

**Reading Rape: Toward an Ethics of Responding to Literary Depictions of  
Suffering and Violence**

Eva Maria Koopman

0328146

Professor Birgit Kaiser

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## Introduction

Literature confronts us with others and with otherness in ways that can trigger ethical reflection. As Susan Sontag has eloquently phrased this ‘ethical potential’: “Literature can give standards and pass on deep knowledge, incarnated in language, in narrative. Literature can train, and exercise, our ability to weep for those who are not us or ours” (“Literature is Freedom” 205). Scholars like Wayne Booth and Martha Nussbaum have emphasized that the effects of fictional narratives on readers’ ethical thinking should not be neglected. By triggering readers’ imaginations and emotions, literature can function as a playing field of ethics, helping readers engage with characters who are distinctly different from themselves and confronting them with the fact that there can be multiple perspectives on one situation (e.g. Nussbaum *Poetic Justice* 5). Booth and Nussbaum have given some eloquent readings of how certain novels can guide us in life, but precisely by seeing novels as ‘friends’ and rolemodels, their type of ethical reading departs rather too much from positive and positivistic notions that both reader and book are stable entities, with the second having a mostly beneficial effect on the first.<sup>1</sup> Readers and books, however, are dynamic and complex, and the potential beneficial effects of literary fiction are all but undisputed.

The idea of art being autonomous (*l’art pour l’art*) has offered, and continues to offer, the perfect excuse to escape the often normative discussions on the morality of literary works. Oscar Wilde gave a poignant one-liner of this aesthetic attitude when he wrote in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* that literary works in themselves cannot be moral nor immoral, but are simply well or badly written (5). The ‘aestheticist’ or ‘formalist’ claim that a work of fiction cannot be inherently (im)moral, however, does not disqualify literature’s role as an ethical agent. As Booth has also argued in *The Company We Keep*, a literary work can very well trigger ethical

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<sup>1</sup> A further criticism that both Booth and Nussbaum have received is that they do not pay enough attention to form. Booth and Nussbaum have both said that form and content cannot be separated, and that an attention to form is crucial (e.g. Booth 108; Nussbaum *Love’s Knowledge* 3). However, their readings themselves pay little attention to style (e.g. Lamarque and Olsen; Nissen; Korthals Altes “The Dissolution”).

reflection while portraying immoral events and even stereotypes (e.g. 179). 'Ethics' thus needs to be distinguished from 'morality': the latter refers to prescriptive notions on what is right and what is wrong within a given society (norms and values), while the first refers to critical enquiry into moral claims (see Hakemulder 13; Korthals Altes "The Dissolution" 3). In that sense, works containing 'immoral' notions can be particularly ethical, but that ethical potential is only realized by the reader.

The 'ethics' of literature are thus transposed to the response of the reader, but this does not mean that the literary text itself gets off completely scott-free: it has the potential to invite and sustain certain reader responses, a potential that should mainly be seen in the 'how' of the representation, instead of in the 'what.' As Adorno argued in "Commitment," the ethical potential of 'committed' literature lies in the form, in the way the work unsettles the reader, not in the events depicted. While fictional narratives are not accountable for the immoral actions they depict, they (or: their writers) could be held accountable for the extent to which they allow for and further ethical reflection. Authors, then, could be said to carry their own responsibility in offering narratives that are ethically stimulating. It is the task of the literary critic to expose the stylistic and narratological devices of a literary work to the public, in order to pave the ground for ethical discussions on the represented events. The task of the literary critic can further be said to include exposing ethical dilemma's in the work.

In the definition I would like to pursue, 'ethical potential' lies in the interaction between the characteristics of a specific representation and those of a specific reader. The extent to which a given literary work can evoke reflection is something that different readers will have different opinions on, and which should thus be carefully discussed per case by literary critics as well as be qualified through reader response studies. Some texts could be said to have a larger capacity to invite ethical reflection than others, and some readers are more inclined to actualize that ethical potential than others. Literary critics can help to

increase the actualization of ethical potential, by pointing readers to the way literary works thematize and problematize ethical issues.

Ethical reflection becomes particularly relevant when a literary work is confronting us with immoral acts, when someone is shown to suffer and someone is shown to inflict suffering. In the Levinasian sense, ‘ethics’ concerns our response-ability to the other and to otherness (see for example *Entre-Nous*). I partly adhere to the Levinasian ethics, not going so far as to claim with Levinas that our responsibility to the other is radical and predetermined, but instead emphasizing that we can choose to be responsible. With that choice we enter into an ethical relation with the other. When we encounter another human being, we are confronted with our shared vulnerability, a vulnerability that demands a response, and to which an ethical response would be one of accountability and understanding (see Butler; Levinas; Oliver). This responsibility could be said to be more crucial when the vulnerability is also heightened, as is the case with confronting the suffering other. The way literature tries to convey extreme human experiences of suffering, both from the perspective of perpetrators and of victims, could then be seen as the ultimate testcase for its ethical potential. Through these horrifying representations, in which ‘otherness’ is particularly pronounced, readers are confronted with what they would rather not see – or would like to see but are afraid or ashamed to admit. If we consider literature to be an ethical playground, allowing us to ‘try out lives’ as Booth phrases it (485), the question is what happens when we are asked to test out the lives of victims and perpetrators of violence. How do we relate to the fictional other who is suffering, the fictional other who is making someone suffer, and the ‘otherness’ of the depicted violence? But also, how can literary works challenge us to realize that we in fact cannot simply ‘try out’ another person’s life?

While responding to others who are either suffering or inflicting suffering constitutes a severe ethical challenge, neither Booth nor Nussbaum has paid specific attention to the issue

of the literary representation of suffering and violence and the problematics of responding to the kind of violent scenes which severely put empathy to the test. Discussions on representations of suffering have mostly occurred within the context of Holocaust and trauma studies, fueled by Theodor Adorno's famous remark in "Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft" that to write lyric poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric (30). In his later essay "Commitment," Adorno nuanced this claim, still believing in its veracity, but also agreeing with Enzensberger that real suffering should not be forgotten and that art seems to be one of the scarce places which can lend a voice to suffering: "suffering [...] demands the continued existence of art while it prohibits it" (312). The main problem Adorno signalled is that the aesthetical aspects of art do 'injustice' to actual victims, because the aestheticism relieves the original horror and, moreover, can provide the reader with a certain amount of pleasure ("Commitment" 313). Adorno's great fear appeared to be that when suffering is represented in an artful way it can become 'entertainment' for those who have not suffered. Later positions in particularly trauma studies, by amongst others poststructuralist scholars Cathy Caruth and Julia Kristeva, aim for a representation of suffering and trauma through unconventional stylistic devices which stress the fragmentary and disruptive nature of traumatic experience.

In these debates, then, it are not the ethics of reading but the ethics of representation that are central. Yet, these two issues are interconnected, as can already be deduced from Adorno's concern with the representation of suffering turning into entertainment. Regarding the representation of the other whom violence is being done to the ethical sword thus cuts two ways: on the one hand there could be said to exist a responsibility with the text and its author to convey extreme human experience in a way that triggers ethical reflection, on the other hand there is the responsibility of the public, which has to balance between empathy with and indulgence in the represented suffering, while also being attuned to the artistic dimension of the text. Given the shared responsibility of the text and the reader in establishing ethical

criticism, this thesis is divided in two parts: the first part deals with the ethics of representing suffering, the second with the ethics of reading suffering.

The specific type of represented suffering that I will explore in this thesis is the literary depiction of rape, since this poses interesting and important problems for the ethics of representation as well as for the ethics of reading. Rape is a violent and illegal act, inherently immoral in its lack of concern for the other's physical and emotional boundaries, needs, and desires. I do not want to put under discussion the immorality of rape and rapists, instead, the ethical issue that I focus on is the position that literary depictions of rape invite the reader to take toward the other: the represented victim, the represented perpetrator, the 'otherness' of the literary text and the 'otherness' within oneself (one's own desires and fears). While rape in real life is morally repulsive, representations of rape function within a fictional context and thus need to be judged according to other standards.<sup>2</sup> From the formalist point of view which lies at the basis of this thesis, there is no subject matter which is off limits for literature, even though authors themselves may feel the need for limitations.<sup>3</sup> What matters is the way in which the (immoral) actions are represented and the responsibility of readers – particularly literary critics – to be critical and to pay attention to the mechanisms of the texts.

Depictions of rape deserve critical attention because the extreme situation of rape simultaneously evokes cultural scripts of sexual fantasies and lies in the domain of taboos, of horrific crimes. The fear of rape is instilled in women from an early age onwards ('don't talk to strangers,' 'don't walk the streets at night'), while images of rape and domination are recurrent in pornography. The ongoing fascination with sexual violence in the artistic domain corresponds to this combination of fear and fantasy. Unfortunately, rape does not only reside

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<sup>2</sup> For a philosophical reflection on the difference between responding to real events and to (artistic) representations, see Van Gerwen.

<sup>3</sup> See for an interesting discussion on the author's own moral problems when representing suffering and violence Chapter 6 in Coetzee's *Elizabeth Costello*. The writer Costello argues in this chapter that authors portraying extremely violent acts become complicit in the violence themselves, they cannot possibly come out unscarred after imagining horrific human behaviour.



in our fantasies, it is very much a part of reality. However, it did take quite some feminist effort to get the criminal nature of rape acknowledged. As Muehlenhard, Danoff-Burg and Powch have stated: “Prior to the feminist reanalysis of rape beginning in the 1970s, influential segments of both the scientific community and the public conceptualized all but the most narrowly defined acts of rape as sex that was desired by female victims” (130). As Higgins and Silver speculate in *Rape and Representation*, the idea that sexual advances are unwanted is so hurtful for the male ego that the myth of seduction, of ‘no means yes’ has been particularly persistent in literary representations of rape throughout the ages.

How have authors in recent decades challenged the silence surrounding rape, surrounding the experience of the victim as well as of the perpetrator? What kinds of different representations of rape could be distinguished? What are the possibilities for critical and ethical reflection in the interaction between the reader and a specific type of representation? How can differences in representation affect readers’ reflections on their own voyeuristic and sadistic responses? These are the questions guiding this exploration into the interaction between literary representations of suffering and ethical response.

By exploring the way in which literary texts can confront us with the suffering other, I hope to contribute to the debate on the ethical potential of literature. Taking the example of rape allows for a different perspective than is regularly taken within the debates on literature and ethics and within the debates on the problematics of representing and reading suffering. In contemporary debates on ethics, reading suffering has not yet played a prominent role, and in the debates on reading and representing suffering, collective traumas like the Holocaust and 9/11 have figured as the main subjects. Focusing on rape can bring out new issues and insights, making this focus not only relevant in the context of ethics, but in itself, as a further cartography of the issues at stake when representing sexual violence. On my part, this focus implies that I have to be attuned to power dynamics within the texts and how these correspond

to supposed societal conceptions of sexual violence. Responding in an ethical fashion to these depictions is not a question to which only one answer is possible, and I will not pretend to hold the key to an ethical answer. I will, however, give a proposal for an ethical reading of suffering which may be useful for further exploration into the ethical role of literature. Moreover, I will offer an account of the dynamics between text and reader which can function as a theoretical background for empirical reader response research.

In order to address these issues, as indicated, the thesis explores both the ethics of representing and of reading rape. Chapter 1 starts out with a theoretical discussion of the issues at stake when representing rape, presenting a selective overview of earlier critical studies on how rape has been represented, most prominently Higgins and Silver's collection of essays *Rape and Representation* and Tanner's *Intimate Violence*. The first section of the thesis continues to focus on the following question: how has rape been represented in literary works since 1970? Attention is given to the question which general stylistic modes of rape representations could be distinguished in the novels under scrutiny, and what authorial stances appear to lie behind the diverse modes of representing violence and suffering.

The question how rape has been represented in contemporary literature can only be answered partially and preliminarily, by relying on close readings of a limited sample of literary texts. For the literary analyses which form the main part of the thesis, a sample of contemporary literary works was used (a list of which can be found in Appendix 1). For my selection of works I relied on online inventories of rape novels, mainly the site LibraryThing ([www.librarything.com/tag/novel,rape](http://www.librarything.com/tag/novel,rape)), library catalogues (search terms for Dutch libraries: 'verkrachting' and 'seksueel geweld,' for English libraries: 'rape' and 'sexual violence'), and on advice by fellow scholars working in the field of literature. The preliminary selection was a relatively random selection from the extensive lists and suggestions of novels in which rape figures, but some selection criteria were applied.

Firstly, all novels had to be published in 1970 or later. 1970 is a somewhat artificial starting point, chosen because of the fact that the second feminist wave of the late '60s openly criticized society's legitimizing rape by blaming the victim. From 1970 onwards authors representing rape could thus be held accountable for the way in which they represent sexual violence and its power dynamics. While stereotypical representations of gender and power will very likely still be present and deserve critical attention, it can be expected that novels published after 1970 no longer condone a 'no means yes'-mentality. From 1970 onwards the question why an author is representing a rape scene in a specific way becomes justified.

Secondly, the authors in the preliminary selection had to have received some critical attention, being present in public and/or scholarly debates. Practically, this meant that the works in question complied to one or more of the following conditions: the work has been translated into another language (or languages); articles have been published on the work of the author; multiple professional reviews have been published on the work; the author has received awards; the work has been made into a movie. Novels which did not meet at least one of these criteria were excluded, since their general impact on critics and public alike can be considered negligible.

Thirdly, for my purposes, it needed to be clear in the novel that a rape took place, and there had to be a certain 'node' (or 'nodes') within the text which could be labelled as a 'rape scene,' a distinct page or pages in which the rape was represented.

From the sample of literary works I deduced three main ways in which rape is depicted: explicit, allusive, and aesthetic. These three modes of stylization are gradients rather than closed-off entities. The specific qualities and potentials of these three modes of stylization are discussed separately in Chapters 2, 3 and 4, all of which deal with the ethics of representation. From the preliminary selection I chose a few works to use as illustrations of subvariations of the modes of representation, and one novel per mode to explore in further

detail. These three novels were chosen on the basis of being a poignant example of the general mode of representation and offering an ethically interesting representation, being disturbing and evoking questions: Virginie Despentes' *Baise-moi* (explicit mode), J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* (allusive mode), and Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (aesthetic mode).

The deeper analyses of these novels in the second section function to bring out how representations of seemingly individual suffering and violence can bring to the fore disturbing ethical issues and thus need to be read in an openness to being ethically unsettled. In the second section, the central question is what responses the different rape depictions are likely to evoke and what could constitute a potential ethical reader response to these representations. Thus, this section starts with a general chapter presenting a proposition for an ethics of reading. This proposition partly follows Derek Attridge's lead regarding having to be attuned to the singularity of literary texts, complemented by an attention to affective responses when reading suffering, based on the theoretical work by, amongst others, Dominick LaCapra and Laura Tanner.

Attending to the singularity of the text overlaps with the concept of close reading, which has been the reading strategy for the first section. The second section builds on these close readings, keeping in mind Adorno's warning of the spectacle of suffering being turned into entertainment within art, with 'entertainment' being specified to consist of voyeuristic and sadistic responses on the one hand and aesthetic distance on the other. After the theoretical chapter, I present my own readings as attempts to ethically engage with what the different novels representing rape can allow a critical reader to think and feel. To what extent do they trigger empathy with the victim, empathy with the perpetrator, sadism, and voyeurism? To what extent does the rape within the novel as a whole allow for critical reflection and for ethical reflection on our position *vis-à-vis* the other? Chapter 6 deals with the hazard of the sadistic indulgence with domination that the explicit mode of depiction can

evoke, and to what extent this issue and other ethical issues are played out in Desportes' novel. The hazard of fantasizing that an allusive depiction can trigger, but also Coetzee's demonstration of the unknowability of the experience of the other, are the subjects of chapter 7. Finally, chapter 8 explores the potential effects of aesthetic features in either drawing readers in or distancing them through a focus on style, paying attention to the issue of sympathy for the perpetrator and to the way rape figures as a metaphor for other types of oppression in Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*.

## PART I: ETHICS OF REPRESENTATION

### **Chapter 1: Mapping the Problematics of Representing Rape in Literature**

Sexual violence constitutes a specific problem in representation. The sexual element implies that authors have to relate to issues of gender, power, domination, sadism, voyeurism and arousal. In order to understand the choices authors make in their depictions and to be able to take a critical attitude toward these choices, this chapter discusses some of the issues at stake in representing rape that will be most important for my analyses of the literary works: engaging the reader versus triggering the reader to critically reflect, relating to socio-cultural stereotypes concerning sexual violence, consideration for the actuality of rape victims, evoking or obstructing voyeuristic and sadistic responses, portraying or obscuring the victim's perspective, and relating to the issue of aestheticization. Some of these ethical issues that authors depicting rape have to deal with will be more relevant to the deeper analyses in the second part of the thesis than to those in the first part, yet I mention them here in order to offer a theoretical background to the ethical concerns of representing suffering and violence.

#### 1.1 Representing Suffering through Empathic Unsettlement

A first and fundamental ethical problem for all rape depictions can be deduced from debates within the context of trauma and Holocaust representation, namely the question under which conditions, if at all, representing the suffering of others is possible and desirable. Rape representations cannot simply be equalled to either trauma or Holocaust representations, but there is an important overlap concerning the representation of suffering and violence. For the victim, being raped is a form of suffering that combines pain and humiliation, comparable to situations of torture and other traumatic experiences. On the other hand, there is the perpetrator, whose motives and feelings deserve further attention if we ever want to understand our own and others' capacity for violent deeds. Concerning the victim's

experience, similar positions on the representation of suffering can be discerned in the accounts of various, mostly poststructuralist, literary scholars working on trauma representation (a.o. Caruth; Kristeva *Black Sun*; Felman and Laub; Scarry; Rothberg): suffering can never be transmitted completely as it was for the victim experiencing it, but since these extreme experiences can only be communicated through signs, through representations, choices need to be made to convey it in the most effective way. What is effective, however, depends on the type of response one wants to evoke: making the experience understandable for outsiders or stressing the ways in which it can never be understood. Since traumatic experiences in real life suspend and challenge linguistic representation in a more radical way than everyday experience, critics have called for unconventional ways of expressing these experiences, through fragmentary and innovative narratives which mimic trauma (e.g. Caruth; Kristeva *Black Sun*).

Dominick LaCapra, however, has stressed that ‘nonconventional’ – fragmentary, confusing – narratives of trauma can feel ‘disembodied,’ insofar as they do not present readers with characters and situations that they can empathize with, thus failing to communicate the gravity of the experience of suffering (49-50). On the other hand, LaCapra claims that the danger with radically nonconventional representations, which mimic trauma in the forms of representation, is that in claiming to stay ‘faithful’ to the trauma, the distinction between the actual victim, the one who writes about the victim, and the one who reads about the victim is denied. He warns against all representations that claim to be truthful: representations which appear extremely realistic may give readers the undesired feeling that they know ‘what it is like,’ just as representations which mimic the traumatic experience by using extremely fragmentary language (21-22). Yet, LaCapra does appreciate nonconventional elements in a work, since they can trigger readers to think, to become

‘unsettled,’ and perhaps precisely thereby gain greater knowledge of the limits of the representability of suffering.

While LaCapra acknowledges the value of disruptive narrative techniques in demonstrating the unknowable aspects of traumatic experiences, he also emphasizes the importance of staying true to facts (especially in historic writing) and not foreclosing empathy (in writing trauma in general). He terms this type of writing ‘empathic unsettlement.’ LaCapra’s plea for ‘empathic unsettlement’ is a plea for a type of writing that establishes a balance between disrupting the public’s conventional frameworks of knowing (suffering) and engaging the public with the persons involved in the depicted suffering, not only the victim, but also the perpetrator. The term ‘empathic unsettlement’ already indicates that LaCapra is talking just as much about the reader’s response as about the representation itself. Empathy, to LaCapra, is “a counterforce to numbing,” and “may be understood in terms of attending to, even trying, in limited ways, to recapture the possibly split-off, affective dimension of the experience of others” (40). ‘Attending to’ the experience of victim and/or perpetrator (without falling in the trap of “unchecked identification, vicarious experience, and surrogate victimage,” 40), and thus being open to empathic unsettlement, is a responsibility for authors and readers.

I would like to follow LaCapra’s concept of empathic unsettlement for both the ethics of representation and the ethics of reading. Instead of being prescriptive, ‘empathic unsettlement’ brings out the potential power that lies in texts which strike a balance between realistic modes to engage readers and disruptive techniques to prevent overidentification with the suffering and to further critical reflection. This is a useful approach to the problem of representing suffering, a broad hypothetical guideline for a possible ethics of representation. The question then becomes what textual elements evoke engagement with the scene and with characters and what elements evoke distance from the scene and/or point to the problematics



of understanding another's experience, questions that will be more fully addressed in the second section of the thesis. In the first section, while keeping potential reader responses in mind, the focus lies on how authors have represented rape, thus on the narratological and poetic devices they are using. Before we can turn to how rape has actually been depicted, theoretical issues of representing rape need to be further discussed in order to bring out the ethical concerns that are specific to rape representations.

### 1.2 Rape as a Socio-Cultural Issue

One of the main ethical concerns underlying the representation of rape in fiction is how to relate to actual rape as a socio-cultural issue. From the victim's point of view sexual violence foregrounds issues of power, humiliation, shame and/or guilt, and feelings of pollution, contamination and/or sin. These issues are strongly determined by socio-cultural dynamics, and the question with rape depictions is thus not only whether and how an author is portraying the suffering body and its violation, but also whether power dynamics present in society are shown in a way that leaves room to question them. As Susanne Kappeler has stressed in *The Pornography of Representation*, representations influence our perceptions of the world, amongst others our conceptions of what constitutes legitimate sexuality and when this turns into sexual violence (3-4).

When sexual intercourse 'counts' as rape has been (and to an extent still is) a disputed issue. While definitions of rape always include "the notion of nonconsensual sexual behavior," what constitutes 'consent' is debatable (Muehlenhard, Danoff-Burg and Powch 124).<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, interpreting what constitutes sexual violence is heavily problematized by gender role stereotypes. From Krafft-Ebing onwards, rape has been justified 'scientifically' through the idea that women unconsciously (or even consciously) desire to be taken by force

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<sup>4</sup> According to MacKinnon, for example, the legal definition of rape is too narrow: "The law distinguishes rape from intercourse by the woman's lack of consent coupled with the man's (usually) knowing disregard of it. A feminist distinction between rape and intercourse, to hazard a beginning approach, lies instead in the *meaning* of the act from women's point of view" (651-52). MacKinnon's 'feminist' definition implies that seduction also becomes a form of rape, which has been disputed by other feminist critics.

(see Dijkstra 101). Within these Victorian sexual schemes – which appear to be dominant even nowadays – the gender behavior that is expected and desired is as follows: women protest coquettishly, men seduce and possess. These stereotypes form a fertile ground for the ‘rape myths’ which legitimize rape as ordinary sexual behavior. ‘Rape myths’ “refer to false beliefs and stereotypes regarding forced or attempted sexual intercourse and the victims and perpetrators of such acts” (Kahlor and Morrison 730). The most common rape myths are the following: “(1) victims lie about rape when they regret consensual sex after the fact, and (2) a victim’s provocative dress, suggestive behavior, or ‘bad reputation’ is often to blame for the ‘mixed signals’ that led to the rape” (Kahlor and Morrison 730).

The conception that rape victims, particularly when those victims are female and of legal age, ‘have asked for it’ is not only prevalent among men, but also among women (e.g. Check and Malamuth). In proposing that rape victims have brought their suffering upon themselves, rape myths create and increase victims’ feelings of shame and guilt, and violently abject them from society. These myths also function to lessen perpetrators’ responsibility for the feelings, desires, and pain of their sexual partners: if a person presents him- or herself as a sexual object, they ‘ask’ to be dominated, to be taken by force. Rape myths and stereotypical notions of what constitutes ‘appropriate’ gender role behaviour are very difficult to transform, the double standard is not likely to disappear any time soon. Literary works and the way critics interpret them can play a role in the (de)construction of conceptions of sexual gender role behaviour and victimhood by either endorsing or challenging stereotypes.

### 1.3 Pornography versus Empathy with the Victim

The way authors relate to the socio-cultural dynamics of rape is thus ethically relevant, but it is a difficult step from the reality of the rape victim to the representation of rape. Lucy Valerie Graham has emphasized a ‘double bind’ when it comes to representing rape: writers may want to “expose atrocities,” but then they “[run] the risk of turning violence into a

pornographic spectacle that [threatens] to implicate the viewer” (441). Here, we see a resonance with Adorno’s warning against turning suffering into entertainment (“Commitment” 313). It could be argued that sexual violence is even more problematic to represent ‘ethically’ than other experiences of suffering and violence because of the potential overlap with pornography. As Susan Sontag has remarked, “all images that display the violation of an attractive body are, to a certain degree, pornographic” (*Regarding* 85), but logically rape depictions carry an explicitly pronounced danger of having people take a voyeuristic and/or sadistic pleasure in the other’s depicted suffering.

