cosmopolitanism and its national affinity, contemporary readers can identify with the characters at multiple levels; the intersubjective foundation for sadistic reading is inherent to this global reading process. The characters are, from the outset, both points of

identification for the reader and representations of an other, a foreigner whose experiences are necessarily anathema. Pascale Casanova, a critic often cited in discussions of contemporary world literature, points out that in the “world republic of letters” not all literatures compete equally. Within the global system, all national literatures are judged by their relation to the current literary moment created by Eurocentric arbiters of quality. The “consecration” bestowed upon a text from a literarily disinherited country catalyzes what Casanova hyperbolically describes as “a transmutation in the alchemical sense” (126). This change in a text’s “very nature” is “a passage from literary inexistence to existence, from invisibility to the condition of literature” (127). The literary capital gained from international recognition endows the text with authority to represent, to act as a work of literature, that is, as a meaning-making machine. Casanova’s “alchemical change” is not in the text itself, which is of course static, but rather in its reception. How we read an international text depends upon a host of reference points, including political and historical knowledge and rehearsed relationships to genre. In the case of *Disgrace*, a European or American reader relies on limited knowledge of South African history to change the meaning of the text so that it can reify our conceptions of the African other and reflect our self-perceptions.

Most readers on the global market do not use the postcolonial novel as an exotic fetish, but rather consume texts like *Disgrace* primed to recognize commonality of experience across cultures. Ironically, our training in recognizing a cosmopolitan world literature leads to a sadistic reading practice: as readers we can identify with the characters, but we can just as easily point to their cultural difference. Lucy is both foreign and familiar in that she is a South African farmer who is also an educated woman

of European descent. Though she seems an odd candidate to represent South Africa, she is, due to her multiple identities as European and African, an ideal figure to read sadistically, to view as both the “me” and the “not-me” within the text. For Lurie in particular she is at once his home—literally his kin—and something entirely foreign—a rural gay woman.

And yet, within the global market *Disgrace* can be understood as an Orientalist novel in that it represents the east as a lens through which to interpret the west. If the novel gives insight into South Africa’s problems with race, violence, and institutionalized rape, its final task is to confront a Western practice of reading rape narratives. Written in an imported genre, concerning Africans of colonial ancestry, the novel repeatedly references European representations of sexuality. *Disgrace* is less concerned with confronting the South Africa rape epidemic than addressing Anglophone conventions for working out the problem of rape.

David Lurie and The Problem of Sex

The novel begins with an ironic introduction to its protagonist. “For a man of his age, fifty-two, divorced, he has, to his mind, figured out the problem of sex rather well” (1). At this point in his life, Lurie believes the main “problem of sex” is finding beautiful young women willing to go to bed with him. His solution is to visit a prostitute once a week, and, later, to seduce a young student from one of his literature classes. Yet as the narrative progresses, it becomes clear that Lurie’s “problem” is far more complex. Sex occupies an intersection of power, violence, and desire, and is never divorced from cultural systems of domination. Within this system, representations of rape are

embedded in narrative conventions that promote power and dominance. *Disgrace* critiques these narratives, both traditional and contemporary, by undermining all of our attempts to read rape in terms of rehearsed narrative. The novel's many casualties are women of various ages and races against whom sex is used as a weapon to demonstrate authority. Caught in the midst of this violence is Lurie, the sometime violator, sometime victim, who struggles to identify his place in sexual systems of domination.

Lurie's original misjudgment of the real "problem of sex" catalyzes the initial plotline, which details the abuse of power embedded in Lurie's literary world at the University of Cape Town. Lurie's obsession with the racially ambiguous Melanie Isaacs is coded as a desire to own her; to woo her, he asserts that "a woman's beauty does not belong to her alone. It is part of the bounty she brings into the world." These lines are to some extent meaningless seduction clichés, but they do reveal Lurie's acquisitive nature. For him, sexual desire is the desire to own a woman's beauty. Under the shifting power structures of South Africa at the turn of the millennium, however, a white man no longer has the authority to demand that a woman share her body. The "problem" here has become a mutual misunderstanding of where power lies, of who can demand and who must submit. Initially, it seems, tradition wins out, as Lurie can inflict damage with impunity. He describes their copulation as a form of assault:

Not rape, not quite that, but undesired nevertheless, undesired to the core. As though she had decided to go slack, die within herself for the duration, like a rabbit when the jaws of the fox close on its neck. So that everything done to her might be done, as it were, far away. (25)

Lurie clearly identifies Melanie's trauma-induced dissociation, but he does not seem bothered if she "dies within herself." In other words, he cares more for his pleasure than for her personhood. The reader here is in an awkward position: we must read the events through Lurie's repugnant perspective, and in so doing ally ourselves with a disagreeable point of view. Although we might recognize, as Lurie does, that the events are distasteful, we must to some extent continue to consume them if we wish to follow the course of events as they are laid out for us. Questions linger for readers allied with this unfavorable point of view: how much must we identify with our protagonist, and how can we sympathize with such a disgraceful man? When Lurie describes Byron's Lucifer to his students, he answers this question and instructs us how to read him: "We are not asked to condemn this being with a mad heart...we are invited to sympathize." (31). Lurie believes in the moral ambiguity of the Byronic hero, who lives independent of or above social mores. By vocation and by admission, Lurie is a dogmatic adherent to this misogynist Romanticism; he is self-styled Don Juan who calls upon a well known literary history on which to base his identity. The reader, too, calls upon that history to make sense of this unseemly protagonist. If he is a legitimate anti-hero, we expect he will at some point become sympathetic.

