Affect, Embodiment, and Ethics in Narratives of Sexual Abuse

Dissertation

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate School of The Ohio State University

By
Lindsay A. Martin, M.A.
Graduate Program in English

The Ohio State University
2016

Dissertation Committee:
James Phelan, Advisor
Robyn Warhol, Co-Advisor
Brian McHale
Copyright by
Lindsay A. Martin
2016
Abstract

In the field of rhetorical narrative theory, the study of affect has been oft-acknowledged but remains undervalued. Even as affect studies has burgeoned in other fields, affect in narrative theory continues to be discussed either as a product of ethical judgments or as a purely physical response that scientific studies can measure. *Affect, Embodiment, and Ethics in Narratives of Sexual Abuse* expands the vocabulary for affect in narrative theory, in particular focusing on expanding our awareness of the varying potential relationships between ethical judgments and affective dynamics. Turning to narratives that represent sexual abuse and taboo violation in late-twentieth-century American literature—Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita*, Kathryn Harrison’s memoir *The Kiss*, and Alexander Chee’s *Edinburgh*—I demonstrate that affective dynamics have a variety of possible relationships with the negative ethical judgments encouraged against the abuser figures and/or taboo violators.

Specifically, I argue that in order to attend to affect as it appears in narratives of sexual abuse, we must attend to “embodiment”: the character’s shifting experiences of how closely tied he or she feels mind and body to be. I call this experiential embodiment and chart it by examining representation of characters’ emotions, trauma, and bodily experience. In Chee’s *Edinburgh*, Fee’s paradoxically embodied desire to transcend the body, as a result of his trauma, is a central instability that must be resolved through
resolving his aesthetic and sexual identities. Fee’s embodied experiences encourage similar readerly feelings and ultimately revise the frameworks for ethically judging the abuser figure. That is, whereas Big Eric receives harsh, black-and-white judgments, Fee’s progression leads to a revised, more nuanced and understanding approach that resists similar judgments when he, as an adult, has sex with a teenage student.

In Harrison’s *The Kiss*, I examine the representation of affectless prose to demonstrate that the memoir’s submerging of excessive trauma and deep feelings itself constitutes the ethical injunction to *witness* the author’s and narrator’s traumatic history. This witnessing, however, does not lead to simple identification, in that the narrative refuses access to some of the deepest levels of affect the narration only hints at. Moreover, I argue that the memoir’s affectless prose and request to witness is a more successful representation of affect than the recovery model it shifts into for the resolution.

Turning last to *Lolita*, I demonstrate another relationship between affect and ethics, this time in a close attention to individual, isolated moments in the narrative. In moments of *lyrical address*, *Lolita* offers the opportunity for potential identification with Humbert and a setting aside of the negative ethical judgments that are emphasized elsewhere. Moreover, these moments can provide a temporary reprieve from reminders of Humbert Humbert’s unreliability—and thus from the need for readerly suspicion and judgment.
Acknowledgments

This dissertation would not be possible without the commitment, assistance, and belief—indeed, might I say, the emotional and affective support—from so many I’ve encountered over the years since my education in literary studies began. First and foremost, I thank my committee members: James Phelan, Robyn Warhol, and Brian McHale. Jim Phelan has demonstrated time and again, by pushing me to clarify my thoughts and pressing on my interpretations, that he believes in the potential of my work, and he has unfailingly supported me in my endeavors, both within and out of academia, acting as mentor above and beyond what one might expect of an advisor. The monthly potlucks Jim hosted, where post-candidacy advisees could discuss their work, was invaluable as I sorted out my ideas and the overall structure of this dissertation. For all of the above, I am deeply grateful. Robyn Warhol was integral to the development of my thinking over the years; indeed, I might say that she helped me see (finally, belatedly) what a feminist narrative theorist identity—and a feminist identity more broadly—can look like. For her unfailing support in arenas both academic and personal, I cannot offer sufficient thanks. Brian McHale has likewise offered invaluable feedback through this dissertation process and has always pressed me to be a clearer, sharper writer and better thinker.
I also could not have completed this dissertation with the encouragement, help, and constant emotional support of numerous friends and colleagues. To Anne Langendorfer, Sarah Copland, Matthew Bolton, Rebecca Fox-Gieg, Lauren Ressue, Elizabeth Nixon, Tara Cyphers, and many others: I am so grateful. Anne Langendorfer and Sarah Copland have read and commented on more drafts than I can count by this point. Others have cheerled. Still others have conversed about ideas and plans as I sorted through the many potential directions this project could have taken.

Finally, I could not end an acknowledgments section without going further back in time to the years at Hamilton College that first made graduate school seem possible. To my mentors at Hamilton, who continue to care and converse and to be in my thoughts: Peter J. Rabinowitz, John O’Neill, Sharon Williams, Katherine Kodat, Robert Martin, and Jennifer Irons: You made this path possible for me and opened up a world of thinking and learning I could not have fathomed before college. I am so grateful, every day, for what my experience at Hamilton offered; I see this moment as a direct result of attending.
Vita

2007.................................B.A., English, Hamilton College

2009.................................M.A., English, The Ohio State University

Ohio State University

University

2010–2011..........................Writing Tutor, The Ohio State University Writing Center

2013 to Present.....................Acquisitions Editor, The Ohio State University Press

Field of Study

Major Field: English
# Table of Contents

Abstract ........................................................................................................................................ ii

Acknowledgments ....................................................................................................................... iv

Vita ............................................................................................................................................... vi

Chapter 1: Introduction ........................................................................................................... 1

Chapter 2: Embodiment and Mind-Body Integration in Chee’s *Edinburgh* ....................... 58

Chapter 3: Affective Witnessing in Harrison’s *The Kiss* .................................................. 102

Chapter 4: Lyrical Address, Identification, and the Moment in *Lolita* ............................. 155

Coda: What Readers Bring to a Narrative ............................................................................. 203

Works Cited ............................................................................................................................... 217
Chapter 1: Introduction

Teachers of literary narratives that lead to hotly contested—sometimes even intensely personal—debates know that narratives evoke reader emotions. Instructors who assign narratives about taboo situations like Nabokov’s *Lolita* with its representation of pedophilia, *Brokeback Mountain* (the film or the story by Proulx) with its graphic representation of sex between men, and Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things* with its representation of incestuous desire, typically encounter a stream of judgments about characters, undergirded by intense emotional responses to those characters’ actions. Some instructors believe that such judgments and emotional reactions should be avoided, while some embrace such reactions as a useful starting-point in the classroom,¹ but all, I hope, can acknowledge the power that narratives have to elicit both strong ethical judgments and emotional reactions. We feel in response to the things we read, and we often have

---

¹ This brings up questions about the recent debates about the place of trigger warnings in the classroom—a phenomenon that only highlights my point about the difficulty of some texts. This conversation is widely varied and seems to slide quickly between the idea that trigger warnings should be, on the one hand, just that—warnings intended to prepare students to encounter difficult material—and on the other hand, an opportunity for the student to excuse him or herself from encountering the difficult material. Given my interest in the ultimate value of encountering difficult material, I would not promote such a view, though I could understand the need for individual students to sit out of a class-wide discussion, when things get heated, often angry, and visceral, in the way I’ve described.
strong opinions about the rightness or wrongness of either characters’ or narrators’ actions and opinions.

This dissertation turns to narrative representations of one kind of taboo of sexual desire—sexual abuse—and asks the following question: How can we talk about such representations in a way that acknowledges the ethical repugnance of the abuse while better capturing more complex affective experiences represented in and generated by the narratives? In other words, how can we develop a way of reading and attending that allows us to parse out the complexly interwoven responses classroom debates often provide? Combating the viscerally felt yet unexamined disgust, what happens when we distinguish between ethical objection and affective experience? Is it possible to acknowledge negative ethical judgments against abusers and taboo sexual desires but still experience affective states that lead to identification in spite of those negative ethical judgments? In the narratives I examine—Alexander Chee’s *Edinburgh*, Kathryn Harrison’s *The Kiss*, and Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita*—the representation of abuse assumes as a starting point that readers will object ethically to said abuse, but then it pushes outside of that particular ethical dimension in certain affectively intense passages. In these passages, the narratives focus closely and intensely on characters’ affective, embodied experience, encouraging similar awareness of the reader’s own experiential embodiment. Sometimes these moments revise earlier ethical judgments; sometimes they reinforce ethics from a different perspective; and sometimes they foster an experience that exceed those negative ethical judgments without actually undoing them.
In considering the relation between affect and ethics in these narratives, I respond to work on affect and ethics in the fields of rhetorical and feminist narrative theory by James Phelan and Robyn Warhol. I ask how the understanding of affect in narrative theory becomes complicated by seeing affect as fundamentally about the body and embodiment, primarily as represented within the narrative itself but also partially as experienced by the reader. I also ask what happens when we approach narratives with an attention to the deep affective potential for identification in individual moments of a narrative. Narrative theorists like Warhol and Daniel Punday have turned to the body, either bodies of characters or of the reader, but I am more interested in the dynamic of embodiment: the extent to which a subject consciously experiences the deep mind-body interconnection, and what that can tell us about character experience and offer as potential for identification. To examine this dynamic, I turn to Richard Shusterman’s philosophy of somaesthetics, a pragmatist aesthetic philosophy that promotes what he calls mind-body interconnection. I chart Shusterman’s concept of body consciousness—what I am calling embodiment—a cross character experience in *Edinburgh, The Kiss,* and *Lolita,* arguing that attending to character embodiment in this way gives us deeper insight into character emotions and trauma, the judgments the narratives encourage about the depth and experience of that trauma, and the narratives’ invitations to readers to identify with these underlying psychological dynamics as well as with the physically felt attention to living within the body. Especially when we distinguish between what I call external embodiment and experiential embodiment and focus on the latter, such an understanding
of the characters complicates overly logical or overly physical understandings of what affect is.

By extension, representation of character embodiment has implications for affect as the text encourages readers to experience it. Readerly affective and embodied experience is impossible to describe without copious self-reporting, so instead of thinking about actual reader experiences, I will focus on textual dynamics in the representation of how character embodiment shifts over time, shifts that, I argue, function as textual prompts to readers to similarly shift their own relationship with and awareness of their bodies. Passages that highlight characters’ experiential embodiment prompt readers to increase their own body-consciousness, which can arise out of the invitation for readers to identify with the characters’ pain, trauma, desire, and conflicted relationship to their own bodies.

My approach to identification, which I will elaborate at length later in this introduction, leans heavily on the work of Laura Green, who sees it as “an occurrence emerging from the encounter of the psyche of a reader and the rhetorical construction of a narrative” (9). Green’s understanding is a modification of Freudian models and focuses on “relationships between characters within novels; responses of readers to characters rhetorically invited by the text… [and] relationships between readers and authors” (9). My interest will be in characters’ relationship with their own bodies, textual cues that invite readers to identify with those characters’ embodied affects, and the implications for readers’ relationships with their own bodies.
This identification with a character who, earlier in the narrative in question, has either committed or justified unethical actions highlights the extent to which affective dynamics have the potential to reframe or exist in tension with negative ethical judgments against an abuser figure. Identifying on some level with an abusive or taboo-violating character raises ethical concerns, perhaps suggesting that in identifying the reader has excused the abuse. Ultimately, these narratives return to the larger questions about the ethics of the abuse, but I argue that they refuse to let an identifying reader brush aside those moments of identification under a more ethically palatable rubric. Attending to the body and embodiment brings out facets of the narrative that have a number of effects upon the central ethical concerns established initially by the novel. For instance, by attending to character embodiment, we see how affect revises previously established ethical frameworks in *Edinburgh*, how affect determines readers’ ethical obligations in *The Kiss*, and how affective identification functions as a temporary reprieve from reminders of Humbert Humbert’s unreliability—and thus from suspicion and judgment—in *Lolita*.

As I proceed, I will be moving through a variety of critical discourses, starting with what is foundational to my approach, rhetorical narrative theory, and from there moving outward to expand into other theoretical approaches such as affect theory and embodiment theory to explain my approach to these texts.
Rhetorical Narrative Theory and Valuing Readerly Experience

There has been a history in literary criticism of sidelining—or worse, denigrating—the role of strong emotional responses to narratives, as well as the role of ethical judgments in responsible literary analysis. From Plato’s distrust of the appetitive soul in *The Republic* to Wimsatt and Beardsley’s affective fallacy, literary theorists have doubted the merits of considering readers’ emotional responses to narrative. The reasons for this distrust vary—from suspicion of emotions themselves through to a conviction that emotion is too subjective to discuss in literary critical terms—but they tend to come back to a devaluing of the readerly experience made possible by literary narrative. Within this larger trend, exceptions appeared in the work of Aristotle, the neo-Aristotelians, and some aspects of reader response criticism. More recently, the work of narrative theorists on emotion, empathy, and affect demonstrates increased interest in reclaiming and examining deeply the emotional aspects of the reading experience, work I build on and push further into the realm of the subjective.

This dissertation places at its center a valuing of the details of affect in bodily/embodied experience as represented in character experience, and secondarily, a focus on how these representations guide reader experience. Indeed, I explore narratives that are crafted, in part via their focus on sexual abuse, specifically to evoke strong emotional and ethical reactions. I will offer a full rationale for my specific choices below, but for now I single out two reasons: (1) *Lolita*, *The Kiss*, and *Edinburgh* are positioned against mainstream cultural narratives about sexual abuse in the late twentieth century in the U.S.; and (2) they represent character affect in such a way as to encourage
identification that complicates the negative ethical judgments against the abuser and/or taboo violator. I argue that such viscerally held opinions are not irrelevant, nor do they distract from understanding the narrative in question. The narratives I examine are intentionally crafted to have effects that are so uncomfortable that actual readers often choose to emphasize only one aspect of that experience—hence the debates in the classroom. I argue that these narratives cause such debates not merely because they represent abusive dynamics and taboo sexual desires that are largely generally agreed by contemporary readers to be unethical. They are intentionally crafted to represent and evoke certain fraught and deeply felt affective experiences, which sometimes lead to new understandings of the ethical foundations of the work and sometimes simply exist in tension with the ethical judgments actual readers wish to hold onto.

Narratives that represent sexual abuse raise difficult questions about what approaches are best to understand the intersections of ethical judgments, emotional response, and authorial craft. While it would be quite possible to turn to sexuality studies, for instance, to examine the way these narratives represent a particular understanding of how child sexuality is formed by larger cultural narratives and expectations, I am here interested primarily in how individual narratives are crafted to influence those readers who read in order to attend deeply to character affective experience. The place of these individual narratives in their larger cultural context is not, of course, irrelevant; it influences how we understand those the ethical and affective dynamics of the narrative. Because these narratives are explicitly positioned against mainstream cultural narratives (a concept I will explore shortly) about sexual abuse, the cultural context becomes a
background against which we can situate and examine how they upend expectations that
ethics and affect work in concert to reinforce negative ethical judgments of abuser
figures.

Rhetorical narrative theory is a prime ground to begin with because it starts with
the premise that it is possible to discuss the craft of individual narratives and how that
craft is linked to reader response. First articulated by Wayne Booth in *The Rhetoric of
Fiction* (1961), rhetorical narrative theory attempted to shift some of the concerns of first
generation neo-Aristotelians, focused on poetics, to a conversation focused instead on
rhetoric. Booth’s first work was somewhat narrowly focused on defending the concept of
narratorial rhetoric in fiction: the idea that there is no real separation between “showing”
and “telling” in fiction and that authors are always telling even as they show. *The
Rhetoric of Fiction* examined fiction via a means-ends reasoning, arguing that abstract
rules for judging fiction don’t work and that fiction should be judged based on whether
the means help achieve the ends. With the end of *The Rhetoric of Fiction* and a
consideration of the morality of impersonal narration, Booth addressed the role of ethics
in the means and the ends of fiction, later elaborating these concerns in *The Company We
Keep*. Specifically, here Booth considered the ethics of a novel, as reflected in both the
means and the ends of authorial craft.