In *The Pornography of Representation*, Kappeler states that there is “no clear-cut definition of pornography,” but that “[t]he traditional emphasis is on ‘obscenity’: the immoral or ‘dirty’ quality of the sex portrayed. Feminist argument has shifted the focus on to violence: the violent quality of the sex portrayed” (1). In that feminist ‘definition,’ rape depictions would be practically inherently pornographic, insofar as sexual domination is shown. For the purposes of this study, keeping in mind Adorno’s warning, I would define pornography as those depictions of sexual violence which show sexual acts and sexual speech in a way that emphasizes the arousal of the perpetrator, steering the reader into the direction of taking (sadistic) pleasure in the depiction. Features of the depiction which show the arousal of the perpetrator can evoke a voyeuristic response of wanting to see (more), wanting to indulge in the sexual violence from the safe position of the spectator. In the sense that they show a disregard for the pain of actual rape victims and try to evoke arousal or sadism, depictions of someone’s suffering in a pornographic manner seem to constitute the clearest case of unethical representations. However, pornographic elements in literary texts can also have a critical function within the text; it remains important to ask why rape is presented in that manner.

Texts representing rape steer readers into the direction of either experiencing the perpetrator's drive, corresponding with pornography, or into the direction of experiencing the victim's pain. In this respect, Tanner's sophisticated analysis of rape and torture in twentieth-century fiction in *Intimate Violence* is relevant to mention, since Tanner discusses both the process of representing and the experience of reading violence, and the interaction between the bodies of the (represented) victim and 'the reader' (Tanner herself). Tanner, in a similar move to Adorno, finds it of great importance that texts portraying intimate violence do not obscure the painful reality of actual violence, "the suffering body" (10). In order to do so, "to reveal rather than obscure the suffering body," Tanner believes that "literary representations of violence must often work against themselves to subvert their own distancing conventions" (10). Tanner insists that what representations of violence 'should' do is "subvert the disembodied tendencies of the reading process in order to offer the reader the fullest experience of reading violence. They must, in effect, remind the reader of his or her own violability" (12-13). Tanner thus pleads for a type of representation which tries to its best ability to confront readers with the reality of pain. The problem with this position is that it is impossible to decide when 'the reality' of pain has been 'truthfully' conveyed. What is possible, however, is to determine whether a victim's voice has been represented at all, in what way, and to monitor the impact of that representation. This is a concern that will reappear during my analyses of various rape representations, just as the critical attitude toward textual elements which allow readers to sit back as voyeuristic spectators.

#### 1.4 The Rape Victim's Voice and 'The Rhetoric of Elision'

The importance of representing the victim's voice in narratives of sexual violence has also been stressed by other feminist critics. Hemmerechts, for example, objects in *De Man, zijn Penis en het Mes* to the lack of empathy shown by male protagonists in Anglophone literature for the girls and women they sleep with. To Hemmerechts, it would be a great

‘improvement’ if the female voice would also be represented in sexual scenes, those with and those without violence (8; 35). As Higgins and Silver have emphasized in *Rape and Representation*, for the victim’s voice to be heard, rape first of all needs to be acknowledged as rape. Their collection of essays brings out that male uneasiness about sexual coercion has translated into a tendency to silence and/or misrepresent rape in the Western art tradition.

According to Higgins and Silver:

art and criticism share the well-documented bias of rape law, where representations of rape after the event are almost always framed by a masculine perspective premised on men’s fantasies about female sexuality and their fears of false accusation, as well as their codified access to and possession of women’s bodies. (2)

Thus, in European and American literature, rape has typically been presented through a perspective that considers rape a justifiable occurrence of sexuality or it has not been represented at all. Higgins and Silver find the absence of the scene of violence in white male fictions of rape to be a “striking recurrent motif” (5), revealing “the ambivalence of the male author caught up in representations of masculinity and subjectivity that he may question, but that he ultimately leaves in place” (6). They speak of ‘the rhetoric of elision.’

One form of the rhetoric of elision discussed in *Rape and Representation* – by Silver herself – is periphrasis: “a figure that simultaneously ‘under- and over-specifies’ or ‘the use of a negative, passive, or inverted construction in place of a positive, active or normal construction” (115). In E.M. Forster’s *A Passage to India*, which Silver takes as her case study, this takes the form of a rape scene which appears only to exist in the fantasy of the woman. Since the rape is not named as such, the novel questions whether the rape actually took place. According to Silver, however, to the critical reader the denial through periphrasis only increases the attention to the elided act: “However creative the elision of the proper term performed by periphrasis may be in literary speech, when used as part of a rhetoric of power

in *A Passage to India*, the elision emphasizes the refusal to name the reduction of woman and Indian that makes them rapable, the refusal to name it rape” (133).

While Silver thus suggests that the attitude of the reader toward the elision is crucial, Higgins, on the other hand, finds elision inherently damaging because it questions whether a sexual act was actually rape, thus playing into the power of rape myths. In “Screen/Memory: Rape and Its Alibis in *Last Year at Marienbad*” she indicates what happens when rape is unclearly represented. Alain Robbe-Grillet’s *Last Year at Marienbad* [*L’année dernière à Marienbad*] is a movie which makes use of postmodern techniques, that is to say a fragmentary representation which leaves room for multiple interpretations. Since the scenes are presented from a male perspective, the perspective of the supposed perpetrator, the crime is made into a seduction. Higgins would rather have seen an indisputable rape scene, but speculates that especially literary texts will probably not represent an entire rape scene since that may stop readers from continuing to read. She feels that “keeping rape literal” should be a feminist goal, and to that extent, she claims “we should be antipostmodern” (318).<sup>5</sup> In the meantime, to the extent that authors do not present rape literally, “it is in our feminist interest ... to understand how rape is metaphorized, becomes discourse” (318). While Silver and Higgins seem to differ in their opinion on how ‘damaging’ elided rape is, their feminist perspective eventually does show a preference for depicting rape in a realistic and serious fashion.

Although representing the victim’s voice is an important concern, and my readings below will demonstrate how the presence of the victim’s perspective can temper voyeuristic and sadistic qualities in rape narratives, I would not go so far as to agree with Higgins that authors have to necessarily ‘keep rape literal’ in order to make readers engage with the issue of rape. Firstly, the question is what a ‘literal’ depiction could be, since representation

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<sup>5</sup> Not all feminist critics are as negative about ‘postmodern’ representations of rape, however. Anneke Smelik, for example, is quite positive about Linda Dement’s postmodern cyberpunk cd-rom *In My Gash*, which tries to convey traumatic sexual violence through fragmentary and violent images of female bodies (89).

intrinsically has to be selective as well as figurative. Also, it needs to be questioned whether more ‘realistic’ (that is to say, straightforward and descriptive) representations of rape actually trigger more ethical reflection in readers. As we will see later on in the discussion of Coetzee’s *Disgrace*, contemporary allusive depictions of sexual violence can very well trigger ethical debates on what it means to be raped, how one can convey that experience to others, et cetera.

### 1.5 Implications for the Current Study: Voyeurism, Power Dynamics, Aestheticization

Taking into account the scholarly work discussed above, I would pose the following issues as the most important in the problematics of representing rape: the absence or representation of the victim’s voice, the evocation or obstruction of voyeuristic and sadistic responses, the misrepresentation or challenging of social power dynamics, and the extent of aestheticization. These are the issues guiding this current study. In all of these issues, the evoked distance or proximity to the scene is an important mediating factor and/or result. The distance or proximity evoked by a text can be viewed from LaCapra’s perspective of ‘empathic unsettlement,’ but it is also helpful to refer once more to Tanner, who has discussed the issues of voyeurism and aestheticizing in the context of distance and proximity. In *Intimate Violence*, Tanner stresses the importance of taking into account how a text portraying violence directs a reader’s gaze and thus plays with the reader’s distance to the scene (10-11). She follows feminist film critic Laura Mulvey in stressing the voyeuristic and sadistic pleasures the one who holds the gaze can derive from objectifying the erotic object, while emphasizing the difference between the experiences of watching movies and reading novels (11; 27).

The question who is watching and who is being watched in a representation of rape is valuable, since the one who holds the gaze has power over the one s/he gazes upon. In this respect, I want to follow Mieke Bal in her emphasis on the importance of a narratological

analysis of focalization for a consideration of (gendered) power relations. The three central questions to ask a narrative, according to Bal, are: who speaks (narrator), who acts (agent), and who sees (focalizer) (*Death & Dissymmetry* 14).<sup>6</sup> Particularly focalization will be relevant to the readings below.

Power dynamics are not only a matter of focalization, they are most obviously visible in the content of what is depicted. Logically, rape is an issue of someone overpowering someone else, and the socio-cultural conceptions related to these gendered power dynamics can be either challenged or endorsed. As multiple essays in Higgins and Silver's *Rape and Representation* demonstrate, because of the power dynamics inherent in sexual violence, authors have used rape as a poignant metaphor, or metonym, for other situations of dominance and submission. In some of the novels that will be discussed, equations are made between rape and war, or rape and racism. These equations will be shown to be problematic, to the extent that they take away from the seriousness of rape in itself, and fail to acknowledge its specificity.

Finally, departing from the assumption of having to take the real life experience of rape victims seriously, aesthetic distance in the case of the representation of rape can be problematic. Tanner states that aestheticization can blind a reader "to her own complicity in the violence enacted by the text" (14). Similarly, in *Rape and Representation*, Peixoto discusses three short stories by Lispector, stressing that the danger of "'aesthetic' symbolic representation" but also of "farcical plot events" is that these narrative devices "minimize violence" (190). In the case of Lispector's "Mystery in São Cristóvão," Peixoto feels that the symbolism and aestheticism increase the erotic suggestiveness of the scene and justify "the encroachment upon a woman's body and its repercussion" (185). For some representations, aesthetic devices can thus increase the likelihood of a voyeuristic response. This means that a

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<sup>6</sup> For further narratological background on focalization, see Mieke Bal's *De Theorie van Vertellen en Verhalen* (especially 104-106), or Rimmon-Kenan's *Narrative Fiction* (chapter 6).



critical attitude towards the use of metaphoric and generally poetic language is in order, discerning which devices are used and to what effect.

The observations by the scholars mentioned above have helped to guide the current study, in which contemporary examples of rape depictions were looked at to explore a possible ethics of representating rape and of responding to rape representations. In order to engage with these issues, it is necessary to investigate different ways in which sexual violence has been represented, attending to stylistic features and narratological devices. In preliminary research I have read twenty literary texts published after 1970 which contain a rape scene (see Appendix 1). This led me to deduce three main ways in which these scenes are depicted in contemporary literature: allusive, explicit, and aesthetic. These terms will be explained in chapters 2, 3 and 4. Carefully looking at how authors have represented rape will help to prepare for an ethical reading of these representations.

## Chapter 2: Explicit Rape Depictions

The term ‘explicit’ most adequately applies to those representations of rape which leave hardly anything to the imagination of the reader, which are not trying to make the rape scene less shocking by using poetic language or veiling terminology. Explicit rape depictions are quite the reverse of the ‘rhetoric of elision’ observed by Higgins and Silver; it could not be more clear that sexual violence took place. According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, ‘explicit’ means:

**1 a** : fully revealed or expressed without vagueness, implication, or ambiguity : leaving no question as to meaning or intent <explicit instructions> **b** : open in the depiction of nudity or sexuality <explicit books and films>

In explicit depictions, the reader gets to ‘see’ the actions that constitute sexual violence clearly and up-close: demeaning remarks, physical violence (hitting, kicking), and sexual nonconsensual behaviour (touching, groping, penetration). Explicit depictions of rape can range from realistic or even clinical portrayals of a few sentences to extensive pornographic scenes.

Novelists portraying rape face the challenge what they show of the rape scene and how they show it. Indeed, the distinction between explicit and allusive scenes is a sliding scale, a matter of gradation in which the main characteristic to distinguish explicitness from allusiveness lies in the amount of access to the scene, access that is granted through a particular narration and focalization (of the victim, the perpetrator, a bystander, or an omniscient narrator). What constitutes ‘the scene’ is of course open to debate. In the most narrowest terms it would be the penetration itself, but more broadly the scene ranges from the starting of aggressive sexual innuendo and/or the anticipatory fear of the victim to the aftermath of pain and shame. To qualify as an explicit rape scene in my terms, there has to be a clear depiction of violent behavior with a sexual intention (touching or hitting breasts,

genitals, or other parts of a semi-naked body, kicking legs open, making degrading sexual remarks, et cetera).

In the section on allusive depictions, the issue of explicitness being a matter of gradation will figure more prominently, and in the section on aesthetic depictions I will look further into how aesthetic devices can mediate the explicitness of the scene. For now, I would like to concentrate on some obvious instances of explicit depictions. I will discuss different variations within explicit depictions that I encountered in the corpus of texts: depictions which are rather clinically realistic, depictions which are provocative or shocking in depicting sexual violence in a way that borders on pornography and depictions in which the provocation of explicitness is reduced by foregrounding the victim's perspective. The final example of Despentès' *Baise-moi* combines features of the other subvariants of explicit depiction, while also offering distinct features. The distinction between the three variations discussed below was the most striking within the corpus I looked at, but of course, looking at a larger or different corpus may bring other subvariants to the fore. In any case, discussing these subvariants is relevant from an ethical perspective, since each subvariant provokes a different interaction between reader and text.

### 2.1 Realism

Multiple examples of short but realistic explicit rape scenes can be found in Julia Voznesenskaya's *The Women's Decameron* [*Damskij Dekameron*, 1985] – a rewriting of Giovanni Boccaccio's famous *The Decameron* – in which ten Russian women who have been quarantined in a hospital tell each other stories. One of the themes in this *Women's Decameron* is rape: an entire chapter is dedicated to rape and the question whether not every woman has at least experienced one attempt of sexual violence. Within the safe, all-female atmosphere of the story-telling in this narrative setting, the sometimes rather explicit but always short scenes do not so much evoke a sense of pornography but rather a straightforward

expression of violence done to women and the ways these women have dealt with it (from taking revenge to taking precautions or toughening up). One of the cruellest rapes is the one narrated by a woman named Albina:

He drove me into the corner until I was bent double and didn't have the breath to scream. Then he threw me on to the floor and started to kick me with his boots on the breasts and between the legs. Now I started to scream in earnest ... But no one ever did come to my aid, that angelic-looking sadist finished beating me up, and as he raped me, he pinched my breasts till they were black and blue and tore out chunks of my hair. As he neared orgasm he grabbed my throat with both hands and squeezed it in time to his coming. (152)

Explicitness is synonymous to openness here; similar to the women within the novel, readers are sharing, as listeners, in a confession of a traumatic experience. While Albina makes no attempts at concealing, she also does not pay 'unnecessary' attention to the details of pain, violence and sexuality. She does not expand upon it or try to give an aesthetically pleasing account, but instead gives a measured amount of details, in order to make clear what happened, not to provide the listeners with a voyeuristic look on the sexual scene.

A similar realistic use of explicitness can be found for example in Nora Okja Keller's *Comfort Woman*, which addresses the systematic rape of Korean girls by Japanese soldiers. Within the genre of historic fiction, depicting rape in a realistic way can serve the purpose of making readers aware of actual suffering. As both Rothberg and LaCapra have emphasized, when writing about historical traumatic events, a certain amount of realism and 'staying true to facts' is desirable, even though authors and readers alike would have to acknowledge that a straightforward access to the past – especially a traumatic past – is impossible. While this type of realistic rape account can help further the realization of the seriousness of rape, it does not appear particularly conducive to evoking challenging ethical questions.

## 2.2 Provocation and Violence

Other types of explicit depictions are more challenging, seemingly revelling in the depiction of the sexual violence. The effect could either be characterized as ‘pornographic’ or ‘shocking,’ depending on the reader. An example of an extensive pornographic scene is the extremely violent and voyeuristic rape scene in Shani Mootoo’s *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996). The narrator of the scene is intradiegetic – he is the nurse of Mala, the woman who is being raped by her father in this scene and who is later institutionalized – but he was not a witness to these events. This implies that he must have pasted the scene together from Mala’s account of it and his own imagination. There is a perverse kind of voyeurism created because this narrator is presenting it as if he were omniscient, focusing on the perspective of the perpetrator and depicting it in a detailed and violent manner, as if he is taking a certain pleasure in describing the horrific and disgusting violence. The following is only a fragment of the rape scene:

**He pushed** her [Mala] to the sink and **shoved** her face down into the basin, **pressing** his chin into her back as **he used both hands to pull up her dress**. **He yanked out his penis**, hardened **weapon-like** by anger. **He used his knees to pry her legs open** and **his feet to kick and keep them apart**. With his large fat fingers **he parted her buttocks** as she sobbed and whispered, ‘Have mercy, Lord, I beg, I beg.’ **He rammed himself in and out of her**. He reached around and **squeezed her breasts, frantically pumping** them to mimic the **violent thrusting** of his penis. Then **he pulled out of her and flung her around**. Standing with his pants around his knees, his **still erect penis pointing** at her, Chandin **slapped her back and forth** with the palm and the back of his hand. **Her lower lip split** and **the outer edge of her left eye tore**. She tried to stop crying but her chest heaved. **He slapped her so hard that she stumbled and fell** onto the ground. He lowered his huge frame astride her, **pulled her up by her hair** and **shoved his penis into her mouth**. She choked and gagged as **he rammed it down her throat**. When she went limp, he took the **weapon** out of her mouth and spurted all over her face. (121-122) [*my emphasis*]

Every violent action is depicted graphically and directly, body parts figure prominently and are mentioned rather clinically (“buttocks,” “breasts,” “penis”). At the same time, Mootoo uses the metaphor of the ‘weapon’ to refer to the penis thrice (twice within the excerpt quoted above), making the violence and domination blatantly pronounced.

This depiction of rape corresponds to Elaine Scarry’s remarks in *The Body in Pain* that an efficient way to describe pain is by using what she labelled “the language of agency” (13): rendering internal pain visible by showing something to be hurting a specific body part. Since Scarry’s focus is on pain without a referential object, she stresses that this ‘unshareable’ experience of pain has mainly been represented through the ‘metaphors’ of the weapon and the wound: “The first specifies an external agent of the pain, a weapon that is pictured as producing the pain; and the second specifies bodily damage that is pictured as accompanying the pain” (15). In the case of rape representations, there is an ‘agent’ who is hurting the victim, the pain is referential, so Scarry’s remarks become less relevant. However, it is interesting to notice that certain rape representations focus on showing what is hurting what, especially since Scarry has warned that the ‘language of agency’ may have sadistic effects in its focus on showing domination (13). In Mootoo’s fragment, we do not only find the explicit metaphor of the weapon, knees are also prying legs open, feet are kicking, the penis is thrusting, et cetera. Instead of the language of agency, I would suggest to rename this the language of domination, particularly in the case of rape, since the ‘agents’ here are subjecting and dominating something or someone. From the words depicting (sexual) violence that I have emphasized, it can be seen that the rapist, Chandin, is constantly shown as being the (violent) agent. Verbs and body parts figure prominently within this language of domination.

Looking at this type of language of domination it is clear that it inherently implies victimhood: where someone is dominating, the one who is dominated is put in the position of victim. In this respect, it is interesting to notice that the penis is referred to through a

synecdoche in the sentence “He rammed himself in and out of her.” ‘Himself’ is a *totum pro parte* for the penis, and somewhat less obvious ‘her’ fulfills a similar function for the vagina (which is not referred to directly at all in the scene, not even in a later description of Mala’s injuries). The contrast between the silence surrounding Mala’s genitals and the equation of Chandin’s penis with a weapon and with this violent man in his entirety reaffirms the rather binary distinction between female submission and passivity and male dominance, a stereotype which is typical for rape, but need not be typical for portrayals of rape.

Explicitness, then, establishes a certain voyeuristic problem if told from the perspective of a bystander, especially if that bystander seems to be projecting his own fantasies onto the scene. The same type of voyeuristic and sadistic problems occur when it is told from the perspective of the perpetrator, as we will see in the discussion of the aesthetic rape depictions, mainly Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* and Reve’s *Een Circusjongen*. When voyeurism and sadism are evoked, the ethics of reading become particularly relevant, but for now I will concentrate on the issue of how authors have represented rape.

### 2.3 The Victim’s Perspective

When told from the perspective of the victim, explicitness seems more appropriate than when told from another’s perspective. While looking at the rape from the position of a bystander or the perpetrator may be conducive to, respectively, voyeuristic and sadistic reactions, looking with the victim may obstruct such reactions. If we grant that it would be ethically desirable if readers can empathize with the suffering other, then a victim’s perspective on his or her own suffering may be the most conducive to this. On the other hand, as LaCapra suggested, when looking with the victim and empathizing with her we have to be careful not to think that we actually know what it feels like for her. As Scarry has stressed, we are incapable of fully grasping the pain of the other (4), yet this should not prevent us from trying to understand at least the emotional pain of victims.

Wally Lamb's *She's come undone* (1992) offers an example of an explicit rape scene which is narrated and focalized by the rape victim herself. Compared to the scene from Mootoo's novel quoted above, Lamb presents a rape scene which is grounded within the experience of the victim – a highschool girl who is raped by a friend of the family. We are looking with her instead of at her, which, as Tanner has also emphasized (e.g. 29), obstructs voyeurism and brings the reader closer to the experience of the victim:

He kept fumbling and poking at me. I tried to pull my head up, to punch and spit, but my fists wouldn't land. The drool fell back against my chin. His elbow swung out and jabbed against my throat, gagging me. His rubbing was rough and mean. His pants were down. 'I hate you!' I shouted. 'You pig!' I stopped fighting, cut off by the pain of it. The sound of the barking dogs fell away so that all I could hear was his cursing and grunting, over and over, in rhythm with each thrust, each rupture. He's splitting me open, I thought. He'll break me and then I'll die. (109-110)

Note the difference between Mootoo's "she choked and gagged" and Lamb's "gagging me"; in the case of the second the word 'me' establishes that the reader is no longer simply watching but is invited to empathize. Lamb also uses focalization from within, presenting the thoughts of the victim, a device which is absent from Mootoo's representation.<sup>7</sup> In Mootoo's representation, the victimization was much more pronounced: Mala was presented as completely subjugated. With Lamb, the girl is not only actually fighting back, the fact that she is narrating and focalizing also makes her more of an agent and a subject ('I,' 'me') instead of a simple victim.

In Lamb's excerpt, the rape is shown while it is happening as it happened. Speech acts are presented in the direct mode, and actions and body parts are consistently shown, adding to the visual sensoriness of the scene. While the fragment does not appear overly poetic, the

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<sup>7</sup> See Rimmon-Kenan's *Narrative Fiction* for the distinction between focalization from within and from without (77). Rimmon-Kenan reserves the terms 'external focalization' and 'internal focalization' for the distinction between focalization by the narrator-focalizer (external) and focalization from inside the represented events (internal), 75-78.



narrative past tense (epic preterite) does give a sense of stylization, and there are some poetic stylistic devices like repetitions (“each thrust, each rupture”; “My hand opened and closed, opened and closed,” 110) and metonyms (“his dead weight on top of me,” 110). The sentence fragment “The sound of the barking dogs fell away so that all I could hear was his cursing and grunting” establishes a contrast between sound and silence and between the setting outside and the experience of the victim: shortly the attention is focused outside, but only to bring the attention back more fully to the rape scene itself. Indeed, Lamb’s excerpt demonstrates how literary depictions of rape are seldomly completely unaestheticized. Distinctions could be made in what precisely is aestheticized: the feelings and thoughts of victims and perpetrators, the (sexual) aggression itself, or both. The question is when the poetic devices (like repetitions, contrasts and metaphors) applied by authors are increasing the visibility and ‘openness’ of the scene and when they are obscuring it. This issue will be further addressed in the chapters on allusive and aesthetic rape depictions.

#### 2.4 Transgressive Fiction Bordering on Pornography: Despentés’ *Baise-moi*

Given its realism and provocativeness, Virginie Despentés’ *Baise-moi* (1993) is a particularly poignant example of an explicit rape scene. It is relevant to mention that Despentés writes within the tradition of transgressive fiction, a type of fiction harking all the way back to the work of the Marquis de Sade, characterized by protagonists who reject societal norms and typically engage in gratuitous violence. In the 1990s it would be justified to speak of a veritable subgenre of transgressive literature, including the work of authors like Bret Easton Ellis, Chuck Palahniuk, Irvine Welsh, and Poppy Z. Brite. Despentés’ novels all deal with characters who are nonconformist, rejecting society and rejected by it, from singing porno-actrices (*Les jolies choses*, 1998) to homeless addicts (*Bye bye Blondie*, 2004). Her themes are those of downbeat youth culture: having no future and wallowing in teen angst, being preoccupied with sex, drugs, and rock and roll (or another genre of alternative music);

generally transgressing norms and laws. Desportes implicitly and sometimes explicitly refers to French decadent, or *fin de siècle*, literature. In *Les jolies choses*, for example, she makes this literary influence explicit by naming her libertine protagonist Claudine, after Colette's (1873-1954) autobiographical Claudine-cycle. Yet, Desportes' themes and verbal modes – particularly the heavy use of slang – are contemporary: her *fin de siècle* is the end of the twentieth century.

Within the genre of the transgressive novel it is noticeable that the rape in *Baise-moi* is not perpetrated by her protagonist(s) but against one of her protagonists. In transgressive fiction protagonists typically engage in risky and immoral sexual and violent behavior (to put it very lightly in Ellis' case), and this is also the case for *Baise-moi*'s characters Manu and Nadine, who are mostly willing to have sex with whomever crosses their path and who do not shy away from killing anyone who irritates them. The rape scene in *Baise-moi*, however, precedes the meeting between these two young women, and appears relatively early in the novel (chapter 8 out of 28). It is a gang rape, happening to Manu and her friend Karla.