Just as the reader suspects that this rake will be redeemed, his community, too, wishes to rehabilitate him. After the affair becomes public, Lurie faces a disciplinary committee that expects him to confess his guilt. Lurie bucks the system, in large part because he feels his "mad heart" places him outside this institution. He refuses to admit that he feels a true sense of guilt and claims instead that he was merely a "servant of Eros." One colleague begs him to confess to what is a common slip-up: "We have our

weak moments, all of us, we are only human. Your case is not unique.”(52). Critics have alternately read this scene as a parody of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission or a parody of feminist political correctness.⁸ Both interpretations ignore the scene’s critique of institutionalized abuse; professors are allowed to prey upon students, and their exploitation is nothing more than a “weak moment.” By refusing to engage in this farcical hearing, Lurie ironically subverts institutionalized acceptance of sexual abuse. Unfortunately, Lurie cannot recognize his own complicity with systemic violence; he views himself as an outsider even as the reader knows he participates in an exploitive institution. Although he believes himself a sexual libertine, in fact Lurie merely reifies the “problem” of power, violence, and desire.

The Unreadability of Rape

Lucy’s violent gang rape doubles Melanie’s earlier, murkier rape. Combined, the two assaults posit that rape is an infinite signifier because it depends upon narrativization to make meaning; what a rape signifies depends upon how the story of that rape is recounted, which can change with each re-presentation. Thus, rape’s signification is ever-shifting as its story can be re-interpreted and re-told by each individual. The novel emphasizes this claim as it thwarts readers from coming to a final perspective on Lucy’s rape, instead opening the text up to infinite discussion of what her abjection signifies.

To create such a proliferation of meaning, Coetzee immediately effaces every possible interpretation as soon as it is offered, either implicitly in the text or explicitly by a character. In the novel’s most frustrating exchange, Lucy explains that she cannot come forward with her story because they live in a particular time and place: post-Apartheid

⁸ See Elizabeth Anker and Sohinne Roy for examples.

South Africa. But when Lurie assumes she is trying to avoid further vengeance on white citizens, she explains

“I am not just trying to save my own skin. If that is what you think, you miss the point entirely.”

“Then help me. Is it some form of private salvation you are trying to work out? Do you hope you can expiate the crimes of the past by suffering in the present?”

“No, you keep misreading me. Guilt and salvation are abstractions. I don’t act in terms of abstractions. Until you make an effort to see that, I can’t help you.” (112)

Throughout this conversation, Lucy remains unknowable. She wants to keep silent because of where and when they live, but not because she feels responsible for past wrongs or because she fears present retribution. She will not say what specifically motivates her silence, but she does indicate that Lurie—and the reader—cannot possibly understand her reasons. Unconcerned with abstractions, unconcerned with practicalities, Lucy will not tell her father what she is concerned with.

As readers, we, like Lurie are left grasping at straws. Two possible readings of Lucy’s rape appear in another discussion between the victim and her father: Lucy muses aloud that the attack “was so personal. It was done with such personal hatred.” Her father tries to comfort her by saying, “It was history speaking through them. A history of wrong... It may have seemed personal, but it wasn’t. It came down from the ancestors” (156). Lucy, understandably, interprets her rape as personal, whereas her father believes

the violence is representational, a sign of revenge aimed at an entire race. Lurie here plays the consummate critic, interpreting history through a single moment and infusing one woman's suffering with the weight of a nation. We as readers are left to decide for ourselves what to make of this rape. Do we side with Lucy, who repeatedly tells Lurie "You don't understand what happened," or do we interpret the event as Lurie does, as an act greater than the individual players, an act of historic significance? Even if we do agree with Lucy—and accept that Lurie's interpretation is false—no alternative presents itself. All we ever know of Lucy's rape is that it was "personal." According to her, it was not public, and therefore is not an act that can be subject to public speculation.

Lucy's insistence that any interpretation of her rape is necessarily a misreading undermines any and every model the reader might rely on to make sense of this narrative. Coetzee takes particular care to subvert archetypal European conventions readers might call upon. In musing on the rape, Lurie recalls the painting *The Rape of the Sabine Women*, which features Roman guards on horseback and women "in gauze veils flinging their arms in the air and wailing." He then asks himself, "What had all this attitudinizing to do with what he suspected rape to be: the man lying on top of the woman and pushing himself into her?" (160). He also considers that his hero, Byron, must have "pushed himself into" a whole host of servant-women, but, because such rape was systemic rather than violent, it is "old fashioned" and irrelevant to Lucy's plight. Lurie attempts to comprehend his daughter's violation—a scene to which he has no access—through the Masters of Western Art. It is important to note that, as we saw in the novel's first half, he is aligned with the masculine tradition in which a wealthy intellectual's privilege allows him to sexually abuse his socioeconomic inferiors. In re-examining Lurie's models to

read rape—the “attitudinizing” aesthetics of representational rape, the romanticized escapades of a Byronic playboy—the novel establishes a potentially unbridgeable gap between representational and empirical rape. In other words, narrative always falls short in its attempt to accurately identify what happens during a rape. When Lurie attempts to imagine Lucy’s rape, he expresses a need to know her individual experience, but Lucy insists Lurie can’t “know what happened” because he “wasn’t there.” Any attempt he makes to find out the truth is an impossible guessing game.