One important consequence of *The Company We Keep* was to acknowledge the
intensely personal nature of reading a literary narrative and the experience of reading.
Describing books as friends—either good or bad friends—Booth was interested in the
quality of life led in the company of a particular book. He thus also wanted to capture the
way that sitting down with a good book can often feel like putting oneself into the hands of a trusted friend—like going through a full experience, one replete with cognitive, ethical, and emotional facets, with that individual. Accordingly, Booth claimed, just as one assesses the ethical quality of life spent with friends, so should we assess the ethical quality of life spent with a book—or in Booth’s terms, the life spent with the “implied author” as a guiding friend. This discussion of good books as friends who lead readers through experiences of a particular ethical quality allowed for an expanded emphasis on the idea of reader experience.

Following through on Booth’s path, subsequent rhetorical narrative theorists have attended in more detail to the role of affect and emotion in the reading experience. James Phelan in particular has developed the rhetorical model in more depth and detail to better describe the nuances of each stage in the reading process. Whereas Booth was interested in larger questions of the ethics of authorial means and ends, Phelan uses those questions to delve further into what he calls the textual and readerly dynamics of narrative progression. Distinguishing textual and readerly dynamics allows Phelan and other rhetorical critics to ground discussions of reader experience in specific textual features that are seen as intentionally crafted by an implied author to have those effects.

Phelan’s attention to narrative progression and readerly dynamics allows for a more nuanced discussion of affect and emotion in the critical conversation within narrative theory. Accordingly, one can discuss the poignancy of Sandra Cisneros’s “Woman Hollering Creek,” delving into the details of the moment-by-moment experience—both ethical and affective—encouraged by Cisneros’ various choices and
the responses they invite. The current understanding about affect and emotion in the rhetorical model, however, has room for further development. One area for development is the expansion of the vocabulary and the range of territory covered by the language we have for affect. Phelan acknowledges the limits of his vocabulary for affect: “With regard to the affective dimension of response, I have been using a vocabulary, derived in part from the first- and second-generation neo-Aristotelians, that refers to the consequences of our judgments and of our immersion in progression. Among these terms are sympathy, desire, hope, disappointment, sorrow, happiness, expectation, anticipation, suspense, frustration, and satisfaction” (91). My attending to the body and the experience of embodiment/body-consciousness is one way to expanding this ground into territory not covered by the terms Phelan has used thus far.

More importantly, though, there is room to complicate the understanding of affect as always integrally tied to—and often an effect of—ethical judgments. In Phelan’s understanding, for instance, a judgment about Wentworth in *Persuasion* leads to a particular emotion about that character. While affect may in theory be bodily in this understanding, it is never actually discussed as bodily. This dissertation pushes forward Phelan’s exploration and asks what kinds of reading experiences are possible if we allow for a wider range of affective experience, experience not arising out of prior ethical judgments and instead located first and foremost through understandings of the body.

---

3 See Phelan, *Experiencing Fiction* (92): “The second reason that the [affective] terms are only partial is that they do not cover a wide enough range of affective response. What we make a negative ethical judgments of a character such as William Elliot, what is the affective consequence? Terms such as *antipathy* and *hostility* seem too strong. *Distrust* is better...”
Accordingly, though I build on rhetorical narrative theory, I expand the concept of affect beyond the narrow range of feelings listed by Phelan above, as well as beyond those emotions, such as desire, disappointment, and sympathy, that are so integrally tied to ethical assessments about the quality of the characters or the storyworld. In particular, I am less interested in the affect of “sympathy,” an affect I find to be integrally tied to judgments about characters’ actions and the situation, as ultimately to sympathize is to make a judgment about whether or not a character “deserves” sympathy. If we want to examine the full range of affective experience, we need to acknowledge that affect has the potential to arise out of readers’ intuitive, bodily responses (responses that are not always reasoned) to certain representations even before it is influenced by elaborately developed ethical judgments.

By expanding the concept of affect beyond reasoned emotions, I draw on the work of Robyn Warhol in Having A Good Cry: Effeminate Feelings and Pop-Culture Forms. In this work, Warhol defines affect as centrally about bodily sensations and examines the gendered nature of the somatic effects a range of popular sentimental texts have upon readers’ bodies. Like Warhol, I believe that expanding affect studies beyond an understanding of reasoned and ethical emotions can grant insight into more complex and nuanced facets of the reading experience. As Warhol states, acknowledging the lasting power of performed emotions to establish subjects in the social world, “Narratives mark readers’ bodies with these effects, and if the cry, the laugh, the gasp, the yawn is only ephemeral in any given instance, certain genres invoke these physical responses in predictable, formulaic patterns” (7). Based on these examples of reader affective
experience—the laugh, the gasp, the yawn—it is clear that, while Warhol wishes to situate affective responses as most importantly located in the body, she does not go so far as some affect theorists who turn to scientific studies that track physiological responses and brain activity to make a case for the body’s reaction to stimuli preceding conscious thought. Brian Massumi, for instance, references these studies in “The Autonomy of Affect”; while his larger argument goes beyond these claims for the primacy of physiological responses of the body and brain activity, the turn to such evidence is one potential consequence of insisting on the possibility that affective response can precede ethical judgments.4 I highlight this potential to contrast Warhol’s approach wherein, while she acknowledges that affective experience is bodily, she is not proposing a false separation between the body and the mind. In Warhol’s model, these affects—the laugh, gasp, and yawn—still depend upon some level of cognition—at the very least, the cognition required to process the facts of a narrative storyworld. There is thus some continuity between Phelan’s and Warhol’s approaches in terms of how they situate affect, cognition, and judgments in relation to each other.

My approach is closer to Warhol’s than Phelan’s in that I lean on an assumption that, while cognition is necessary to develop initial bodily, affective responses, the affects I am interested in describing do not necessarily depend upon or stem from the kind of complex and multifaceted ethical judgment5 that Phelan describes as necessary to

---

4 See Massumi (89–90). Massumi here covers EEG studies that chart how participants’ brain waves revealed brain activity that started a physical movement temporally before they charted having made the decision to move.

5 It’s worth noting that, while Warhol is interested in capturing immediate and less reasoned affects, Having A Good Cry does also describe a multi-layered approach, the
understand the implied author. While I do consider the ethics of each narrative, these considerations come into play more in relation to the larger narrative than in relation to local moments. This is because central to my methodology is a focus on specific, local moments within each narrative—moments that are defined by their representation of character affect and embodiment and that accordingly encourage identification in terms of readerly embodied experience. In my approach to affect, the best way to acknowledge the power of such moments is to linger over them and to draw out the implications—bodily, aesthetic, and ethical—of the affective dynamics they offer. More importantly, the ethical implications and consequences of such moments cannot be reduced or subsumed under the larger narrative critics tell about the progression of ethical dynamics from the beginning to the end of the story. Accordingly, while I am interested in situating such moments in the larger narrative progression in accordance with Phelan’s rhetorical model, I am also reluctant to recast such moments in more palatable ethical terms in light of the dynamics the narrative ends on.

I must also address here the fact that I have intentionally been speaking of “narrative” thus far in my own project, rather than the concept of “fiction” with which Booth began the conversation. One of my case studies—Harrison’s *The Kiss*—is, indeed, a memoir, and thus it has another layer of ethical dynamics that come into play, especially with regard to the ethics of the telling. In terms of narrative theory, the distinction in genre has consequences for whether we can speak of a narrator as potential to have an affective response to an earlier affective response. The chapter on *Pretty Woman* addresses how one’s affective response of feeling happy at the connection between Vivian and Edward, in conflict with feminist resistance to such problematic notions that Vivian should be saved by a man, produce another affect—The Cringe.
“unreliable,” in that nonfiction seems less likely to create a significant gap in reporting, interpretation, or evaluation between the narrator and the implied author. In terms of ethics of the telling, on the one hand, the nonfiction status seems to have intensified the visceral response to Harrison’s story. In terms of my approach, however, the nonfiction status does not significantly affect the argument about affect as an ethical obligation to attend to Kathryn’s affective experience and trauma. That is, because of the nonfiction status of the story Harrison tells, the reality of her trauma makes the reader’s obligation to attend all the more consequential. I will elaborate how this attention plays out specifically in nonfiction in a section on identification later in this introduction.

**Representations of sexual abuse in twentieth-century American culture**

Before I delve into what readings that attend first and foremost to affect can look like, it is helpful first to explore the kind of ethical dynamics all the texts I examine are working with. From the perspective of rhetorical narrative theory, to talk about the ethics of a text is to talk about the judgments each text encouraged readers to make. For instance, Phelan explains that “individual narratives explicitly or more often implicitly establish their own ethical standards in order to guide their audiences to particular ethical judgments” ([Experiencing](#) 10) and elaborates that there are four ethical positions: (1) the ethics of the told (character-character relations); (2) and (3) the ethics of the telling (narrator’s relation to the characters, narrating, and the audience; and the implied author’s relation to these things); and (4) the ethics of the actual audience’s responses to the first three dynamics ([Experiencing](#) 11). When I say that the ethics of these texts are to, first,
encourage a judgment of action as sexual abuse, and then to judge that abuse as ethically wrong because of the trauma it causes in the victim, I am talking solely about the first position, the ethics of the told. The ethics of the telling and of the actual audiences’ responses are not as immediately relevant when we are considering how the narratives I examine begin with the assumption that the sex we witness is abusive and therefore unethical because it harms another. The moments I focus on move beyond that ethical judgment into exploring how to complicate readers’ reactions via affective dynamics. The ethics of the telling are relevant on more of a meta-level when we consider these affectively intense moments in relation to the ethics of the told, that is, when we consider the problematic nature of the larger ethics of a narrative that encourages identification with deeply unethical characters.

Because sexual abuse is such a charged topic in American culture in the twentieth century, it ultimately brings to the fore both ethical and affective dynamics and places such affective responses in sharp relief. By drawing on the work of Philip Jenkins and turning to what I will call “mainstream cultural narratives”—the general beliefs and stories U.S. society tells itself about the level of threat that sexual abusers present, the primary features of the abuser figure, and the primary features of the (often child) victim at different points over the latter half of the twentieth century—we can see that the background against which Lolita, The Kiss, and Edinburgh appear suggests that most would assume it to be almost impossible to separate out affective from ethical responses to sexual abuse. There are not many other crimes more often responded to with visceral disgust, which is then reframed and cemented by negative ethical judgment. In this
section, I will situate the narratives I’m interested in against the mainstream cultural narratives, and then I will describe in detail how those narratives have changed over the course of the twentieth century. Turning briefly to the state of contemporary television media gives us a sense of the background attitudes about sexual abuse in the late twentieth century. I am interested primarily in narrative representations on television given that these are more comparable to the texts I study here. What we find is that mainstream cultural narratives about sexual abuse occur across the fiction-nonfiction divide, while narratives that resist simplistic ethical judgments about other taboo violations (murder, addiction, alcoholism, to name a few) tend to be fictional.6

We can see the state of mainstream cultural narratives about sexual abuse very clearly by turning briefly to the current state of American television. Whereas shows that complicate the status of the villain and create an “anti-hero” figure are increasing in popularity (The Sopranos, Breaking Bad, Dexter, Shameless, and potentially the more recent Bates Motel), there is a distinct lack of shows problematizing the villainy of sexual abusers. While there seems to be a trend in television toward complicating ideas about how “evil” the protagonist is in cases of murder, drug abuse, and alcoholism that leads to family abuse and neglect, this kind of ambivalence and uncertainty in ethical judgment does not, it appears, extend to perpetrators who are sex offenders—and particularly not to those who are child abusers or who have taboo sexual desires. If anything, most television shows that touch on the topic of sexual abuse simply recast popular cultural

6 See Baker’s “To Catch Who?” for a discussion of moral panics in contemporary television media. Baker examines the show To Catch a Predator closely to reveal the problematic setup of the show, as well as the racist underpinnings of the show’s structure and assumptions.
narratives of moral panic about the threat that child molesters pose to children. *To Catch a Predator*, for instance, ran in the mid-2000s, and *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit* began in 1999 and is still running new seasons. Both television shows, on the whole, rely on fears and concerns about the safety of children in a world where child molesters are ever-present, uncontrolled, and ingenious in their tactics. Although these shows seem to have been relegated to the background of public discourse, with the new and more boundary-pushing shows taking the spotlight, *To Catch a Predator* and *Law and Order: SVU* indicate a continuing low level of anxiety about sexual abuse, the threat posed by pedophiles, and the fate of children.

This project is interested in narratives that resist the representations of both abuser figure and child figure, as well as the accompanying affective responses of disgust, that we see in *To Catch a Predator* and *Law and Order: SVU*. The narratives I am interested in, then, to some degree do the cultural work of *Breaking Bad*, *Dexter*, and *Shameless*—but for sexual abuse or taboo violation. The narratives that complicate mainstream cultural narratives about sexual abuse primarily exist in literary, print form rather than television. The question of why this difference between literary and televisual representations of sexual abuse is a fascinating one but beyond the scope of this project. One might speculate that literary narrative has room for more ethical/affective experimentation than television; I might also add that, at least in terms of the dynamics of embodiment of certain moments that I chart in this dissertation, the medium of television may perhaps face more difficulty conveying such internal experiences. That said, it was probably not foreseen that we would have television narratives promoting sympathy for or identification with mob bosses or serial killers, so perhaps it’s just a matter of time until we encounter this narrative on television with regard to sexual abusers.
complexity about child sex abusers, there are notable works in the latter half of the twentieth century that performed such cultural work. Turning back to these works may help us understand why it is that sexual abuse seems to exist in an ethical realm of its own, one that evokes judgments and affective responses much stronger and more visceral than responses to other ethical crimes like murder, physical/emotional abuse, and neglect.

This project examines literary representations of sexual abuse, particularly narratives that resist mainstream twentieth-century U.S. cultural understandings of said abuse. *Lolita, The Kiss,* and *Edinburgh* resist such cultural narratives by employing narrative form to elicit unconventional or unexpected ethical and affective responses to the situations of abuse, pedophilia, and parent-child incest. Mainstream cultural narratives about sexual abuse, pedophilia, and parent-child incest tend to encourage strongly negative ethical and affective responses to abusers. Particularly in the latter half of the twentieth century, terms like “child abuse” and “pedophile” evoke a kind of disgust that is quickly and deeply reframed as moral outrage like few other sex acts or crimes evoke. In contrast with these mainstream narratives, the works I study to some degree

---

8 There are some exceptions to this, such as the new BBC series *Broadchurch,* which plays a little with ambivalence about the abuser figure. The second season, however, solidifies judgments against and disgust for Joe Miller. Furthermore, this narrative is solidly situated in small-town England, which would make it unsuited to my project of exploring narratives that resist contemporary American attitudes toward sexual abuse. The Americanized version *Gracepoint* sidesteps the difficulty of difficult affective responses to a man interested in a child as it reveals that someone else killed Danny Latimer in an accident. Joe Miller then remains as the parent who covers up his child’s unintentional crime, in league with his wife who is equally guilty.

9 While many instances of sexual deviance evoke visceral disgust, what is particular to sexual abuse is the way moral outrage combines with fear for future transgressions to feed back into an even stronger expression of disgust and judgment than we would otherwise see. Other instances of sexual deviance like bestiality or rape of the elderly (or
encourage engagement with both victims and perpetrators with a different focus in mind—affective dynamics and embodiment.