The rape scene in *Baise-moi* can be characterized as crude and straightforward, combining explicitness, violence and realism. The scene is set in the suburbs of Paris, and Desportes uses the appropriate slang, like “sales gueules,” “les mecs,” “petite pute” and “des capotes,” which are translated into English as “mean mugs,” “dudes,” “little whore” and “rubbers.” The focalization lies with Manu, who, as the narrator makes clear, is a tough, no-nonsense kind of girl with no ambitions beyond having sex and getting drunk: “Manu aime bien ce qui dépasse, tout ce qui dérape la fait rigoler. Elle a les envies larges et déplacées. Et la baise, c'est bien tout ce qu'elle a trouvé qui mérite encore un détour et quelques efforts” (46-47).<sup>8</sup> Karla, from Manu's viewpoint, is “comme les autres, craintive et aggressive” (47).<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> English translation *Baise-moi (Rape me)* by Bruce Benderson (New York: Grove Press, 1999): “Manu really likes everything that goes too far, everything that gets out of hand she finds hysterical. Her desires are big and out of bounds. And fucking is the only thing she's found that's worth going out of your way for, making an effort for” (47). Further English citations all come from this publication.

These girls are attacked by three guys with unpleasant faces and attitudes, who are identified entirely through their footwear: “pompes pointues” (“roach-stomper shoes), “mocassins,” and “baskets” (“basketball shoes”) (47).

The scene has all the features of explicitness mentioned before. Firstly, the perpetrators’ language is depicted directly and their remarks are pornographic, for example: “Baisse ta culotte et écarte tes cuisses, écarte-les bien, comme ça j’tu ferai pas mal avec mon bel engin,” and “Alors, ma puce, qu’est-ce que t’en dis de ma queue? T’as pas l’air de détester ça, hein?” (48).<sup>10</sup> These kind of erotic remarks become extremely perverse within the context of gang rape. The effect of humiliation is exacerbated by other demeaning remarks the rapist make about their victims:

- J’en reviens pas, comment celle-là se laisse faire.
- Faut dire qu’avec la gueule de poufiasse qu’elle se trimballe, elle doit pas se faire empaler souvent, hein?
- Méfie-toi, elle doit pas faire la différence entre sa chatte et un vide-ordures.
- On aurait dû ramener des capotes, on sait jamais... Avec des filles qui se laissent violer... (49)<sup>11</sup>

Not only do the rapists abject their victims, literally comparing them to trash, they are also laughing about their supposed cleverness, increasing their dominant position.

Secondly, the same type of language of domination as in Mootoo and Lamb is used, noses are hit and thighs are kicked: “Le mec allongé sur elle rigole et tape avec la paume de sa main sur son nez” (48), “C’est un autre type qui vient sur elle; avant de se coucher, il lui fait mieux écarte les jambes en lui donnant des coups de pieds à l’intérieur des cuisses” (49-

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<sup>9</sup> “like the others, fearful and pushy” (47).

<sup>10</sup> “Lower your panties and spread those thighs, spread them wide, so I won’t hurt you with this hot tool of mine,” and “So, sweetheart, what do you think of my cock? You don’t seem to hate it, do you?” (48).

<sup>11</sup> “I can’t believe the way this one just lies there and takes it.’ ‘Gotta say, with that slut’s mug of hers she drags around, she must not get pronged often, you know?’ ‘Careful, she probably doesn’t know the difference between her cunt and a garbage chute.’ ‘Should have brought rubbers, you never know... With girls who let themselves get raped...’” (50).

50).<sup>12</sup> It needs to be noticed, however, that while in Mootoo the events depicted and the language used to depict it were blatantly violent, these descriptions are much less physically violent. The use of the word ‘tape’ for example, connotes a type of hitting that is more teasing and demeaning. While the humiliation and contempt are clearly and cruelly portrayed, especially through the representation of direct speech, the physically aggressive and also the more narrowly sexual actions are not quite as violently depicted as in Mootoo or even Lamb. These are the references to sexual acts: “il plaque sa main sur ses seins” (48), “Elle sent la main de l’autre mec entre ses cuisses lui malmener la chatte” (48), “Quand il rentre en elle” (50), and “Le mec se retire” (50).<sup>13</sup> Taken out of context, these references to sexuality could actually be erotic. It is precisely within this context that they bring out the sadistic pleasure of the perpetrators.

In the combination of the attention paid to the perpetrators’ humiliating remarks and the straightforward references to sexual acts, the scene is thus bordering on the pornographic, invoking fantasies of domination. However, Despentés choice to represent the events through the eyes of Manu makes the scene more complex. There is a great difference in Despentés’ depiction between the way Manu experiences the rape and the way Karla is shown to experience it, through Manu’s perspective. Manu, as indicated before, enjoys intercourse as one of the few things that make life worth living, and while the gang rape is entirely unwanted and unenjoyable for her, her main concern throughout the scene is staying alive and keeping the physical damage to a minimum. In that aim, she hardly cares about the acts of penetration, she stoically bears with it, leading the rapists to remark that it feels like ‘fucking a corpse.’ This explains why the sexual acts are not described as more horrific.

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<sup>12</sup> “The guy on top of her laughs and hits her on the nose with the palm of his hand.” (48), “Now another guy gets on top of Manu; before lying down, he makes her spread her legs more by kicking the inside of her thighs” (50).

<sup>13</sup> “he plants a hand on her breasts” (48), “She feels the other guy’s hand between her thighs, grabbing her pussy” (48), “When he’s inside her” (50), “The guy pulls out ” (51).

Manu's attitude stands in great contrast with Karla's, and through Manu's focalization, the suffering and pain that we see is mostly Karla's, as the following scene indicates:

Karla pleurniche et discute, supplie les mecs de ne pas la toucher. Un des types la tient par les cheveux. Il tire sa tête en arrière en la traitant de petite pute. Elle a le visage rouge, congestionné, plein de larmes. Un peu de morve lui coule dessous le nez, et du sang plein la bouche. Quand elle essaie de parler, elle bave du sang. Entre ses dents, ça fait des traits rouges. Un autre type l'attrape par l'épaule, elle se protège la face avec ses bras et tombe à genoux. Tas rabougri et pleurnichard. Terrifié, implorant. (48)<sup>14</sup>

Karla is depicted as a crying and bloody mess, a complete victim. Through Manu we get a close look at Karla's tears, the blood on her face, the dirt on her legs. The attention is to wounds and abjection, to the effects of the rapists' actions on her. Apart from this, Karla's resistance is portrayed as having a reverse effect: not only does it make the rapists hurt her more, they also enjoy raping her more than raping Manu. All the while, Manu is looking at, and looking out for Karla, at times shouting at the guys to leave her alone, or shouting at Karla not to resist so much. Her own resistance lies in averting her eyes and her thoughts. At one point she also talks back to the rapists: when one of them is saying that she is not a woman since she is not even crying she answers that he has not got much between his legs either (50). She regrets it instantly, since actively resisting could work against the main aim of survival.

That survival is central to Manu is emphasized through a rather long fragment in which Manu's thoughts are represented; she is thinking about how to get through it:

Qu'est-ce qu'ils feront après, qu'est-ce qu'ils feront à la fin? Ils ont l'air

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<sup>14</sup> "Karla's whining and trying to negotiate, begging the guys not to touch her. One of the dudes holds her by the hair. He pulls her head back and calls her a little whore. Her face is red, covered with tears. There's a little snot under her nose, and her mouth is full of blood. When she tries to speak, she drools blood. There are red traces between her teeth. Another guy grabs her by the shoulder, she protects her face with her arms and falls to her knees. A hunched pile of tears. Terrified and begging" (48).

violemment raides eux aussi. Et l'alcool ne les rend pas franchement aimables. Ils sont contents d'être ensemble, ils échangent de bonnes vanes, ils ont **une activité commune, un ennemi commun**. Jusqu'où comptent-ils aller pour se prouver qu'ils sont ensemble? Est-ce qu'ils vont leur ouvrir le ventre ou leur enfoncer **un canon de carabine bien profond et les exploser de l'intérieur**? ... Mais peut-être qu'ils veulent juste les violer. Il ne faut surtout pas leur faire peur, surtout qu'ils ne paniquent pas. Surtout ne pas les provoquer à aller plus loin que des coups dans la gueule et leurs brusques coups de reins. (49)<sup>15</sup> [*my emphasis*]

It is interesting to notice that Manu thinks about the brotherhood established by these three men, likening them to soldiers having a common enemy whom they are battling, and thinking them capable of shoving rifles inside them and exploding them from the inside. In a similar move to Mootoo's comparison of the penis to a weapon, rape is likened to war here. At the same time, however, it is contrasted with it: being raped is not quite the same as being exploded from the inside, the last would be 'as far as they can go.' The rapists themselves are also not quite the same as brave soldiers; they are portrayed as pathetic and abject, for example when Manu notices the untasteful detail that one of the guys who is raping Karla has an ass with red pimples and black hairs: "avec des boutons rouges et quelques poils noirs" (50).

In this war between the sexes, Manu comes out relatively unscathed because she has no stereotypical notions of forced sex being demeaning for the woman. After the rape she feels relieved that "c'est jamais qu'un coup de queue" (51) ("all they did was fuck us," 52). Karla is outraged at these words, and generally at Manu's lack of resistance. After the rapists have gotten back to their car, leaving the girls behind, Karla runs after them, shouting and cursing. They simply run her over, ending the scene and the chapter. The contrast between

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<sup>15</sup> "What will they end up doing, what'll they do after? They seem completely smashed. And the alcohol is not making them at all friendly. They like being together, exchanging gibes, working together against a common enemy. How far are they planning to go to show their solidarity? Are they going to slit their bellies or shove a rifle deep inside them and explode them from the inside? ... But maybe they just want to rape them. Really mustn't make them afraid, these guys mustn't panic. Especially don't make them go any further than punches in the face and some rough fucking" (49).

Manu and Karla's response combined with the fact that Manu survives while Karla does not provokes the reader to challenge conventional notions of sexual experience. This will be further discussed in chapter 6, taking the context of the novel as a whole into account.

Regarding the ethics of representation it can be concluded that the explicit mode of representing rape has the objective to show the violent acts in full view – the language of domination and victimhood, images of weapons and wounds, humiliating remarks by the perpetrators in direct speech, et cetera. In some cases this full view gives readers more access to the victim's experience, in some cases the perpetrator's drive seems emphasized. For empathy on the one hand and sadism and voyeurism on the other, it matters greatly whose view is presented. When we are looking with the victim – as Tanner has also stressed in *Intimate Violence* – it becomes much harder to take a sadistic stance toward that victim than when we are looking at the victim. This difference was brought out in the discussion of Mootoo's rape scene versus Lamb's rape scene. Some explicit representations, like the one by Mootoo, are more violent and this seems to correspond with a higher occurrence of the language of domination with its verbs depicting violent actions. If a perpetrator's perspective is added to this, the reader is forced in an uncomfortable position of being invited to feel what it is like to dominate another person. With Lamb's poetic victim account, on the other hand, readers are invited to feel what it is like for a rape victim. Here, Scarry's notions on the unsharability of pain as well as LaCapra's remark that readers must not confuse their empathic response to a represented (trauma) victim with actually knowing what that person felt are valuable to keep in mind for a critical attitude toward these kinds of representations. Still, embellished depictions like Lamb's, in their evocation of empathic responses, may have a larger impact on readers than the more straightforward, unembellished victim narratives like those in Voznesenskaya and Keller, which seem to aim for a rather 'factual' account. Lastly, in the explicit spectrum we can find rape depictions departing from a transgressive aim – that

is, confronting readers with taboo-breaking behaviours and attitudes. Desportes' *Baise-moi* is an example of this, but the rape scene itself in this novel did show consideration for the victim's point of view. While the direct speech of the perpetrators was rather pornographic, the focalization by Manu and her attention to Karla's dirty and bleeding body brought out the extent to which particularly Karla experienced the humiliation and abjection. Manu's own atypical, stoic response was perhaps the most 'transgressive' feature in this rape scene.



### Chapter 3: Allusive Rape Depictions

Allusive rape depictions are opposed to explicit rape depictions in the sense that they try to present the rape indirectly. Some allusive rape depictions would fall within the ‘rhetoric of elision’ mentioned by Higgins and Silver. Novels in which the rape is completely elided have been excluded from the preliminary selection for this study (e.g. Bernice Rubens’ *Milwaukee*). From elision to allusion is a sliding scale; for my purposes it is the distinction between depictions in which it is questionable whether a rape has taken place at all and the rape scene is not represented at all (elision) and depictions in which a rape scene does figure, but the rape is not fully and openly shown (allusion). In allusive scenes, the fact of rape is not so much disputed, but the way in which the rape took place is disputable, since it is not shown directly. Sometimes this means that ambiguous references are later on reaffirmed to have been a rape scene (see for example Brand’s short story “Sans Souci”). In the allusive mode, the rape itself is circled around, and instead of showing the violent and sexual acts other elements are highlighted, for example the fear or confusion of the victim. Thus, the reader’s attention is turned away from the sexual act itself, which is veiled, obscured, alluded to, represented in hindsight or by signs. What we get to see, for example, is the bruised body of the victim and his or her flashbacks: elements which stress the traumatic impact of the rape. Another way in which a rape scene can be allusive is when the rape is so heavily metaphorized that it is very unclear what exactly happened.

#### 3.1 Metaphoric Circumlocution

Multiple interesting examples of heavily metaphorized rape can be found in the work of Sylvie Germain, an author who generally makes use of imaginative visual language and fairy-tale like characters. Especially interesting is Germain’s *L’Enfant Méduse* (1991), in which the rape of a little girl (Lucie) by her stepbrother is at first depicted in a way that is purposefully painterly, since Lucie later takes refuge in drawing and painting. In a chapter

named “Second Red Chalk Drawing” (“Deuxième Sanguine”) an unknown narrator describes how the morninglight is “cleans[ing] itself of night’s last traces” (76) (“la lumière s’épure des dernières traces de la nuit,” 88), waking up small animals and vainly turning in keyholes. The notion of the light as dirty, voyeuristic and violating, but also “being delicate and soft” (76) (“légère et tendre,” 89) and incapable to actually turn the key stands in comparison and contrast with the beautiful but violent stepbrother, the wolf in sheep’s clothing who is likened to the sun multiple times throughout the novel. The scene subsequently focuses on the fear of the little girl. In the poetic description of her fear it becomes quite clear that she is a rape victim:

*C’est la peur qui la tient tout entière en alarme. C’est l’effroi et la haine. Un effroi à l’odeur nauséuse, comme la paille humide qui moisit au fond d’une étable. L’odeur de l’Ogre blond qui s’en vient la saisir. Un effroi couleur de bleuets dans les blés. Une haine lourde d’un corps d’homme; un corps pesant et étouffant comme une pierre tombale. (90)<sup>16</sup>*

Instead of saying that Lucie has been raped, the narrator speaks in metaphors and synecdoches: it is an ‘Ogre,’ whose smell (so not he himself) comes to take possession her, and the hate she feels carries the weight of a man’s body (instead of she herself having to bear with that man’s body). When the rape is described somewhat more explicitly two chapters later, it is still through metaphoric language, likening the girl to ‘an insect or frog’ and the rapist’s sexual drive to hunger: “Il a bu, il va se coller contre elle, il va se frotter à elle, et lui écarteler les membres comme on le fait avec des insectes ou des grenouilles de dissection. Il a bu, il va sombrer dans un sommeil lourd sitôt sa faim assouvie, son corps inerte pèsera sur elle” (105).<sup>17</sup> What is also remarkable in this passage is that it uses the future tense to describe

<sup>16</sup> Translation Liz Nash (Sawtry: Dedalus, 1994): “Her dread has a nauseating smell, like damp straw mouldering at the back of a cowshed. It is the smell of the blond Ogre **who is coming to take possession of her**. Her dread is the colour of cornflowers in wheat. Her hatred has **the weight of a man’s body**; it is as heavy and stifling as a tombstone” (77). Further English citations of *L’Enfant Méduse* all come from this publication.

<sup>17</sup> “He will press and rub himself against her, and wrench her limbs apart as if she were an insect or frog he intended to dissect. Because he is drunk, he will slump into a heavy sleep as soon as his hunger is satisfied, and his inert body will press heavily on her” (91).

what has happened before and will happen again, and again, as is also evident from the repetition of ‘il a bu’ (which is repeated six times on page 105).

This passage does not spell out ‘rape’ directly, but it is obvious that the ‘hunger’ is a reference to sex, especially given the earlier chapter referring to an Ogre “taking possession of her.” “His inert body” pressing resonates heavily with the earlier “weight of a man’s body.” Germain thus goes through great lengths to make it indisputable that the little girl has been raped, while hardly showing any acts of violence, sexuality, and without referring directly to genitalia or penetration. The choice of words and images – particularly the fairytale language – instead increases the feeling that we are dealing with a very young and innocent girl. In *L’Enfant Méduse* poetic images are thus used to obscure the visibility of rape while placing the focus on its effect on the victim.

### 3.2 Traumatic Discourse: Flashbacks and Cleansing

While Germain’s representations are highly aesthetic and fantasmatic in their allusiveness, Joyce Carol Oates takes a more realistic approach to representing rape, while also skipping over the rape scene itself. In *We Were the Mulvaneys*, high school student Marianne is raped, but this rape is only depicted in hindsight, through Marianne’s intrusive memories and the evidence of her body. What is mainly represented, through Marianne’s focalization, are the girl’s attempts to clean up any signs and act like nothing has happened, e.g.: “Where she’d gently hand-washed the dress with Pond’s complexion soap in lukewarm water in Trisha’s bathroom sink the stains were still visible, blood- and vomit-stains. The satin was still damp. When it dried, it would wrinkle badly. But she would try again of course” (86). These kinds of realistic descriptions of ‘cleansing’ are interspersed with Marianne’s thoughts of school events and with flashbacks to the rape. These flashbacks are constantly repeated sentences that the rapist said to her, represented in cursive: “*Look, you know you want to. Why’d you come with me if you don’t? Nobody’s gonna hurt you for*

*Christ's sake get cool!*" (87). The descriptions of the stained dress and the washing of the dress can easily be interpreted as metaphoric for Marianne's violated virginity and her desperate hope for repurification, but at the same time these descriptions can be read purely literally as the real aftermath of unwanted intercourse. While Marianne stays silent, her body speaks, if only to her: "She shut her eyes not wishing to see her naked arms and legs, milky-pale, floating like a dead girl's. Her pale bruised breasts, floating. The ugly plum-colored bruises on the insides of her thighs" (90). Oates thus uses the discourse of the wound to make rape evident.

The incomplete representation of the events, the recurring flashbacks and the references to cleansing are all ways in which to represent the traumatic impact of rape for this victim. The rape escapes Marianne's normal frameworks for understanding, she has not fully experienced it while it happened, thus the rape scene keeps imposing itself through flashbacks which are ever incomplete, corresponding to trauma theory, which stresses that the traumatic event is experienced "too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor" (Caruth 4). It is interesting to notice how both Oates and Germain use repetitions to emphasize the traumatic impact of the rape, while obscuring the act of rape itself. Here we see a great contrast with for example Desportes' explicit depiction, which showed the rape extensively, without presenting it as traumatic – at least for Manu. There is thus a difference in focus to be discerned between representations of rape which focus on the events and representations which focus on the emotional impact on the victim. Sometimes, however, like in Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place* which will be discussed later, both are combined.

### 3.3 Incomplete Depiction and Complementing Imagination: Coetzee's *Disgrace*

An incomplete depiction of the rape scene which simultaneously makes use of flashbacks thus corresponds to the idea of rape as a traumatic event. J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* (1999) uses a similar type of portrayal of rape, while paying specific attention to what happens when the rape victim herself is silent and the rape scene is not or cannot be narrated by an intradiegetic or omniscient narrator. Coetzee – an acclaimed South-African novelist who is actively engaged in public debates on ethics and representation – is generally preoccupied with the unbridgeable gaps between individuals from different backgrounds and especially the insufficiency of language. For example, in *Foe* the white woman Susan Barton never really gets through to the mute black man Friday and in *Waiting for the Barbarians* the white male colonist remains uncertain how to interpret his sexual relations with a native woman.

In his essay “Into the Dark Chamber” (1992), Coetzee has discussed the fascination of the novelist with imagining scenes of human suffering; with knowing what goes on in the torture room: that “site of extreme human experience, accessible to no one save the participants” (363). Coetzee argues that both the mystification of the other's pain and the novelist's fascination with it are shameful. He suggests that political regimes which use torture have as their objective to create fearful fantasies in subjects. This implies that both ignoring suffering and producing certain obscene imaginative representations of that suffering means that one is “play[ing] the game by the rules of the state” (364). For Coetzee, the ‘true challenge’ for the author is “how to establish one's own authority, how to imagine torture and death on one's own terms” (364). His author position is to go against the state's discourse and not to fall into the trap of “lyrical inflation,” thus not poeticizing the darker aspects of human behaviour out of fascination (365).

In *Disgrace*, the notion of having to attend to the silence of the suffering other is played out between a father and daughter in post-apartheid South Africa. The father, David Lurie, an incorrigible philanderer and literature professor, is the protagonist. While the story is told in the third person by an unknown narrator, the focalization lies completely with Lurie; the reader only gets to see what he sees and only knows what he knows. In the case of the rape scene, which takes place in another room, this limited perspective has as its effect that both Lurie and the (voyeuristic) reader are in a similar position: wanting to know what he did not get to see. This makes *Disgrace* a particularly interesting example of the allusive mode.

The rape scene in the novel takes place when Lurie is at the farm of his lesbian daughter Lucy. Three black men come to the farm and rape Lucy while Lurie is locked in the bathroom. The rape, however, is implied and only confirmed later on in the novel. Lurie himself is being set on fire, but is mainly panicking about Lucy, whom he does not have access to:

So he was wrong! He and his daughter are not being let off lightly after all! He can burn, he can die; and if he can die, then so can Lucy, above all Lucy. ...

Everything is tender, everything is burned. Burned, burnt.

'Lucy!' he shouts. 'Are you here?'

**A vision comes to him of Lucy struggling with the two in the blue overalls, struggling against them. He writhes, trying to blank it out.**

He hears his car start, and the crunch of tyres on gravel. Is it over? Are they, unbelievably, going?

'Lucy!' he shouts, over and over, till he can hear an edge of craziness in his voice.

At last, blessedly, the key turns in the lock. By the time he has the door open, Lucy has turned her back on him. She is wearing a bathrobe, her feet are bare, her hair wet. (96-97)

Since Lurie does not know what has actually happened to Lucy, the reader is also barred from this information. Lurie immediately questions Lucy about what has happened to her, but she does not answer him, and requests the following: "David, when people ask, would you mind

keeping to your own story, to what happened to you?" (99). Lucy's request implies that she is the only one allowed to speak about her rape, and whether to speak about it is her choice alone.

After the traumatic events, Lurie keeps pushing Lucy to tell him, as well as the police, what happened to her, and is stunned by her refusal to do either. Lucy's silence towards David occupies a large part of the novel. When she eventually does speak about the rape, her 'testimony' is incomplete, she only reveals fragments of what has happened to her:

Halfway home, Lucy, to his surprise, speaks. 'It was so personal,' she says. 'It was done with such personal hatred. That was what stunned me more than anything. The rest was...expected. But why did they hate me so? I had never set eyes on them.'

He waits for more, but there is no more, for the moment. 'It was history speaking through them,' he offers at last. 'A history of wrong. Think of it that way, if it helps.' (156)

The rape remains implied, yet everyone knows that it took place, and the 'why' of the rape hardly seems to be a question either. The only thing that remains to be known is how it took place. Lurie wants to know because he wants to understand and help his daughter, but she does not want him to know and she emphasizes that he cannot understand. When he continues to ask her to press charges or in any case leave the farm, she says: "you don't understand what happened to me that day. You are concerned for my sake, which I appreciate, you think you understand, but finally you don't. Because you can't" (157).

Lurie claims that he does understand and in this claim tries to fill in the gaps in Lucy's testimony:

['I will pronounce the word we have avoided hitherto. You were raped. Multiply. By three men.'

'And?'

'You were in fear of your life. You were afraid that after you had been used you would be killed. Disposed of. Because you were nothing to them.'

'And?' Her voice is now a whisper.

‘And I did nothing. I did not save you.’

That is his own confession.

She gives an impatient flick of the hand. ‘Don’t blame yourself, David. You couldn’t have been expected to rescue me. If they had come a week earlier, I would have been alone in the house. But you are right, I meant nothing to them, nothing. I could feel it. (157-158)

Lurie tries to make the rape explicit, but he does not mention any physical details, he concentrates on the emotions, and mostly his own emotions for that matter. For Lucy, who is evidently impatient with Lurie’s interpretations of the event, being in fear of her life does not seem to be the worst part of her experience, given her question “And?”. Instead, the hatred of the men and her own being ‘nothing’ to them seems to be the central traumatizing aspect of her experience. This is the point she keeps emphasizing, and she speculates that it is intrinsic to heterosexual intercourse:

‘Hatred... When it comes to men and sex, David, nothing surprises me any more. Maybe, for men, hating the woman makes sex more exciting. You are a man, you ought to know. When you have sex with someone strange – when you trap her, hold her down, get her under you, put all your weight on her – isn’t it a bit like killing? Pushing the knife in; exiting afterwards, leaving the body behind covered in blood – doesn’t it feel like murder, like getting away with murder?’ (158)

In this fragment, Lucy not only equates rape with murder, with the violent act of pushing someone down and pushing in a knife; to her, penetration in general is like that, if there is no love between the partners. Her description of sexual intercourse as a man leaving the body of a woman behind ‘covered in blood’ and the phrase that ‘nothing surprises her any more’ suggests that she has had earlier negative experiences with heterosexual intercourse. Her remarks could also just be based on the rape by the three black men. In either case the antagonism between genders is evident in her account, and her metaphoric descriptions offer a vague sense of how she experienced the rape. One more remark by Lucy concerning the rape



is given: Lucy says that the men spurred each other on, “Like dogs in a pack” and she implies that they wanted to subjugate her (159).