Lurie, however, remains faithful to the idea that a sympathetic audience can accurately understand the trauma of rape once the narrative is laid bare. He insists that if he can imagine what has happened, he will *know* what has happened. After all, he assumes “What more could he have witnessed than he is capable of imagining?” (141). He can (and does) recreate the scene through his own creative musings, in effect re-writing the brutal scene by fantasizing a cinematic depiction of what occurred. Yet his vision of the rape is perhaps as irrelevant to reality as all the “attitudinizing” of *The Rape of the Sabine Women*. No matter what Lurie or the reading public thinks happened in that bathroom, nobody can actually know. And more importantly, a contemporary scholar and critic like Lurie, though capable of imagining a “realistic” rape, cannot escape the misconceptions that plagued the masters of the past.

The Sympathetic Imagination and Sadistic Identification

Engaging cultural and literary models of rape, Lurie hints at a faith in the Romantic “sympathetic imagination” as a means to bridge the gap between representations and experiences of rape. When reading or hearing a rape narrative, one

must imaginatively piece together the events from the point of view of the victim, a creative act that leads to identification. If the rape is replayed in the reader's mind, it becomes a kind of experience, though of course an internal rather than "real" one.

Through this intellectual and emotional connection to the original act, the reader connects representation to reality. Of course, this linking is not easy and requires some previous experience with imaginative identification. One main concern for Lurie is whether he has the ability to bridge that gap, because in order to do so, he must imagine himself as a woman in her basest state—to "be where the woman is" (141).

Whether or not Lurie is capable of entering the subjectivity of the "woman" depends not on his imaginative faculties, which are highly developed, but on his willingness to confront his own vulnerabilities.

You don't understand, you weren't there, says Bev Shaw. Well, she is mistaken... he can, if he concentrates, if he loses himself, be there, be the men, inhabit them, fill them with the ghost of himself. The question is, does he have it in him to be the woman? (160)

Critics like Richard Barney, Jane Taylor, and Margot Beard have contended that Lurie's character trajectory traces a developing sense of imaginative empathy. The above quote indeed would suggest that Lurie is at the very least trying to imagine himself into the female experience. However, Lurie's compulsive struggle to understand Lucy implies that his traditional narrative models for comprehending rape fail: although Lurie does in fact have it in him "to be the woman"—he is capable of imagining what has happened to Lucy—those moments of identification are fleeting, ephemeral, and complicated by less idealized impulses.

Beard claims that Lurie's acquaintance with Wordsworth and Byron helps him develop a Romantic ability to imagine himself into another being, though she does acknowledge that, at first, Lurie exploits the Romantic mode by using poetry both to seduce Melanie and to demonstrate his felt superiority before his colleagues. According to Beard, his final ability to empathize with the euthanized shelter dogs is evidence that the novel trumpets the project of Romanticism.

Disgrace therefore argues that Romanticism is not simply a Eurocentric throwback, something to be rejected out of hand in post-colonial South Africa. Instead, this novel addresses the major proposition of Romanticism - the essential nature of the creative imagination which is our only means to enter the experience of another, of overcoming our atomistic isolation from the rest of creation." (74)

Beard assumes that if readers interpret English Romantics correctly, the Romantic project will easily translate across national borders and will open up a universal collectivity of mutual understanding. This interpretation is not implausible, but it does ignore the novel's ambivalence. Michael Marais agrees that though Lurie develops a rudimentary ability to empathize, he remains unable to solve the "problem of sex." Lurie continually regresses to previous positions; he finally sympathizes more with Mr. Isaacs than with Melanie, and though he decries his daughter's exploitation, he finds himself guiltily returning to a prostitute in the novel's final chapters.

Moreover, Lurie and Lucy never effectively communicate with one another, and ultimately fail to comprehend one another's perspectives. So, too, does the reader fail to understand Lucy's perspective. Marais explains, "In finding that his every attempt at

imagining Lucy's singularity merely renders it unimaginable, the reader would find...himself in relation to that which he cannot correlate with, and thereby subsume within, culture's epistemological paradigms" (88). Lurie's attempts to identify with Lucy are futile because he lacks the discursive tools necessary for such understanding. Her alterity exceeds the bounds of sympathetic imagination, which is limited by a culture's epistemological paradigms. Though, as Marais discusses, Lurie relies on racialized South African discourse to describe Lucy's rape, I would emphasize that he also requires the language of the "masters" to imagine her story. Reading across the gap is always already limited by the strictures of language and cultural models. Lurie and the reader lack a paradigm for making a coherent narrative out of Lucy's trauma, and as a result cannot enter her subject-position—they cannot "be where the woman is." Limited by Lurie's perspective and lacking necessary discursive tools, the reader cannot incorporate Lucy's experience into a coherent narrative, because the novelistic genre still lacks a sufficient paradigm to read rape.

Marais ultimately concludes that, while the imagination might not allow for complete empathy, readers may draw inspiration from the very *attempt* to incorporate Lucy's otherness. Though Beard and Marais come to slightly different conclusions regarding Lurie's capacity for sympathy, both enforce the idea that reading teaches individuals how to address otherness. Byron and Wordsworth's presence throughout the narrative offer the promise that we can learn from literature how to enter the interiority of the other. Ironically, the novel positions Lurie himself—white male authority figure that he is—as an unreadable other by making him unsympathetic and couching his motivations in distancing language. We are always one remove away from Lurie, even as

we are held at an even further distance from Lucy. The limited third-person narration gives us Lurie's perspective without clarifying his character. Thus, as Marais has pointed out, the novel complicates a pure faith that reading always leads to "creative imagination" or an ethics of empathy. Rather, the novel instructs that though we may be currently limited, a text such as this one can help us overcome those limitations by pointing to their existence. The burden is on the reader, of course, to continue this empathetic project even after the novel is finished.