A Note on Terminology

For this dissertation, I have chosen to use the phrase “sexual abuse” rather than “pedophilia” to capture the sex between the individuals in question. Aside from the somewhat obvious reason that *The Kiss* does not reveal an adult father having sex with a young child but rather with his twenty-year-old daughter, I have other, more complex reasons. “Pedophilia,” a concept often credited to sexologist Richard von Krafft-Ebing, was introduced in the late nineteenth century as a way to explain deviant sexual behavior, according to Steven Angelides, (“Emergence” 274). Initially, according to Angelides, it was “not exactly seen as a grave threat or social problem” (274). Angelides charts how the concept shifted over time from one that described a moral vice, “perversity,” to one that described a mental disease, “perversion”: “It was almost as though in this new [medical] paradigm the concept of perversity stood in for those older tropes of legal and religious meaning such as sin and immorality, whereas perversion represented the newer and supposedly impartial scientific and medical terminologies” (275). With the newer medical model, Angelides argues, “not until the 1980s did the signifier or paedophilia accrue the kind of abhorrence and horror that it connotes today” (276). In this moment, even sodomy, in certain temporal and geographical contexts) may evoke disgust, but if victims are associated with those acts, those victims still do not receive the kind of valorization that children do in the latter half of twentieth-century American culture. One instance conveying this excessive anxiety about children over other potential victims like animals or the elderly is the reporting laws that require sex offenders to be tracked and for neighbors to be notified when they move into a neighborhood.
the figure of the pedophile was equated with the figure of the homosexual as a “sinister, negative model of masculinity” (285).

Because of the specific problems associated with the medicalized concept of “pedophilia,” I instead use the phrase “sexual abuse” to describe the sex between characters that these narratives represent. This moves us away from a preoccupation with vice or perversion into an acknowledgment that the sex harms someone, usually a child. The definition of “sexual abuse” may seem clear, as suggested by the entry in *Encyclopedia of Human Development*: “A sexual act is typically considered abusive when there is an age difference of five years or more between the offender and victim, when the event occurs for the pleasure of the offender but not the victim, and usually when the offender has power over the victim” (McCammon and Ramby 1156). However, as critics in literary and sexuality studies criticism have long argued, exactly what constitutes sexual abuse is historically specific, grounded in contemporary cultural beliefs about gender, power, childhood, and sexuality. Thus, for instance, Ian Hacking traces the changing notions of “child abuse” from the early twentieth century until publication in 1991, noting in particular how medicalized the problem has become (265, 274–80). Angelides argues that the initial rise of fears about child sexual abuse in the United States in the 1980s were products of the feminist movement, which centrally defined child

---

10 See, for instance, Fishman’s “The History of Childhood Sexuality,” which charts changing attitudes about child sexuality and the best location of individuals who regulate and monitor attitudes about it. Claudia Konker’s “Rethinking Child Sexual Abuse” makes a similar claim from a social science perspective. In the foundational “The Politics of Child Sexual Abuse” (56–62) from 1988, Linda Gordon directly connects the success of fully acknowledging the problem of child sexual abuse to the goals of the feminist movement.
abuse as a traumatic event built on a destructive power differential that destroyed a natural childhood sexual innocence. Angelides articulates and then challenges these assumptions that adult sexual relations do not include power differentials between consenting parties and that childhood ever has a natural state of innocence.11

As I use the phrase “sexual abuse,” I am relying on the assumptions about trauma and undue power by the perpetrator—though not on the assumptions we see in the Encyclopedia of Human Development about childhood innocence, the location of pleasure, or any specific age restriction. That is, the narratives I examine do adopt some of the basic ethical assumptions of the mainstream cultural narratives I discussed above that we find in part in the encyclopedia definition: i.e., that sexual abuse can be identified when it occurs by virtue of a significant power imbalance between two individuals (an imbalance often but not always reflected by age differential), and that, furthermore, the personal testimony of the “victim” (or “survivor,” in feminist and therapeutic language) provides the best insight into that power imbalance. We will find, however, that Edinburgh and The Kiss represent “sexual abuse” in spite of some departure from these parameters (pleasure and age). Above all, the concept “sexual abuse” rather than “pedophilia” allows me to keep my focus on the action rather than the identity of the perpetrator. Because I am interested in ethical judgments against these specific actions, this focus is most productive for working in the rhetorical model in this way.

Thus, the individual works I examine still advocate the same basic ethical principles about sexual abuse as the mainstream cultural narratives in that they

acknowledge the fact of sexual abuse at the outset. It may be tempting to argue that these works in fact resist mainstream cultural narratives by suggesting that readers do not even encounter an event we could label “abuse, but what I find fascinating about these works is that they do not resist these ethical judgments about the abusive actions. *Lolita*, *Edinburgh*, and *The Kiss* all take on these ethical foundations and instead use affect as their means to complicate readers’ emotional responses to the situation of sexual abuse.

In choosing which terminology to use (sexual abuse or pedophilia), I also rely on premises grounded in rhetorical narrative theory. What is important about this model is that it allows us to talk about the ethical judgments an individual work encourages, whether those judgments reinforce or resist the assumptions of mainstream cultural narratives. On the whole, the works I examine adopt the ethics underlying the mainstream cultural narratives that condemn sexual abuse, assuming an ethical system in which sexual abuse is a crime against the autonomy of the child who cannot consent. On the local level, however, each work complicates many other assumptions in the mainstream cultural narratives—assumptions about the type of threat posed and, more importantly, the potential affective responses evoked in response to such ethical violations. I turn now to say more about those mainstream cultural narratives.

**The Relevant Narratives in the Context of the Twentieth Century’s Waves of “Moral Panic” over Sexual Abuse**

This project reflects on two distinct moments of the twentieth century—mid-century and the turn of the twenty-first century—and how two narratives in the latter
moment (*The Kiss* and *Edinburgh*) take up, reframe, and recast the novel from the former (*Lolita*). This gap of forty years may seem surprising, leaving readers wondering why I have skipped over decades during which significant literary work representing sexual abuse was produced. That is, why the forty-year gap between *Lolita* in 1955 and the two other works in 1997 (*The Kiss*) and 2001 (*Edinburgh*)? The answer, in short, is that there are important similarities between the mid-1950s and 1990s—similarities that Philip Jenkins’s cultural history, *Moral Panic: Changing Concepts of the Child Molester*, helps to chart. According to Jenkins, the twentieth century saw multiple, cyclical waves of panic over child sexual abuse. Jenkins’s concept of “moral panic” points to times when there is widespread fear and anxiety on a national scale about the threat to children from sex offenders.12 Jenkins describes the intense (and in his opinion, exaggerated and excessive) fears and attendant beliefs that the waves of moral panic engendered:

> Sexual abuse is pervasive, a problem of vast scope; molesters or abusers are compulsive individuals who commit their crimes frequently and whose pathologies resist rehabilitation or cure. Sexually deviant behavior often escalates to violence or murder. Sexual relations with adults invariably cause lasting damage to the children involved; a battery of psychological explanations exists to account for any failure by the victim to perceive harm from the abuse or to recognize its severity. Finally, sexual

---

12 Angelides builds on Jenkins’s argument, accounting for the *why* of these moral panics, at the psychological level, that Jenkins addresses on a level of society and discourse (“Historicizing Affect”). As in his other works, Angelides argues that a major source of fear about pedophilia and sexual abuse is rooted in a denial of child sexuality (*Edinburgh* is the prime example of my project that represents this progressive view about child sexuality.)
molestation results in what is called the cycle of abuse: molestation so disturbs the victim that he or she usually repeats the same act later against children of the next generation. (1–2)

Jenkins’s list here encapsulates many of the beliefs that have accompanied fears about sex offenders at different points in the twentieth century, though each belief was not necessarily relevant in each of the phases he charts. Jenkins clearly thinks these fears are absurd to some degree, describing them as “wildly exaggerated and wrongly directed”; while I do not wish to affirm his skepticism about the actual risk children faced, I find the larger charting of waves of panic useful for my purposes of noticing particular trends.

The three eras that Jenkins charts are distinguished and labeled in chapter titles as such: The Age of the Sex Psychopath (1937–1957), The Liberal Era (1958–1976), and a two-part era that started with the Child Abuse Revolution and turned into the Return of the Sexual Predator (mid–1970s through the 1990s). The first and third eras saw these moral panics, while Jenkins sees The Liberal Era as a time of easing anxiety, a time when “characterizations [of child molesters] were far removed from the utter evil that would have been obligatory in later years” (107). For instance, in these years, Jenkins argues that “A book from the 1960s, for example, would state what was then orthodoxy: molestation was a very infrequent offense unlikely to cause significant harm to the vast majority of subjects (the word victims seemed too harsh), and molesters were confused inadequates unlikely to repeat their offenses” (2). In the liberal era, the assumptions that abusers were inherently evil “sex psychopaths” shifted to a medicalized model that perceived abusers as needing treatment more than punishment. This attitude, as Jenkins
notes, resulted in more ethically complex portrayals of child abusers, primarily by virtue of their less sympathetic portrayal of the children. (In part, Jenkins here points to a number of films from the 1970s that represent sexually precocious children, such as Night Moves [1975], Taxi Driver [1976], The Exorcist [1973], and Pretty Baby [1978], among others.) Thus, representations that question the abuser=evil, victim=pure/innocent from this era were not significantly opposed to mainstream cultural narratives; rather, these more ethically complex portrayals reinforced the mainstream narratives of the liberal era.

By contrast, the 1940s–1950s, and the 1980s–1990s—the times when Lolita (1955), The Kiss (1997), and Edinburgh (2001) were published—saw increasing panic over the welfare of children. The offenders in the 1940s–1950s were “sex psychopaths,” that is, “outsiders, sex fiends…near-demonic figures satisfying their baneful sexual urges at the expense of women and children unknown to them” (13). The next wave of moral panic resulting in extreme and dichotomous views about abusers and victims did not recur until the very end of the 1970s, when the multiple influences of the second-wave feminist movement and the later rise of therapeutic culture combined to create a belief that sexual abuse caused individuals long-term psychological damage. This panic continued through the 1980s into the mid-1990s (and, I would argue, in a less intense and only slightly modified form, through today). The mid-1950s and the 1990s are thus more comparable to each other in terms of the content of the mainstream cultural narratives. I have also chosen works that cluster in a short period of time long after Lolita because I am interested primarily in historical moments where the cultural narrative itself assumes (often unthinkingly) the unredeemable quality of the abuser and, in the case of the 1980s
and 1990s, the lifelong damage that sexual abuse inflicts upon victims. It is in these moments where we can find narratives that, in encouraging some form of emotional engagement with abusers, do two interesting things simultaneously. They acknowledge and reinforce strong ethical judgments against abusers, but they also simultaneously use affective dynamics to move beyond the simplicity of black-and-white judgments.

This account of the two discrete temporal moments I explore also helps to explain why my project does not examine some significant late-twentieth-century representations of sexual abuse. For instance, why, one might ask, do I not write about Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*? Why not Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*? My reason for skipping these powerful narratives has to do with the kind of rhetorical and cultural work each story is doing. My project is to examine works that resist particularly reactionary mainstream narratives about sexual abuse—that is, those that were most powerful in the mid-1950s and from the mid-1980s on. I sideline narratives that, instead, were responding primarily to the “liberal era” and attacking its “liberal-ness.” These narratives I’ve decided not to study thus worked to re-establish clear judgments against child abusers. The works I am interested in examining grant the abuser or the taboo-breaker this kind of interiority and thus complicate the simple ethical judgments of abuser=evil, victim=innocent.

The narratives I discuss are linked in that they all attempt to resist contemporary mainstream cultural narratives about sexual abuse. Fears over sexual abuse of some kind have been a key concern throughout the twentieth century, but as Jenkins demonstrates in *Moral Panic*, the cultural narratives that specified the identity of the primary threat and
victim were recast multiple times throughout the century. Jenkins ends his narrative in the 1980s and 1990s, while my corpus extends into the early 2000s, which, I believe, largely repeats the primary concerns Jenkins sees in the 1990s. The fears over sexual abuse and child molesters are distinctive in their current form because of both the presumed identity of the abuser and the crimes the public assumes the abuser will commit. Whereas fears over sexual abuse before the 1980s took the form over fears about “sex psychopaths,” men who could not stop themselves from abusing and then likely torturing and murdering young children, the current stories represent the child abuser as a lone, usually gay, somewhat childish man—one who is excessively interested in children, though he claims to be so only out of genuine caring for those children. The abuser figure is not necessarily feared as a mortal threat, but the general consensus on sexual abuse today is that the psychological damage is so severe and long-lasting as to make it just as bad as, if not worse than, being murdered. *Edinburgh* and *The Kiss* engage with certain threads and assumptions in this contemporary narrative about sexual abuse and the molester.

Two of the narratives this dissertation examines enter this cultural milieu of the post-1980s and push back against the assumptions in these reactionary mainstream cultural narratives. In the changing landscape of U.S. culture, while mainstream cultural narratives reinforced existing ideas about sexual abuse, pedophilia, and sexual taboo, the literary works I examine trouble the common representation of the abuser/molester/pedophile or of the taboo violator as unfathomably perverted, “sick,” and depraved. They resist assumptions not only about the identity or threat of the abuser, but also about the identity and sexual “purity” of the victim. Most importantly, these literary
works of fiction and nonfiction push back against mainstream cultural narratives of the late twentieth century without resorting to the reactionary victim-blaming tactics second-wave feminists of the 1970s worked so hard to combat.

As such, I demonstrate how two of the narratives are very much a product of their post-1970s time, even as they attempt to resist what has tended to become unthinking, surprisingly conservative assumptions about sexual abuse and valorizing of “pure,” childlike figures that were, in some ways, surprising out-growths of the second-wave feminist movement. I demonstrate how these novels attempt to complicate narratives about the pure, innocent, abused “child”-figure, who becomes the victim of the abuser-figure, usually an individual labeled a “pedophile,” a man who may appear on the one hand obviously threatening and “evil” or, on the other hand, deceptively kind and normal—but is almost always depicted in mainstream cultural narratives and received in the cultural imagination as aberrant and predatory—indeed, “disgusting.” By extension, these works also resist simple judgments against other taboo sexual desires that are commonly associated with pedophilia, such as incestuous sexual desires between parent and child. *Lolita, The Kiss,* and *Edinburgh* all revise at least some portion of this cultural narrative, pushing readers to reconsider, even temporarily suspend, their long-held and often viscerally experienced beliefs about the appropriateness of the object of one’s sexual desire, child sexuality, sexual abuse, and consent.

Most importantly, by virtue of pushing back against mainstream narratives of sexual abuse, which tend to hold ethical and affective responses so deeply and viscerally, the works I examine become an ideal test case for examining potential new relationships
between the ethical judgments about abuser figures and our affective responses. As they resist mainstream cultural narratives, I want to emphasize that we do not simply find another, equally appealing and stable ethics that encourages us to have sympathy for a pedophile. Rather, there is something particular about how ethics and affect intertwine—or depart from each other—in these representations of sexual abuse. The ethical dynamics that result in our calling the interaction “sexual abuse” in the first place remain, but they can be so complicated by the way affect is treated that a reader can be encouraged to feel simultaneously a deep identification with the perpetrator even as he/she maintains the judgments against the action of sexual abuse.

**Locating Affect in Character Embodiment and Somaesthetics**

As discussed above in relation to rhetorical narrative theory, my interest is in capturing the complexity of how affect works in texts and, by extension, in readers, as far as I can capture such an individual experience. Affect as discussed by Warhol in *Having a Good Cry* is deeply embedded in the body, formulated as subjectively felt sensations and, more importantly, observable actions such as crying, sighing, gasping, yawning, or cringing. Warhol is interested specifically in actual readers’ bodies as reflected by actual reader responses; though she explores textual dynamics to examine technologies of affect and how readers’ bodies are drawn to perform gender in predictable ways, the primary insight focuses on what it means for actual readers’ bodies who respond in these ways by having a good cry.
While I value the emphasis on the body Warhol manages to capture throughout *Having a Good Cry*, I am more reluctant to attempt to describe something as subjective as bodily responses, for a few reasons. First, the kind of bodily experience in readers I will want to suggest as a possible outcome of the novels I examine is not observable in the way that crying, gasping, and yawning are, because it is about the experience of noticing one’s body, not about an action that an outside observer might make.¹³ (I will return to and elaborate on this point below.) Warhol’s approach builds quite directly on the theories of Silvan Tomkins, wherein subjects’ affects were defined precisely by their outward manifestation. This kind of approach works particularly well for the texts Warhol examines, which are culturally associated with the effects she describes. *Little Women* and *The Color Purple* may not cause all readers to weep with either sadness or joy or surprise, but there is plenty of discourse in both genres of book reviews and scholarly criticism that supports this association.