Since Lucy’s ‘testimony’ is incomplete, leaving most of the act undescribed, Lurie is triggered to try to imagine himself there, in her place, but he cannot, he can only be in the place of the rapists. His imagination of the scene consequently carries a perverse element, since he trying to imagine the violation of his own daughter:

Lucy was frightened, frightened near to death. Her voice choked, she could not breathe, her limbs went numb. *This is not happening*, she said to herself as the men forced her down; *it is just a dream, a nightmare*. While the men, for their part, drank up her fear, revelled in it, did all they could to hurt her, to menace her, to heighten her terror. *Call your dogs!* they said to her. *Go on, call your dogs! No dogs? Then let us show you dogs!*

... Lucy’s intuition is right after all: he does understand; 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)

The answer in the novel is that he does not, he cannot ‘be the woman.’ The implications of the incomplete representation of the rape scene, Lurie’s imaginative supplement to it and his final admittance that he cannot imagine being the woman will be discussed in chapter 7.

As we have seen in this chapter, the allusive rape depictions by Germain and Oates employed narratological devices, albeit in different ways, to simultaneously stress the traumatic impact while obscuring the violent acts. Oates’ depiction more directly engaged with the conceptions of trauma discourse concerning fragmentation and repetition, since she made less use of poetic images than Germain and made more use of repetitions of realistic events (like the direct speech of the perpetrator). Coetzee’s allusive rape depiction comes closer to the ‘rhetoric of elision,’ and since the focalization does not lie with the victim, there lies a problematic challenge for the reader to engage with the invitation to fill in the gaps of the incomplete account oneself.

## Chapter 4: Aesthetic Rape Depictions

The aesthetic mode of depicting rape is different from the explicit and allusive modes in that it can co-occur with explicitness or allusiveness, while allusive and explicit are opposing ways of depicting rape. As mentioned in the chapter on explicit depictions, novelists depicting rape face the challenge of choosing how much access to the rape scene they grant the reader and how that access is envisioned. Depictions which are fairly explicit can still play with the how and what of showing the rape (its anticipation, the act itself and the aftermath) and a few explicit portrayals of rape which play with the access to the scene through a heavy use of stylistic devices will thus be discussed in this chapter on aestheticization. We are of course dealing with gradations when it comes to aesthetics; literary works are always aesthetic artefacts since ‘literary’ and ‘aesthetic’ are overlapping concepts. When I am speaking of ‘aesthetic’ rape depictions I mean those depictions that clearly foreground stylistic features like metaphors, contrasts and repetitions. We already saw an aesthetic representation under the allusive mode, namely the depiction by Sylvie Germain, in which poetics were employed to obscure the rape scene. In this chapter I want to bring out some of the diverse effects that aesthetic features can have.

### 4.1 Metonyms Increasing Viscerality

Poetic devices are not only employed to obscure violent acts, they can also have the opposite effect of increasing the viscerality of the rape scene. A great example of this is Gloria Naylor’s *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982), which has been lauded by Tanner for effectively bringing the reader up close to the experience of the victim, obstructing a voyeuristic response (29). In Naylor’s novel, a gang rape is portrayed in an extremely explicit manner, containing detailed descriptions of the violent sexual act(s) and particularly of the bodies of the victim and perpetrators, e.g.: “He slammed his kneecap into her spine and her body arched up, causing his nails to cut into the side of her mouth to stifle her cry” (170).

However, as can already be discerned from the choice of words in the aforementioned sentence (“arched up,” “stifle”), Naylor makes use of poetic discourse to transmit these events.

Furthermore, Naylor consistently mentions every body part involved in the violence, to the extent that explicitness becomes stylistics. To give a few examples of how she combines the explicitly violent and the aesthetic:

- The impact of his **fist forced air** into her **constricted throat**, and she worked her sore **mouth**, trying to form the one word that had been **clawing inside of her** – ‘**Please.**’ (170);
- Then she opened her **eyes** and they **screamed and screamed** into the **face** above hers – the **face** that was **pushing his tearing pain** inside of her **body**. (170);
- She couldn’t tell when they had changed places and **the second weight, then the third and the fourth**, dropped on her – it was all **one continuous hacksawing of torment** that kept her **eyes screaming** the only word she was fated to utter **again and again** for the rest of her life. **Please.** (170) [*my emphasis*]

The violence of the rape is inescapable, but at the same time Naylor uses repetitions (e.g. “screamed and screamed,” or the word ‘Please’), prefers poetic words to more common ones (e.g. “continuous hacksawing of torment”), and makes extensive use of metaphoric language, particularly in the form of synecdoches and metonyms. The use of synecdoche and metonymy puts the body parts mentioned in another perspective: it is not “the man” who is pushing his penis, but “the face” (*pars pro toto*) which is pushing “his tearing pain” (substitution of effect for cause). This is an interesting form of Scarry’s language of agency, since the displacements in agency simultaneously invoke the agent that is not directly shown: ‘the face’ has to be attributed to the man, and the ‘tearing pain’ to his penis. This also means that readers have to make an extra step in their imagination, seeing the man while only ‘the face’ is mentioned. A particularly emotive displacement (and contrast) is that while the victim is incapable of screaming with her vocal chords, her eyes do scream, making her ‘Please’ visual instead of

auditive. Through metaphoric language Naylor is thus showing more instead of less. This effect is strengthened through the fact that, even though an omniscient narrator is narrating, the victim possesses the focalization during most of the fragment.

#### 4.2 Ambiguity through Polyphony

Another nice example of the combination of the explicit and the aesthetic, used to a different effect, is Joyce Carol Oates' *Rape, A Love Story* (2003). In *Rape, A Love Story* Oates cleverly plays with the access to the rape scene. In this short novel, Teena Maguire – who is known as a beautiful, flirtatious woman – is gang-raped in a boathouse one night while her 12-year old daughter manages to escape and hide. The novel mainly addresses the aftermath of the rape, with the prejudices of the townsfolk (rape myths) and the painful court case in which Teena herself is put on trial. The story is narrated partly by an omniscient narrator and partly by an unidentified voice addressing the daughter Bethie, which most likely belongs to the sympathetic police officer Dromoor. Multiple partial reconstructions of the rape are given throughout the novel, but Teena herself has an incomplete memory of the event, so we only get her account up until the point of the rape. The most explicit reconstruction is the following:

They yanked at your mother's hair wishing to pull it out by the roots. One of them would gouge repeatedly at her right eye with his thumb, wishing to blind her. You could not know how there was a radiant madness in their faces, a glisten to their wolf-eyes, a sheen to their damp teeth. You could not know how their eyes showed rims of white above the irises. How their bodies were coated in oily sweat. How they straddled your mother's limp body and jammed their penises into her bleeding mouth and into her bleeding vagina and into her bleeding rectum. You would hear the noises of this rape not fully aware that what you heard was *rape*. (30-31)

This rape scene is very explicit while being aesthetic. There is a repetition of the words “You could not know how” (a case of *apophasis*: mentioning by not mentioning), followed by sentences starting with “How their” and “How they.” These repetitions within the context of

grief make the fragment sound like a lamentation. The rapists have “a radiant madness in their faces,” “wolf-eyes” and “a sheen to their damp teeth,” which recalls the type of language used by Germain in *L’Enfant Méduse*: the rapist as supernatural predator, as a creature from a nightmare (an almost literal ‘lunatic’). Even the most explicit sentence is aestheticized through the threefold repetition of “into her bleeding...”

What is interesting is that while the scene is explicit, at the same time it is emphasized that Bethie, who was present at the rape scene, ‘could not know’ that all of this happened like this. The reference to ‘your mother’ implies that Dromoor is speaking here, complementing Bethie’s account with criminal evidence and filling in further gaps through his imagination. In the phrasing, it sounds like perhaps this is the daughter’s testimony spoken out loud to her, but at the same time the phrasing is too poetic to be a court testimony. Since we cannot be sure who is speaking here and how he or she acquired this information the truth value of it all within the narrative world is questionable, despite the clinical details. There is thus a polyphony established which simultaneously increases and questions the seriousness of the rape. While Higgins and Silver argued against the type of representation of rape which simultaneously questions the rape, in the case of *Rape: A Love Story* it seems justified since this novel offers a critique on the detrimental effect of rape myths and legal procedures on the victims of sexual violence. The problem *Rape: A Love Story* addresses is exactly that there is no perfect witness to the rape scene, and the form Oates uses expresses that problem poignantly.<sup>18</sup>

#### 4.3 Ironic Hyperbole

Naylor puts the focalization with the victim and Oates problematizes the notion of who can narrate and focalize the rape scene, but explicit aestheticized depictions can become arguably more problematic when they take the point of view of the perpetrator. This is the

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<sup>18</sup> See Felman and Laub’s *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* for an account of the difficulty of bearing witness to traumatic events.

case in Gerard Reve's *Een Circusjongen* (1975), in which an entire chapter is dedicated to the description of a rape which the protagonist-narrator sees as his one unforgivable sin. For several reasons it is hard to take the rape scene seriously: earlier in the story the narrator has recounted cruel sexual fantasies with the aim to arouse his partner and Reve uses an exalted and hyperbolic discourse to describe the rape and to contextualize it within catholic notions of sin and forgiveness, a discourse which shows a decadent fascination for the horrific beauty of transgression. The androgynous girl who is raped is presented as the most angelic pure being that ever existed – a true Justine – and later in the novel she literally becomes a saint. The description of the rape is extremely detailed and aestheticized, and also very sadistic, inviting the reader as voyeur on the scene. One example will suffice to illustrate this:

Ik knoopte nu haar bloesje open tot haar middel, en greep daarna haar beide borstjes vast, kneep elk ervan tot langwerpigheid ineen en trok, terwijl ik de beide koele, harde, maar wat de huid betrof perzikachtige aanvoelende vruchten stevig omklemd hield, met forse kracht haar bovenlichaam voorover naar mij toe. De duidelijke gewaarwording, dat ik dit weerloze, schuldeloos speelse wezen dat nog bijna een kind was, hierbij hevig pijn deed, deed mij, als in dronkenschap, enkele ogenblikken duizelen. (107)<sup>19</sup>

Reve is describing the rape as an erotic scene in which the resistance of the victim only increases the arousal. While the narrator keeps emphasizing how awfully sinful his behaviour was, the indulgence in the rape scene – which, as said, takes up an entire chapter – is pornographic, while the edge is taken off from the pornographic descriptions through the ironically hyperbolic poetic discourse.

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<sup>19</sup> “Now I unbuttoned her shirt up to her waist, and grabbed both of her small breasts, squeezed each of them into elongation and pulled her upper body towards me with brutal force, while I firmly clasped both of the cool, solid, but as far as the skin was concerned peachy-soft fruits. The clear realization, that I was heavily hurting this defenseless, innocent, playful creature that was practically a child, made me feel dizzy for several moments, as if intoxicated.” [Since there is no official translation of *Een Circusjongen* I translated the passage myself, adjusting Reve's unconventional word order to keep it understandable].

#### 4.4 Eufemisms and Poetics Softening the Blows: Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*

Like Reve, in her debut novel *The Bluest Eye*, Toni Morrison offers an aestheticized depiction of rape, focalized by the perpetrator. While aestheticized representations of suffering can be criticized for taking the edge off of suffering (cf. Adorno), Morrison herself has indicated in interviews with Jane Bakerman and with Claudia Tate that polishing the language is the best way to engage the reader (in Taylor-Guthrie 35-38; 164-165). Morrison's aesthetics are not those of elaborate and ornate prose, on the contrary. In interviews she has indicated that she searches for the right symbols and that her aim is to write "spare, evocative prose" (in Taylor-Guthrie 37) in order for the reader to become more involved: "My language has to have holes and spaces so the reader can come into it. He or she can feel something visceral, see something striking" (in Taylor-Guthrie 165). Aestheticization, in the way that Morrison applies it, namely eufemistically, would help the reader to look at – and even feel – the painful scene. She wants to gently guide the reader by the hand to watch suffering and violence (in Taylor-Guthrie 164). With respect to the rape scene in *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison has indicated that she wants the reader to be a voyeur, but not so much of the victim but of the perpetrator:

I tell you at the beginning of *The Bluest Eye* on the very first page what happened, but now I want you to go with me and look at this, so when you get the scene where the father rapes the daughter, which is as awful a thing, I suppose, as can be imagined, by the time you get there, it's almost irrelevant because I want you to *look* at him and see his love for his daughter and his powerlessness to help her pain. By that time his embrace, the rape, is all the gift he has left. (in Taylor-Guthrie 164)

Ethical interpretations of Morrison's attempts to make the reader look at and be understanding of an incestuous father – in combination with the other themes of *The Bluest Eye* – will be discussed in chapter 8. For now it is simply relevant to know her author position in the ethics of depicting violence and suffering: her aim is exactly to use forms of

representation that make the reader look. In this, Morrison could be compared to Desportes, but Morrison has stated that she does not want to shock the reader, which will explain her different manner of representing rape (in Taylor-Guthrie 164). To some extent, we could oppose Morrison and Coetzee in their ethics of representation: Morrison shows (selectively) in order to further understanding between the reader and characters, Coetzee obscures in order to stress the limits of understanding.

In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison's aestheticization of the rape scene at first takes the form of a long anticipatory segment in which rapist Cholly Breedlove is watching his daughter Pecola as she is doing the dishes. What I would distinguish as the rape scene within the novel starts with narrator commentary on Cholly's motivations:

Had he not been alone in the world since he was thirteen, knowing only a dying old woman who felt responsible for him, but whose age, sex, and interests were so remote from his own, he might have felt a stable connection between himself and the children. As it was, he reacted to them, and his reactions were based on what he felt at the moment. So it was on a Saturday afternoon, in the thin light of spring, he staggered home reeling drunk and saw his daughter in the kitchen. (126-127)

Chapter 8 will pay further attention to what this framing means for an interpretation of the rape scene, for now it suffices to know that this is the framing Morrison chose. From then on the scene is focalized by Cholly, we see what he sees and his thoughts are represented in the free indirect discourse, for example:

How dare she love him? Hadn't she any sense at all? What was he supposed to do about that? Return it? How? What could his calloused hands produce to make her smile? What of his knowledge of the world and of life could be useful to her? What could his heavy arms and befuddled brain accomplish that would earn him his own respect, that would in turn allow him to accept her love? His hatred of her slimed in his stomach and threatened to become vomit. But just before the puke moved from anticipation to sensation, she shifted her weight and stood on one foot scratching the back of her calf with her toe. It was a quiet and pitiful gesture. ... The timid, tucked-in



look of the scratching toe – that was what Pauline was doing the first time he saw her in Kentucky. Leaning over a fence staring at nothing in particular. The creamy toe of her bare foot scratching a velvet leg. It was such a small and simple gesture, but it filled him then with a wondering softness. (127-128)

While presenting the perspective of Cholly, Morrison does not let him narrate, nor does she present the scene in the type of language he would use. The length and content of the questions, for example, seem carefully measured. The narrator uses the term “calloused hands,” carrying the double connotation of hands ‘having calluses’ and of being unfeeling, and continues with the similar wordgroups “heavy arms” and “befuddled brain.” These wordgroups all make a body part carry a certain emotional weight, and likewise Cholly’s ‘hatred’ is transported to his body: it is starting to materialize as vomit. Then, however, the scene changes because of a gesture that brings back nostalgic memories to Cholly. In this visual move, Morrison adjusts the mood of the scene by using quite different combinations of body parts and adjectives: “creamy toe,” “bare foot,” and “velvet leg,” all adjectives with a highly erotic connotation. A ‘tenderness’ wells up in Cholly, and he starts sexually assaulting his daughter, an event which is described in the following way:

He put his head down and nibbled at the back of her leg. His mouth trembled at the firm sweetness of the flesh. He closed his eyes, letting his fingers dig into her waist. The rigidity of her shocked body, the silence of her stunned throat, was better than Pauline’s easy laughter had been. The confused mixture of his memories of Pauline and the doing of a wild and forbidden thing excited him, and a bolt of desire ran down his genitals, giving it length, and softening the lips of his anus. Surrounding all this lust was a border of politeness. He wanted to fuck her – tenderly. But the tenderness would not hold. The tightness of her vagina was more than he could bear. His soul seemed to slip down to his guts and fly out into her, and the gigantic thrust he made into her then provoked the only sound she made – a hollow suck of air in the back of her throat. Like the rapid loss of air from a circus balloon. Following the disintegration – the falling away – of sexual desire, he was conscious of her wet, soapy hands on his wrists, the fingers clenching, but whether her grip was from a hopeless but stubborn struggle to be free, or from some other emotion, he could not tell. Removing himself

from her was so painful to him he cut it short and snatched his genitals out of the dry harbor of her vagina. (128)

In this extensive fragment, we can observe various repetitions and contrasts in word groups and semantics. Very simple but effective, for example, is the enumeration with the repetition of the word 'and' in the sentence starting with "The confused mixture." This repetition gives the sentence a feeling of breathlessness and inevitability, corresponding to Cholly's increasing arousal. Morrison paints a rather romantic picture of the incest by using phrases like 'bolt of desire' and by stating that Cholly's mouth was 'trembling' at "the firm sweetness of the flesh." The alliteration of the fricative sounds of the 'f' and 's(h)' in 'firm sweetness of the flesh' arguably emphasizes the erotic meaning of the words. As earlier, Morrison makes combinations of body parts with emotional adjectives: "the rigidness of her shocked body" and "the silence of her stunned throat," word groups which are completely identical in the word order of nouns and adjectives.

As for contrasts, there is the painful contrast between the "easy laughter" of the mother and the stunned silence of the daughter. This contrast is simultaneously a contrast between past (Pauline's easy laughter only exists in Cholly's nostalgic memory) and present, between love and cruelty. Likewise, there is a constant contrast in the scene between Cholly's lust and hatred versus his tenderness for his daughter. The violence in the rape is described rather euphemistically as "the tenderness would not hold." Cholly's climax is poeticized as "His soul seemed to slip down to his guts and fly out into her." While Naylor's displacing of body parts increased the viscerality of the scene, Morrison's displacing the climax to a 'soul slipping down' lessens the viscerality, distracting from the fact that what we are watching is rape. Indeed, this corresponds with Morrison's statement that showing the atrocity of incestuous rape is less relevant to her in this scene than showing Cholly's love and powerlessness.

Likewise, the most melancholic phrase in the scene is exactly the most violent part of the rape: “the gigantic thrust he made into her then provoked the only sound she made – a hollow suck of air in the back of her throat.” The “hollow suck of air” is immediately likened with the strange image of “the rapid loss of air from a circus balloon,” distancing us from the fact that we are dealing with rape. The circus balloon is a rather grotesque image, which has the connotation of fun and clowns, a domain more befitting of a little girl. The balloon thus distracts from the rape, but by invoking the contrast of what a father ‘should’ do with his daughter and what Cholly is doing, it also focuses attention to the childhood gone wrong (both of Cholly and of Pecola).

The rape itself is followed by Cholly’s realization afterwards of what he has done, with the pathetic visual detail of the “wet, soapy hands on his wrists” and the classical image of “clenching fingers.” Once again Morrison does not shy away from calling genitals by their clinical name, despite her aestheticization of the rape throughout: Cholly “snatched his genitals out of the dry harbor of her vagina.” The oxymoric metaphor of the dry harbor underlines the involuntary and unnatural features of this rape. It is noticeable in its similarity to the *Unheimlichkeit* of incest: a harbor connotes “a sheltered part of a body of water deep enough to provide anchorage for ships” (Merriam Webster Dictionary), so if the harbor is dry something is off, the safety of the shelter falls away. The ‘dry harbor’ thus can be said to function as a *mise-en-abyme* for the rape scene in its totality.

Morrison ends the rape scene in the following way:

She appeared to have fainted. Cholly stood up and could see only her grayish panties, so sad and limp around her ankles. Again the hatred mixed with tenderness. The hatred would not let him pick her up; the tenderness forced him to cover her. So when the child regained consciousness, she was lying on the kitchen floor under a heavy quilt, trying to connect the pain between her legs with the face of her mother looming over her. (128-129)

By referring again to Cholly's contrasting feelings of hatred and tenderness Morrison closes the circle, making the rape scene a coherent whole. On the one hand Pecola is portrayed as a piece of dirt, lying discarded on the kitchen floor, with her 'sad and limp' 'grayish panties,' but on the other hand the love Cholly is said to have for her limits her disgrace: she is covered with a quilt. Yet, the quilt is heavy, the homely becomes suffocating, resonating with the uncanniness of the dry harbor. The discourse of abjection that surrounds Pecola in *The Bluest Eye* will be further discussed in chapter 8. As the 'looming face' of the mother indicates, the story has not ended yet, the rape carries implications.

As we have seen, each mode of representation (explicit, allusive, aesthetic) can have different effects depending on the specific choices of the author. Choices as to who narrates, who focalizes, the specific characterization of victims and perpetrators, the amount and content of speech and thoughts (of victims versus perpetrators) that is represented, whether poetic images are used in a way to distract the reader from looking at the rape itself (e.g. Germain) or to increase the viscosity of the scene (e.g. Naylor), et cetera. In this section I have offered three main author positions with different implications for both the ethics of representation and reading: 'provoking' the reader through an explicit, transgressive depiction (Despentes), 'frustrating' the reader through a fragmentary, incomplete showing of the rape scene (Coetzee), and 'engaging' the reader through a carefully aestheticized depiction (Morrison). The effects of these choices and positions in the ethics of representation will figure more prominently in the section to follow, in which it will be discussed in more detail what kinds of reader responses these three rape representations appear to evoke, taking into account the context of the novels as a whole.

## PART II: ETHICS OF READING

**Chapter 5: A Proposal for an Ethics of Reading Rape**

Thusfar, the focus has been on how authors can and have represented rape, also hinting at the ethical issues that are at stake, without interpreting the rape scenes in the context of the entire novels. In order to do that, namely, it is important to determine what could constitute an ethical reading of literary depictions of sexual violence and suffering. To think this through, the ethics of reading proposed by literary theorists need to be further explored. To recall, I adhere to the distinction between ‘morality’ as prescriptive notions of right and wrong (norm and value judgments) and ‘ethics’ as critical reflection on moral issues. Critical reflection will thus be central to an ethics of reading rape. While I do not question that the act of rape is morally wrong in hurting another human being, fictional representations of rape are not morally wrong in themselves. They do, however, have an ethical dimension in that they can trigger readers to think, to indulge in violence, or possibly both.<sup>20</sup> This means that the ethics of rape representations have to be actualized by readers.

Scholars have engaged in disparate ways with the ethical potential of literary texts. In “Some Dilemmas of an Ethics of Literature,” Liesbeth Korthals Altes describes two opposite positions: Martha Nussbaum’s ‘moralism’ in her efforts to deduce moral guidance from literary texts and her claim that literature can teach us ‘how to live the good life’ versus Andrew Gibson’s “ethics of/in literature as a radical deconstruction of morality itself” (17). Korthals Altes criticizes Nussbaum for being normative and for not taking into account literary ambiguity (20). While she appreciates Gibson’s critical deconstructive approach to questions of morality and his sensitivity to literature’s multivalency, she doubts whether the

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<sup>20</sup> As Liesbeth Korthals Altes says in “Some Dilemmas”: “No representation of human affairs, aesthetic or otherwise, can really avoid having a moral or ethical dimension, even if it is in the negative. The question is only what role and how central or peripheral it comes to play in the interpretation and evaluation of art, in our case, literature” (17).

relativistic “submission to any text-as-other” is an ethical value in itself (25). As Korthals Altes states, both Nussbaum’s moralism and Gibson’s deconstructionism “run the risk of reducing literature to a preset idea about what ethics actually is” (15). Nussbaum focuses too much on deducing one moral meaning from the text, while Gibson focuses too much on never attributing one meaning (but finding the meaning exactly in that). Korthals Altes proposes a middle ground, represented in her account by Ricoeur’s *Soi-même comme un autre*, in which the philosopher “strives to both maintain [a] plural conception of the self and recognize a responsible, which is moral, self” (25).

In a similar move to Korthals Altes, I will discuss the benefits of a deconstructive approach while also pointing to aspects that appear to be overlooked, or deserve more attention, in this approach. Deconstructive ethics will be shown to carry useful elements as a model for the ethical relation of the critical reader toward the literary text. However, the problematics of reading suffering can only be grasped if it is fully acknowledged that readers bring emotions to the text and try to relate to the represented events. The deconstructive approach of close reading and postponing and/or unsettling meaning will thus be complemented with an empathic approach. In this proposal for an ethics of reading I will not be able to escape laying down a subjective conception on what an ethical response could entail. ‘Responsibility,’ ‘singularity’ and ‘empathy’ will be key terms in this conception.