Narrative in this schema is an instructional tool, showing readers how to enter another individual's interiority. In *Schools of Sympathy*, Nancy Roberts offers a more complex understanding of the sympathetic imagination similar to my formulation of a sadistic reading practice. Sympathy does not necessarily rely on one singular process of identification. Literary texts teach a reader how to imagine himself as a suffering heroine, but they simultaneously teach that reader how to possess the heroine:

The novel is the 'place' where consciousness is created for us to possess, to colonize, and to empathize (with). It is the place in which our own emotions are produced and designed through sympathy and identification. The reader changes places, assumes roles of both sexes, plays at being hero, plays at being victim. The figure of the heroine victim activates a certain *sort* of identification. She becomes a 'charge' or a 'field of emotional power' through which readers re-charge themselves. (26)

Once a reader learns the Romantic lesson to enter the interiority of another, s/he can re-produce the self by playing at differing subject-positions. Roberts's choice to describe the process as "re-charging" the reader brings to mind heightened emotions and the

pleasure derived from a surfeit of affect. Emotions constitute a bodily response in that they are experienced physically; the feeling produced is pleasurable to a reader. To sympathize, then, is not an act of self-negation: it is rather an act of self-gratification.

Lurie is at a point in his life at which he must grapple with his own vulnerability: he is aging, disgraced, and geographically displaced. His position of white authority has been dismantled. Having been forced to hear Lucy's rape while lying helpless in the adjacent bathroom, he is emasculated, and his attempts to imagine her story comprise an effort to control the story, to regain his masculine authority, a power equated with knowledge and control. He wishes to know what happened so that he might control the narrative set forth to the community and, perhaps more importantly, to himself. His own identity is tied to Lucy's rape: his identities as a father, a South African man, and a "seducer of women"—a phrase he uses to describe how he treats Melanie—rely on how he interprets her attack. Unable to own that story, he is unable to properly interpret it, to read it, and therefore cannot produce the proper emotional response that might lead to Roberts's "re-charged" selfhood.

We readers too experience momentary identification with the violable heroine, but we cannot *become* the other, nor can we completely identify what her experience is because we are culturally limited, as Marais suggests, and ambiguously motivated, as Roberts suggests. The question that emerges from these conclusions concerns motivation: if we cannot identify with the defiled female figure, why do we enjoy reading about her? Lurie's continual struggle to interpret Lucy helps elucidate the reader's urge to narrativize the rape scenario. Imagining the woman's violation does not always help one to become the woman, but it does afford a mechanism of control. Mentally

reconstructing the horrors of rape, interpreting what those horrors mean to a particular culture and to our individual selves, offers critical authority: if we can picture the scene, know it, read it and interpret it, we again maintain power in knowledge.

Because Lucy insists that her father not read her rape, she takes away that form of control, an act that aggressively confronts a readerly need for that hermeneutic authority over the woman's body. From Lurie's early contention that a woman's beauty—which can be extrapolated to mean her body—"does not belong to her," the professor has established his need to possess young women. Lucy does not escape his survey; he names her "his second salvation, the bride of his youth reborn" (86). His daughter exists only to meet his needs, but the story of her rape places her beyond his control, in large part because the representation of her rape is beyond his control. His Romantic poetry cannot transform her attack into something comprehensible. He recognizes that Lucy is disgraced because "Like a stain the story [of her attack] is spreading across the district. Not her story to spread but theirs: they are its owners. How they put her in her place, how they showed her what a woman was for" (115). The parallel between Lucy and Melanie is obvious: Melanie's story, too, spread, and though it stained both perpetrator and victim, the players found themselves unable to control the proliferation of meaning attached to the abuse narrative. After Lucy's rape, Lurie must confront what comes from sexual inequality. If he wishes to play the Byronic hero, the casual womanizer, he must accept its implications of "what a woman is for." Now that he is no longer in the position to control language, as he is no longer the articulate seducer or privileged professor, he begins to feel disenfranchised. While Romantic/Byronic violence occurs in florid language, Lucy's rape is spoken of in the vulgar tongue of rural gossip. Here it is a

historically disenfranchised community—not white professors but an impoverished black community—that controls language. It is “their story to tell.”

Ironically, Lurie cannot fight back with his own language; for all his convincing, Lucy refuses to report her rape, to give voice to her own experience. Lucy does not want her rape turned into yet another story because she does not want to be misread. In this sense she is naïve, as her story is already public—Lurie, Ettinger, the rapists, the community, all have a version of the narrative to interpret. Lucy’s motives for clinging to her version of events, arguably the only “true” version, seem a kind of radical masochism, but it ultimately ignores the reality that the act of rape always requires discursive engagement. Lucy believes that by refusing to speak out in protest, by suffering in silence, she maintains authority. The sadomasochistic dynamic that emerges between Lucy and her readers hinges on who has control over her rape, and every time Lucy frustrates our control, she forces us to try harder, look closer, and extract meaning. But Lucy cannot stop us from interpreting her. She can only ask us to consider whether our reading, our extracting meaning from her, is solipsistic. Those who quest to make meaning of her story, to control the event imaginatively, make the rape *their* story to tell. If a reader can imagine the attack, recreate it in his/her mind, interpret it, it becomes his own. While the desire to maintain control over the event is understandable, it is still frustrating to watch Lucy cling to a silence that leads her to live “like a dog,” to refuse to help herself; as readers we cannot understand why she will not care for herself or press charges against her assailants. Further clues to the mystery of Lucy’s silence can be found by turning to Coetzee’s larger oeuvre, most notable in the novels *Waiting for the Barbarians*, published in 1980, and *Elizabeth Costello*, published in 2003.