Second, having a good cry suggests the very different ethical situation readers approach in reading *Little Women* or *The Color Purple* versus reading *Lolita* or *The Kiss*. Warhol reflects somewhat sarcastically on the emotional appeal of the fantasy that affect and love will prevail and provide hope for future societies: “[F]amily affection does transcend death; sisters are friends forever; true love will prevail; courage will be rewarded; affectionate domestic relationships will put an end to racist oppression—oh, it is a wonderful life!” (50). This is remarkably different from a reader encountering

---

¹³ Warhol’s reasoning for focusing on these affects is, in part, to avoid the already very well-trodden area of exploring the erotic, which itself would present the difficulties of observability I am discussing here.
Humbert’s narration and feeling identification with his pain. The complicated guilt possible is of a very different sort when we are discussing the discomfiting ethics surrounding sexual abuse and those surrounding awareness of ongoing inequality, racism, and sexism in American society.

For these reasons, instead of focusing on observable bodily responses in readers, I instead turn to a concept capturing—not how the reading body visibly responds to certain stories—but rather how a subject’s awareness of his or her body may shift over time and how that awareness reflects a shifting understanding of the mind/body relation. Because of the deeply subjective and nonobservable nature of this experience, I will focus more thoroughly on how embodiment is represented in characters’ experiences, and only later suggest how the shifting understandings represented in the text can prompt similar shifts in awareness in a reader.

In the field of philosophy and becoming ever more incorporated into literary studies, embodiment now signifies the mind/body connection in a way that explicitly counters Descartes’s influential dualist philosophy that separated the two. Clarified in the phenomenological work of Merleau-Ponty, embodiment theory examines how, even in experiences that, under the Cartesian mind-body dualist approach, seem to be all about “mind,” the body is always there, influencing the mind. Embodiment theory has also been drawn into the field of literary studies, for instance by Guillemette Bolens’s *The Style of Gestures* and Daniel Punday’s *Narrative Bodies*. This work is similar to Warhol’s *Having a Good Cry* in that it affirms the centrality of the body and refutes Cartesian dualism.
One strand of scholarship on embodiment is focused specifically on “embodied cognition.” Bolens’s *The Style of Gestures* is invested in this topic, as is recent work by Melba Cuddy-Keane. This scholarship begins with the premise that recent research debunking Cartesian dualism is correct, and that when it comes to cognition (what we typically think of as the realm of completely disembodied processes), the body is, in fact, integral to perception, analysis, and decisions. Literary analysis invested in embodied cognition turns to texts primarily in order to parse out the representations that show this complex, always-embodied process in action. In other words, they are often focused on describing how certain texts depict what Descartes could not see, the deep interdependence between mind and body. My goal, by contrast, is invested less in cognition and less in exploring the ways a recently acknowledged philosophical “truth” has always been represented in text. I do not wish, in other words, to read narratives as evidence of a static alternative that many now agree is more compelling than Cartesian dualism. Instead, I am interested in the experience of the body, both how it is experienced subjectively and in how it is described and perceived aesthetically.

In a different vein, Daniel Punday’s *Narrative Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Narratology* explores how the body has been represented through two centuries of

---

14 In "Narration, Navigation, and Non-conscious Thought: Neuroscientific and Literary Approaches to the Thinking Body," for instance, Cuddy-Keane explores neuroscientific studies of cognition that establish that the body thinks. Using this as a starting point, Cuddy-Keane examines gesture as an entry-point into the way embodied cognition functions to help individuals activate certain mental schema in order to navigate different spaces. Bolens’s *The Style of Gestures* likewise is interested in studying gestures as they appear in literature. Bolens starts with scientific studies of embodied cognition—or kinesic intelligence—arguing that readers’ knowledge, grounded in corporeality, is essential to understanding the character dynamics in works by Milton, Austen, Proust, and Joyce.
narrative and how our widespread cultural practice of ignoring the body has resulted in an
anemic narrative theory, one unable to see why we define narrative as we currently do or
what the broader possibilities of narrative are. Punday argues that how we understand the
body is integral to modern understandings of narrative, especially as we encounter them
in contemporary narrative theory. For instance, he explains that in general in modern
narrative, there has been a correlation between degree of embodiment and the degree of
authority a character can achieve, a dynamic he terms “differential embodiment”: “Our
ideas of objectivity, in turn, usually depend on ideas about the power of the mind to
transcend particular physical circumstances. Thus, it is in some sense natural that stories
ascribe strong physical markings to untrustworthy figures” (176–77). In other words, he
explains the broad appeal in modern narrative for stories that come from a figure of
complete authority—by necessity, then, a figure that entails no bodiliness to emphasize
its individual perspective.

Punday’s exploration of embodiment in this particular case turns on locating how
many external, physical features of a character are provided. In this formula, the more
physical features described, the more embodied a character. It follows in this
understanding, then, that the more embodied a character, the more separate and
delineated from the reader that character becomes. Ultimately, I will locate a somewhat
similar trend in texts that represent sexual abuse, where I find more highly embodied
narrators less easy to identify with. Before I elaborate that dynamic, however, I first must
complicate the notion of embodiment Punday employs by separating it into two different
types—one of which does have the effects on identification Punday describes, one of which has the opposite effect.

Like Punday and Warhol, I do wish to affirm the centrality of the body in both represented storyworlds and in the reading experience. When narratives emphasize the physicality of character-narrators, I will argue, this trend has an effect on the ethical and affective dynamics of that narrative. However, my understanding of embodiment departs from both Punday’s and Warhol’s understandings in that I am interested in a more abstract, more nebulous, and more experiential dynamic than Punday’s emphasis on physicality. I will therefore argue for a more complex understanding of the body in narrative and the phenomenon of embodiment, which we can divided into two types: embodiment as physicality, viewed from the outside—what I will call external embodiment—and embodiment as experience, suggested as a subjective state that individual characters may or may not feel, which I will call experiential embodiment.¹⁵

External embodiment is the kind that Punday tends to focus on, an emphasis on the physical attributes emphasized in the aesthetic description of a character. Experiential embodiment has to do with phenomenological understandings of how an individual subjectively experiences his or her body—in particular, how individual characters

¹⁵ In using the concept of experientiality, my terminology echoes that of Monika Fludernik, who argued that what specifically defines narrative is its ability to capture experientiality. My interest, however, is different in that I am not invested in addressing what all narrative does with regard to experience; instead, I am interested in describing how some narratives capture some particular facets of experientiality. And just as narratives themselves can fall on a spectrum of what they represent experientiality, a single narrative can represent a spectrum of an individual’s consciousness of that experientiality. Because I am invested in the potential for change within a character across a single narrative, and in the potential for narratives to choose not to represent character experience in this way, my approach differs from Fludernik’s.
experience their bodies as inhabited, as central to their beings. I want to explore how that experience of embodiment might be reflected in narrative by more than mere descriptions of body parts. How, in other words, do authors make certain aesthetic choices to successfully convey character experience of embodiment? And what are the effects of these techniques and that embodiment on the ethical dynamics surrounding sexual abuse that the narratives invoke?

I examine how these experiences reflect what seem to be varying degrees of perceived connection between an individual character’s mind and body. By examining the experience of embodiment, I therefore shift the inquiry from the political and gendered implications of specific bodily responses, and from demonstrating any “truth” about mind and body, to a question about how certain narratives represent characters’ changing relations to their own bodies. Indeed, to find much scholarly discourse on such an experiential focus on embodiment, I discovered I had to look further afield from literary studies, especially given that the primary focus now is in the vein emphasized by Bolens and promoted by Antonio Damasio’s studies. Where I found this emphasis was in the work of Richard Shusterman, proponent of a philosophy he calls *somaesthetics*, a pragmatist aesthetic philosophy that promotes what he calls “body consciousness.” Soma, according to Shusterman, “denotes not mere physical body but the lived, sentient, intentional, body that involves mental, social, and cultural dimensions. The soma is not merely an object of consciousness but a conscious subjectivity that displays different levels of consciousness (and unconsciousness)” (“Soma” 315). The phrase “different levels of consciousness (and unconsciousness)” is what is important here and what
distinguishes Shusterman from other literary critics and even other theorists of phenomenology. Whereas Merleau-Ponty, for instance, emphasizes the “value of unreflective or implicit somatic consciousness”—what Shusterman quotes another philosopher Shaun Gallagher as calling “performative forgetfulness of the body” (318)—Shusterman emphasizes a broader range of potential somaesthetic awareness. He elaborates this range from inexplicit consciousness, when our body remains aware of surroundings as we sleep, through explicit consciousness, such as when we notice if our breathing is short or ragged. He continues through levels with more awareness:

Finally, there are cases of more reflective somatic consciousness, such as when we are not only explicitly aware that we are breathing but also clearly conscious of our conscious awareness of breathing and of how that reflexive consciousness affects our breathing and other dimensions of somatic experience. These explicit and reflective levels of consciousness, which can blend or overlap into each other, I describe respectively as somaesthetic perception and somaesthetic reflection. (“Body Consciousness” 133–34)

My interest in analyzing these works lies in examining how characters move among these different levels and how the trauma of sexual abuse influences their ability to move toward somaesthetic perception and somaesthetic reflection.16

---

16 Carruthers also discusses the phenomenon of embodiment from a philosophical perspective, distinguishing between “online” and “offline” representations of the body and arguing that integrated offline representations of the body—which “include information from the senses of touch, proprioception, heat, cold, vision and feelings of emotions” (1315) are what underlie the sense of embodiment.
Within the latter category, characters may move along a continuum from an experience of complete disembodiment toward fully realized connection between mind and body. In this respect, my analysis departs from much scholarship invested in exploring embodiment, as I am also interested in represented character experiences that may, at first glance, seem to further entrench the still-powerful legacy of Cartesian mind-body dualism. However, in works that are at the intersection of sexuality, taboo desires, and trauma as a result of sexual violence, the possibility of disembodied experience must enter the picture.

This way of looking at embodiment is important for understanding a text’s affective dynamics, because it melds the two understandings currently dominant in what is known as affect studies. By turning to the body itself, I trouble the deep reliance on reason and ethics to determine affective dynamics that pervades rhetorical narrative theory as described by Phelan. On the other hand, by focusing on characters’ experiences of and attitudes about the mind-body connection, I try to acknowledge that affect must be captured by more than scientific observation of physiological sensations. Affect may begin with the physical, bodily sensations, but in order to account for its complexity and the way thoughts and awareness about the body can feed back into the body’s own experience, we must also attend to the represented psychological and emotional character dynamics that might be stirred up by, or even that might be contributing to, those sensations. Embodiment theory and somaesthetics are heavily invested in the interdependence of body and mind.
The focus on embodiment is particularly apt for narratives that represent sexual abuse and/or taboo violation, whether the story is narrated by a perpetrator or a victim of sexual abuse. This is because the extent to which that narrator (and potentially other characters) experience themselves as being fully embodied takes on new significance in light of both sexual violation and the experience of taboo sexual desires. In other words, the fraught relationship between embodiment (often seen as a positive self-awareness of the mind-body connection), sexuality, and societal judgments about specific, taboo sexual desires all have an important bearing on the ethical and affective dynamics of a narrative. On the one hand, from the perspective of a victim of sexual abuse, the degree of embodiment becomes a window into that individual’s psychological state. That is, in the late twentieth century, after the widespread recognition in the psychiatric community of PTSD, general cultural knowledge about trauma acknowledges that victims of trauma and sexual abuse often afterward experience a sense of disembodiment or disconnection.17 The disconnect from the body is therefore seen as a sign of trauma, and the ability to reconnect with the violated body may be seen as forward movement in a narrative of therapeutic progress.

On the other hand, embodiment also has central significance in light of sexual abuse when the story is narrated by a perpetrator, because the perpetrator’s connection to his or her body often appears as a connection to the (in this case, taboo) sexual body. In these cases, embodiment has the potential to be reframed, not as a story of therapeutic progress.

---

17 See, for instance, Hlavka’s exploration of how children discuss their experience of embodiment after sexual abuse. See also Young and Farley and Keaney for studies about incidences of dissociation and other instances of psychological breakdown of integrity as a result of childhood sexual abuse.
recovery, but as a story of sexual deviance, excess, and even violence (against the victims). In either case, a character’s experience of shifting dynamics in the mind-body relation—how much he or she feels or desires a sense of a split between mind and body, versus how much he or she achieves an awareness of the interdependence of mind and body—becomes crucial information for readers’ understanding of that character’s psychological state, for readers’ privileging of certain information in order to cast ethical judgments, and even their ability to identify with the experience narrated.

In the works I study, the former type of embodiment, the focus on external physicality, tends to result in less sympathetic characters engaged in sexually abusive dynamics. In the novel narrated by a perpetrator, *Lolita*, we can see, by virtue of an opposed dynamic between the two, that the more bodily description of the narrator, the more the fact of sexual violation is highlighted. This kind of general rule makes some kind of common sense, especially when juxtaposed with the argument that Humbert de-emphasizes his own sexual body in an attempt to make himself more sympathetic. However, what is also interesting in these novels is the ways they use experiential embodiment to push back against the harsh ethical judgments of the physical bodies described.

Experiential embodiment, on the other hand, is central to all three narratives. What runs through all three is a tension between characters focusing on the ever-present physical (and sexual) body—because of the pain associated with the desires embedded in the lived physical body—and either feeling disembodied or experiencing a desire to achieve disembodied-ness, to transcend the physical body. What’s most interesting is that
the desire to transcend the human body is a felt, paradoxically embodied, state. In two of the narratives, *The Kiss* and *Edinburgh*, both narrated by characters who are victims of sexual abuse, disembodied experience—either achieved or desired—is central to the representation of their trauma. But interestingly, even in *Lolita*, we see this pull, the desire to transcend the body of Humbert. The more characters reflect upon the desire to transcend that body, the more the limits of the human body are emphasized.

This desire to transcend the body happens because the characters’ experience complex relations with their bodies due, as noted above, either to trauma (in the case of the character being a victim of abuse) or to another type of psychological pain or inability to accept deviant sexual desires. The pain both creates and is created by desire, both unfulfilled desire for something perceived to be essential to happiness and desire to escape that pain—hence desire, in some ways, to transcend the body. This complex interweaving of pain and desire as represented through the experiential embodiment I describe lifts the dynamics of these passages out of the particular and into a more abstract, generalizable realm that emphasizes affect states rather than particular character relations (which entail ethical dynamics of actions between characters). These passages that become more general and emphasize characters’ psychological pain—pain that is felt within the body through the impossible desire to escape the body—offer the potential for a reader to identify with this pain and desire. The more these narratives emphasize the character’s individual internalized experience of embodiment in moments of such pain and desire—experiential embodiment or lack thereof—the more potential for identification there is between the reader and the narrator, even when that narrator is a
perpetrator of sexual abuse. By contrast, the more a narrative emphasizes external embodiment—the actual physicality of bodies, whether or not in relation to a taboo sex act—in these narratives representing sexual abuse, the more alienating the narrator becomes. This ebb and flow of identification works in tension with the ethical judgments about sexual abuse suggested by the narrative.

When I say that readers have the potential to “identify” with a character, I am interested less in articulating positive judgments readers make about characters in these moments than I am in the potential to feel with the affects conveyed in these passages. In other words, these are not passages that encourage an assessment that the character in question deserves sympathy because his actions were redeemable, or because he was a victim in some way. In these passages representing experiential embodiment, assessments and judgments of this sort are de-centered.

Laura Green discusses the concept of identification in such depth that we see the historical convergences with and divergences from the concept and notions of an ethics of reading. According to Green, literary identification has to do with similarities between character and reader, with “connections [that] begin but do not end with a reader’s recognition of aspects of her- or himself in a fictional character” (1). Literary identification, in one sense, has to do with “the passionate sense of connection to the text that ‘seek[s] both to penetrate and to encompass,’ to inhabit the text and to create it” (19). Green’s history of the concept of identification covers a wide swath of ground, moving from nineteenth-century understandings of the term to those from Freud and contemporary scholars, as well as between the interrelated concepts of identification and
sympathy. The central disagreement Green locates within all of these understandings has to do with the relationship between self and other in the process of identification; each position has ethical implications.