### 5.1 Deconstructive Ethics: Derek Attridge

In the deconstructive approach to ethics that can be discerned from the work of, amongst others, Emmanuel Levinas and Judith Butler, suspending one’s judgment of the other is vital. This type of ethics, with its attitude of being open to otherness, questioning the other and questioning oneself instead of placing judgment, carries useful elements for an ethics of reading, as Derek Attridge has demonstrated in *The Singularity of Literature* and *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*. In these works, Attridge demonstrates how the confrontation with

otherness is “at stake in every literary work, and in a particularly conspicuous way in the work that disrupts the illusions of linguistic immediacy and instrumentality” (*Ethics* 12). Faced with the otherness of the text, Attridge states that we need to ‘read creatively’: “To read creatively in an attempt to respond fully and responsibly to the alterity and singularity of the text is to work against the mind’s tendency to assimilate the other to the same, attending to that which can barely be heard, registering what is unique about the shaping of language, thought, and feeling in this particular work” (*Singularity* 80). According to Attridge’s deconstructive approach, an ethics of literature thus entails that readers respond to the singularity of the text, not trying to reduce it to something familiar or trying to deduce some single important meaning of the text, but allowing it to be ‘other’ while still making a genuine effort to understand its various meanings and intricacies (*Ethics* 11). Practically, this means we need to be constantly willing to expand our own mental frameworks in a sensitivity to stylistic features (close reading) as well as to the socio-historical context of a work, questioning the text and postponing judgment (*Singularity* 67). In this sensitive attuning oneself to the text lies the responsibility which makes reading a literary text an ethical event.

While Attridge’s approach constitutes a nice ideal of how a critical reader can approach a text, the stress on otherness and on postponing judgment at first view seems to overlook two responses that readers bring to a text: 1. (immediate) affective responses to events and characters, 2. necessary attempts to make sense of the narrative world, to impose meaning instead of (or at least before) questioning it. While these type of responses indeed do not – or hardly – figure in Attridge’s readings in *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*, Attridge does acknowledge that the other can only be understood to the extent that he or she is “assimilate[d] ... to my existing schemata of understanding” (*Singularity* 32-33). The other – as a person, a person within a text, or a text – is thus both other and not other, and in that confrontation, Attridge says: “I encounter the limits of my own powers to think and to judge,

my capacities as a rational agent” (33). Thus, it is only because we try to make meaning that we can question meaning and our own capacities to make meaning. Moreover, in this encounter, the singularity of the text makes a certain demand on the reader which appears to be affective: “literature happens” as Attridge stresses (*Ethics* xii). To Attridge, this potentially transformative ‘happening,’ which is in direct relation to the questioning of norms, in content but mainly in form, opens up “new possibilities for thought and feeling” (*Ethics* 11). An affective response of the reader is thus also implied in Attridge’s ethics of reading. Yet, this affective response is not clearly specified. Attridge’s ideal reader mainly seems to have an affective response of unsettlement to the formal features of the text. In the context of reading suffering, affective responses to the text in general and to characters and events specifically, deserve some more attention and specification.

### 5.2 Complementing the Deconstructive Approach with an Empathic Approach

Once the text has left the hands of the author the text becomes our concern, and while we could say that the text is ‘pushing’ certain values and interpretations, it is our responsibility to relate to those values and interpretations. When a reader chooses to read a certain literary work and to read on when s/he encounters passages of suffering and violence, s/he enters into a relationship of responsibility with the representation. For a literary critic, that responsibility also consists of communicating the intricacies of the text to others. Every text poses interpretational problems, the question for the literary critic is how to expose those problems and how to deal with it. Deconstructive reading – the kind of reading that pays attention to stylistics in the same way as traditional close reading, exposing power dynamics and binary oppositions while also reading the text against the grain – can bring out how supposedly immoral messages in a text can be ‘dismantled.’ In order to explain the mechanisms and effects of texts, taking into account both what can be understood and what escapes understanding, the deconstructive notions of postponing judgment and reiterating



questions are useful approaches, but – as indicated – empathic response should not be overlooked. As Frank Hakemulder’s review in *The Moral Laboratory* (1998) has demonstrated, reader response studies provide evidence that literary narratives can increase both ‘ethical reflection’ and ‘pre-ethical feelings’ (63). ‘Ethical reflection’ designates “an enquiry into our actions from the viewpoint of norms and values, good and evil, responsibility and choice” (13), while the ‘pre-ethical’ consists of the other-oriented feelings of empathy, sympathy, pity, and understanding (23). Having ‘pre-ethical’ feelings does not automatically lead to reflection on ethical issues: one can sympathize with a character without wondering why one is sympathizing, whether the other deserves this sympathy. However, these pre-ethical feelings are a crucial precondition for ethical reflection concerning our position towards the other. This implies that any ethics of reading has to take into account empathic responses.

While Attridge has pointed to the unsettlement that inventive literary texts can provoke, pre-ethical feelings like empathy do not seem to be a major issue for him. In order to complement the deconstructive approach with an empathic approach, I once again come back to Dominick LaCapra’s concept of ‘empathic unsettlement’ in *Writing History, Writing Trauma*. As discussed before, LaCapra has stressed that when reading about the traumas of others, empathy is “a counterforce to numbing,” and “may be understood in terms of attending to, even trying, in limited ways, to recapture the possibly split-off, affective dimension of the experience of others” (40). ‘Attending to’ the experience of others (without falling in the trap of “unchecked identification, vicarious experience, and surrogate victimage,” LaCapra 40), and thus being open to ‘empathic unsettlement,’ is a crucial responsibility for readers in my proposal for an ethics of reading suffering. ‘Empathic unsettlement’ implies that a certain amount of empathy is necessary to relate to the depicted events and characters, while being unsettled by the representation helps to recognize the

difference between one's own situation and the depicted events and characters, to acknowledge the fact that in looking at another's pain we can never completely share it. Both empathy and unsettlement are affective responses of the reader, triggered by features in the text.

Empathic responses help readers to have some conception of whom they are facing, thus leading to a more relevant questioning of this other. We need to be drawn into the imagined narrative world to some extent before we can critically engage with the text's formal features and how those stylistics relate to the depicted events. Only when acknowledging the empathic dimension can the critical reader start to question oneself as well the text. What arises, then, is an ethics of reading that takes into account the interaction between the need to go along with the text and the need to resist the text, an interaction that is particularly adamant in the case of representations of suffering and violence. Representations of suffering and violence may trigger more extreme emotional responses in readers regarding the depicted other, responses that an ethical approach would monitor and subsequently question.

### 5.3 Affective Response in the Context of Rape Representations

In the case of reading representations of suffering and violence, of sexual domination, attending to one's emotional responses thus becomes a particularly relevant ethical responsibility. Neither Booth and Nussbaum nor Attridge have paid specific attention to our ethical responsibility in reading suffering. To further explore what this ethical responsibility could entail, other critics, who have dealt with the problematics of reading and watching scenes of suffering, are more useful. Susan Sontag has explored some of the potentially undesirable effects of watching representations of suffering in *Regarding the Pain of Others*. To Sontag, we have a certain obligation to familiarize ourselves with the suffering in the world, but we also "should feel obliged to think about what it means to look at [images of

suffering], about the capacity actually to assimilate what they show” (95). She stresses that there is an inherent danger in being put in the passive position of the sympathizing spectator: “So far as we feel sympathy, we feel we are not accomplices to what caused the suffering. Our sympathy proclaims our innocence as well as our impotence. To that extent, it can be (for all our good intentions) an impertinent – if not an inappropriate – response” (*Regarding* 102). Our forced impotence in the face of represented suffering can turn pity into a pleasurable experience, in the sense that on a metalevel, we feel that pity announces our moral justness. Sontag does believe, however, that narrative texts provoke more nuanced, reflective responses, if only because of the concentration and time they ask us to put in (*Regarding* 122). The simple fact that readers have to transform the linguistic signs on paper into imagined visual scenes could provide a greater reflective distance to the scene than would be the case with visual representations.

Apart from pity, our capacity to feel for the other could also turn into sadistic pleasure if the options to react are barred. As Eagleton has argued in *Sweet Violence*: “there is a streak of cruelty in the kind of pity which finds itself helpless before a hopeless situation. The frustration involved in this can fester into sadism, as a kind of psychological defence against one’s impotence” (159). Sadism and voyeurism are socially undesirable reactions, but these are logical reactions to being confronted with a scene of violence and humiliation while being placed in the position of a bystander who cannot do anything to prevent the actions from happening (except skipping some pages). With (artful) representations of suffering a passive position of the audience is presupposed, but the audience does have mental playing ground to be critical toward their reactions, be they reactions of pity, bafflement, sadness, anger, indifference or sadism. Or, for that matter, the fascination with our own death which Freud termed ‘the death drive.’ As Eagleton poses: “What if we would rather confess our enjoyment of another’s agony than acknowledge the shaming truth that the destruction we most revel in

is our own? Could our wryly conceded sadism be yet another mask for the death drive?” (*Sweet Violence* 175). In this respect, I want to bear in mind Bataille’s emphasis (derived from Freud and Nietzsche) on the human tendency to be fascinated with the destruction of the other and the need to watch this destruction as a way to experience one’s own death from a safe distance (e.g. *L’Érotisme*). Bataille has also stressed that literature is one domain in which we can explore that which horrifies us, testing out our biggest fears and fascinations (see *La littérature et le mal*).

Recognizing ‘shameful impulses’ like the voyeuristic pleasure or the death drive in oneself and in others is critical when one reads an account of suffering, since one is then put in the challenging position of relating that suffering other to oneself. As Kelly Oliver has argued, owning up to one’s desires and phobias is a necessary precondition to being a self-reflective, ethically responsible person, especially because domination often springs from fears and desires which those in power would rather not admit to (199-200).

#### 5.4 Dynamics of Engagement and Detachment when Reading Rape

In being attuned to the affective responses that literary representations of rape can evoke, Tanner’s discussion in *Intimate Violence* of the interaction between readers and representations of rape and torture is particularly useful. As indicated earlier, Tanner has concentrated on the play between readers’ awareness of their own body and their awareness of the suffering body of the depicted victim. Readers’ ability to connect the two – practically: to empathize – depends largely on whether the text is drawing them into the scene or distancing them from it, and the readers’ critical attention to both of those mechanisms (9). Distancing, to Tanner, is inherent in literary representations, with their “manipulation of words, images, and literary forms” (9). Yet, in their manipulation of words, literary works can also draw the reader in, and when they do so readers can find themselves in “a position of discomfiting proximity to the victim’s vulnerable body” or “discomfiting proximity to the

violator” (10). Both cases of discomfort, Tanner emphasizes, “may become an opportunity for interrogating the mechanisms of representation and the conventions of reading through which the material dynamics of violence are depicted” (10).

The discomfort of the reader, according to Tanner, concerns the matter of ‘voyeuristic participation.’ As an example, Tanner notices that Faulkner’s *Sanctuary* – which would correspond to my ‘allusive’ mode of representation – invites a voyeuristic response through focusing on the perspective of the perpetrator as well as on outsiders’ fantasies: “Denied an explicit account of the novel’s violence, the reader is tempted and frustrated, until the process of reading begins to assume the rhythm of desire itself” (21). Here, Tanner points to a dynamic that I have already hinted at in the section on allusive representations, and will develop more fully in the interpretation of Coetzee’s *Disgrace*, namely that being denied access to the scene of suffering can precisely lead to voyeurism. As said before, Tanner has observed the opposite effect for Naylor’s *The Women of Brewster Place*. According to Tanner, Naylor’s explicit depiction from the victim’s point of view obstructs voyeurism (29). Tanner – much like Higgins and Silver – prefers it when the rape scene is not obscured and is represented from the victim’s perspective; rape representations in which the reader’s distance to the scene is reduced to a minimum. However, she does emphasize the distinction between the position a text steers readers toward and readers’ critical engagement with that position. As she expresses the aim of her study: “By articulating the ways in which literary representations of violence construct and are constructed by the reader, this study attempts to provide a critical perspective that allows the reader to resist the kind of intimate violence that certain texts would perpetuate through the act of reading” (16). Tanner thus proposes a metalevel of reading that comes after discerning the mechanisms of the text, a metalevel in which the reader reflects on the ‘distance’ or ‘proximity’ of the text.

### 5.5 Implications for a Proposed Ethics of Reading Rape

The positions above were invoked to emphasize what is at stake in an ethical reading of scenes of violence and suffering. Literature that addresses suffering may provide us with instances in which we are confronted with desires that we would rather repress, and what is left for us is to take in a critical attitude regarding these desires; a critical attitude which includes opening oneself up to affective responses while closely attending to textual features. This nuanced attitude would combine the best features of Attridge's approach with LaCapra's 'empathic unsettlement.' Indeed, I believe empathic unsettlement to be critical in the response to the fictional suffering other and the fictional other who imposes suffering.

The approach that I propose is similar to Tanner's approach, in which both the text and one's own response is questioned. I would concur with Tanner that the power of literary depictions of violence is realized in the reader's play between distance and engagement, between the moments when stylistic devices are foregrounded and the moments when they disappear to the background and the events take precedence. In my account, at first view, the allusive and aesthetic modes evoke more 'distance' to the violence of the scene, while the explicit mode evokes more 'proximity.' However, closer inspection of the scenes and their context within the novels, as well as the affective responses that the texts can trigger, will have to prove whether this first view can be nuanced. My proposal for an ethics of reading designates an approach in which the intricacies of the text are exposed, and while different interpretations are allowed for, there is an engagement with one's own initial (affective) response as well as a reflection on this response.

The ethics of reading rape that I propose is specifically attuned to the literary critic or critical reader. As a literary critic, I have a responsibility towards the text that is in front of me. I can feel that the text is encouraging me to have affective responses that I myself find undesirable, even immoral, like voyeurism and sadism, but for the way I critically engage

with these initial responses I finally can only hold myself accountable, although the text can offer me encouragement for ethical questioning. This ethics of reading thus implies two ethical responsibilities: 1. toward the text: I feel responsible to carefully read a text and indicate for myself and others what narrative devices it employs, 2. toward myself: I feel responsible to monitor what these devices evoke in me and to critically engage with my own response, in dialogue with the text.

In chapters 6, 7 and 8, this approach will be tried out on the three main examples of rape depictions given in the first section. Expanding upon the close readings of the stylistic and narratological devices given in the first section, interpretations will be offered, with specific attention to the following questions: 1. To what extent could the rape depiction be said to trigger affective responses: empathy with the victim, empathy with the perpetrator, sadism, voyeurism, and arousal?, and 2. To what extent does the rape within the novel as a whole allow for critical and ethical reflection on our position *vis-à-vis* the other? Logically, these questions can be answered in multiple ways, and answers will differ per reader. My readings should be seen as an explorative starting point, the testing out of an ethical reading strategy that is both empathic and self-questioning, and that tries to find a fair balance between style and content. Without wanting to pass judgment on which novel would be 'better' or 'weaker' – as Booth and Nussbaum would want ethical criticism to do – I want to show what responses these different depictions can evoke and how to ethically relate to those responses.

## **Chapter 6: Arousal and Sadism in the Explicit Mode: The Case of *Baise-moi***

As noticed in chapter 2, explicit rape depictions range from clinically realistic to violently pornographic. Realistic representations can be argued to try to communicate something of the pain of actual rape victims by forcing readers to look at the scene of violence, while explicit representations which use the same crude words and images as non-artistic representations of sexual violence can resemble pornography. The binding factor that established the category ‘explicit’ in my definition was the fact that the reader is allowed a rather open access to the rape scene. In terms of proximity and distance, explicit portrayals of rape decrease readers’ distance to the scene, in the sense that readers are ‘forced’ to look at the scene. As Graham has argued, when writers show the violence of rape with explicit detail, they make the reader complicit in the violation, by ‘watching’ the violent scene and possibly deriving some kind of aesthetic or even erotic pleasure from it (441). I would like to stress, though, that in the case of ‘having to watch’ the entire scene of suffering – even when this scene is described pornographically – the reader can respond ‘ethically’ by taking in a critical attitude towards the emotions that the scene evokes and by closely attending to critical notes within the text. Moreover, not every explicit depiction makes the reader a bystander to the violence, in some cases the reader is invited to go along with the perspective of the perpetrator or with the victim, which provoke very different problems for an ethical attitude.

### 6.1 Despentés’ *Baise-moi*: Focalization Reducing Voyeurism and Sadism

In the case of Virginie Despentes’ *Baise-moi*, the rape scene is focalized by a rape victim who is simultaneously watching another girl being raped. In chapter 2 it was discussed how this scene openly showed the perpetrators’ demeaning language and referred to violent and sexual acts without making them sound too excruciating. It was also discussed how much the reaction of focalizer-protagonist Manu differed from the reaction of the other girl being raped, Karla. Through the perspective of Manu, Karla was shown as a suffering victim: in her



desperate protest she received most of the violent beatings of the rapists, while Manu tried to distance herself from the scene as much as possible.

While the perpetrators' remarks are rather pornographic and Manu could be said to be a voyeur to Karla's rape, explicitness in this case does not seem particularly conducive to a sadistic and voyeuristic reader response. The pornographic quality of the scene is reduced because we receive the focalization of victim Manu, who is constantly worried about Karla and about her own survival. As Tanner has remarked in the case of Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place*, the fact that the rape victim in that novel looks at her rapists means that "the body that is dissected by that gaze is the body of the violator" while "the victim ceases to be an erotic object subjected to the control of the reader's gaze" (29). In *Baise-moi*, rape victim Manu not only gazes at the perpetrators but also at Karla. However, the potential desire of wanting to be a voyeur to Karla's rape is obstructed to the extent that the rape is not described by Manu through references or allusions to sexual acts, but through an explicit focus on her pain, her crying and bleeding. The reader who has a voyeuristic desire to watch a rape is thus confronted with all its unsavory aspects. Since Manu is not revelling in Karla's pain, but extremely concerned about it, the description of Karla's suffering would invite readers to empathize with Karla and/or with Manu. For the anonymous perpetrators, there is no sympathy and no empathy invoked. We receive their words but not their perspective. Moreover, the rapists are depicted as disgusting, ugly nobodies. Significantly, at the beginning they are only identified by their footwear, their 'mean mugs' apparently being indistinguishable.

## 6.2 An Atypical Victim's Perspective

Manu's reaction to the rape is rather stoic and is interesting in its atypicality. In all of the other novels listed in Appendix 1, rape is portrayed as an excruciating, traumatic event, filling the victim with shame. Manu is not ashamed; after the rape she is nauseous and

realizes how much she is hurting, but most of all she is glad to have survived it. She tells Karla, who is asking her why she did not protest more, that it could have been much worse, that “c’est jamais qu’un coup de queue” (51) (“all they did was fuck us,” 52). Through this response, Manu immediately distances herself from the rape, bringing the reader in the confusing position of perhaps wanting to feel sorry for her, but not being allowed to. This is interesting given Sontag’s warnings about the delight people can take in their pitying responses to represented suffering. Manu does not want anyone’s pity, and while it could be argued that her stoicism is a mere defense mechanism, her atypical response can challenge readers to revise their own typical conceptions of and responses to rape victims. Manu further explains to Karla that she has no intent of letting these pathetic rapists get to her: “C’est comme une voiture que tu gares dans une cité, tu laisses pas des trucs de valeur à l’intérieur parce que tu peux pas empêcher qu’elle soit forcée. Ma chatte, je peux pas empêcher les connards d’y rentrer et j’y ai rien laissé de précieux...” (51).<sup>21</sup> Manu thinks of rape as violent, unwanted sex, a crime that unfortunately cannot be prevented but the impact of which can be diminished by not conforming to normative notions of rape as shameful for the victim. This provides her with a certain empowerment and challenges notions of (the inevitability of) victimhood in the case of rape, thus possibly unsettling readers. Simultaneously, however, it indicates the extent of her fatalism, the fact that she expects the worst out of life. Manu derives her strength from having little left to lose.

Seeing that Karla is incredibly upset by her words, Manu tries to appease her with yet another fatalistic remark, this time one without any strength: “C’est juste des trucs qui arrivent... On est jamais que des filles” (52).<sup>22</sup> Here we see a passiveness that counters the potential strength of Manu’s atypical response - a passiveness that she will later reverse

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<sup>21</sup> “It’s like a car that you park in the projects, you don’t leave anything valuable in it ‘cause you can’t keep it from being broken into. I can’t keep assholes from getting into my pussy, so I haven’t left anything valuable there...” (52).

<sup>22</sup> “It’s just that things happen...when you’re a girl” (52).

radically. Manu's stoic attitude can thus be interpreted both as positive or as negative by readers, either as necessary defense mechanism or as too radically closing off from the world. That in either case Manu's attitude is more realistic and beneficial within the narrative world of *Baise-moi* than Karla's is attested to by the fact that she survives, while Karla is mentally and physically broken by the rape, probably dying after being run over by the rapists' car – we never find out for sure, because Manu does not look back. The contrast between Manu's and Karla's fate could then be said to demonstrate the damaging effect of rape myths that dictate that rape victims are to blame themselves (especially if they do not protest 'enough'). Manu does not 'let' herself get damaged. Consequently, there is hardly any sadistic pleasure to be gained for the rapists as well as for those who read about her rape.

To recall Eagleton, frustration regarding one's own passivity in watching another's suffering can lead to sadism, but Manu's own passive stoicism obstructs such a response. However, this also means that it can be difficult to empathize with her. This effect is confirmed by the results from a reader response study I conducted, asking respondents about their feelings and thoughts on this scene as well as the rape scenes in Germain, Naylor and Oates: readers generally reported that they had difficulties empathizing with Manu and that they felt distance toward this rape scene (see Appendix 2). Compared to the fragment by Naylor, readers experienced significantly less engagement with the scene and less empathy with the victim.<sup>23</sup> Of course, empathy with the rape victim is not necessarily an ethical response. As LaCapra's notions regarding 'empathic unsettlement' indicated, it is precisely when readers are confronted with the limits of empathy that critical ethical questions can be raised about our responsibility to the other.

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<sup>23</sup> Results of this study, conducted with Michelle Hilscher and Gerald Cupchik at the University of Toronto in the Fall of 2009, will be presented at the IGEL conference in July 2010 (Utrecht). See Appendix 2 for more details on the study and its most important results.

### 6.3 Contextualizing the Rape Scene: Social Dynamics

Indeed, *Baise-moi* as a whole poses interesting problems for an ethical reading in the way it presents readers with violence and sexuality. Knowing more about Manu's background, about the thematization of violent transgression, and comparing and contrasting the rape scene to the many other sex scenes and sexual references in the novel will help to further discover ethical questions the novel raises. Moreover, the context of the novel as a whole helps to better understand Manu's reaction as well as the impact of the rape scene on the reader. The rape scene happens relatively early on in the novel, after readers have gotten acquainted with both of the protagonists, Manu and Nadine, separately, but before these two girls have met. The rape appears to be presented as one of the final straws before Manu shakes off her passive attitude and starts taking revenge on society.

Given the fact that Manu and Nadine are practically the only focalizers within the novel, the reader is asked to go along with their perspective on things. That perspective is bleak and brutal. Moreover, the two are constantly behaving asocially. Both live in the *banlieues*, between drug dealers and junkies, prostitutes and criminals. Manu comes from the Algerian community, and knows how to keep her head down in order to avoid trouble, with the police and with criminals. Both girls make some money by selling sex: Manu has done a few extreme porn movies, Nadine has a few well-paying clients. When their paths cross they are utterly repulsed by the world. Manu's brother has been killed by the police and a close friend of hers has been severely beaten by drug dealers. Nadine's lover, also a drug dealer, has been shot by a pharmacist. Both girls have recently started adding destruction to self-destruction: Nadine has strangled her roommate, while Manu shortly after the rape decided to steal a rifle and has killed a police-officer and a drug dealer.

Manu and Nadine are thus striking back at society, but their violence is not simply revenge-motivated. It is random, vulgar and hedonistic: they kill partly for kicks, partly to get

rid of whom they find annoying, and partly for money. From the moment that Nadine and Manu are starting to behave actively, the combination of their focalization, the fact that by now we have gotten to know them, the awful events in particularly Manu's life, and their current powerful predatory behaviour, does appear to encourage readers to sadistically cheer them on in their immoral actions.

#### 6.4 Ambiguities Triggering Ethical Reflection

However, there is a certain critical distance invoked toward these protagonists. The position of the narrator or narrative instance toward Manu and Nadine is unclear, mainly because Desportes makes extensive use of free indirect discourse, but it does not appear to be uncritically positive. The thoughts of the protagonists are often represented in a way that makes narrative commentary seep through subtly. For example, when Manu reacts resigned when a communist friend is pushing her to protest against the way that the police has treated an Arab friend, it is indicated that: "L'enfant ne se rend pas compte de ça, combien la révolution est trop loin de son trou pour l'intéresser. De plus, il faut pour s'exalter comme il le fait un sens de la sublimation et du respect de soi qui font défaut à Manu" (14).<sup>24</sup> The designation 'l'enfant' is typical for Manu's addressing of this friend, just as the words 'de plus' indicate character speech, however, the latter part of the sentence, characterizing Manu as lacking in self-respect and having no 'sense of sublimation' seem to belong to a narrative instance, given their more eloquent phrasing and using not simply the third person but Manu's name. If we do attribute these words to a narrator, then we can discern a critical distance of the narrator toward the character. This ambiguity is used more often in the novel, providing the reader with some critical distance from Manu and Nadine, a distance that can help to test out as well as question their norms.

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<sup>24</sup> "The kid doesn't get it, how the revolution is too far away from her hole to really interest her. Anyway, to get carried away like him you need a sense of sublimation and self-respect that Manu just doesn't have" (14).