Radical Silence in *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *Elizabeth Costello*

Throughout his oeuvre, Coetzee has examined the complicity of the reader who partakes in postcolonial narratives. Readers and writers who come from a place of power—from the culturally sophisticated “center” of knowledge implied in the act of making art—are always implicated by their own willingness to engage violent narratives. As Teresa Dovery has noted, his novels are “always making reference to the self of writing...in order to gesture towards the possibility of escaping complicity with the dominant discourses” (19). By calling attention to the “split between text and narration”—that is, by self-consciously reproducing in the reader an awareness of the writer’s place in the text—Coetzee begins a revolt against the dominant discourses steeped in histories of violence and oppression. However, he is never able to complete that revolt, as his novels suggest that those who create or consume narratives of violence are always responsible for recreating those very discourses.

In *Waiting for the Barbarians*, Coetzee grapples with readers’ complicity through an allegorical tale of empire and oppression. The protagonist, the Magistrate of an outpost of the Empire, is an ethical man who distinguishes himself from the sadistic military officers who torture the “barbarians,” the displaced aboriginal population. The Magistrate’s moral disgust for Colonel Joll’s futile pursuit of “truth” through pain is marred by his complicity. An official of Empire, the Magistrate operates within a violent matrix that maintains authority through brutality. Recognition of his passive participation in the Empire’s brutal regime emerges as he develops a relationship with a young barbarian victim in his care. The barbarian girl he takes in has been tortured while under

arrest, and the Magistrate saves her by taking her in. Her presence in his house consumes him, but his desire for the girl is hermeneutic rather than sexual; instead of her body he wants “the traces of a history her body bears” (64). He is at once repulsed and fascinated by the torturers’ actions, obsessed with learning how she came by her disfigurement, and overwhelmed with guilt for his prurient interest. As he comes to realize that his own “loving leaves no mark,” that the girl will better remember the face of her torturer than the Magistrate’s intimate administerings, he “cringes with shame” asking himself “whether, when I lay head to foot with her, fondling and kissing those broken ankles, I was not in my heart of hearts regretting that I could not engrave myself on her as deeply” (134-135). Continually employing a printmaker’s diction, the Magistrate considers the girl’s body a blank slate on which the men of Empire inscribe themselves. She is an Orientalist text, a mere reflection of Empire, a tool by which Colonel Joll and the Magistrate alike can read themselves. When Joll explains his philosophy that “pain is truth” (5)—or, more precisely, that pain precipitates revelations of truth—he privileges his private interpretive quest over his humanity. Joll seeks truth and believes that, due to his “training and experience,” he is equipped to discern it from lies. The Magistrate, like the reader, knows Joll to be an inept interpreter whose “truth” is solipsistic: he extracts confessions only of what he wants to hear. The Magistrate recognizes from the outset that he is complicit in Joll’s brutality—“who am I to assert my distance from him?” he asks (5)—and as his journey unfolds he repeatedly questions if his attraction to the tortured girl makes him the same as men like Joll. When examined through the lens of colonialist exploitation, Joll’s intimacy in torture comes to mirror the Magistrate’s intimacy in bed. Both officials want to use the barbarian body to extract their own, more personal “truth.”

The barbarian girl's truth, like Lucy's, is elusive. Though she does tell the Magistrate the story of how she was blinded, her narrative does not satisfy him because "the marks do not go deep enough." In other words, her tale of torture does not speak "truth" any more than Joll's forced confessions do. Before returning her to the barbarians, the Magistrate begs her to "tell them the truth." The girl mocks him, asking if that is what he really wants. In response to the Magistrate's question, "what else is there to tell?" the girl shakes her head and keeps silent (71). Here again is a woman who refuses to tell "the truth" of her story, whose exploitation narrative is available only through interpretation of clues, of the markings on her body and her few enigmatic words.

Waiting for the Barbarians, in sharp contrast with the realist *Disgrace*, reads like a Kafkaesque allegory, but in the Magistrate's desire both to read the girl's marks and to engrave himself on her we come to understand both Lurie's obsession with hearing Lucy's rape narrative and Lucy's refusal to tell. The story of violation is erotically alluring, but not overtly sexual: every night the Magistrate tends to the girl's body, washing and oiling her naked flesh, but he never penetrates her. Like Colonel Joll, he wants to read and interpret her body; he cannot distance himself from the Empire's torturers in part because he benefits from the Empire, in part because like them, he uses the subaltern's body to know himself. Lurie is no different. He demands a confession from Lucy that meets his own expectations—her admission of truth, of what really happened to her, reflects a desire to reify his own imaginative recreation of the rape. He wants his interpretation of violence confirmed as truth.

Waiting for the Barbarians suggests that reading violence is also an erotic act, as

the Magistrate attempts to discover the girl's story by oiling her flesh every night. That his attentions are perhaps unwanted further indicates that reading about violence is a bodily violation in and of itself, an idea that reappears in the 2003 novel *Elizabeth Costello*. The titular Elizabeth has had an experience similar to Lucy's. As a young woman she was almost raped, brutally beaten, and humiliated by a strange man. And, like Lucy, she refuses to tell what happened to her. "She finds it good, it pleases her, this silence of hers, a silence she hopes to preserve to the grave" (166). Unlike Lucy, Costello explains why silence is "good." She believes storytelling is like "a bottle with a genie in it. When the storyteller opens the bottle, the genie is released into the world...better, on the whole, that the genie stay in the bottle." (167) She later compares violent traumatic narratives to "forbidden places" better left unoccupied. Most troubling to her is her own pleasure and "excitement" (179) in reading about traumatic violence. She is a writer, and so she knows how to "play with words until she got them right, the words that would send an electric shock down the spine of the reader. *Butcherfolk in our own way* (179)". Writers are "evil"—they are "butcherfolk"—because they want to venture into forbidden places, they want to let the genie out of the bottle, they want, quite simply, to revel in scenes of violence.