According to these theories [posited in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries], identification, underlying sympathy, allows us to reach out to selves outside our own, and thus at least implicitly maintains the value of the other. According to Freud’s theory, identification allows us to bring others inside us—to assimilate or introject them, a direction that does not require a particular ethical stance toward, or attachment of value to, the other. (27)

The important facet of this passage is how “sympathy” is intertwined with an understanding of identification in such a way that both dynamics become tied to fundamentally “moral” concerns; George Eliot’s investigation of sympathy and identification, for instance, is at base about describing how fiction could be a “positive resource for the cultivation of morality” (Green 23).

By contrast, identification from a Freudian perspective sidesteps ethical questions in that the individual identifying does not necessarily attach value to the other. That said, as Green later acknowledges, the autocentrism involved when one simply finds oneself in the other undermines the very ethical and political arguments that scholars and literary figures make on behalf of fictional realism. As Green says, “From the point of view of political critique, the strong pedagogical and ethical claims made on behalf of fictional realism—based partly on its imputed ability to created sympathy for real others on the
model of the identifications it encourages with fictional ones—are equally open to
question. If identification takes a ‘detour through the other’… its final destination is
always the self” (35–36). This dynamic holds for and is particularly relevant in the
narratives I examine. These narratives rely precisely—to varying degrees—on a reader’s
willingness to find the self within the other (or, at least, to try to do so), as this is the only
way one might reach some form of intense feeling for the problematic character in
question.

Another way to think about this tension is to frame it as examining when
identification becomes “risky” to some degree for a reader, in personal terms or in larger
political/ethical terms. There is, of course, the “risk” of being unethical by being too
autocentric, as Green suggests above. But once we set that aside, we see another, more
interesting risk created by the specifics of what these narratives represent. On the one
hand, identification with fictional beings seems easier—and therefore safer—than
identification with real others. Green demonstrates the emotional appeal of identifying
with fictional characters because the very un-real-ness of fictional characters eliminates
some of the risk of connecting too much with them. Quoting Catherine Gallagher, she
notes:

Fiction, then, stimulates sympathy because, with very few exceptions, it is
easier to identify with nobody’s story and share nobody’s sentiments than
to identify with anybody else’s story and share anybody else’s
sentiments…. Nobody [i.e. a fictional character] was eligible to be the
universally preferred anyone because nobody, unlike somebody, was
never anybody else. (Gallagher 172; qtd. in Green 22)

Catharine Stimpson elaborates this concept in “Reading for Love,” examining
specifically how identifying with a beloved fictional character brings with it all the
benefits of emotional connection, without the risks of identifying with real others.
Discussing readers’ love of Jo March from Alcott’s *Little Women*, she explains the safety
of the feeling:

A bonus of loving Jo … is the safety of the feeling. Like the perfect
mother, she offers the heart a haven. … For how could a Jo, except in a
reader’s self-authored delusions, spurn one’s affections? How could she
speak? Or refuse to speak? … Jo is this way because Jo is bodiless. As a
result, how could loving her, again except in a self-authored delusion, ever
be consummated? The anxieties of actually having to be erotic, whether as
heterosexual or homosexual, fade away—like film exposed to sunlight.

(969)

In this understanding, identifying with a fictional character is to go the safer route, to get
the benefits of an emotional experience (perhaps a perceived sense of connection) while
avoiding the risk of discovering that the real, living individual can disappoint and hurt
one.

On the other hand, the very reason this type of identification is the only possible
type in the narratives I examine means that it also presents a risk. What these novels
represent, and what their character-narrators are often trying to justify, makes them, on
some level, “risky” to identify with because of their unethical behaviors and self-justifying rhetoric. What does it mean about us as individuals, I might think, if we find ourselves in a character like Humbert? Can we as readers even admit to any points of convergence? Is there an actual personal “cost” to finding oneself in some of the emotions and physical experience of a repellant character-narrator? These questions point to some of the reasons readers might have for resisting identification with a narrator such as Humbert, narrator-Kathryn, or Edinburgh’s Fee.

The potential reading experience I am describing is possible when a reader is willing to acknowledge some points of convergence and to find his or her own pain within the narrator’s pain. The connection to Freudian notions of identification also necessarily brings up the question of where and how “desire” fits in, and again, Green’s understanding helps here. Eva Badowska explains how, despite Freud’s attempt to separate identification and desire, the two “like two ghosts, occupy one place and keep fluidly morphing into one another.” Green elaborates: “I read desire largely in terms of identification: a desire to be, rather than to have, a particular kind of subject—sometimes, but not always, including a particular kind of sexual subject” (33). The dynamics in these narratives are much more complicated than a “desire to be…a particular kind of subject,” given that it’s unlikely many readers want to be Humbert or Kathryn or even Fee. The alignment of desire intertwined with pain, though, as part of a general human condition of dissatisfaction and disappointment, allows for a slightly modified notion of identification—identification as finding and elaborating one’s own experience in the characters’ experience.
Let me pause for a moment to address the difference that the nonfiction status of *The Kiss* makes for this argument. I do believe that the dynamics described above do pertain to a reader’s relationship with Harrison on one level, because there is still the opportunity to feel with a narrating subject. But what’s particularly interesting is that *The Kiss* is the one narrative in my study that, even as it delineates many layers of affective experience, does so to the end of demonstrating how ultimately unknowable Kathryn’s pain actually is. That is, *Edinburgh* and *Lolita* attempt to bring the reader inside the pain, to have readers experience that pain for themselves; *The Kiss* instead delineates the pain but more as an object of study and less as a recreated experience for the reader. The nonfiction status of the narrative, though, adds a layer of ethical obligation onto the reader (which I describe as the injunction to “witness”) to attend to this difference, to acknowledge what is unknown, and to feel what can only be guessed. The fictional narratives do not have this intensity of obligation to attend, though to some degree, my argument relies on a general valuing of this kind of deep, close attention to others’ affective experience—whether that experience appears in fiction or nonfiction.

Because my notion of identification relies on recognizing affective parallels of experience even in spite of negative ethical judgments, and because affect in my terms is deeply intertwined with the body, the reader’s experience of embodiment is the natural extension of considering identification with character experiential embodiment. That is, the question that follows from “How does representation of embodiment affect readers’ identification?” is “How does this identification bear upon readers’ bodies?” However, by asking questions about readers’ bodies, I am not interested in asking questions about what
the physical sensations created by reading are. It seems impossible to make a claim about
whether a reading body experiences the affects Warhol describes—the gasp of shock or
awe, the yawn of boredom, or the tears of sadness or happiness, or as I might add in the
case of the texts I take on, the gag of disgust or the physical pull of yearning with a
character. Just as my questions about characters’ embodiment focus on the characters’
shifting awareness of inhabiting the body, my questions about readers have to do with
when texts, through their representation of embodiment, encourage certain similar shifts
in readers’ own bodily awareness. I ask, in other words, how do bodily representations
shift readers’ basic awareness of bodily experiences, and how does this shifting
awareness bear on the reader’s identification with the character? The reader’s awareness
of his or her own body corresponds, then, to the character’s experiential embodiment—
though not to the other dynamic of external embodiment that also applies in these novels.
The distinction between external embodiment and experiential embodiment does not
extend to readers, because the former is a discursive feature, a way of describing a body
from the outside and focusing on the physicality of the character’s body. The latter is,
instead, a character’s internal experience, something a reader can likewise experience
while reading. It is possible that both types of embodiment as represented in a narrative
bear on the reader’s experiential embodiment, but without a narrator describing a reader’s
physical body, there is no external embodiment of the reader.

In starting with this question about how bodily representations affect readers’
bodily experiences, in many ways I delve in where Warhol ends in her overview
concluding remarks. *Having A Good Cry* is interested primarily in promoting a “body-
conscious reading strategy” (70), something that must be explicitly prompted for some readers to analyze, not to mention notice in the first place. Warhol describes the process of becoming body-conscious in a way that did not emphasize consciousness about how one’s body looks to or is objectified by others, but rather how it feels to live in a body, to encounter what I have called experiential embodiment: “The experience of massage has made me body-conscious in a way that is entirely separate from the realm of the visual. It makes me understand my subjectivity in a mode that has nothing to do with being the object of a gaze, nor indeed with objectifying anyone else.” She further elaborates: “Just as I ‘forget myself’ during a massage, I can also forget myself while reading. I hope the argument of Having a Good Cry will promote a new body-consciousness to accompany the act of reading, without falling into the discomfort of thinking about how the body looks” (123).

Like Warhol, I am interested in what a kind of body-conscious reading might look like, but I begin from a different opposition. Warhol opposes “body-conscious” to a kind of self-consciousness about the physical and visual body created by all of the expectations of sexist contemporary American society. Thus, for instance, this kind of body-consciousness is important as an alternative to “being the object of a gaze” or “objectifying anyone else.” By contrast, I am interested in “body-consciousness” as the alternative to what I perceive as a different problem common in American culture, particularly in intellectual American culture: the tendency—not to “forget” the body, which implies that we once attended to it and are relieved to have permission to forget it—but rather never even to notice the body in the first place. Shusterman acknowledges
both possibilities, noting that the body “expresses the ambiguity of human being, as both
subjective sensibility that experiences the world and as an object perceived in that world”
(Body Consciousness 3). While acknowledging the problems Warhol notes, he finds the solution not in permission to “forget [one]self” but rather in the ability to remember the body from an experiential standpoint:

Somatic self-consciousness in our culture is excessively directed toward a consciousness of how one’s body appears to others in terms of entrenched societal norms of attractive appearance…. Virtually no attention is directed toward examining and sharpening the consciousness of one’s actual bodily feelings and actions so that we can deploy such somatic reflection to know ourselves better and achieve a more perceptive self-consciousness to guide us toward better self-use. (Body Consciousness 6)

In line with Shusterman, I would suggest that the tendency to “forget oneself” while reading is one that I believe we cannot overstate, especially when we are discussing, as Warhol does, middle-class pleasure-reading, a reading practice that is often the starting-point for many who end up also becoming academic readers. The prevalent, deeply ingrained Cartesian dualism that assumes a mind-body split still holds wide appeal for many young academics first inducted into the surprising and exciting world of intellectual exploration at the college level. These readers moving into the academic realm are often those who were originally readers we might more typically associate with “middle-class pleasure-readers.” In other words, I do not see a divide between the idea of reading for pleasure and what often initially draws students of literature into departments to study
texts. Reading and thinking as “escape”—either from culture, if we’re talking about fictional escape from the socio-economic and socio-political world in non-academic reading, or from the body, if we’re talking about more cerebral approaches to reading—continues to hold strong sway in popular discourse around reading novels and academic work. In other words, rather than asking “How does reading feel?” a follow-up question to my analysis of character embodiment is “When (and in what specific contexts) does reading feel?” Accordingly, then, I agree with Warhol that reading leads to the tendency to forget oneself, but rather than see this forgetting as a good thing—as a reprieve from a kind of body self-consciousness (which it might well be)—I see this as in opposition to the “new body consciousness to accompany the act of reading” (Warhol 123).

When I reflect on readers’ experiences, I am reflecting primarily on character experiences and suggesting that the extent to which characters’ physical bodies are emphasized has effects on how much readers are encouraged to notice their own physical bodies. In general, though, this is the extent of my insight into readerly embodied experience, as I do not believe it is possible to reflect in very specific terms on how

---

18 Italo Calvino’s address to “Reader” in If on a winter’s night a traveler, indeed, while describing the process of situating one’s body in order to read, simultaneously upholds the ideal of forgetting one’s body while reading: “Find the most comfortable position: seated, stretch out, curled on, or lying flat. Flat on your back, on your side, on your stomach. … Of course, the ideal position for reading is something you can never find… Try to foresee now everything that might make you interrupt your reading. Cigarettes within reach, if you smoke, and the ashtray. Anything else? Do you have to pee? All right, you know best” (3,4). The elaborate situating the narrator encourages Reader to do is in the service of the Reader’s body not interfering with his continued immersion in the storyworld once he has delved in. While this kind of reading is pleasure-reading rather than explicitly academic reading, the initial identification of a real reader with Reader initially blurs that distinction. And the status of Calvino’s novel in many curricula studying postmodern fiction suggests that it functions often as an object of study and an opportunity for the very kind of pleasure-reading it describes.
readers’ bodies experience reading these specific texts. The shift in noticing and forgetting the reading body, though, has implications for how much readers are drawn into and pushed out of fictional worlds—and therefore for their emotional engagement in the storyworld and their identification with the narrating figure. In other words, then, I turn to characters’ body awareness to gain insight into how readers are encouraged to experience more deeply engaged affective identification or more distanced ethical judgments.

**Ethics and Value in Relation to Embodiment**

Ultimately, I find that attending deeply to affective and embodied experience offers a reading experience that is richer than attending—as the central ethical problem in these narratives would have us do—primarily to negative ethical judgments. Such a critical practice also better attends to the complexity of what the individual moments of the reading experience can look like. That is, my project is motivated by both a descriptive and a prescriptive impulse. The first impulse aims to describe, in detail, what a reading experience can be like on the first pass, when we linger over the affective depths of certain moments in a narrative. What are the affective dynamics of those moments, and what does an individual reader do with them, psychologically, even if subsequent passages prompt him or her to reassess the original interpretation? While I cannot answer these questions about actual readers without working with actual readers, using tools such as interviews, focus groups, and surveys, my interpretations try to draw out the potential of such a reading practice.
On a prescriptive level, my approach cannot be said to depart from all talk of values in all contexts. That is, where I believe that we can discuss the separation of specific negative ethical judgments about characters from affective experience that encourages identification sometimes despite those judgments, I am specifically interested in the way negative ethical judgments about characters’ decisions and abusive actions are either attenuated or temporarily set aside in the considerations I elucidate in each chapter. To the extent that one sees in my approach a general valuing of affective experience as an ethics, to that extent one could say that I am in fact making an argument for a different kind of ethics in these narratives. I do not, however, believe that this is the most productive way of understanding these narratives and how they tackle judgments of their narrators in relation to identification. In this understanding, any redirection of our attention elsewhere implies a particular value of attending and thus an ethics; in this understanding, then, everything is ethics. Seeing everything as ethics does not capture the specific tensions that each of these narratives raises between, on the one hand, a clearly defined system of ethics focused on condemning sexually abusive actions and, on the other hand, a valuing of attending so deeply to affective experience that negative ethical judgment is either attenuated or becomes backgrounded.

The Case Studies

The primary focus in each chapter will be an analysis of the representation of character affect, which in these narratives is most often tied deeply to the character’s embodiment. In other words, I’ll be examining how the character’s relationship to his/her
body is represented, and how that relationship changes over the course of the narrative. This matters relative to the ethical judgments surrounding sexual abuse, because of the alignment I suggest between conflicts around experiential embodiment and the character’s desire to transcend his/her own body, either due to trauma or yearning for something unattainable. The pull into the storyworld itself mirrors the tension between embodiment and disembodiment that protagonists I examine experience.

*Edinburgh, The Kiss,* and *Lolita* reflect different ways of representing affect and different degrees of embodiment. Moreover, they present different relationships between affect/embodiment on the one hand and ethics on the other. Whereas *Edinburgh* represents a character who feels an intense experience of embodiment (bound by the body amidst intense desires to transcend that body), *The Kiss* and *Lolita* instead represent individuals who have to some degree disconnected from their own bodies, due to trauma and/or to denial about their sexual desires. Moreover, the narrative techniques to represent these dramas vary. *Edinburgh* uses poetic language to convey the feeling of experiential embodiment. *The Kiss* employs what critics have called “affectless prose,” simple sentences and a reporting-like quality that conveys the dissociation Kathryn felt. *Lolita* simply attempts to evade questions about the body and instead focus, in certain moments, on the fact of loss and the emptiness of the jail cell where Humbert narrates.