This slight critical distance is not the only thing complicating easy interpretations of the morality of the novel and thus potentially triggering readers to ethically reflect. The ambiguity is also discernable in Manu's and Nadine's 'own' thoughts and remarks. They indeed seem to be aware of their lack of self-esteem and of the fatalistic aspects of their nihilism and misanthropy. This is particularly pronounced when they meet the beautiful Fatima, a tough but just girl who advises them not to give up on life so easily, but to try to escape to another country. While they clearly respect Fatima, they do not believe for one minute that she or they can escape a fate of either being incarcerated or shot. Apologetically, Nadine tries to explain how their attitude differs from that of Fatima: "Nous, on est plus dans le mauvais goût pour le mauvais goût, tu vois" (167).<sup>25</sup> For Manu and Nadine, bad taste for bad taste's sake is all that is left when one has been down in the dirt for so long. Growing up in the *banlieues* and taking all relations between people to be modelled after the theories of Nietzsche and the fantasies of De Sade, they simply cannot afford to care about anyone or anything. In this narrative world, the only way to empowerment is subjugating those around you. By stealing the rifle, Manu suddenly found herself 'on the right side of the gun' as she says to Fatima: "c'est toujours au premier qui dégomme l'autre. Sauf que là on est passées du bon côté du gun. La différence est considérable" (160).<sup>26</sup>

Manu and Nadine's attitudes toward their own weaknesses and choices are ambiguous: on the one hand they make themselves sick, on the other hand they take pleasure from the sickness and debauchery. They feel like everyone is sick, society is sick, and the only response they can think of is pushing moral boundaries to the extreme. Shortly after shooting a child in a pâtisserie, their most extreme crime, Manu remarks, rather ironically in this context, that if only other people were better she could have been the epitome of kindness: "À la base, je suis du style à faire passer Mère Teresa pour une grosse salope. Mais

<sup>25</sup> "We're into bad taste just for the sake of it, you see" (180).

<sup>26</sup> "it's still about who can lay into the other first. Except now you're on the right side of the gun. Makes a big difference" (172).

ces gens sont trop faibles, ils sont nuisibles, y a pas moyen de leur faire du bien” (146).<sup>27</sup> That Manu is not simply being sarcastic here is attested to by the fact that every time Manu and Nadine meet someone who is kind to them and whom they do like, like Fatima, their hearts seem to melt completely; they are indeed willing to sacrifice themselves either for good or for evil.

### 6.5 Literary Transgression and its Critique

Manu and Nadine’s morality of excess and transgression complies with the motto by Dostoevsky that Despentès gives her novel: “Et parce que tu es tiède, et que tu n’es ni chaud ni froid, je te vomirais par ma bouche” (7). In its extremity and given the fact that it is a desperate response by disturbed girls to being constantly either pushed down or ignored, Manu and Nadine’s murderous all-or-nothing attitude confronts the reader with potential consequences of actions of subjugation and indifference. In their complete transformation from victims to victimizers, Manu and Nadine are a nightmare come to life for everyone who has ever looked down on another human being. On the right side of the gun, they are willing to risk everything, taking sadistic pleasure in their sudden power.

From their abjection and transgression, Manu and Nadine feel they can derive a new sort of sanctity. As Nadine ponders about her work as a prostitute: “Il y a de l’orgueil à se mettre aussi bas, un héroïsme dans la déchéance” (56).<sup>28</sup> In this respect, Despentès joins the (markedly French) literary tradition which glamorizes excess and transgression, from De Sade to Baudelaire, to Genet and Bataille.<sup>29</sup> Significantly, however, Despentès also criticizes this literary tradition and the general tendency to glamorize violence. This critique is already visible early on in the novel, for example in the description of Manu’s neighborhood: “ici le

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<sup>27</sup> “Down deep I could make Mother Teresa look like a big slut. But these people are too weak, harmful, no way to do them any good” (159).

<sup>28</sup> “there’s a kind of pride in stooping so low, a heroism in the degeneracy” (57).

<sup>29</sup> The idea that breaking taboos corresponds to a mystical, religious experience has been extensively argued by Bataille in *l’Érotisme*. See also Kristeva’s *Powers of Horror* and Mary Douglas’ *Purity and Danger* on the sacred aspects of taboo’s.

fétide n'a aucune connotation romanesque" (27).<sup>30</sup> Dirt and debauchery can have a romantic connotation, but not here. This is a constant idea in the novel: violence and abjection can be glamorized within fantasy, film, music or literature, or as long as one is 'on the right side of the gun' – but as soon as the point is hit where the reality of pain and death strikes it is not quite so romantic anymore.

Despentes points to the reality of physical pain – ironically, of course, while only presenting us with a novel – precisely by evoking media depictions of violence and the girls' failing attempts to live up to that 'ideal': Manu remarks multiple times that their killings do not quite live up to the movie versions she knows. The contrast between romanticized pain and actual pain is also played out through the fact that Manu and Nadine show excessive swagger but never manage to become completely 'cold': there is real intimacy between the two and Nadine is completely heartbroken after Manu's death.

Most demonstrative of a critique of the literary tradition of transgression is a scene late in the novel with an architect. Manu and Nadine want to rob this architect and donate the money to Fatima. In his house, Nadine is immediately impressed by his good looks and good taste, feeling inferior herself. This architect is a typical 'hypocritical reader' in Baudelaire's terms; he owns the complete works of De Sade, as well as movies by Godard and Buñuel, thus evidently finding aesthetic and/or erotic pleasure in fictional depictions of sexual transgressiveness. Nadine wants him to long after her, and in order to put on an impressive play for him she talks to him about literature: "J'ai peine à détester un homme qui lit Ellroy dans le texte et possède l'intégrale de Sade" (198).<sup>31</sup> She in fact does not seem quite sure whether she is lying or being genuine in her conversation with this man; she enjoys becoming a fascinating character for him, but she simultaneously detests him for revelling in imagined violence while underestimating the danger of whom he is faced with now.

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<sup>30</sup> "nothing romantic about this kind of rankness" (27).

<sup>31</sup> "I can hardly hate a man who reads Ellroy in the original language and has the complete works of Sade" (214).



The architect appears truly impressed by Nadine, looking at her with desire and fascination and being fully ready to trust her. Despite the fact that Nadine has erotic feelings for him, she decides to kill him. Once the architect realizes that he will be murdered, his attitude changes completely: he is no longer charmed and charming, he is begging and crying. After he dies he is compared to a garbage bag, “un sac à ordures” (204), indicative of the perverse fantasies that were playing behind his handsome face. Later, Nadine remarks:

Ce mec est vraiment ma victime préférée. ... Ça aime les auteurs déjantés, les artistes maudits et les putes dégénérées... Ça apprécie la décadence classée par ordre alphabétique. Bon spectateur, en bonne santé. Ça sait apprécier le génie chez les autres, de loin quoi. Avec modération, surtout. Pas d'insomnie, bonne conscience en toutes occasions. C'est moral ce qu'on a fait chez lui.” (210)<sup>32</sup>

Here Nadine poignantly characterizes the problem in taking pleasure from artful representations of suffering and violence hinted at by Sontag: one is a spectator to suffering without having to worry about one's conscience. Precisely because authors like De Sade and filmmakers like Buñuel are canonized as high art, indulging in their representations is considered legitimate – ‘in moderation,’ of course. In the terms of Dostoevsky Despentès invokes, this attitude of aesthetic distance towards suffering would be ‘neither hot nor cold’ but lukewarm.

Through the way the novel represents Nadine's murder of the architect, who is forced to confront the reality of suffering, we ourselves are confronted with the problems – and our possible hypocritical pleasure – in reading (artful) depictions of (sexual) violence. In this ironic fashion, the novel raises the question whether an aesthetic attitude toward depictions of violence is ethically justified. Moreover, it confronts readers with the question why they want

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<sup>32</sup> “This guy's really my favorite kind of victim. ... Loves all the sick writers, accursed artists, degenerate whores... Likes his decadence arranged in alphabetical order. A good spectator, in good health. Knows how to appreciate the genius of others, from afar, you know. And of course with moderation. Sleeps well, conscience always clear. What we did at his place was a moral duty” (228).

to read about violence and suffering: do we truly want to ‘understand’ it better, or is our fascination more voyeuristically inclined? The novel as a whole keeps an interesting ambiguity intact by relying on people’s fascination with depictions of sex and violence while implicitly chastising them for it through confrontational scenes like this one.

These ethical issues are further problematized through the fact that Nadine desires the architect and does appreciate his taste, which makes her killing him a rather sadomasochistic act itself. In fact, she mainly resents him for being ‘better’ (handsome, rich, educated) than herself. She resents him for having the luxury of being a spectator, but if she would have had the chance to be in such a position she would have taken it. Thus, while Nadine’s action challenges the hypocrisy of the architect, the representation of her motives exposes her own hypocrisy, giving the reader no moral ground within the novel to hold on to.

#### 6.6 Contrasts in Sexual Scenes Challenging Normative Notions

That Nadine does enjoy being a spectator of suffering herself is demonstrated from the first pages onwards: the novel opens with Nadine watching a porn movie in which humiliation and rape figure. Significantly, the language used by the rapist in the porn movie is very similar to the language used by Manu’s rapists: “Tu verras, tu finiras par l’aimer ma queue, elles finissent toutes par l’aimer” (8) versus “Alors, ma puce, qu’est-ce que t’en dis de ma queue? T’as pas l’air de détester ça, hein?” (48). Painfully ironic in this respect is the fact that Manu herself acted in porn movies. This apparent similarity may appear to take away from the seriousness of the rape scene, if one could argue that the rape scene becomes just one of the many sex scenes. However, a stronger case is to be made for the interpretation that it is exactly the contrast between contexts that Desportes is demonstrating, showing the difference between pornography and rape. The same kind of sentence carries different connotations in fantasy and in reality and the rape scene is crucial in bringing this to the fore. While the language of the perpetrators in the scene Nadine masturbates to is similar to the language used

in the ‘actual’ rape scene, the fact that we are given Manu’s perspective during the ‘actual’ rape scene, and she is clearly not enjoying it, minimizes the pornographic load of that scene. Moreover, by showing a porn actrice as a rape victim, the rape myth that women who are ‘easy’ cannot be raped is exposed, the fact that a girl is sexually active does not mean she forsakes the right of choosing her own partners.

The contrast between the representation of rape in the porn scene that Nadine watches and the representation of Manu’s rape thus constitutes a contrast between fantasy and reality in a similar fashion to the idealization of violence in fiction and the ‘actuality’ of violence for Manu and Nadine’s victims, like the architect. Apart from the contrast between ‘fictional’ rape and ‘actual’ rape, many different types of sex are contrasted in the novel: voluntary sex purely for pleasure (from masturbation to one night stands), sex in order to forget one’s sorrows, sex in order to make money, sex as a favor for kindness, sadomasochistic play, the rape of Manu and Karla and incest between Fatima and her father (the last form of sex is only mentioned by Fatima).

While Desportes could easily be accused of sensationalism with all these sexual scenes and references in her novel, the contrasts and comparisons between them bring out the fact that sexual acts can have many functions and interpretations, sex is a complicated social interaction. Thereby Desportes challenges normative notions of what sex ‘is supposed to mean’ for women. In the beginning of the novel, Nadine is flabbergasted by her roommate’s Severine’s normative conceptions of sexuality. Severine worries that a boy whom she has slept with will not call her back, thus having taken ‘advantage of her,’ about which Nadine thinks: “Servi d’elle. À croire qu’elle a le con trop raffiné pour qu’on lui fasse du bien avec une queue. Elle profère quant au sexe des inepties du genre avec une déroutante prodigalité, discours complexe et rempli de contradictions non assumées. Pour l’instant, elle répète avec

véhémence ‘qu’elle n’est pas une fille comme ça’ (10).<sup>33</sup> Severine simply conforms to the fear of being ‘une fille comme ça’ without wondering about the power dynamics behind the term. Nadine makes certain not to let her desire be smothered by gender stereotypes. From the very first pages, then, we are confronted with a female protagonist who does not comply with society’s double standard concerning sexuality.

On the one hand, sex is portrayed in the novel as a means to power, something one uses rather pragmatically to acquire money, pleasure, or to establish domination. Deepfelt erotic desire, however, is portrayed as more individual and complex. Most indicative of this is Fatima’s admittance to Manu and Nadine that she actually enjoyed the sex with her father. Incest is an ultimate taboo, and it is significant to notice that Desportes treats it with relative deference: we do not hear any details of the sexual acts, but simply Fatima’s emotional response to what happened to her. Fatima is said to speak in a soft voice, showing the complexity and shame of these events for her. Likewise, after Manu has noticed bruises and scars on Nadine’s back, Nadine tries to tell her about her masochistic preferences, but she cannot. She thinks back to a masochistic experience in which a man had complete control over her body and she had to eventually yield to his wishes and revelled in her subjugation and pain (90). But while she would like to transmit this experience to Manu, she feels too ashamed, she feels it was all too grotesque: “Nadine sourit à la petite en signe d’impuissance, s’excuse: - Pas moyen de te raconter ça” (91).<sup>34</sup> Manu indeed does not understand Nadine’s preference, for her sex should be pleasurable and she sees no pleasure in humiliation and pain. Manu has disconnected sex and shame (as the rape scene also shows), while for Nadine the feeling of shame seems to add to the erotic experience. These kind of contrasts and the depictions of various types of sexuality challenge readers to confront the norms and fantasies

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<sup>33</sup> “Used her. As if her cunt were too high-class to get any good out of a prick. Where sex is concerned, she comes up with a mind-boggling wealth of such stupidities, a complicated treatise full of contradictions she never admits. Right now she just keeps vehemently repeating that she’s ‘not that kind of girl’” (8).

<sup>34</sup> “Nadine smiles at the smaller girl to show her helplessness, excuses herself: ‘Don’t know how to tell you about that’” (99).

influencing their own erotic experience, including the question to what extent erotic fantasies are fed by media portrayals of sexual submission.

### 6.7 Rape and War

In the context of the novel as a whole, the rape scene demonstrates that one might have some control regarding the extent to which one complies with society's normative conceptions, but one cannot control the perceptions of others, nor their violent impulses. The rape scene is one of the last horrible events to happen to Manu before she takes up the gun herself, being fed up with receiving the blows, transforming passive resistance into active resistance. In this respect it is interesting to expose how rape and war are likened, both in Desportes' *Baise-moi* and in Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place*. Naylor's novel includes a paragraph trying to explain the mechanism behind rape: "these young men wouldn't be called upon to thrust a bayonet into an Asian farmer, target a torpedo, scatter their iron seed from a B-52 into the wound of the earth, point a finger to move a nation, or stick a pole into the moon – and they knew it" (169). The rapists in Naylor's novel try to regain a sense of power by gang-raping a girl who crosses 'their street.' Significantly, Desportes also included a paragraph in which Manu likens the rapists to soldiers with a common enemy.

The comparison between rape and war is based on the shared ground of domination. The comparison between the penis and a weapon, be it a gun or a knife, has already been noted, but it is a comparison that deserves attention and criticism. It could be argued that when these sex-workers, these girls from the slums, take the gun in their own hands and start reigning terror – while Manu would have been happy to be a mother Theresa, and Nadine would have enjoyed a life in which her fascination with sex and violence would have stayed purely fictional – it constitutes a wake-up call for readers concerning matters of (sexual) domination. However, we should not forget that Manu and Nadine were already using sexuality to their own benefit. Moreover, easy comparisons between the domination of

violence and sexuality go awry in the broad palet of sexual experiences that Desportes presents. In *Baise-moi*, the penis cannot simply be equated with the gun.

To conclude, the rape scene in *Baise-moi* provokes multifaceted affective responses: the language of the perpetrators is reminiscent of pornographic movies, but since we receive the focalization of the victim and mainly hear about her worries, readers are confronted with the undesirability of rape, hampering an indulgence in a sadistic response. Protagonist Manu's atypical response – the way she distances herself from the world around her and her refusal to feel shame – may make it harder to empathize with her, since she herself does not want pity and she also does not show any pity in her later murderous actions. Receiving her distancing response, the proximity of the reader to the rape scene is reduced. However, given this obstruction of pity and empathy, and given the contrast between Manu's response and Karla's devastation, we may be triggered to reflect on the damaging effect of normative conceptions of what it means to be raped. In *Baise-moi* generally, the combination of immoral events and invoked critical distance provides a fruitful ground for ethical questions.

In having to follow Manu and Nadine's perspective – including the ambiguities in their thinking – readers are asked to confront and challenge their (normative) assumptions concerning sexuality as well as their own possible sadistic indulgence in violence and domination. Similarities and contrasts between sexual scenes evoke the question whether we can separate fantasies of sexual domination from real life rape. Especially the scene with the architect confronts us with the question what it means when we enjoy reading about violence, pain and domination. Desportes challenges us to confront such unpleasant questions, to acknowledge the boundaries between fantasy and fiction as well as the hypocrisy in enjoying the idea of something but not enjoying its reality. Responding to that challenge instead of simply dismissing the novel as violent and pornographic is what constitutes an ethical reading.

## Chapter 7: Voyeuristic Fantasies in the Allusive Mode: The Case of *Disgrace*

While explicit rape depictions make one a bystander to the rape, allusive rape depictions are about not being there, not having access. In the first section, allusive literary accounts of rape were defined by the crucial elision, or veiling, of the sexual act itself: instead of realistically showing the bodies and actions of the victim and perpetrator during the rape scene, the allusive account focuses on other elements, often through the use of metaphors and metonyms. The allusive literary depiction of rape, then, could come across as ‘more gentle’ in allowing the reader distance from the rape scene – a distance in visibility that is distinct from the emotional distance evoked by Manu’s stoic reaction just mentioned. While the rape scene in *Baise-moi* was represented explicitly, Manu’s distanced reaction made it more difficult to empathize. Allusive portrayals, on the other hand, may actually succeed in drawing readers closer in, to the extent that the veiling of the scene evokes curiosity and voyeuristic desires. This is at least what Tanner has argued in the case of Faulkner’s *Sanctuary*: “In *Sanctuary*, the narrative’s withholding of the representation of Popeye’s crime shifts the burden of creation away from Faulkner and toward the reader. The novel’s refusal to write the rape jolts the reader into becoming the author of the crime” (19). Is this dynamic of reader voyeurism more generally a logical effect of the allusive mode? In chapter 3, Coetzee’s *Disgrace* was discussed as a main example of allusiveness. How does *Disgrace* play with the dynamics of proximity and distance, and its implications for voyeurism? What emotions are evoked in the depiction of rape, and how can the rape scene be critically interpreted in the context of the novel as a whole?

### 7.1 Voyeuristic Invitation and Misunderstanding in Coetzee’s *Disgrace*

As indicated in chapter 3, the rape scene in *Disgrace* is inaccessible to the focalizer-protagonist David Lurie. He is not in the same room as his daughter Lucy when she is being raped, which also bars the reader’s access to the rape. While it is happening, Lurie does have

‘a vision’ of the rape, “a vision ... of Lucy struggling with the two in the blue overalls, struggling against them. He writhes, trying to blank it out” (97). Even though he wants to blank it out initially, afterwards he keeps attempting to get Lucy to confess to him what exactly happened to her. For a long time Lucy remains silent, but when she eventually does speak, she gives an incomplete, fragmentary account. Since the reader constantly gets Lurie’s focalization, implicitly being asked to go along with his perspective on things, Lurie functions as a strong focus for empathic feelings. It therefore becomes easier to understand why, when Lucy tells him about the rape, he pushes his own interpretation instead of acknowledging her experience: Lurie has a great need to understand and to show his concern. However, when looked at critically, Lurie is incapable of simply ‘feeling’ for and with his daughter, and does not provide her with the type of listening she needs. In the context of Holocaust-survivor testimonies, Dori Laub has stressed the importance of ‘being heard’ for the victims and the special qualities an adequate listener needs to have: “He or she must listen to and hear the silence. [...] He or she must recognize, acknowledge and address that silence, even if this simply means respect – and knowing how to wait” (58). David Lurie is far from being the perfect listener, first of all because of his impatience to know, an impatience in which he may well resemble most readers of the novel. At the same time, readers would have to acknowledge Lurie’s specific position, with his strong sense of guilt: he cannot put his role as a father who has failed to protect his child aside.

The narrative’s concentration on Lurie would thus confront a critical reader with Lurie’s solipsism, with the fact that he cannot offer us a better understanding of Lucy’s pain. Since we hardly gain any access to Lucy’s experience, our own attempts to sympathize with Lucy are also obstructed, and what we are left with is a desire to fill in the gaps in her story. This stands in contrast with the case of the explicit rape representation in *Baise-moi*, which left very little to the imagination of the reader. In a sense, our voyeuristic tendencies are



fueled by the dynamic between Lucy and Lurie: his constant attempts of trying to get to know more and her constant denying him knowledge. However, the difference needs to be stressed here between wanting to see the rape (a voyeuristic desire) and wanting to understand the pain of the victim (an ethical desire). For Lurie, in his desires of wanting to know more, these two seem intermingled. When going along with Lurie's focalization, the reader, like him, is triggered to imagine what happened to Lucy. Coetzee's choice to not directly show Lucy's rape but to let Lurie's fantasy of the rape stand in for the rape scene is disturbing, since it establishes a form of voyeurism both from Lurie's and the reader's point of view. The scene of Lurie's imagination of his daughter's rape has already been quoted in chapter 3, but since I postponed its interpretation to this chapter, I will give the quote again:

Lucy was frightened, frightened near to death. Her voice choked, she could not breathe, her limbs went numb. *This is not happening*, she said to herself as the men forced her down; *it is just a dream, a nightmare*. While the men, for their part, drank up her fear, revelled in it, did all they could to hurt her, to menace her, to heighten her terror. *Call your dogs!* they said to her. *Go on, call your dogs! No dogs? Then let us show you dogs!*  
 [...] he does understand; 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)

In this fragment we are looking at Lucy, but it is noticeable that this imagination by Lurie is still a partial representation of the rape scene: fear and domination are shown, but no sexual acts. However, in summoning fear and domination, the absence of the sexual act functions as a point of desire, that which is not shown but is implied thus is to be supplemented by the reader's imagination. The reader is invited to imagine, with Lurie, to 'be the men.' This invitation is disconcerting, and the perversity of this voyeuristic invitation can be validated in two ways.

The first validation would rely on the initial response of evoked voyeurism. The allusive portrayal Coetzee uses, including Lurie's fantasy of the rape, can be criticized for inviting readers to imagine 'being the men,' continuing processes of domination. Why does Lurie need to imagine the rape scene in order to better understand Lucy's pain? And if his imagination cannot take him as far as 'being the woman,' as he later admits, how can readers be expected to imagine what it is like to be a female rape victim? Will the elision of the rape scene not trigger them as well to imagine it solely from a perpetrator's perspective? In that case the reader, aligned simultaneously with perpetrator and spectator, would be implicated in the violation. As Tanner warned: "Insofar as the reader's imagination manipulates the victim's body as a purely textual entity, the reality of pain and the vulnerability of that body may be obscured by the participation of a reading subject who perpetuates the dynamics of violation" (10). It is questionable, however, whether *Disgrace* can really be accused of inviting such a reading. First of all, the victim, Lucy, is very present in the story, precisely in her refusal to let Lurie in. Moreover, the novel as a whole questions 'the dynamics of violation,' as will be demonstrated later on.

Consequently, a second validation would go beyond the initial response to this short passage, considering it on a metalevel and taking into account the context of the novel as a whole. On a metalevel, voyeurism is not evoked in *Disgrace* as an end in itself, but precisely to confront readers with the correspondence between their own voyeuristic tendencies and those of Lurie. As Lucy Valerie Graham has stated, Lurie's question whether he has it in him to be the woman "suggests that ethical responsiveness depends on experiencing the narrative differently – not from the viewpoint of perpetrator or voyeur, but from the position of weakness and suffering" (444). I would agree with Graham that the reader of *Disgrace* has to take "the responsibility for such an imagining" (444). However, to me, this 'responsibility' does not simply mean trying to imagine rape from the viewpoint of the victim, but also taking

responsibility for the failures, the perversities, in our imagination when we think of ‘being the men’ as well as ‘being the woman’: our own weaknesses when we are faced with (imagining) the other’s suffering. In *Disgrace*, Coetzee confronts his readers with these weaknesses by having them empathize with Lurie, who himself struggles with empathy. Lucy keeps telling him that he does not, that he cannot understand her experience (e.g. 157). *Disgrace* simultaneously evokes and obstructs a desire to know more about Lucy’s rape, ‘forcing’ readers to use their imagination, but precisely by doing so addressing the limits of using one’s imagination in understanding the suffering of the other. The novel thus functions as an implicit inquisitor, asking us whether and why we want to know about Lucy’s suffering, and to what extent this wanting to know is intermingled with wanting to see.

At the same time, the novel as a whole brings out the importance of being attentive to the other’s suffering. Lurie, namely, goes through a process of acquiring heightening awareness of his own confused relation to female sexuality.<sup>35</sup> His admittance that he can only truly imagine what it would be like to rape a woman, but not what it would be like to ‘be the woman’ is a crucial moment in his struggle to become a more empathic human being. The voyeurism, in fact, ends at the moment that it is realized to its fullest, through this admittance of not being able to understand. Until the very end of the novel, Lurie remains unable to understand the female experience of rape (and sexuality in general), but he has gained much in admitting this inability to understand, since he no longer uses it as an excuse to disregard others’ feelings.