Such celebration of silence flies in the face of one common psychoanalytic theory, articulated first by Freud and later by feminist psychologists including Judith Herman and Laura S. Brown, which claims that writing about a trauma reconstitutes the victim's fractured psyche. According to this school of thought, telling what happened helps the traumatized subject make sense of the event, place that event within a coherent narrative, and thus move on. If Lucy were to follow conventional wisdom she would get

“closure” by reporting her assailants to the police and confronting her attackers. However, like Costello, like the barbarian girl, and presumably like Coetzee, she believes that telling her story would repeat the violence. It is worth returning here to Coetzee’s discussion of Samuel Richardson’s *Clarissa* described above, in which the author points out that Clarissa’s rape is hers alone to interpret, and she would rather die than relinquish that right to another. Lucy, too, chooses a kind of death, a self-abnegation, rather than give herself over to the social discourses of rape. She will not engage in a therapeutic telling, nor will she discuss the socio-historical interpretations of her rape that view history as speaking through her violators. And yet Coetzee will not allow his reader the easy assertion that a woman’s rape is simply unknowable. Rather, asserting that any man’s attempts to interpret a woman’s rape re-violates her falls into a “sentimental notion of womanhood” that claims “the woman’s body as special, compounded of the animal and the angelic in ways beyond a man’s comprehending” (*Stranger Shores* 32).

Here again Coetzee refuses to pin down one distinct argument regarding the problem of sadistic reading. Interpreting the woman’s body does constitute a violation, but it is not a complete violation, or rather, it is only a violation if we misread the woman’s body as a universal signifier. And yet, once the woman’s body becomes a piece of a narrative, once her body has been marked by the violation, she cannot escape a signifiatory role—she is doomed to be interpreted. By positing that readers “participate in a violence of interpretation,” (*Stranger Shores* 31) Coetzee’s works ask the reader to interpret him/herself, or at the very least begin to analyze his/her own textual participation. Elizabeth Costello, the Magistrate of *Waiting for the Barbarians*, and even Coetzee-as-literary-critic all express shame in participating in narrative violence, and

Lucy's stark refusal to be interpreted intends to make readers feel that shame as well.

With Coetzee's works, of course, this shame is always tempered by a degree of ambivalence. In one argument with her father, Lucy ironically announces that she is not a fictional character. She tells her father, "You behave as if everything I do is part of the story of your life. You are the main character, I am a minor character who doesn't make an appearance until halfway through" (198). The reader, of course, knows Lucy is a relatively minor character who appears in the middle of the novel as one player in Lurie's story. Her metafictional speech persuades readers to look at her as an artistic creation, as a character in a larger story centered not on her rape but on one man's understanding of sexual relationships. As a character in a novel, Lucy's role is to be interpreted, to accept passively any critical analysis readers wish to engage. Protesting this role, articulating her disdain of this role, Lucy asks her reader to reconsider how we interact with minor characters who seemingly exist for symbolic or plotting purposes.

Coetzee's works self-consciously expose a tension between the "sympathetic imagination" and the "violence of interpretation." The author contends that when we read about and interpret scenes of sexual assault on women we are caught between complicity with such violence and empathy for the victim. Like the Magistrate, we want to read the woman's wounds, but we recognize that in so doing we are complicit with the real-life equivalent of the fictional Empire. What the diegetic Empire specifically represents is debatable, but broadly speaking it symbolizes a hegemonic system of power; in the allegory of reading, the reader knowingly participates in, and benefits from, the hegemony of a narrative system that relies on images of female suffering to make meaning. What the works discussed in this chapter ask us to consider, however, is

whether or not, through imaginative identification with the woman, a reader can rise above a violent narrative ideology.

Coetzee's answer seems to be a pessimistic "no." His standing as a global author with a large Western readership complicates this contention by exposing it to postcolonial politics. Writing about South Africa for the world, Coetzee subjects his nation to the same evaluative scrutiny as the woman's body. Readers interpret his novels not as merely personal or psychological narratives but as indictments of an entire nation, and so that nation becomes another object onto which fears can be written. The South African woman, then, becomes doubly abject. In a global literary economy women's bodies do not circulate equally because their signification depends upon their racial and national make-up; stories of sexual violence are read according to cultural context. Here, the cultural context distances the action so far that readers can comfortably interpret the woman's violation with impunity.

Coetzee repeatedly claims that to speak of violence is to perpetuate violence. He endows narrative with the power of action, equating telling of violence with enacting violence. He also contends in his work that those who participate in a system of domination can never fully escape that system. Even David Lurie, a relatively liberal white man, does not escape the racist discourse of his surroundings, for he insists on interpreting the rape through South Africa's racialized historical terminology. If reading about violence places the reader inside a system of violence, that reader never escapes complicity, for although one can feel empathy with the characters, a reader cannot become the violated figure. Instead, a reader takes pleasure from looking at that unseemly image. What Lucy tells us in her final decision to live "like a dog" is that the only escape

from sadistic reading is to opt out, remain mute, and refuse to become an object of interpretation.