The relationship of affect to ethics is also different across these narratives, and it is this relationship that structures the ordering of my case studies. Rather than proceed chronologically, I proceed through three case studies addressing narratives with increasingly difficult ethical situations that thus present increasing barriers to
identification. *Edinburgh* and *The Kiss* are both narrated by victims of abuse, but *Edinburgh* draws a reader into Fee’s experience whereas *The Kiss* both demonstrates affective dynamics and highlights, on some level, the unknowability of the depth of Kathryn’s affective experience. *Lolita* is narrated by perpetrator Humbert whose elaborate attempts to justify his actions present the most barriers to attending to affect on its own terms. What we find is a range of relationships between the affective dynamics and ethics. In Case #1, *Edinburgh*, where embodiment is most paramount and thematized, affective dynamics reframe later ethical judgments. In Case #2, *The Kiss*, affective dynamics are not formed by ethical judgments about Harrison’s choices; rather, attending deeply to the complex affective dynamics—“witnessing”—is the ethical injunction of the narrative. In Case #3, *Lolita*, in local moments, affective dynamics exceed ethical judgments, as we encounter the potential to identify or feel pain with Humbert on a higher level than conflicts of the past.

In the first chapter, turning to Alexander Chee’s novel *Edinburgh*, I argue that the novel’s affective dynamics are most closely tied to the protagonist’s experiential embodiment, which is, in turn, deeply tied to aesthetic appreciation. The protagonist, Fee, experiences sexual abuse as a twelve-year-old boy, and the narrative charts his complex relationship to embodiment as a result of the trauma. He often feels disembodied and yet also experiences a strong sensation of living within his body, especially in the midst of intense desire to transcend that body. The novel thus redirects attention away from initial strong ethical judgments about Big Eric and onto the psychological experience of living through sexual trauma, living within the body, and coming to terms with sexuality after
that trauma. Fully attending to these affective dynamics in the beginning of the novel allows for a deep level of identification with Fee and encourages us to re-interpret another case of sexual abuse later in the novel. Affective dynamics thus temper the negative ethical judgments levied against both the primary sexual predator figure, Big Eric, and Fee himself after he has sex with his own teenage student, Warden.

Harrison’s *The Kiss* moves away from questions of aesthetic experience and experiential embodiment into a consideration of how affect is represented in a particular memoir form and what the consequences of this representation of affect are for identification. I argue that *The Kiss* demonstrates two forms of affect, one of which is the oft-noted “affectless” tone, which conveys Kathryn’s past trauma and the many layers of affect that roiled underneath her numbness and denial in the past. Ethics are relevant in this chapter insofar as I suggest that the memoir requests readers to act as “witnesses” to the complexity of these levels of affect. The second type of affect in the memoir is grounded in a narrative of recovery and is less persuasive and less powerful. The central affective and ethical dynamics of the memoir are those in the first half, before Harrison attempts to demonstrate recovery and movement toward reconciliation with her mother.

I turn last to the earliest work, Nabokov’s *Lolita*, as it presents the most difficult ethical situation given that it is narrated by a perpetrator. Here I articulate an audience position made possible in particular local moments of the narrative, when Humbert stops speaking to the many potential, explicitly named audiences (narratees like the jury member or the reader). In these moments, aimed at a *lyrical addressee*, Humbert loses focus on an audience and instead speaks to himself. His intentional, crafted rhetoric
falters and an overflow of spontaneous feeling takes over; considering these moments as “emotives” (building on the linguistic work of J. L. Austin), I argue that these passages thus reveal Humbert’s self-focus in the present day, which gives readers an opportunity simply to attend to the emotions rather than judge.

In addition to moving from least ethically difficult to most, these three case studies thus also progress toward a closer and closer focus on moments in each narrative. In *Edinburgh*, the argument addresses overall narrative trajectory. My argument about *The Kiss* considers how the understanding of affect shifts through the memoir, noting a shift about halfway through and focusing on the division between two halves. In the attention to the affectless prose in the first half of the memoir, I delve below the seemingly “affectless” prose and describe how it conveys multiple layers of affect in the past moments. My argument about *Lolita* draws in even closer on individual moments, considering the affective dynamics of these moments almost in isolation, when readers are asked simply to attend to Humbert’s expressions of pain. I argue that the focus loses specificity we find elsewhere in the novel and moves out toward more general levels of emotion and focus that make identification more possible.

Whereas *The Kiss* represents character disembodiment and denies the reader close knowledge of that feeling, *Lolita* and *Edinburgh* both represent the potential for art and aesthetic experience to lend itself to a desire for and movement toward disembodiment. Whereas one can easily, cynically interpret Humbert’s de-emphasizing of the body as an attempt to improve his persuasiveness, in *Edinburgh* this same disembodying move again becomes a signal of trauma. In both, the desired movement is away from and out of the
body (a feeling within the body of yearning to escape the body) and toward a kind of aesthetic fulfillment. In certain passages, the narratives themselves mirror this experience in the reader, drawn out of his or her body and into the aesthetic beauty mixed with emotional pain of the fictional world. The feeling thus becomes a kind of body consciousness of desired disembodiment.

Above all, in all of these works, my attention remains on the character’s affective experience, the potential to identify, and what we gain from attending to affective dynamics while temporarily setting aside negative ethical judgments about the abuser figure where possible. In these narratives whose plots alone bring the question of ethics back to the foreground, this focus on individual experience, embodiment, and affect is a distinctive move, and it reflects a value we might expect to find less often in a novel and more reliably in a therapist’s office. In this way, these novels relocate the questions about ethics away from the reader sitting back in judgment of the perpetrator of abuse and instead suggest that fully attending to affect first is necessary in order to reach a full understanding of any ethical dimension.
Chapter 2: Embodiment and Mind-Body Integration in Chee’s *Edinburgh*

My first case study of the interrelations of ethics and affect, particularly affect as embodiment, is in fact the most recent novel of the narratives I study, Alexander Chee’s *Edinburgh* (2001). I begin here because Chee’s novel presents us with the most explicit exploration of affect as a question of embodiment, yet it is also the least ethically problematic narrative. That is, the affective dynamics of the novel, when they are conveyed through characters’ affective experiences (their striving toward experiential embodiment) have a somewhat shifting relationship to the ethical judgments readers are encouraged to make about child abuse, specifically, men who have sex with boys. I do not mean here to suggest that the affective dynamics of *Edinburgh* exist only as a product of this experiential embodiment; in certain passages, affective dynamics that are deeply tied to ethical judgments work in concert to establish a value system that harshly judges child abusers and attends only to the harm caused to children.

Yet when we attend to a subset of affective dynamics that are tied to experiential embodiment, the novel encourages identification to such a degree that, ultimately, it recasts priorities established in the prior representations of the child abuser Big Eric. *Edinburgh* does so by offering such an intense focus on individual psychology and experience—and the drama of the protagonist’s experience of embodiment—that ethical
judgments about sexual abuse become relevant primarily insofar as they impinge upon a reader’s understanding of that character’s individual pain, trauma, and desire. Ethical judgments against sexual abuse therefore are highlighted toward the end of *Edinburgh* primarily when they are in fact attenuated by reader identification. At its most extreme, the novel only subtly recasts the ethics of how to perceive and understand the two characters who have sex with boys, Big Eric and Fee. In other words, Chee’s representation of sexual acts between the various men and boys in the novel lead to readerly affective experiences and identifications that influence the priority of values surrounding questions of child abuse, sex and sexuality, trauma, and relationships. In this chapter, I will argue that when we attend to affect, particularly character experience of embodiment and how it affects readerly identification, the ethical judgments about sex between men and boys become more complicated than the novel initially seems to suggest.\(^{19}\)

The subtlety of ethical judgments led by affective experience and reader identification is primarily a product of the perspective, form, and style of the novel. Specifically, the use of the homodiegetic simultaneous present tense encourages a strong focus on the moment-by-moment personal, lived experience, a focus that in this novel also becomes an exploration into the character’s experience of embodiment. By contrast, attending to a simple plot summary suggests a clarity of ethical perspective that taps into

---

\(^{19}\) *Edinburgh* has a remarkable dearth of scholarship on it. Over the past six years, I have found only one published article on the novel: Sohn’s exploration of childhood sexuality, queerness, and Asian American identity in Chee’s novel. Sohn’s argument that “*Edinburgh* dismantles the structure that upholds the preheterosexual innocence of the Child” (245) aligns with my initial claims that this novel is one that pushes back against mainstream cultural narratives.
the narratives of moral panic that Phillip Jenkins describes as common to the 1980s and 1990s. The plot alone suggests the intensity of feeling and simplicity of judgments we might expect in a melodrama rather than a psychological novel.

**Plot, Ethics, and the Form of Melodrama**

*Edinburgh* tells the story of Fee, who, at age twelve, joins a boys’ choir and is molested, along with twelve other members, by the director, known to the boys as Big Eric. Fee knows even before the molestation that he loves his best friend in the choir, Peter, and the molestation occurs just as he is struggling to contain and understand his desire for his best friend. Because Fee is among the first to experience the molestation, he feels responsible for not warning Peter and thus for not preventing his friend’s abuse; desiring Peter, Fee also fears the similarities between himself and his abuser. This guilt is only magnified when both Peter and Fee’s other friend Zach commit suicide, presumably over the molestation. Though Fee remains suicidal throughout college, he survives two suicide attempts and eventually moves on to a stable life. He meets the aptly nicknamed “Bridey,” who pursues him determinedly, and Fee is finally able to develop a healthy, equal relationship with another man. Fee and Bridey eventually move together back to a boarding school near Fee’s hometown, and Fee settles into working as a teacher and swim coach. At the school, feeling safe in his relationship and newfound stability, Fee meets Warden, a seventeen-year-old boy who immediately falls for his teacher. Warden intensely desires Fee, but—in a remarkable coincidence that neither character knows yet—he is also revealed to be the son of Big Eric, the same infant who was around when
Fee attended choir camp, and who has never known his father or why his father has been in prison most of his life. Fee also finds himself drawn to Warden, and when he eventually succumbs to his desires and has sex with Warden, he experiences a resurgence of his long-felt guilt and further conviction that he always saw Big Eric in himself, given their similar desires for young blond boys. Bringing the plot to its dramatic climax is Warden’s simultaneous discovery that the crime that landed his now-released father in prison is the abuse of the very teacher he loves. When Warden learns about this, he (possibly accidentally) murders his father by fire in a fit of rage. When Warden comes to Fee for protection after the murder, Fee’s fear of repeating the crimes of Big Eric is intensified by the feeling of being trapped by circumstances outside of his control. The resolution occurs when Fee reconnects with his soul (actively characterized as a separate being and called “Soul”), which he has always felt was lacking, leaves Warden, and returns to Bridey. This return is characterized as a return to a stable sense of self and to ethical decisions that take into account Warden’s ability to consent.

Such a plot summary seems quite overwrought, perhaps what we might call melodramatic. The intensity of pain and suffering and the explicit judgment from the novel that the young boys are victims of a predator suggest a clarity of ethics about how readers should judge child molesters and sex between men and boys. Readers might therefore be forgiven for reading the entirety of *Edinburgh* through a lens that emphasizes the ethical violation of sexual abuse, with little attention to gray areas. Only ten pages into the novel, readers encounter Big Eric, who brings the boys on a choir section leader camping trip, grooming them for long-term sexual abuse. The extreme,
melodramatic outcomes of many of these boys’ lives suggest that the effects of child sexual abuse are unavoidable, long-lasting, and pervasive psychological damage. The novel strongly suggests that the suicidal tendencies Fee, Peter, and Zach all have are a direct result of—that is, a sign of the trauma that stems from—their abuse by the choir director Big Eric. Fee’s best friend Peter commits suicide by setting himself on fire, and his lover Zach commits suicide with a shotgun. Fee himself experiences suicidal thoughts throughout his young adulthood, attempting to kill himself on two separate occasions in college. In addition, Freddy Moran, another boy-victim-survivor from the choir, contracts HIV and dies during young adulthood; while this death is, of course, not suicide, it contributes to the pervasive sense that child abuse leads to early death. The prevalence of suicide and death is implicitly tied to the boys’ experience of molestation in their early teen years, as by the logic of plot structure, the central conflict of part 1 of the novel becomes the most obvious explanation of the boys’ otherwise inexplicable deaths.

The perspective of Edinburgh, limited to Fee’s consciousness until over halfway through the novel, furthers this connection. Restricting audience knowledge to only the knowledge Fee has, the narrative only suggests reasons for the suicides that surround Fee’s childhood; it cannot provide definitive “answers”—the unassailable certainty—that Fee and others who experience the suicide of a loved one so crave. Instead of granting insight through individual character psychology of the other boys in the choir, then, Edinburgh, through Fee, suggests a causal relation between the abuse and the suicides.

In a reading that emphasizes the abuse and trauma tending toward pain and death, the affective dynamics of reader response to Fee’s experience are intimately tied to
ethical judgments against Big Eric. That is, reading about Fee’s pain and trauma elicits compassion, an emotional response dependent upon a judgment that the recipient is a victim of some sort of wrong. Thus focusing on the ethics of Big Eric’s actions leads to a particular version of readerly affective response grounded in compassion and sympathy.

Emphasizing ethics in this way also leads one to read Fee’s affair with Warden in a similarly stringent black-and-white way. Though Warden pursues Fee, Warden is seventeen and a student of Fee’s. Indeed, Alexander Chee himself has suggested such a reading. Calling the novel a melodrama, in an interview, he notes at one point, “It’s like a myth, according to the principles of Greek tragedy” and later, “[O]f course not many people witness as much death in a pattern like this. The organization within the story of the suicides and the murder, these are aspects of melodrama…. I borrowed from melodrama to create dramatic tension” (24). Chee’s usage of the term “melodrama” resonates with Thomas Elsaesser’s understanding of the genre. Characteristic features are “emotional shock-tactics and the blatant playing on the audience’s known sympathies,” but even more important is an emphasis on plot:

the non-psychological conception of the *dramatis personae*, who figure less as autonomous individuals than to transmit the action and link the various locales within a total constellation. In this respect, melodramas have a myth-making function insofar as their significance lies in the structure and articulation of the action, not in any psychologically motivated correspondence with individualized experience. (69)
Agustin Zarzosa’s understanding of melodrama further explains the motivation behind such a focus on plot and the myth-making function. Zarzosa theorizes melodrama as “a mode that addresses the problem of suffering” (243) and positions it against three other modes that likewise address this problem but do so by “formulating personal narratives as a means of resistance.” By contrast, melodrama “invokes personal narratives only to the extent that they stage ideas that question the moral state of the world and stretch the possibilities of life” (244). Ultimately, when attending to more than the trajectory of the plot, I will demonstrate that Edinburgh vacillates between the melodramatic mode and what Zarzosa calls the “devotional mode” (a mode that “finds hope in the otherworldly” [244]), but for the purposes of discussing how Chee represents his own novel, what is important is the focus on “the moral state of the world” and the emphasis on the melodramatic mode as staging ideas to interrogate such questions.