## 7.2 ‘The Problem of Sex’: Lurie’s Self-Deception

That Lurie generally has a problem with sexuality is clear from the first sentence of *Disgrace*: “For a man of his age, fifty-two, divorced, he has, to his mind, solved the problem of sex rather well” (1). Lurie is presented as someone who is a slave to his erotic desires but

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<sup>35</sup> Cf. Mike Marais’ reading, in which he argues that what is often overlooked in critics’ discussions of *Disgrace* is that “Coetzee tasks his protagonist with the ethical obligation of developing a sympathetic imagination” (76).

feels that these desires have only become embarrassing with old age. Throughout the novel, his desires for younger girls are portrayed as problematic, partly expressed through the fact that these desires are often referred to in terms of incest. Thinking of the prostitute Soraya, for example, Lurie ponders: “Technically he is old enough to be her father; but then, technically, one can be a father at twelve” (1). Lurie deceives himself in thinking that there is something more going on between him and Soraya than a business transaction; he projects his own feelings on her until she explicitly tells him to stop harassing her when he calls her up in her own home (10).

When Lurie starts sleeping with his young black student Melanie, the incestuous connotations become more pronounced. Melanie looks young – “Her hips are as slim as a twelve-year-old’s” (19) – and behaves passive. Lurie seduces the girl and at one point practically rapes her, when he enters her apartment and “she is too surprised to resist the intruder who thrusts himself upon her” (24). The sex they have is described, from Lurie’s viewpoint, as “[n]ot rape, not quite that, but undesired nevertheless, undesired to the core” (25). Several days after Lurie has forced himself upon Melanie, she comes knocking on his door, looking for a place to spend the night. Lurie “makes up a bed for her in his daughter’s old room” (26) and starts thinking of Melanie as a daughter: “Almost he says, ‘Tell Daddy what is wrong’” (26). In that context, it is rather shocking to read that Lurie “makes love to her one more time, on the bed in his daughter’s room,” exacerbated through the remark that “[I]f he does not sense in her a fully sexual appetite, that is only because she is still young” (29). He even has the audacity to think that “there might, despite all, be a future” for him and Melanie (29). Even though Coetzee only presents Lurie’s point of view, the extent to which Lurie is rationalizing his sexual exploits to himself and his blindness to the other’s feelings come out blatantly obvious in the encounters with Soraya and Melanie.

### 7.3 Dynamics of Sexual Exploitation

Times have changed for Lurie, he can no longer get away with his philandering habits, as it turns out when Melanie charges him with harassment. In his defense – or ‘confession,’ in his own words – to the committee investigating the charges Lurie starts out by using the same type of Romantic discourse he used to seduce Melanie: “Eros entered,” “I became a servant of Eros” (52). A woman in the committee refuses to accept this type of ‘confession’: “Yes, he says, he is guilty; but when we try to get specificity, all of a sudden it is not abuse of a young woman he is confessing to, just an impulse he could not resist, with no mention of the pain he has caused, no mention of the long history of exploitation of which this is part” (53). This woman’s reference to ‘the history of exploitation’ partly explains why this committee in the novel has been compared by various critics to the South-African Truth and Reconciliation Committee (e.g. Poyner; Buikema). Indeed, the old white professor Lurie could be said to stand allegorically for the system of colonization and oppression, given the way he has exploited this young black student and now has to answer for it. Such an allegorical reading exposes the social relevance of the novel and Coetzee’s centrality in public debates on South-Africa.

Such a reading, however, is rather reductionistic. As Attridge has emphasized, allegorical readings do not do justice to the complexity of Coetzee’s work: “If Coetzee’s novels and memoirs exemplify anything, it is the value (but also the risk) of openness to the moment and to the future, of the perhaps and the wherever. Allegory, one might say, deals with the already known, whereas literature opens a space for the other” (*Ethics* 64). According to Attridge, readers should recognize the way that Coetzee ‘stages’ allegorical elements, there are always elements in his work which unsettle a complete allegorical interpretation (*Ethics* 60-64). In the case of *Disgrace*, an allegorical reading is upset for example through the fact that Lurie himself is a ‘victim’ of capitalist reorganizations within

the university which have nothing to do with race: he is forced to teach courses on ‘Communication,’ and is only allowed to teach one literary course (Romanticism). The ‘new order’ is thus not simply black finally taking revenge on white; any ‘model’ trying to deduce from the novel what Coetzee’s plans for South-Africa are fails when taking all the elements into account.<sup>36</sup> Lurie himself does not display any interest in racial politics, his main interest is in dealing with his sexual desire.

In a sense, *Disgrace* could be said to express how sexual exploitation and racial politics cannot be thought separately in the South-African context (e.g. Poyner).<sup>37</sup> A completely allegorical reading, however, in which rape stands for colonial exploitation, instead of expressing both instances of abuse simultaneously, would overlook the specifics and socio-political implications of sexual exploitation, as if rape in itself were a purely personal – and thus irrelevant – matter, only useful as a metaphor. A reading more attentive to the suffering that is actually present in the text (a ‘literal reading’ as Attridge calls it, *Ethics* 60) would acknowledge instead the social consequences of sexual abuse on a microlevel, most prominently visible as the rupture in the relationship between Lurie and Lucy. Following such a reading, we can find societal relevance in the way *Disgrace* portrays the dynamics of being confronted with the other’s experience, since our ethical relation to the other forms the basis of interactions within the wider society.

During the novel, Lurie is confronted with the fact that he cannot simply use others to his own benefit. While he initially seems to be able to flee from the ‘disgrace’ of Melanie’s accusations, he cannot flee his own troubled conceptions concerning sexuality. These come

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<sup>36</sup> As Attridge keeps emphasizing in his discussion of *Disgrace*, Coetzee does not offer “a model for the new South Africa” (190). Attridge concludes his discussion of the novel by stating that “If there is a political challenge staged in this novel ... it is to find a way of building a new, just state that is not founded on the elimination of unpredictability, singularity, excess” (191).

<sup>37</sup> The rape of a white woman by black men in post-apartheid South-Africa is highly politicized and Coetzee’s portrayal of Lucy’s reaction has been heavily criticized. Lucy’s decision not to press charges and to even bear the child of the rapists has been praised by Sue Kossew as an escape from the downward spiral of retribution, but for example Elleke Boehmer has argued that in this ‘sacrifice,’ Lucy becomes a scapegoat, reinvoking stereotypes of female passivity and martyrdom (144-45).

back with a vengeance in his confrontation with his own daughter's rape. With Melanie, Lurie ignored the wider context of racial politics as well as the simple fact of abuse, but with Lucy, he is the one referring to a "history of wrong" speaking through the black rapists (156), as well as pushing Lucy to speak the word 'rape' and press charges. Simultaneously, Lurie's incestuous imagination of his daughter's rape stresses the similarity between the rape of Melanie and the rape of Lucy.<sup>38</sup> Thus a network of associations between incestuous connotations of Lurie's affair with Melanie and the rape of his own daughter arises, connotations that all point to Lurie's own complicity in sexual violation. This point is stressed when Lucy herself accuses Lurie, very simply, of being a man: "Maybe, for men, hating the woman makes sex more exciting. You are a man, you ought to know. When you have sex with someone strange – when you trap her, hold her down, get her under you, put all your weight on her – isn't it a bit like killing?" (158). *Disgrace* here raises important questions about the intrinsic exploitative nature of sexual intercourse which is not fully desired by both partners. Lucy broadens Lurie's definition of 'rape,' thus confronting him with his own misbehaviour toward Melanie.

#### 7.4 The Unknowable Other and Ethical Responsibility

It could be deemed problematic that readers do not receive a full account by Lucy concerning her experiences, and that Melanie's account remains almost completely absent. We find out very little about Melanie, not even if it was really Melanie herself who decided to press charges or her father. Toward the end of the novel, Lurie, trying to redeem himself, asks for forgiveness, but he does not ask it of Melanie, he asks it of her father (171). Once again, however, we should not confuse 'the meaning' of the novel with what characters do, should separate Lurie from Coetzee. By keeping the focalization with Lurie to the end, and leaving out Lucy's and Melanie's story, Coetzee suggests exactly that for a male protagonist it is

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<sup>38</sup> The correspondence between the two rapes has also been stressed by Marais and by Graham.

ultimately impossible to find out how sexual abuse is experienced from a female point of view. Lurie, when visiting Melanie's father, encounters Melanie's younger sister Desiree and immediately feels a sexual desire toward her (164). However, by now he knows better than to act on it, and in that difference between impulse and action finally arises a more adult responsibility. This corresponds to Lurie's final 'job' as a man who pays the last respects to the corpses of stray dogs, making sure they are properly burned. Throughout the novel, dogs function as a metaphor for impulsive behaviour, particularly sexual impulses. Lurie repeatedly identifies with dogs, so his decision in the latter part of the novel to help getting rid of unwanted dogs in a 'humane' manner seems to signify that he himself has adjusted to a life in which he can no longer act on his sexual impulses in disregard of others.

The responsibility eventually taken up by Lurie also resonates with the earlier discussed evocation and obstruction of voyeuristic impulses. *Disgrace* urges readers to reassess their own voyeuristic tendencies by confronting them with the impossibility of knowing the suffering of the other. In this double movement, Coetzee is empathically unsettling his readers. He both confronts us with our own desire to know, to watch this suffering, to look inside the dark chamber and shine a light on its horrors, and he leaves the darkness intact. We get some flashes of Lucy's experience, but we are not allowed to see the rape in its full horror. If we then, like Lurie himself, start to imagine it, the text castigates us as well as Lurie for this tendency through Lucy's claim that he does not understand and Lurie's eventual realization that indeed he does not understand.

According to Attridge, Coetzee's work has the ability to make an 'ethical demand' on readers through discomforting them, through 'formal innovations' which may not be evident from the type of language Coetzee uses, but which provoke an "innovation in meaning" by avoiding closure (*Ethics* 11). Indeed, critical ethical reflection is encouraged in *Disgrace* through the correspondence between content and form concerning not being able to see nor



understand the pain of the other. Lurie's blindness is only lifted to the extent that he realizes how blind he really is, in matters of personal sexual experience as well as concerning the socio-political dimensions of race and gender. Lurie's blindness confronts us with our own blindness, challenging us to think about how exploitative our relations with others are. *Disgrace*, then, can trigger readers to question oneself as well as the social and discursive structures that legitimate (sexual) domination.

To conclude, the allusive manner in which the rape scene in *Disgrace* is represented creates an obstruction to its visibility which evokes voyeuristic tendencies – similar to what Tanner noticed for Faulkner's *Sanctuary*. However, because of the way *Disgrace* thematizes problems of understanding someone else's experience (particularly the experiences of rape and sexuality) as well as the problematics of sexual exploitation, the reader is implicitly asked to be critical toward these voyeuristic tendencies. That this dynamic of voyeurism which is simultaneously evoked and criticized occurs more often is demonstrated by Ian McEwan's *Black Dogs*, in which the mayor of a town tries to tell a young tourist couple about a woman being raped during WWII. When he tries to tell about the horrific details he is interrupted by the female hotel owner who quickly says: "She had been raped by the Gestapo" (160). The mayor continues to suggest that the Gestapo used dogs to rape this woman ("It wasn't the Gestapo who raped her. They used...", 160). The hotel owner becomes upset, and says: "You added to her shame with this story, this evil story. ...It gave you so much pleasure. More humiliation for Danielle. You couldn't stop talking about it" (161). Reading this scene, the reader is confronted with the invitation to imagine the perverse (the unspoken but suggested idea that Danielle has been raped by dogs), and immediately castigated for it by the hotel owner's remarks, which make it crystal clear that these type of voyeuristic fantasies about rape humiliate women even further.

The dynamics of affective and critical response evoked by allusiveness may be different for other obscured rape scenes, like the ones mentioned in chapter 3 from the novels of Germain and Oates. In the case of Germain's metaphoric rape, allusiveness seemed to function to draw the reader further into the scene, heightening emotional responses of pity and fear, while not directly confronting the reader with the horror and pain of the rape. With that allusive scene, then, it could be expected that empathic responses would be high and critical distance low. However, results of the reader response study mentioned before indicate that readers were more focused on style for the allusive fragments of Germain and Oates than for the explicit fragments by Naylor and Desportes, while finding the allusive fragments more beautiful (see Appendix 2). The female participants experienced more thoughts than feelings when reading the allusive than when reading the explicit fragments, for male participants there was no difference. These relative results suggest that allusive fragments do provoke an attitude of aesthetic distance in readers when compared to explicit fragments. Yet, this does not yet say anything about contrasts within the allusive condition. In the reader response study, the differences in responses to Germain's and Oates' fragment were negligible. Other allusive fragments were not taken as materials, while the responses to Germain and Oates may be different from responses to Coetzee and McEwan, since Germain and Oates focus on the experience of the victim and fully allow the reader to empathize with her, while Coetzee and McEwan precisely question the possibility of empathizing in the case of the traumatic experience of rape. For Coetzee and McEwan, then, the critical distance of readers to the scene may be even more pronounced.

Disregarding their dissimilarities, both Desportes' and Coetzee's novel contains features that push readers to reflect on their emotional responses. In order to evoke this reflection, logically, some distance to the represented events is offered, which may limit readers' emotional engagement with the characters and narrative world. However, following

Sontag's remarks on the ethical problematics of the pitying spectator, this limited emotional engagement may be validated positively. It is interesting to notice that we are not so much talking about 'aesthetic distance' here, since the reflection does not specifically concern the style of the represented events, but is aimed more at the content. This content is of course represented in a certain style, and as argued, style matters, but both in the case of Desportes and of Coetzee, we are not left to ponder about the beauty or ugliness of the representation, but about ethical issues and affective responses. Regarding aesthetic distance, it will be interesting to find out in the following chapter, which addresses the aesthetic mode, using the case of Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, to what extent poetic devices have the effect of distancing the reader and to what extent they can draw the reader further in.

### **Chapter 8: Distance and Proximity in the Aesthetic Mode: The Case of *The Bluest Eye***

As may have become apparent by now, the options for ethical engagement with a novel that depicts rape depend on the play that is staged between making the reader empathize with characters and feeling engaged with the scene on the one hand, and making the reader aware of his own attitude toward characters and events on the other hand. Thus, the play between empathy and unsettlement in LaCapra's terms, or distance and proximity in Tanner's terms. While the explicit mode initially brings readers up close to the scene and the allusive mode initially provides readers with a relatively large distance to the scene, the aesthetic mode cannot simply be said to do either. At first sight, aestheticization would logically be linked to distance in the sense of 'aesthetic distance.' Aesthetic distance, however, is a complex interaction between the work and the recipient, which can easily turn into an experience of proximity. In his discussion of the evolution of the concept of aesthetic distance as 'psychical distance' toward an aesthetic object, Cupchik distinguishes a 'qualitative' level, at which "psychical distance reflects the non-utilitarian attitude that a person must adopt *as a precondition* for an aesthetic episode to occur," and a 'quantitative' level, at which "psychical distance reveals the relative closeness that a person feels toward an aesthetic artifact or event *as a consequence* of interacting with it" (156). The experience of aesthetic distance, in this definition, refers simultaneously to the aesthetic attitude, taken in beforehand, of paying attention to stylistic qualities – which can be likened to Attridge's stress on taking into account the singularity of the work – and to the subsequently empirically experienced closeness or distance to the artwork (the empathic response). In the case of rape representations, a disinterested aesthetic attitude seems difficult to keep up, since being confronted with sex and violence interferes with peaceful contemplation. Thus, as argued before, an ethical reading of an aesthetic rape scene would also take into account affective responses.

Both allusiveness and aesthetic features in the work itself could be expected to ‘help’ to make the scene less confrontational, and thus possibly easier to aesthetically contemplate. The dynamics of distance and proximity evoked by aesthetic or allusive features will differ per specific work. I believe it is more justified to speak of an oscillation between distance and proximity than of a simple dichotomy. As we saw in the last chapter on Coetzee, the fragmentary allusiveness of the rape scene initially worked to draw the reader in and to evoke voyeuristic desires, only to confront the reader with the perversity and empathic failures of the protagonist-focalizer’s attempts to imagine. Thus, paradoxically precisely by offering more distance from it (by not showing it), the distance to the rape scene in *Disgrace* was first decreased, but then the distance between Lurie’s and Lucy’s experience was emphasized, encouraging critical distance to one’s own response.

Concerning the influence of poetic features on distance, in the first section of this thesis it was indicated that Sylvie Germain seemed to use poetic devices to make the scene ‘softer,’ as well as to focus the reader’s attention to the experience of the innocent little victim. The distance of the ‘softness,’ there, would make it easier for readers to engage with the victim. Gloria Naylor, on the other hand, used poetic devices to make the scene, and particularly the pain of the victim, more visceral, thus decreasing the distance to the scene as much as possible. In both the case of Germain and of Naylor, then, but in different ways, aesthetic devices had the effect of increasing engagement instead of critical distance, although of course this would not take into account aesthetic attitudes taken in beforehand, and as the reader response study showed, readers are more likely to be engaged with Naylor’s excerpt than with Germain’s. How do the dynamics of distance and proximity work in the case of the novel that I took as the main example for the aesthetic mode, Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*? To what effect does Morrison employ aesthetic features in the rape scene and how can the rape scene be read within the context of the novel as a whole?

### 8.1 Sympathy for the Perpetrator in Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*

As noticed in the first section, Morrison believes that the best way to engage the reader, to help him look at painful scenes, is by using aestheticization and gaps, by gently leading him by the hand and making him a voyeur to the scene (in Taylor-Guthrie 164-165). For Morrison, the desire to see suffering appears to be a positive thing, since seeing suffering could be a starting point for understanding. Concerning the rape scene in *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison has stated that she wanted the reader to look at the rapist Cholly Breedlove, “and see his love for his daughter and his powerlessness to help her pain” (in Taylor-Guthrie 164). Indeed, reading the rape scene in *The Bluest Eye*, readers are confronted with the fact that the narrator is making them engage and sympathize with the perpetrator. Not only is the scene focalized by Cholly, the rape scene is preceded by narrator commentary in which it is indicated that Cholly is pitiable. I will repeat this commentary, which frames the rape scene:

Had he not been alone in the world since he was thirteen, knowing only a dying old woman who felt responsible for him, but whose age, sex, and interests were so remote from his own, he might have felt a stable connection between himself and the children. As it was, he reacted to them, and his reactions were based on what he felt at the moment. So it was on a Saturday afternoon, in the thin light of spring, he staggered home reeling drunk and saw his daughter in the kitchen. (126-127)

Cholly is thus portrayed as lonely, abandoned as a child, and not completely responsible for his impulsive actions. Since he is not characterized as such by himself but by an unidentified narrative voice, we are invited to accept this portrayal as true. Added to the excuses the narrator provides for him is the fact that he is drunk.

As indicated in chapter 4, the scene continues to present Cholly's mixed thoughts and feelings toward his daughter, eloquently represented by the narrator in free indirect discourse. Cholly is represented to ask questions like “What could his heavy arms and befuddled brain accomplish that would earn him his own respect, that would in turn allow him to accept her

love?” (127). Here we thus have a narrator that looks with pity upon a man who is about to sexually abuse his own daughter, and we are invited to sympathize, to understand that his love for her takes the form of hatred because of his own inferiority complex. In chapter 4, it was indicated how the aesthetic devices Morrison employs in the depiction of the rape scene mainly function to paint an euphemistic picture of rape, particularly through phrases like “the tenderness would not hold,” and “His soul seemed to slip down to his guts and fly out into her” (128). These phrases actually refer to, respectively, the moment when Cholly started to rape his daughter roughly and the moment when he came inside her, but Morrison’s metaphoric replacements make the rape sound less violent and Cholly less of a despicable person.

Arguably even more disturbing is the fact that the choice of words invites the reader to see Pecola in the same erotic terms as Cholly does. When Cholly’s hatred turns into some sort of tender lust, because Pecola takes in a certain posture that reminds Cholly of her mother, that posture is described as: “The creamy toe of her bare foot scratching a velvet leg” (128). The viscerality of the scene had earlier been emphasized through word combinations like “heavy arms” and “befuddled brain” and by describing Cholly’s hatred as something that “slimed in his stomach,” but here the viscerality clearly becomes erotic. On the other hand, as also noticed in chapter 4, when it comes to the act of rape itself the viscerality is diminished. It is noticeable that Morrison thus uses references to the body in a way that is completely opposed to Naylor. While Naylor’s often metonymic references to the bodies of perpetrators and victim also increased the viscerality of the scene, this had the effect of emphasizing the violence of the rape and the pain of the victim. Through the focalization of the victim, with Naylor, the reader was put so close to the scene as to almost experience it as unbearable, as results from the reader response study appear to confirm, since readers felt most engaged with Naylor’s excerpt (as compared to Desportes, Oates’ and Germain’s), but felt no desire at all

to read more of her novel. A handful of participants even stopped reading the fragment of Naylor because it was simply too excruciating for them, showing that the evocation of heavy engagement can backfire. Morrison takes an opposite approach in tenderly trying to draw readers in, making them go along with Cholly's perspective, including the eroticization of his daughter.

## 8.2 Contrasts and Critical Distance

The evoked sympathy for the perpetrator seems to be rather immoral, especially given the way that it is accomplished: luring the reader in through aesthetics. However, it is up to the reader to both respect the attempt to provide understanding for how certain immoral actions come about and to take some critical distance from it. Precisely by having to take in Cholly's perspective and going along with it, readers can become unsettled and start to ethically reflect on the problem to what extent one should try to sympathize with someone whose actions are objectionable. Some possibilities to take in a critical distance are provided for through the contrasts that are portrayed – between past and present, tenderness and violence, and the mother's "easy laughter" versus the daughter's stunned silence (128). The scene as a whole also establishes a contrast, since the tender scene setting of a girl doing the dishes in her home "in the thin light of spring" is disrupted by Cholly's drunken and violent misdemeanor. In chapter 4, the oxymoric metaphor of the 'dry harbor' for Pecola's vagina was noticed as an aesthetic device that brings out the uncanniness of the incestuous rape: the home becoming unhomely, unsafe. Still, during the whole scene Cholly keeps functioning as the focal point, and we learn little to nothing about Pecola's experience. Unlike *Disgrace*, *The Bluest Eye* does not explicitly problematize that fact. Overall, the novel does not provide a lot of critical distance to this specific crime of rape, which readers thus would have to supply themselves. It does, however, use rape as a metaphor to give a critical view on racism and social abjection.



### 8.3 Rape, Racism and Abjection

Indeed, looking at the novel as a whole, associations between rape, racism and abjection figure prominently. Cholly's rape of his own daughter, as well as her response to it, are associated with the humiliation that comes with being black in a racist society. From the beginning of the novel onwards, two important themes are intertwined through the poetic imagery of 'seeds,' flowers, and 'unyielding' land: Pecola's deluded desire for blue eyes, for beauty based on a white ideal, and Pecola's miscarrying her father's child. In the second chapter, Pecola's childhood friend Claudia narrates:

*Quiet as it's kept, there were no marigolds in the fall of 1941. We thought, at the time, that it was because Pecola was having her father's baby that the marigolds did not grow. A little examination and much less melancholy would have proved to us that our seeds were not the only ones that did not grow; nobody's did. ... It never occurred to either of us that the earth itself might have been unyielding. We had dropped our seeds in our own little plot of black dirt just as Pecola's father had dropped his seeds in his own plot of black dirt. Our innocence and faith were no more productive than his lust or despair. (5-6) [italics are Morrison's]*

Through these introductory lines, the novel sets the stage for the story of Pecola's abjection, as well as the abjection of blackness in general, using the metaphor of the unwelcoming barren earth for incest as well as for the hostile society in which the African-American girls Pecola, Claudia and her sister Frieda come to adulthood. The novel emphasizes the ideal of whiteness these girls grow up with through constant allusions to William Elson and William Gray's 'Dick and Jane' stories, as well as through extensive attention to Pecola's and Frieda's adoration of the blond starlet Shirley Temple.<sup>39</sup>

The suggestion made in the longer passage quoted above is that the hegemony of the white ideal denies the possibility of finding beauty in blackness: the possibility for black girls to flower. In this suggestion, *The Bluest Eye* can be seen as a literary equivalent of Fanon's

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<sup>39</sup> The cultural relevance of Morrison's references to the Dick and Jane stories, as well as to Shirley Temple, has been emphasized by multiple scholars; see for example Matus, or Werrlein.

*Black Skin, White Masks*, in which Fanon gives a psychoanalytic account of the inferiority complex suffered by colored individuals in (post)colonial societies. Both Fanon and Morrison deal with the desire among colored people to comply with the hegemonic ideal of their ‘oppressors’: to become white. While making this desire understandable, both Fanon’s essay and Morrison’s novel condemn this desire as a pathological reaction to an oppressive situation. That oppressive situation has been characterized as the ‘colonization of psychic space’ by Oliver, to indicate the way that oppression “operates through a debilitating alienation based on estrangement from the production of value in a hierarchical system of values through which some bodies are valued and others are devalued or abjected” (13). The devaluation, or ‘abjection’ of blackness, is already evident from the black girls’ Shirley Temple obsession, but the narrative amplifies the abjection of blackness by connecting it to the extreme cases of abjection that are rape and incest.