Conclusion

I began this work with the assertion that by examining novelistic scenes of violence against women, we might better understand our own conflicted attitudes towards female victimization. Relying upon the works of Robert Scholes and Wolfgang Iser, I pointed out that reading is a “two-way street,” a process in which readers bring particular knowledge and attitudes to a fictional text, and then, once they have finished with the text, reassess those views of reality. Having examined the mechanism of the sadistic reader as it emerges in the novels under discussion, the questions that now remain regard our own complicity, and our own willingness to resist. When consuming scenes of violence against women, how much does a reader necessarily identify with the victimizer? More importantly, how is recognizing the fact of our own sadism productive rather than simply self-flagellating? How can admitting to our own violent impulses lead us to resist violence? In other words, how does the reader of *this* text, upon completion, turn back to reality and reevaluate our attitudes towards violence?

In analyzing the works of Carter, Oates, and Coetzee, several themes have emerged that can help answer these questions. Firstly, each of the three novels I focus on allies its reader with a distasteful perspective. *Blonde* and *Disgrace* in particular force the audience to encounter their narratives through a misogynist point of view. Although a reader might want to reject David Lurie’s absurd bravado or Oates’s sleazy characterizations, s/he perceives the text’s events through these limiting perspectives, and is therefore complicit with their world-view. *The Magic Toyshop* gives us a heroine who initially participates in her own objectification and aches to conform to limiting, masculinist visions of femininity. She is naive and silly, and though she is not

necessarily unlikable, she seems ready to enact, in her own life's narrative, the misogynist literary apparatuses established by Oates and Coetzee's narratorial perspectives.

Within these perspectives, the trajectory of a female's narrative is one of inevitable punishment. Norma Jeane, in her "Collected Works of Marilyn Monroe," cheerfully exhorts her own annihilation: "I'm having such a good time in life, guess I'm gonna be punished!" (Oates 640). Her status as a good-time girl—sexy, available, and hungry for attention—makes her a kind of willing victim, as she repeatedly excuses the exploitive and abusive actions of the men in her life. But Norma Jeane is a purely fictional creation, an amalgamation of male fantasies, and thus her willingness to submit offers commentary on the nature of those fantasies, rather than on the character of Marilyn Monroe. The same can be said of Melanie, a self-created heroine, who learns that to be the object of male fantasy is far more dangerous than her schoolgirl daydreams allowed. She is at the mercy of her uncle Philip, who punishes her simply for being her father's middle-class daughter, for being the product of a marriage that deprived the puppet-master of his beloved sister. This class warfare extends from symbolic author to literal: the narrative is structured around Carter's retribution on Melanie for being "a bourgeois virgin, a good screamer" (Kenyon 27). Of course, the disdain Carter expresses for Melanie's class is equal only to her contempt for her virginity: as a naive girl on the cusp of sexual maturity, Melanie must be taught the ways of the world. The fairy-tale references, most significantly to Bluebeard and Sleeping Beauty, as well as the allusions to Genesis, thematize punishment as Melanie's birthright: girls curious about the world, eager to learn the forbidden secrets of adulthood, must suffer for such sins. Our final

heroine, Lucy, is of a different type; an unattractive, independent, gay woman who operates a small farm in rural South Africa, she appears to have dissociated herself from the Western fantasies represented by Norma Jeane and Melanie. And yet, Lucy does not escape punishment, as her father articulates the obvious interpretation that she is raped because she is a white woman living in a black community.

These self-aware narratives of punishment, however, do not exist to meet our sadistic expectations, but rather to bring our own sadism to the fore, and in so doing, reveal the violence inherent to the cultural construction of literary fantasy. In these works, imagination is but one more Foucauldian discourse, forged out of and contributing to dominant systems of power, which are tied to cultural and national histories. In *The Magic Toyshop*, patriarchal oppression finds its most egregious outlet in the male British literary tradition, though Western European fairy-tale conventions are implicated as well. *Blonde* depicts the oppressive violence of the male gaze as integral to American consumerism and mass-produced entertainment. Finally, Coetzee interrogates all narrative as a means of perpetuating political violence. From the Romantic hero-struggle inherited from the British Empire and so beloved by the protagonist, to the village gossip that circulates Lucy's tragic circumstances, all instances of storytelling in *Disgrace* only reinforce Lucy's victim-status within the contemporary South African political landscape. Lucy's story, like Norma Jeane's and Melanie's, is tied to its historical location; readers are guided to interpret all these heroines as markers of their national identities. Because the novels ally us with a masculinist perspective, and because they lead us through narratives of inevitable punishment, they reveal to us how naturalized our own expectations of female violation are.

Simply pointing out the violence inherent in our cultural paradigms, however, does not automatically lead to resistance or change. Here we might return to Judith Fetterley's concept of the "resisting reader" once again, to consider how we, as informed readers, might choose to eliminate the misogyny inherited through our literary traditions. If we seek to name the reality of a violent oppression that is perpetuated in the novel, we can begin to "exorcize" the misogyny of our literary heritage. The novels under discussion perform Fetterley's subversive project by offering a slight variation: the resisting heroine. Each of the heroines discussed above refuses to become the knowable subject of a novel, refuses to play her proscribed role in her given symbolic order. Lucy adamantly declares that she will not be a "minor character" in her father's novel, and she refuses to be "read" by her father. In fact, she refuses to signify in any way. Norma Jeane also resists interpretation by continuously multiplying her identities. She is so many different women that she is, in effect, nobody, or at the very least, she cannot create unified meaning for her audience. Melanie begins her own narrative as a consenting heroine, desirous of being read within the canon of British literature. She wants place her own narrative somewhere between *Lorna Doone* and *Lady Chatterley*, but as she comes into contact with the world outside her parents' house, she begins to understand that she is not so easily reduced to representation. As she sees herself reflected in Finn and her uncle's artistic recreations of her, she notes that they do not accurately identify Melanie herself. Like Lucy and Norma Jeane, she does not inform her audience of what lurks beneath the mysterious facade, but instead asserts that she is decidedly different from how the men in her life choose to represent her.