All of these facets of melodrama align with Chee’s understanding, which highlights the potential for an initial approach that emphasizes the black-and-white nature of the ethical judgments about child abuse and Fee’s affair with Warden. Consider, for instance, Chee’s response to a very nuanced and complex question from an interviewer about the ethics of Warden and Fee sleeping together. The interviewer’s question captures the potential tension between ethical and affective responses to the situation, how a reader might both identify with Warden, wanting the encounter for the boy, and also dread it, knowing that for Fee to sleep with a seventeen-year-old is to commit an unethical action that would damage both himself and the teenager. Chee’s answer,
surprisingly, simplifies the dynamic down to the trajectory of the plot and focuses solely on the ethics of that encounter:

[Interviewer]: *Obviously in light of what happens earlier in the book, this [the sexual encounter between Warden and Fee] is a terrifying and horrifying thing, but it is depicted in such a beautiful way that as I read it, I felt very empathetic to Warden. But when we’re back with Fee, that moment was like an oncoming train. But how can we feel both ways about this? Is it an issue of aesthetics? Of aestheticizing what is from what we know to be a wrong or bad affair?*

[Chee]: The overlay of their narrative is what allows you to know why it’s the worst thing they could do. And that’s where the horror is; it’s not in any of the language. That’s what I wanted: I wanted the horror to be in the reader, not anywhere else, because that seemed the most honest. (21–22)

The language of “the horror” and “the worst thing they could do” suggests the intensity of response we might associate with melodrama as Chee conceives of it. The “overlay” Chee refers to has to do with the history that ties Fee to Warden—that Warden is biologically related to Fee’s abuser—and that makes Fee’s actions all the more meaningful and fraught when he finds himself attracted to the teenager. Specifically, this intensity of reaction, and the language of “the worst thing” taps into the fear that Fee himself has that his actions are parallel to those of Big Eric. In other words, “the worst thing” echoes the sense of fear and fatalism Fee himself experiences as he sleeps with Warden, as well as his fear that he has become just as much of a pedophile and a predator.
as Big Eric was. While it is true that Chee does not explicitly address and refute the interviewer’s claim that we empathize with Warden, the simplicity of his response seems initially to leave the door open for a kind of reading that would emphasize the melodramatic aspects, complete with consistent negative ethical judgments against all men who have sex with boys.

There are a number of questions raised by Alexander Chee’s claims about the novel, however. What is distinctly missing from the author’s commentary here is a nod to the history of Fee’s unwarranted guilt that the novel has represented thus far. Also lacking, therefore, is an acknowledgment of how that history of guilt and suicidal tendencies might lead Fee to prematurely take on too much guilt yet again in this scenario. In other words, this interview raises significant questions about how much the flesh-and-blood author, in this case, can offer a persuasive interpretation regarding what the text of *Edinburgh* is actually doing. I do not mean to suggest that Chee has completely misrepresented his own novel; rather, I do argue that, at least in this moment of this interview, he has placed too much emphasis on the ethics of this final sexual encounter. In Chee’s language, there seem to be few gray areas, few possibilities for one situation to constitute sexual abuse but for the other to be intergenerational sex—possibly sexual abuse, but with mitigating factors. And in Chee’s reading, there is also context of the prior affective dynamics to gauge whether that final sexual encounter really does seem to be “the worst thing.” Granted, Fee thinks it is the worst thing they could do, but attending to some facets of the affective dynamics earlier in the novel complicates the reader’s judgment of Fee’s own judgments.
Ethics, Moral Panics, and the Representation of Big Eric

The oversimplified ethics suggested in Chee’s response, moreover, are borne out by ethical and affective dynamics early in the novel. In other words, the focus on Edinburgh as melodrama is to some degree established in the early action as the boys encounter Big Eric. The representation of Big Eric fosters readerly dynamics in which negative ethical judgments are in tune with affective experience, in that the latter is primarily rooted in fear and visceral disgust. The novel thus begins with some premises about child sexual abusers, representing Big Eric as an oversimplified, almost cartoon-villain and connecting him with overwrought responses to child abuse of fear and disgust that were common in the 1990s.

When Alexander Chee was writing Edinburgh before 2001, he could not have known that its publication in 2001 would practically coincide with the erupting scandal regarding the systemic child sexual abuse of altar boys by priests in the Catholic Church. Yet the parallels between the protagonist Fee in a boys’ choir and the altar boys in the Catholic Church are hard to ignore, even as Chee’s novel clearly layers other concerns about ethnicity, sexuality, and eventually an unsettling complexity of ethical judgments over the layers of sexual abuse and its attendant trauma. It is thus worth exploring how Edinburgh aligns with and departs from mainstream narratives about child sexual abuse, narratives that dominate public outcries like this—what Philip Jenkins calls “moral panics”—about events like the Catholic Church sexual abuse scandals. These narratives, in order to advocate for children from a position of moral righteousness, often represent
the child as a complete victim and an utterly nonsexual being who is traumatized by the very introduction to sexuality.

As discussed in the introduction, Jenkins sees fears over the child abuser figuring in waves throughout the twentieth century, and in the late 1990s, U.S. culture is dealing primarily with the fallout of moral panics and fear for children that emerged in the 1980s. As Jenkins notes, the second-wave feminist movement of the 1970s, a huge part of initial awareness about child sexual abuse, aimed to raise awareness about the prevalence of sexual abuse within the home and to argue that this sexual abuse was, more importantly, not a problem of individual “sexual perverts” but rather an extension of patriarchal power, a potential threat from men close to young girls, men who appeared non-threatening and an integral part of the social fabric.

By the 1990s, the look of the threat had been reformulated. There was in the 1990s a shift in representations of the pedophile, from the threat of the father-figure in feminist perspectives from the 1970s to the figure of the “lone predator, commonly a pedophile, who was painted in the darkest possible terms” (Jenkins 195); these men “were again portrayed as alien and deviant, as monsters and predators” (18). Even so, what is interesting is that cultural narratives of the 1990s relied on the panic—and other emotional responses—raised by the 1980s. As Steven Angelides points out, in the 1980s moral conservative groups used the fear stoked in the seventies by second-wave feminists to create a “child protection lobby” (“Feminism” 141). As Jenkins argues, the feminist reformulations of popular ideas about sex crimes and child abuse “also appealed to conservative and traditional-minded groups who were on other issues deeply
unsympathetic to the women’s movement” (121). In particular, moral conservatives aligned fears of pedophiles with resistance to the increasingly successful gay rights movement; organizations and policies ostensibly concerned with child protection were actually ways of demonizing gay men, in particular, in the public consciousness. As Jenkins notes, Anita Bryant’s Save Our Children (later renamed Protect America’s Children) revealed an “assumption that homosexuals would corrupt children by sexually molesting them, transforming victims into fellow perverts in the process once described as proselytizing” (124). In other words, while initial arguments about child powerlessness and sexuality were initially brought to the national conversation by second-wave feminists as a protective move, these tenets and concerns were then hijacked by a conservative cause more interested in a larger goal of “combating what they saw as a slide toward decadence” (121) than in the specific goal of protecting individual children.

_Edinburgh_ initially seems to tap into these fears about pedophile figures molesting young boys, though when it comes to fears about sexuality, the novel explicitly resists the narrative that abuse turns boys gay. The characterization of Big Eric mirrors some of the worst features of the stereotypical pedophile of the 1980s and 1990s, and it suggests overall that children are always powerless before adult coercion, and particularly that children can *never* consent to sexual relations with adults. Big Eric’s occupation and the tactics he uses to manipulate the boys mark him as closely aligned with this “type” of child molester in late twentieth-century America: the individual who grooms his victims and assiduously plans systematic abuse over many children and many years. The one difference, of course, is that Big Eric “hides in plain sight,” as Fee says. Big Eric’s ability
to create what seems like a safe space for the boys taps into the visceral cultural fears raised by child protection groups about the possibility of pedophiles in seemingly safe social institutions like daycares and schools.

Big Eric is represented as an “alien and deviant” figure, even by Fee’s physical description of him. Big Eric is a “square-headed, owlish man” who has “playful” “pink fingers” (70). The “owlish” description sets Big Eric apart as apparently intellectual but also as one with large, wise eyes—a description that resonates with Fee’s later sense that Big Eric sees everything, even things Fee wants to keep private. For instance, Fee indicates a subtle sense of threat from Big Eric significantly before the first camping trip during which the first molestation event occurs: “I sing and follow Big Eric’s hand…. If I have to look at his eyes, I look at the reflections in the little rims of his gold-framed glasses. I do not think he is completely fooled by this. I feel as if he can see into my throat” (11). This trope of Big Eric’s ability to “see” far into Fee, to see and discern Fee’s desire for Peter, is part of what makes Fee resist telling other adults about the abuse. Big Eric is thus represented as a threat to Fee. His “owlish” features—features that suggest wisdom—are represented as signs of his power over the boys. He lectures the boys on the benefits of nudism and early Greek culture, using his knowledge to groom them and persuade them to agree to sexual games. The glasses, tellingly, a further sign of this intelligence, are a barrier between himself and Fee, making him even more of a threat to the boy.

20 Interestingly, what Fee fears that Big Eric will see—his similar desire for young blonde boys, specifically Peter—is not something the novel resists. Fee’s trajectory from sheepish, guilty, and questioning to a confident, out gay man is part of the story of his recovery from the abuse by a threatening, predatory pedophile figure.
Big Eric subtly “prepares” the boys he has designated as leaders, Fee, Zach, and Little Eric, by bringing them on an individual camping trip, discoursing on the virtues of “libertarianism, nudism, child’s rights” on the drive up (14), and then casually building from nudism to nude picture-taking to sexual play and swapping partners in the sleeping bags at night. Though some of the boys seem primarily excited—for instance, Little Eric giggles to Fee, “I didn’t think I would like kissing so much” (14)—Fee’s own sense of isolation and fear are paramount, leading to questions about the experiences of the other boys. At the summer camp, Big Eric’s tactics shift away from seeming to provide a “safe space” for sexuality and instead into more overt manipulation and even authoritarianism. With two cabins, one of which participates in “naked story hour” while the other boys simply go to sleep (22), Big Eric divides the boys, evokes envy among the ones left out, and leads the boys themselves to desire the sense of belonging that comes along with the molestation. In addition, Big Eric initially splits up a game of Dungeons & Dragons that Fee is leading in order to make the boys in his cabin feel less left out (22–23). These moves prevent the boys from banding together in order to discuss how they feel about the events of naked story hour, or to resist the molestation as a group. Finally, Big Eric uses direct threats to Fee to warn him to change his demeanor in school so that he stops worrying the adults; holding the admittance to the choir, as well as the honor of a solo over Fee’s head, Big Eric coerces Fee into agreeing to be more amenable to events he has, from the beginning, been distinctly uncomfortable with. Big Eric thus first uses solidarity among the boys to establish ease and more willingness to go along with the abuse, and then creates divisions/factions among the boys to prevent resistance to the
established norm of the naked story hour during the camp. All of these moves on Big Eric’s part highlight his intentionally manipulative, coercive behavior and represent him as almost a caricature of the worst stereotypical features of the male figure labeled a “pedophile” in late twentieth-century America. In particular, Big Eric’s manipulations highlight how the novel reaffirms the belief common since the effects of the second-wave feminist movement on the discussion that sex between children and adults is, most importantly, possible only by virtue of a power differential, that children are always subject to adult power, and that they therefore cannot consent to sex with adults.

The fact that Big Eric is represented initially as a cartoon villain and sexual predator taps into these larger cultural narratives and forms one thread of affective dynamics running throughout the beginning of the novel. When we attend to Big Eric, then, affective dynamics are in fact part and parcel of negative ethical judgments; fear and disgust, that is, almost immediately create negative judgments against Big Eric for violating the children’s autonomy and sense of safety. (The novel, however, refuses to suggest that he is guilty for introducing them to the world of sex, which ties into Fee’s larger narrative arc in which healing can occur through healthy sexual relationships.) Thus, Chee’s characterization of Fee sleeping with Warden as “the worst thing they could do,” to some degree, reflects Fee’s own beliefs and the novel’s initial implications about the extreme harm of child sexual abuse.
Simultaneous Present Tense & The Moment

Yet the novel complicates the seemingly simple ethics established by the initial representation of Big Eric. Turning to questions of form and discourse complicates a one-size-fits-all ethical system that would lead one to judge Big Eric and Fee in exactly the same ways. The form and discourse of Edinburgh are intimately tied to questions of experiential embodiment, and in these we find the potential for readerly identification that ultimately troubles the clarity of judgment Chee’s interview suggests. Edinburgh is a novel in four parts that is primarily in the homodiegetic simultaneous present tense. (It shifts briefly into the second person in Part 4, but this does not significantly change the broader dynamics I describe here.) Parts 1 and 2 are from Fee’s perspective; Part 3 shifts, years later, to Warden’s perspective, and Part 4 returns to Fee and re-narrates some of the events of Part 3 from a different perspective. When we attend to the identificatory effects of the novel’s narration perspective and tense—the intensely close focus on individual, embodied character experience through pain and trauma shifting between these two boys/men—the judgments leveled against Warden and Fee for this sexual encounter appear much more complex and nuanced than Chee suggests in the interview commentary. Rather than “the worst thing they could do,” the encounter becomes a scenario readers experience through both characters, an opportunity for identification from both perspectives, and therefore a dynamic that complicates the clear-cut judgments Fee levels against himself. The dynamic, rather than meriting negative ethical judgments against Fee, merits compassion for the pain caused to all parties.

It might be tempting to assign the response to compassion for pain to the realm of
the ethical, suggesting that, at the end of the novel, the identificatory aspects can lead to an affective response that is in line with positive ethical judgments. I hesitate to use the language of “positive ethical judgment,” however, because it connotes approval from a stance of authority over the actions and characters. This stance is not in line with the reader experience from the beginning of the novel of identifying with Fee’s affective experience, participating in it as an equal rather than one to pass judgment upon it. The extent of one’s judgment against the situation extends only to approving of Fee’s decision to leave Warden, but it does not vilify either character for the encounter. In other words, affective dynamics guide readers to separate themselves from Fee’s personal judgments and to come to a more complex assessment of the situation.

Identification is particularly enabled in Edinburgh because of the way Chee employs homodiegetic simultaneous present tense narration, and the groundwork is laid in Parts 1 and 2, where identification with Fee is uncomplicated and strongly encouraged by the text. Because Edinburgh relies on groundwork established in Parts 1 and 2, building on the identification created there in the section with Warden, I will first elaborate the connections between tense, narrative perspective, experiential embodiment, and identification with Fee in Parts 1 and 2.

Chee could easily have chosen to go with retrospective first-person narration, using the gap between the experiencing-I and narrating-I to highlight how much Fee changes from childhood into adulthood, especially with regard to how much he blames himself for the abuse by Big Eric. Instead, Chee uses the homodiegetic simultaneous
present tense to even more firmly embed readers in Fee’s perspective in each moment as it passes.

The homodiegetic simultaneous present tense has myriad effects that lead to more potential for identification and alignment between reader and character. In a chapter about *Waiting for the Barbarians*, Phelan discusses the effects Coetzee’s use of the homodiegetic simultaneous present tense has on how the reader interprets the actions and feelings of the magistrate. Phelan disagrees with Suzanne Fleischmann’s argument in *Tense and Narrativity* that the simultaneous present is inherently unstable because, as Phelan describes Fleischmann’s argument, it “erases the distinction between two temporal planes” (226). According to Fleischmann, as Phelan puts it, one of two effects will occur that draw a text away from narrative: “either the narrator will disappear and the events will be presented as if without a filter, thus moving the text toward drama; or the narrator will become supremely important and the events will be merely an occasion for the discourse, thus moving the text toward lyric” (Phelan 226). Phelan turns to *Waiting for the Barbarians* to describe how a narrative can use the simultaneous present but not lose either mimesis or the narrative features of a text. Thus, for instance, while he notes that as readers “we frequently must struggle to attain the necessary distance from the magistrate’s views and actions” (235), the very struggle and the very ethical conundrum at the center of the novel lends itself to author-character-reader relations that Phelan considers central to narrative itself.

In some ways, the homodiegetic simultaneous present has similar effects in *Edinburgh*. As in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, “the strategy takes teleology away from”
the narrator’s acts (223), in that we cannot guess, as the character cannot, to what end the narrative tends (as opposed to a retrospective narrative, where the status of the narrating subject might offer more hints of the outcome of events in the past). The facets of Coetzee’s novel that pull readers back into the narrative mode, not allowing it to slip into lyric, however, are in play much less in *Edinburgh*. Chee’s novel, that is, is a much more typical example of the simultaneous present tense, where the tense moves the text toward lyric. Moreover, the ethical situation in *Edinburgh* is quite different from what we see in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, and the ethics of the plot situation in *Edinburgh* mean that readers are not reminded to maintain the distance they must struggle to maintain between themselves and the Magistrate. Meeting Fee in the first pages of the novel, readers experience him almost immediately as a victim of child sexual abuse (by page 13), so there is no similar ethical imperative to struggle to keep any distance between oneself and Fee’s perspective.