Rape, racism and abjection are also linked in the narrative events preceding the incestuous rape. Namely, preceding the narrator’s commentary of Cholly being ‘alone in the world’ this omniscient narrator (who needs to be distinguished from Claudia) has provided the reader with an extensive background of Cholly, paying specific attention to one event that appeared to have shaped his life in its devastating racial humiliation. When he was a boy, having his first sexual experience with a black girl, Darlene, their intercourse was interrupted by two white men, at the point when Cholly was about to orgasm. The white men threatened him at gunpoint, using the derogative terms ‘nigger’ and ‘coon’ multiple times. As Morrison has noted herself, the term ‘nigger’ “occupies a territory between man and animal and thus withholds specificity even while marking it” (*Playing* 71). This description of the word ‘nigger’ as neither man nor animal (thus ‘monstrously’ unspecified) corresponds to Kristeva’s notion of the abject as that in-between “place where meaning collapses” (*Powers* 2). Simply by using the word ‘nigger,’ the white men are abjectifying Cholly, and this process of

abjection is intensified tremendously in its connection to sexuality. The terrified Cholly can only respond by saying “Sir?” (116), and by trying to obey. In his total helplessness, his incapability to revolt against the white men, Cholly turns his hatred toward Darlene instead of toward them: “He almost wished he could do it – hard, long, and painfully, he hated her so much” (116).

The scene of Darlene and Cholly presents readers with a double rape: Cholly is raping Darlene, unwillingly, but he is also presented as ‘being raped’ by the white men with their flashlight, that is said to have “wormed its way into his guts” (116), their gun, their demeaning words and looks. At the moment when Cholly was supposed to ‘become a man,’ the white men emasculate him, for once and for all. Since his desire has been appropriated by the white men, Cholly’s sexuality will forever be tainted with violence and disgust, illustrating the workings of racism as well as rape as ‘the colonization of psychic space.’

As Fanon has described, the neurotic colonized subject does not resist the oppressor but instead tries to become more like the oppressor oneself. *The Bluest Eye* follows this logic in portraying Cholly as the rapist of his own daughter; a repetition of his traumatic sexual humiliation, but this time with him in the role of oppressor. The rape scene, then, links Pecola and Cholly in their abjection as well as demonstrating – as was noticed earlier in the cases of Naylor and Desportes – the dynamics of rape as a way to regain power for the perpetrators. In this respect, it is relevant to mention – given the fact that Pecola makes Cholly think of his wife – that Cholly’s wife has no respect for him, making this rape an indirect revenge on her.

The combination of the general framework of the novel (stressing the white ideal) and Cholly’s background history suggests that Cholly’s inability to love his daughter in a healthier way is directly linked to his oppression within white society. The rape brings out the extent of this humiliation: if racism makes someone commit the ultimate transgression of incest, then it must truly be horrific. Incestuous rape, in its horror and shock, thus appears to be applied

functionally to abject racism itself. While I want to prevent giving a completely allegorical reading, in the case of *The Bluest Eye* the narrative framing encourages such a reading. Combined with the passage quoted before concerning the marigolds that did not bloom, the remark on the last page of the novel that “This soil is bad for certain kinds of flowers” (164) functions as a metaphoric commentary on racism in American society. Morrison confirms in the “Afterword” that this was indeed what she was going for. She was inspired by a classmate who prayed for blue eyes, by the “racial self-loathing” implicit in a black girl’s desire for blue eyes. Morrison was also reacting to social events of the time: “The reclamation of racial beauty in the sixties stirred these thoughts, made me think about the necessity for the claim. Why, although reviled by others, could his [sic] beauty not be taken for granted within the community?” (167). The racial issue, then, takes precedence over the issue of rape.

#### 8.4 Pecola as the Ultimate Victim

While *The Bluest Eye* thus thematizes socio-critical issues, it appears to leave the reader relatively little freedom in taking in his own ethical perspective. This seems exacerbated by the univocal way in which Pecola is depicted. However, precisely through the extremity in which Pecola and the theme of black abjection are portrayed, the novel can be said to evoke a reaction of protest, protest against the way the singularity of Pecola’s situation is overlooked. While Cholly is portrayed as being powerless apart from being able to use his penis as a weapon against the only person who is lower in the social hierarchy than he is, Pecola is portrayed as having no power at all. Her reaction to the rape is striking: she does not rebel against her family, or against society. Instead, she loses her mind and becomes misguided enough to believe that her prayers for blue eyes have finally worked. Her abjection is so complete that she cannot even imagine a potential power to spring from her own qualities, or from the black community in general. She is certain that what has to change is she herself, and not even her internal attributes, but her external appearance.

Blue eyes on a black girl are an uncanny displacement, and Claudia dramatizes the extent of this abjection by stating the following: “A little black girl yearns for the blue eyes of a little white girl, and the horror at the heart of her yearning is exceeded only by the evil of fulfillment” (205). Immediately after this sentence, Claudia continues to describe Pecola as mad, shunned and excluded, making strange movements and rummaging through the trash, through “all the waste and beauty of the world – which is what she herself was” (205).

Claudia’s choice of imagery brings out the confusion within the discourse of abjection in *The Bluest Eye*: Pecola is waste and she is beauty. Both of these terms overstate, mystify even, what is actually going on with Pecola, denying the specificity of her situation in order to foreground its socially relevant load. Likewise, the perverse alignment between the marigolds and Pecola’s baby, even though it is made by ‘children’ who ‘do not know better,’ endows Pecola’s baby with a possible beauty and hope that is in stark contrast with the way it was conceived.

### 8.5 Metaphors working against Singularity

The narrative strategies in *The Bluest Eye* put the emphasis on the problem of devalued blackness, in accordance with Morrison’s social engagement. The rape scenes with Darlene and Cholly and with Cholly and his daughter are used quite effectively to establish the connection between racism and abjection. However, precisely by strategically using incestuous rape in close association with (internalized) racism, the novel overstates the case of devalued blackness, ultimately collapsing the associations. Of course, the time and place of conception of *The Bluest Eye* need to be taken into account: late ‘60’s America, the time of the civil rights’ movement. In that context, the rape of one girl appears of minor (social) importance, so it could be argued that by giving rape such a central place in her novel, Morrison challenges readers to take cases of individual suffering seriously as part of the broader dynamic of domination and abjection. Rape breeds rape just as racism breeds rape.

In any case, the use of metaphors within the rape scene as well as the use of the rape scene as metaphor in *The Bluest Eye* make it difficult to affectively engage with the singularity of Pecola's experience. And while at first sight the aesthetic depiction of the rape scene may make it easier to engage with Cholly, euphemistic descriptions like Cholly's 'soul' flying out into Pecola rather increase sceptic disgust toward Cholly as well as the narrator of the scene. While the aesthetic devices as employed by Morrison may make the rape scene easier to digest for the reader than for example Naylor's rape scene in *The Women of Brewster Place*, a certain sour taste is left behind – whether Morrison wanted this or not. Yet, this sour taste can precisely provoke readers to critically engage – not just with their own racist impulses, but also with their conceptions of rapists and rape victims. Pecola is so terribly abjected that it becomes painful to look at, and Cholly is excused to such an extent that it evokes protest. In that sense, a high amount of aestheticization and metaphorization when depicting a horrific event can evoke a reaction of critical distance. The rape representation in *The Bluest Eye* may constitute a particularly troublesome case, since we are not allowed a lot of distance from the perpetrator. Still, there are options for reader resistance, which could be said to work precisely because Morrison first engaged us to a great extent.

## Conclusion

This thesis engaged with the debate on representing suffering and the debate on the ethics of reading, combining these two debates to address the issues of both the ethics of representing and of reading suffering and violence. The premise underlying the thesis was that depicting an immoral act is not in itself immoral, it is the way that the immoral act is represented that matters: authors can provide readers with various stylistic depictions of immoral acts, and some literary texts will be more conducive to an ethical response than others. The representation of rape was taken as the more specific case to explore the interaction between textual features and reader response, broadly conceptualizing ‘ethical response’ as an attitude of reflection on one’s responsibility toward the other.

Regarding the ethics of representation, the central question was how rape has been represented and which issues are at stake in representing rape. Relying on earlier scholarly work, I posed the following issues as the most important in representing rape: the absence or representation of the victim’s voice, the evocation or obstruction of voyeuristic and sadistic responses, the misrepresentation or challenging of social power dynamics, and the extent of aestheticization of the rape. All of these issues are expected to influence readers’ ethical response, through influencing their critical and/or empathic engagement. For a model of the ethical potential of literary depictions of suffering and violence it is crucial to explore the choices of authors in presenting the events to the reader. Thus, close readings were given of a small selection of rape representations, bringing out the stylistic and narrative devices employed by authors.

I deduced three types of rape representations from a sample of twenty contemporary literary works which contained a rape scene: explicit, allusive and aesthetic. The explicit mode shows the violent acts in full view, the allusive mode veils the act of rape and instead gives a partial or fragmentary account. Within both of these modes, aesthetic features mediate

the impact of the rape depictions. These three modes typify different ways in which authors are engaging with the ethics of representing rape. Three main author positions with different implications for both the ethics of representation and reading were shown: ‘provoking’ the reader through an explicit, transgressive depiction (Despentes’ *Baise-moi*), ‘frustrating’ the reader through a fragmentary, incomplete showing of the rape scene (Coetzee’s *Disgrace*), and ‘engaging’ the reader through a carefully aestheticized depiction (Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*). While Coetzee is mainly interested in using narrative strategies to ensure that the experience of the other in his fiction is never completely knowable to other characters, Morrison uses aestheticization to make the violence bareable for the reader. Despentes may not seem as concerned with ethical questions as Coetzee and Morrison, yet her explicit way of depicting transgressive behaviour demands a response.

Each of the modes of representation provides a valuable contribution in the attempt to confront readers with the suffering of rape victims and the power dynamics of rape. Within each mode of representation, specific choices of authors regarding for example focalization, characterization of victims and perpetrators, the extent of using ‘the language of domination’ (after Scarry’s ‘language of agency’) and the way in which poetic images were used, were demonstrated to constitute different possibilities for the play between reader and text. Other selections from another corpus of rape representations may bring other problems and ways of representation to the fore, yet I believe that the themes and the stylistic and narrative choices just mentioned are all crucial issues in the representation of rape. While I want to be careful in drawing more general conclusions with regard to what each different mode can do to readers, there are some general tendencies and issues to be discerned.

With regard to the explicit mode, these type of representations can grant a relatively large access to the victim’s experience or to the perpetrator’s drive. Explicitness establishes problems of voyeurism and sadism if told from the perspective of a bystander or from the



perspective of the perpetrator, while leaving the focalization to the victim obstructs voyeuristic and sadistic responses. A victim's perspective on his or her own suffering may be the most conducive to empathy, but as *Baise-moi* demonstrated, this does not necessarily have to be the case. The allusive mode can be particularly effective in conveying the traumatic impact of rape on the victim, as the examples of Germain and Oates demonstrated. On the other hand, the danger of veiling rape is that the denial of access can evoke voyeuristic desires. The aesthetic features which mediate the impact of explicit and allusive depictions can have the opposite effects of absorption or of aesthetic distance. There is a great difference, for example, between the way Gloria Naylor employs aesthetic devices (particularly metonymia) in *The Women of Brewster Place* to increase the viscerality and gruesomeness of the rape scene, and the way Sylvie Germain employs aesthetic devices (particularly metaphors) in *L'Enfant Méduse* to soften the rape scene.

Regarding the effects of the abovementioned particular choices and positions in the ethics of representation on readers I did not simply suggest what the actual effects of the different rape representation could be, but offered a reading attitude that could be beneficial to ethical reflection. For this 'ethics of reading,' Derek Attridge's stress on being attuned to the singularity of the literary text, which in practice means giving close readings, being open to diverse interpretations and taking into account the socio-historical context, was complemented by approaches of scholars who have stressed the importance and hazards of affectively responding to representations of suffering and violence. Both LaCapra and Sontag have pointed to the danger of overly sympathizing with the victim while simultaneously stressing the importance of empathy for ethical reflection. LaCapra's 'empathic unsettlement' offered a fruitful position for both the representation of violence and suffering and for responding to it. LaCapra stressed the value of disruptive narrative features which point to the fact that we can never completely comprehend someone else's traumatic experience, as well

as the value of a portrayal of victims and perpetrators whom we can empathize with, so that we can get closer to some sort of understanding. Likewise, the ethical attitude for someone reading about violence and suffering would be to affectively respond to the experience of others, while acknowledging one's distance to the fictional and actual other.

Following Eagleton and Oliver, I further argued that undesirable affective responses like voyeurism and sadism could still be effective ingredients in an ethical response, as long as readers acknowledge their own undesirable reactions and use these to ask themselves critical questions with regard to their responsibility to others. In that sense, the warning by Theodor Adorno that representing suffering in an artful way can make it entertaining for the audience constitutes an ethical problem needs to be specified and revised. In the case of the representation of sexual violence, we can take the entertaining value to lie either in an indulgence in the stylistics of the representation, or in a voyeuristic or sadistic revelling in the represented events. However, in either case these at first sight unethical responses can function as a starting point for an ethical reading, adding to the richness of the final ethical response.

The ethical way of reading that was proposed would expose the intricacies of the text through close reading and would engage with one's own initial affective response as well as reflect critically on this response by returning to the text as well as by exploring and revising one's own ethical notions. The options for ethical engagement with a novel that depicts rape depend on the play that is staged between making the reader empathize with characters and feeling engaged with the scene on the one hand, and making the reader aware of his own attitude toward characters and events on the other hand. Distance and engagement, which are central to both LaCapra's and Tanner's work, were thus used as key terms in the analyses of Despentès' *Baise-moi*, Coetzee's *Disgrace*, and Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*. These novels typify a certain mode, a certain author position, and in each of them the rape scene fulfills a

crucial function. In different ways, the three modes of representing suffering and violence that these novels stood for – explicit, allusive, and aesthetic – each were shown to establish an oscillation between engagement and distance, but only for readers who are willing both to let themselves get engaged and to be critical.

The explicitness of the rape scene in Desportes' *Baise-moi* was shown to establish a proximity of the reader to the rape scene that could lead to a sadistic response, since the reader is forced to watch up close without being able to act. However, Desportes problematizes the sadistic response in multiple ways: she lets one of the rape victims focalize and while this rape victim is very concerned about the way the rapists are hurting the other girl, she tries to distance herself from what is happening to her as much as possible. She does not feel ashamed and she does not want pity, and her stoic response makes it more difficult for the reader to empathize, which precisely can trigger ethical reflection. The novel furthermore triggers readers to ethically reflect because it thematizes the hypocrisy of enjoying being a spectator to fictional (sexual) violence, and it challenges normative notions of sexuality and victimhood. The elements mentioned for the case of *Baise-moi* are not translatable to the explicit mode generally, but *Baise-moi* does bring out how explicitness, especially when focalized by the victim, does not necessarily have to lead to sadistic reactions. Of course, insofar that it does, it is the ethical responsibility of the reader to deal with this.

Coetzee's *Disgrace* presents readers with an allusive rape scene: the rape of Lurie's daughter Lucy is not seen by him and she only provides him with a few fragments of what happened. Together with Lurie, whose focalization is given throughout the novel, the reader is invited to imagine what happened to Lucy. Since Lurie himself is confronted during the novel with his incapability to understand what happened to his daughter as well as with his own responsibility toward a girl whom he has sexually exploited, readers are also invited to

question their own possible responses of voyeurism. With Lurie, *Disgrace* invites critical readers to take responsibility for failures and perversities in their imagination when they think of ‘being the men’ (the rapists) as well as ‘being the woman’ (the rape victim). The allusive portrayal first functions to veil the scene, denying the reader access, but precisely through this veiling the reader is invited to come and try to have a closer look. In *Disgrace*, that desire to have a closer look is thematized as problematic, while the emphasis on having to attend to the other’s suffering stays intact. Both Despentés’ and Coetzee’s rape representations, then, in different ways, bring out the fruitfulness of the play between proximity and distance in pushing readers to critically reflect on their emotional responses and on ethical questions.

Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* provides a more troublesome case when it comes to an ethical reading of the rape scene, but through offering a problematic rape representation, it could be argued that this novel allows for at least as much ethical reflection as the other two. Morrison portrays the rape scene through the focalization of the perpetrator, she uses metaphors and other stylistic devices to make the incestuous rape scene less horrific and thus arguably tries to have the reader sympathize with the perpetrator. This specific depiction of the rape scene seems to have the function within the novel of stressing the humiliation African-Americans had to endure and to protest against the general devaluation of blackness. However, using the ethical reading response outlined in chapter 5, readers can question the way that the text invites them to take sides with the rapist, focusing instead on the singularity of the rape victim’s experience, which is silenced within the narrative. More generally, the way Morrison uses aesthetic devices to obscure the traumatic experience of the rape victim can both help to be engaged in the scene, to be able to look at it, and – when one realizes the way these aesthetic devices have been employed – to take in a critical distance.

As I hope to have shown, all of the literary texts become more ethically valuable – in the sense of bringing up more ethical questions – when looked at both critically and

empathically: attending to the singular features of the work as well as to one's response to it. It is important, however, to acknowledge the subjective nature of such a reading. Indeed, normative notions of what a rape representation 'should' and 'should not' be like, as well as how one 'should' respond to it, resonated in the background of the thesis. This was already apparent in the foregrounding of specific 'issues' which play a role in the reader's affective and critical response, particularly the idea that it is ethically desirable if readers can empathize with the suffering victim. While the notion of empathizing with the victim was problematized through LaCapra's concept of 'empathic unsettlement,' 'empathic unsettlement' in itself demonstrates a certain normative preference. When speaking of the ethics of reading, it is difficult – perhaps impossible – to escape offering subjective preferences for what type of depictions and what type of reactions are desirable. The question is whether we can and should try to escape these subjective preferences or instead bring them to the fore and put them up for debate. I would take a stand and defend the ethical benefit of being 'empathically unsettled' by rape representations which stage a play between our distance and proximity to either the rape victim, the perpetrator, or both. Putting us in a position we will hopefully not be confronted with in real life, literary rape depictions can help us test out affective responses and give us the necessary distance for reflection on those responses. This may not make us 'better' human beings, but it can help us to more fully conceptualize our response to the suffering other, the other who inflicts suffering, and the otherness within ourselves.

Apart from ethical reflection on one's responsibility and response to others, the novels discussed evoked questions regarding socio-political issues. Since they concern issues of power and gender, which are social constructions, representations of sexual violence cannot be isolated from the social context. Within literary scholarship, attention to the power dynamics of race and gender has been widespread. I believe literary scholars have to be careful when it comes to mingling in politics and calling for literary works which are socially

engaged (as e.g. Thomas Vaessens has done), since this can give those outside academia the impression that literature is only relevant when it engages explicitly with socio-political questions. By focusing on the ethics of reading suffering, I hope to have shown that literature can be particularly relevant in making people engage with ethical questions which underlie more specific socio-political questions. The question of the role of ethics in (reading) literature thus becomes of crucial importance in a time when literature is accused of losing its influence on society.

The relevance of the current study is multifold. First of all, the representation of rape is a problematic issue that deserves more attention, not in the last place because the discussion of rape representations can help to open up debates on conceptions of ‘actual’ rape: how are we constructing concepts of sexual violence and sexual abuse, how do gender stereotypes and rape myth figure in this, and how has literature worked to confirm or challenge these conceptions? These questions were not central to the current enterprise, but the first section, which indicated different ways in which rape has been represented, can help pave the way for this type of discussion. What this study did seek to address directly was the way in which rape representations can confront readers with ethical questions, as well as the personal responsibility readers carry in that confrontation, by taking in an ethical reading attitude. Through focusing on the ethical reading attitude, I hope to have taken a fruitful step out of the debates on the impossibilities of the representation of suffering by stressing the importance of the interaction between the representation and the reader in ethical responsibility. Literary scholars have the added responsibility of bringing out the features of the literary work which are conducive to certain responses and providing readers with informed interpretations. With my personally informed interpretations, I hope to have shown that reading suffering can further ethical debates on our responsibility toward others.

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## Appendix 1) List of Primary Works in Categories

The works listed below all have rape scenes that were explored in order to come to the categories of explicit, allusive and aesthetic. Preference went out to works by well-known and acclaimed novelists. This list only includes novels and stories with a rape scene or multiple rape scenes. Novels in which rape is an issue, but in which the rape scene is not depicted at all, are not included here. Also, not more than two novels by the same author were included, for the sake of diversity. Allusive fragments may be underrepresented given the fact that they are easier looked over in listings and discussions of rape depictions. On the website <http://www.librarything.com/tag/novel,rape> more novels portraying rape can be found.

**Bold**= explicit

Underlined = allusive

Green = aesthetic

1. Brand, D. "Sans Souci" in *Sans Souci* (1988)
2. Coetzee, J.M. *Disgrace* (1999)
3. **Despentes, Virginie. *Baise-Moi* (1993)**
4. **Dickey, James. *Deliverance* (1970)**
5. Germain, Sylvie. *L'Enfant Méduse* (1992)
6. Germain, Sylvie. *Le Livre des Nuits* (1985)
7. Grunberg, Arnon. *Onze Oom* (2008)
8. **Heim, Scott. *Mysterious Skin* (1995)**
9. **Keller, Nora Okja. *Comfort Woman* (1997)**
10. **Lamb, Wally. *She's Come Undone* (1992)**
11. LeRoy, J.T. *The Heart is Deceitful Above all Things* (1999)
12. McEwan, Ian. *Black Dogs* (1992)
13. **Mootoo, Shani. *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996)**
14. Morrison, Toni. *The Bluest Eye* (1970)
15. **Naylor, Gloria. *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982)**
16. Oates, Joyce Carol. *We were the Mulvaneys* (1996)
17. **Oates, Joyce Carol. *Rape, A Love Story* (2003)**
18. **Reve, Gerard. *Een Circusjongen* (1975)**
19. **Voznesenskaya, Julia – *The Women's Decameron* [*Damskij Dekameron*] (1985)**
20. **Queffélec, Yann. *Les Noces Barbares* (1985)**

## Appendix 2) Reader Response Study

This reader response study was conducted at the University of Toronto in the Fall term of 2009, in cooperation with Michelle Hilscher and under the supervision of Gerald Cupchik. 34 undergraduates and graduates (13 male, 21 female) reported their feelings and thoughts on four rape scenes, each being cut down to 2 pages: Germain's *The Medusa Child*, Oates' *We Were the Mulvaney's*, Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place* and Desportes' *Baise-Moi*. The first two of these excerpts were labelled 'allusive,' the second two 'explicit.' Moreover, Germain and Naylor were labelled 'aesthetic,' since these two excerpts used more poetic devices than the other two. 'Allusive' versus 'explicit' was coded as 'DETAIL,' while 'aesthetic' versus 'non-aesthetic' was coded as 'STYLE.'

Allusive/Explicit and Aesthetic/Non-aesthetic were used as independent variables, thus having a supposed effect on the items the participants were asked to rate on a 7-point scale: 1. engagement with the scene, 2. empathy with the victim, 3. experiencing the perpetrator's drive, 4. finding the excerpt stylistically beautiful, 5. concentrating on events or on style, 6. finding the excerpt realistic, 7. experiencing tension, 8. having a more intellectual or a more emotional response, 9. finding the excerpt arousing (versus repulsive), 10. feeling like the author is describing a sexual fantasy, 11. finding that it mattered for their response that they knew the excerpt was fictional, 12. wanting to read more of the novel.

Since both undergraduates and graduates were asked to participate, and students whose first language was English as well as students for which this was not the case, 'education' and 'English as a first language' were taken into account as covariates, thus explaining part of the variance apart from the variance explained by allusiveness versus explicitness and by aestheticization. Gender was taken into account as a between-subjects variable. Using the statistical procedure of the Ancova, the following significant results were found:

- 1. Engagement** STYLE x DETAIL:  
Aesthetic + Explicit (Naylor) was found to be more engaging than Non-aesthetic + Explicit (Despentes),  $F(1, 30) = 7.02, p < .05$ .
- 2. Empathy with Victim** STYLE x DETAIL:  
Respondents displayed a stronger focus on the victim's emotions in Aesthetic + Explicit (Naylor) than in Non-Aesthetic + Explicit (Despentes),  $F(1, 30) = 6.93, p < .05$ .
- 3. Perpetrator's Drive** DETAIL:  
Respondents displayed a stronger focus on the perpetrator's drive in the Explicit than in the Alluded-to condition,  $F(1, 30) = 4.22, p < .05$ .
- 4. Stylistic Beauty** DETAIL:  
Alluded-to was rated as more beautiful than Explicit,  $F(1, 30) = 8.82, p < .01$ .  
STYLE:  
Aesthetic was rated as more beautiful than Non-Aesthetic,  $F(1, 30) = 7.01, p < .05$ .
- 5. Events versus Style** DETAIL:  
Participants were more concentrated on events in the Explicit as compared to the Alluded-to condition,  $F(1, 30) = 5.20, p < .05$ .
- 6. Realism** STYLE x DETAIL:  
Aesthetic + Alluded-to (Germain) was the least realistic combination,  $F(1, 30) = 5.34, p < .03$ .
- 7. Tension** ENGLISH x STYLE  
Tension is elevated for participants whose first language is not English when reading Aesthetic excerpts as compared to the Non-aesthetic ones,  $F(1, 30) = 4.21, p < .05$ .
- 8. Thoughts versus Feelings** GENDER x DETAIL:  
Thoughts were provoked most for Women reading Alluded-to excerpts,  $F(1, 30) = 4.16, p = .05$ .
- 11. Fiction** STYLE x DETAIL:  
Aesthetic + Alluded-to (Germain) is experienced as most 'fictional,'  $F(1, 30) = 4.50, p < .05$ .
- 12. Read More** No significant results, but there was a tendency toward significance which showed that participants were most likely to want to read more of Oates' Non-Aesthetic Alluded-to excerpt and least likely to want to read more of Despentes' Non-Aesthetic Explicit excerpt,  $F(1, 30) = 3.92, p = .057$ .