As a model of resistance, Melanie perhaps sets the easiest course for readers to follow suit. As her narrative progresses, she undergoes a shift in self-perception: although at first, she wants nothing more than to aestheticize her femininity, as she begins to understand the violence inherent to literary representations of women, she refuses to remain complicit. Maturity for Melanie means divorcing her identity from the male fantasies she used to construct an identity, and her readers, too, are free to create a new imaginary identity for this heroine. As she leaves behind the burning remnants of the magic toyshop, she might very well leave behind the paradigms for womanhood available to her there. As is true for all the heroines in question here, there is no way to resist within the representational system that already exists. As readers we rely on the representational economy in which we have been trained, and thus might be frustrated by a heroine who subverts that economy. And yet, to resist our own complicity with a violent tradition, we must conceive of new literary paradigms for women.

Such a task, of course, is not easily accomplished, in large part because of our own ambivalence towards violence and women. If there has been one theme that stands out above all others in this study, it is reader ambivalence. When I began working on this project several years ago, I expected to find that my theory of a sadistic reader pointed, more than anything, to a latent misogyny that leads to anger or aggression. However, in examining the mechanism of sadistic reading in its local iterations, I found ambivalence a far more defining characteristic than hostility. Alternately identified with the structures of authority and with the victimized heroine, the sadistic reader moves in and out of the heroine's subjectivity, and never completely becomes one with the fictional woman. In each of the novels examined here,

this readerly ambivalence reflects a split-identification with both the endangered heroine and with those who occupy a position of power over that heroine.

While these novels present systems of dominance perpetuated in/nationally defined literature, they self-consciously tease out the ambivalence readers feel towards such dominance by presenting complex “reader” figures. In *The Magic Toyshop*, Finn takes on the role of ambivalent witness. He expresses a sympathetic compatibility with Melanie, and both characters feel mutual belonging to one another; as he observes the novel’s actions, however, he finds himself caught between his identification with fragile Melanie and his desire to emulate the sadistic patriarch Philip. Finn’s identity as a second-rate artist, an aspiring apprentice, complicates his readerly role within the novel’s meta-fiction: Finn wants to place himself within the same artistic tradition that Philip has mastered, but he does not want to take on the violence and oppression connected to artistic production. Moreover, like Melanie and like the reader, he is not the masterful artist, and thus he cannot occupy the novel’s supreme position of power. As a witness/reader rather than patriarch/author, he must take on the subservient role, and his desire for “master” status (both as artist and as patriarch) is unfulfilled. Thus, even when he symbolically castrates Philip, Finn remains an ambiguous figure. Wanting to cast off the shackles of the an oppressive past and wanting to create a new world order in which gender equality prevails are two different aims, and the novel ends by questioning whether Finn, though revolutionary in some ways, is capable of leaving behind the remnants of patriarchy.

David Lurie, the reader/critic in *Disgrace*, is similarly caught between his identification with the masculinist tradition of Romantic literature and his desire to take

on his daughter's abjected subjectivity. He attempts to be "where the woman is,"—that is, he endeavors to imagine what it is like to be a woman suffering at the hands of a man—but he finds the task beyond his capabilities. Ultimately, Lurie is caught between a need to understand his daughter, to humble himself through his sympathetic imagination, and his long-standing comfort with the cultural paradigms that influence his misogyny.

Blonde offers not a singular reader figure but rather a host of audience members who attempt to interpret the signifier of Norma Jeane. Ranging from the photographer Otto Ose to the salivating fans to her lovers and husbands, the men who wish to read Norma Jeane desire her and want to destroy her in equal measure. Her audience—including the author and the reader—is caught between wanting to know who she really is, to unmask Marilyn and find the "true" Norma Jeane beneath, and wanting simply to take possession of her body. The ambivalence Oates describes is more overtly violent than the ambivalence felt by Finn and David Lurie, but its brutality does reveal what lingers beneath the literary language and high-art allusions of *The Magic Toyshop* and *Disgrace*.

The readerly ambivalence portrayed in each of these novels reflects a generalized unease with the violence in the world at large. Rather than easily consuming scenes of violence, someone who struggles between identification with and a self-distancing from the abjected heroine bears witness to his or her own discomfort with systems of dominance that generate such violence. Readerly ambivalence reflects an inner conflict about one's own relationship to violence as a tool of power, and to those who wield that tool. While it perhaps might be easier to claim a complete identification with the heroine, to root for the victimized, our reading processes are in fact more complex and draw upon

our own multi-layered relationship to structures of authority. Readers who choose to take part in scenes that disturb them are given the opportunity to pay attention to, and perhaps subvert, power structures that rely on violence. In order to do so, however, we must first acknowledge our own tendencies towards complicity and even identification with authority. Recognizing our own ambivalence is, ironically, a first step towards potentially subverting systems of domination that rely on violence against women. By allying us with an incriminating perspective, by making us more aware of those impulses within ourselves, these novels draw out the complexity of reader identification, and thus urge readers to reconsider, and perhaps resist, the proliferation of narratives that normalize sexual violence.

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