The use of the simultaneous present tense also intensifies the effects of participating in the experience of a character who is dealing with trauma, pain, and misery and who is already a deeply introspective, almost alienated individual. The focus on the moment furthers these effects. Without Fee’s awareness that there is a teleology to his narrative—that his own narrative is tending toward an endpoint different from the moment in question—his suicidal ideation becomes that much more intense. Chee’s use of the simultaneous present tense dramatizes for the reader and makes him or her participate in Fee’s inability to see outside of the present moment—and therefore his inability to know that the pain will end. While it may be possible for an individual reader
to resist this identification, there is little in the narrative to encourage one to retain the
distance between oneself and Fee that is necessary to render ethical judgment. The extent
to which the reader has a cognitive awareness that this moment will pass and that Fee is
likely to continue is the extent to which the reader can trust that Fee himself is unlikely to
successfully commit suicide. The distance between the reader and Fee, in ethical terms
then, only intensifies the identification possible with Fee’s pain.

Embodiment

Another important feature about the discourse of *Edinburgh* that encourages
readers to identify with Fee is the style, the poetic nature of the prose itself, which
emphasizes the drama of experiential embodiment Fee goes through over the course of
the novel. Fee’s awareness and acceptance of his body—and everything that feeling
embodied entails—shift over time, primarily in response to the molestation and to Fee’s
own sense of guilt about the molestation. In particular, because the molestation is
specifically sexual, Fee’s conflict about embodiment manifests in how he does or does
not accept the body in what he separates out as the two realms of love/affection and of
sex/sexual desire. The conflict that arises about whether to isolate or integrate mind and
body arises in response to an early need—a need thwarted and mutated by the
molestation—to experience a kind of communion and closeness with a loved one,
especially a communion achieved through sexual experience. Fee’s relationship with his
body and the experience of embodiment occurs in approximately three stages over the
course of the novel: (1) Before the molestation, he experiences a budding, embodied
desire and affection for Peter, which has the potentiality of developing sexuality; (2) After the molestation, he experiences a separation between body and mind, sex and love/affection, and the body becomes tied to affectionless sex, while the affection for Peter is tied to a separate realm of the emotions and intense aesthetic experience, through which Fee wishes to transcend his physical body; and (3) Adult Fee finally “recovers” from his childhood trauma when he is able to re-integrate body and emotions/affection/love in the context of sex. It is in the moments that Fee experiences embodied desire, or in the moments during stage 2 when he experiences a desire to transcend the body—a desire so intense that it paradoxically becomes embodied—that we see the distinctively poetic prose of *Edinburgh*.21

Rather than laboriously chart every step of Fee’s progression, I want to highlight the dynamics in Stage 2 in order to describe how they capture in Fee an affective experience that the novel as a whole encourages the reader to identify with. Due to the molestation, Fee associates the body with sexuality and sexual desires and so experiences a strong discomfort with inhabiting his own body. Accordingly, when it comes to experiencing the intensity of his love for Peter, he often wishes to transcend the body; for Fee, this desire is deeply tied to aesthetic experience, appreciation of Peter’s beauty, the beauty of nature and the intensity of pain, and the art of the beautiful singing the boys

---

21 For psychological and health studies that point to the real possibility of disembodied feelings as a result of childhood sexual trauma, see Young and Farley and Keaney. Both studies chart the incidence of dissociation of degraded psychological integrity as a result of sexual abuse. While *Edinburgh* is fictional and not bound to represent character experience in line with real psychological studies, the connections here demonstrate that Chee is attempting to capture, aesthetically, the struggle of a real phenomenon. This grants greater urgency to the focus I propose here on the body.
produce. Yet in the midst of these wishes, in capturing this desire and the physical feeling of such a desire, the novel itself reminds the reader of the limitations of that body. Fee’s longing to be pulled outside of himself, to transcend himself into something more moving and beautiful, has parallels in the reader’s experience of encountering the aesthetically moving prose of the novel.

In a review in *Meridian*, calling the book “a lyrical masterpiece,” Kathryn Webber attempts to describe what makes the prose aesthetically moving for the reader:

> At the beginning of the book, the story is so ethereal and hazy that the reader can feel the distance—both emotional and temporal—that separates the child Fee from the adult, narrative Fee. However, this distance is juxtaposed with the immediacy of the older, more intelligent Fee articulating emotions that a boy cannot…. Fee infuses poetry into his memories, a distancing and beautifying technique, to be able to understand the abuse, the suicide of his first love and best friend, his self-hatred as a boy and teenager, and even as an adult. (Webber 99–100)

Setting aside for a moment Webber’s emphasis on the distance between adult and child Fee, I want to focus here on the way she describes the prose as “ethereal,” “hazy,” and as infused with “poetry.” This poetic quality occurs primarily in the moments of experiential embodiment, when Fee wishes to transcend his own body as he feels the aesthetic pull of Peter or the singing. More specifically, what makes the prose “poetic,” aside from the fact that the simultaneous present tense moves it into the realm of the lyrical, is a distinct combination of abstraction and metaphor with concrete, densely layered imagery. These
passages, however, are distinctive primarily because of the way the novel shifts in tone depending on Fee’s relationship with his body in the narrating moment. Let us turn first to the moments in which Fee’s narration conveys a degree of dissociation from his own body.

After the molestation begins, the narration that describes Fee’s experience of sex is distinctly affectless, in contrast with the aesthetic/emotional experiences associated with his childhood love, Peter. Describing sex with Zach, he says, “I get down on my knees. I take him in my mouth. I have read that this is something that men like. It makes me nervous when Zach does it to me, but I feel in control when I do it to him, and this much I know I like. I don’t like doing it for itself” (21). The simple sentence structure of this passage, in a matter-of-fact tone, points to what I suggest is a distinct lack of experiential embodiment in Fee. The passage emphasizes bodies, action, and sexuality on the one hand. On the other hand, the thoughts and feelings about that action (“nervous,” “I feel in control,” “I know I like”) are markedly calm and dissociated from the actions; they identify feelings but do not recreate the feelings of control for the reader The three very short sentences in a row that start with “I” suggest a kind of step-by-step thought-process that Fee probably undergoes as he tries to perform the action he has simply read about. This passage is illustrative of the tone of other sexual encounters with Zach and other men for whom Fee does not have affectionate feelings but with whom he rather just wants sexual experience (50, 111–112, 113).

In contrast with this disembodiment that Fee experiences during sexual experiences, during certain aesthetic experiences tied to his love for Peter, he faces an
intensely physical, paradoxically embodied desire to become disembodied—to transcend his body. Such an experience is encapsulated by his obsession with a passage from Plato’s *Phaedrus*:

I read everything I have ever wanted to know about the world in this: Love is the regrowth of the wings of the soul, years in the past almost past seeing…. he receives through his eyes the emanation of beauty, by which the soul’s plumage is fostered, and grows hot, and this heat is accompanied by a softening of the passages from which the feathers grow, passages which have long been closed up, so as to prevent the feathers from shooting. (100)

Plato’s *Phaedrus* encapsulates the tension in Fee between his wish to experience a kind of idealized, disembodied, aesthetic love for Peter, and the reality of that love also being associated with sexual desire. In this conversation, Socrates argues to Phaedrus that only when the philosopher loves a young man appropriately—refraining from sexual contact and instead simply admiring the young man’s beauty—will the soul’s wings return to the philosopher. In other words, “love” as defined by Plato—affection and admiration of true beauty, which improves the soul—is fundamentally opposed to the sexual desires. Such a separation between physical, sexual body and emotional, spiritual mind naturally appeals to young Fee. Yet Plato’s work is even more appropriate than this, as the language of the *Phaedrus*, as many have noted, is itself barely veiled in its suggestions of sexuality and desire for the young man, and Fee must ultimately re-interpret this passage for himself to accept a re-integration of both parts of himself—sexual and emotional, physical and
spiritual—in order to heal.

As with the lover in Plato’s *Phaedrus*, Fee’s desire for disembodiment is integrally tied to aesthetic experience—an aesthetic experience that the poetic quality of the novel itself attempts to recreate for the reader him or herself. Plato’s Socrates argues that the beauty of the beloved triggers in the lover memories that the soul has of the forms in heaven. For Fee, aesthetic experiences of hearing Peter sing, encountering Peter’s beauty, and encountering the natural world all intensify Fee’s desire to transcend the body.

Almost paradoxically, the reader experiences Fee’s growing sense of embodiment through passages that describe a painfully intense desire to become disembodied. Chee’s language that captures this desire is so densely layered in imagery and emphasizes the concrete to such a degree that it ends upon invoking the senses and highlighting the very body Fee wants to escape. Consider the following two passages when Fee responds to hearing Peter sing in the choir. They meld the desire for disembodiment with a tug away from that body toward disembodiment:

We are on the other side of the equation of light and sound. When we sing, we try on the robe of a muse. We wear a color of light. (20)

Peter is to begin his descant. As I sing, it feels suddenly airless, as if in taking his breath, Peter has swept the atmosphere clean away. We hit the air repeatedly with the chords in our throats and bellies, making our devotions.
Peter opens his mouth. The first note pierces, the next goes inside the choir’s airborne array, and then he is there, a part of us, all our tangling voices skein the air and Peter slips up, born aloft. My jealousy scrapes off as he keeps breathing, keeps sending more air through himself. Slow fire.

(50–51)

This world when Fee is listening is “on the other side of the equation of light and sound” (20) and is “airless, as if … Peter has swept the atmosphere clean away” (50); the world, that is, without air or any kind of atmosphere to transmit light or sound, is not conducive to one of the most basic necessary function of the body, breathing. Drew Leder describes the tendency to ignore the body until something in it stops working as the phenomenon of its “dys-appearance” (84). Fee here imagines a reality wherein a context that would normally lead to such dys-appearance instead allows him to transcend his own crucial bodily functions. In this heavenly non-atmospheric reality, the body does not remind Fee that it cannot function; it simply ceases to be, while Fee as consciousness or soul continues to be.

Even more distinct is the way Chee’s emphasis on the concrete focuses less on the sense of sight by offering specific concrete visuals, and more on less commonly invoked senses such as touch, smell, hearing, and even proprioception (awareness of one’s body in space). Indeed, the focus on these senses, with their vagueness, may account for the “haziness” Webber describes. Because these senses highlight the experience of living within the body even more than they do objects and actions outside of the body, they therefore also call attention to Fee’s experience of becoming conscious of living within
his body. In this passage, we see a focus on the non-physical and intangible features of the natural world: air, air pressure, light, heat, things that cannot be touched but whose presence, and absence, can be felt. The effect of focusing on senses that determine these features of the natural world is to emphasize the self-aware sensation of being in one’s own body. As Kerry McSweeney explains in *The Language of the Senses*, the senses that many traditionally consider “higher,” or “dominant,” sight and hearing, focus primarily on the object and have the potential to “lead to a separation of subject and object” (8). I would add that they also allow for a potential erasure of the subject’s self-awareness. In contrast, the three other primary senses, touch, taste, and smell, have an autocentric rather than allocentric mode of operation. It is mainly through these senses that the sixth or proprioceptive sense, the body’s sense of itself, is activated. In touch, for example, both poles of the sensory experience—subjective and objective, active and passive—are present. In touching an object, I at the same time feel myself touching it: it is “as if the same stimulating event had two possible poles of experience, one objective and the other subjective.” (McSweeney 8)

Sight and hearing emphasize the object, but they tend to erase the subject, if not always and necessarily for the experiencing subject him/herself, then definitely for the reader. The three other senses, however, encourage a stronger focus on the interrelation of subject and object and thus on the sense of proprioception and on the subjective feeling of embodiment. Thus in focusing on the senses of touch, taste, and smell in the midst of the desire to transcend the body *Edinburgh* highlights the very body that notices these
sensations. Chee seems to have translated Plato’s idealistic philosophy through the language of a specifically autocentric sensory experience; while the desires in Plato are affirmed by Fee’s psychological experience, the discourse that conveys those desires so intimately also demonstrates the impossibility of achieving them.

These passages that evoke intensely desiring but not achieving disembodiment are also invitations to a reader to reflect upon her or his own embodiment and the experience of reading the most aesthetically intense passages of the novel. In the passage quoted earlier—“Peter opens his mouth. The first note pierces, the next goes inside the choir’s airborne array, and then he is there, a part of us, all our tangling voices skein the air and Peter slips up, borne aloft….”—the sensations of “piercing,” of being “born aloft,” of something “scrap[ing] off” oneself are precisely a response to the aesthetics of Peter’s singing, and they are equally possible readerly responses to Chee’s prose. The piercing specificity in the passage, the sense of being “borne aloft” toward a heavenly place, these sensations might be described as similar to those experienced by a reader who is moved by the intensely moving scenario and poetic quality of the writing and who is therefore likewise “borne aloft,” in this case toward the fictional world. The “slow fire” of Chee’s prose also leads ever more inexorably through the trauma of child molestation to the intense experiences of suicidal ideation and seeming recovery with Bridey, and finally to an explosion of flame, when Fee is attracted to and has sex with the seventeen-year-old Warden. The point here is that the fine precision, what reviewers have called “lyrical” and which highlights the drama of Fee’s embodiment, invites responses in individual readers’ bodies that are similar in their overall intensity and trajectory. With such focus
on individual, inwardly focused experience, *Edinburgh* thus invites intense identification with Fee throughout his childhood trauma and unrequited love of Peter, and then his young adulthood and experiencing falling in love with Bridey. While an individual reader may not have had the traumatic experiences Fee has, the aesthetic pull outside of the body, reminding one of the limits of that body, is the link between the character and reader.

In the first half of *Edinburgh*, after the representation of Big Eric establishes a particularly extreme understanding of the ethical foundations for judging child abusers, these affective dynamics that are tied instead to embodiment and Fee’s emotions take precedence. While negative ethical judgments about the abuse are not necessarily in conflict with affective dynamics in these later passages, they *are* backgrounded when we attend to affect as experiential embodiment. There are some affective responses that contribute to generating negative ethical judgments of Big Eric, but the novel soon redirects the attention to Fee’s experience of the trauma and pain. Affective responses that are grounded in embodiment encourage identification based on similar relationships with and attending to the body.

**Identification with Warden’s Desire for Fee**

The identification that the narrative encourages with Fee has important consequences for the affective dynamics of Parts 3 and 4 of the novel. In Part 3, Chee returns the novel to its beginning point: ethics, specifically the ethics of sex with someone significantly younger. Part 3, “And Night’s Black Sleep Upon the Eyes,” shifts
to a new perspective: that of the seventeen-year-old Warden. Here, the primary questions are what Warden will do about his immediate and intense love for Fee and whether anything will come of the teenager’s desires. The first question addresses Warden’s own affective experience, while the second one raises again ethical questions about child sexuality, consent, and the possibility of trauma in response to abuse. As I described earlier, the flesh-and-blood author Alexander Chee has stated that sex between Warden and Fee is “the worst thing they could do,” implying that Fee is just as guilty of child abuse as Big Eric was. This commentary assumes a specific interpretation of what I take to be an unclear portion of the end of the novel: the way readers are guided—by the details of the text, not the comments of the flesh-and-blood Chee—to ethically judge Fee’s actions in sleeping with Warden, and thus also how to assess Fee’s guilt.

When readers get to Part 3 and enter Warden’s perspective, the style resonates so much with the style from Fee’s sections that the invitation and potential to identify with the narrator continues. Indeed, Part 3 continues so much of the style and recurring metaphors and images of the first half of the novel that it tilts toward eliding the differences between the two perspectives and characters. At the same time, Warden’s experience of living in the body presents certain inversions of Fee’s experience— inversions that encourage readers to resist judging Fee negatively for the sex the two men have. This complex combination of echoing the first half of the novel while differing from it ultimately invites a reading experience grounded in identification with Warden’s desire and in an ethics-based resistance to judging Fee for having sex with his student.

The affective dynamics in Part 3 are not, as they are with Fee, so integrally tied to
the character’s drama of embodiment. Instead, ethics and affect in Part 3 are simultaneously more intertwined and more in tension with each other. Ethical judgments about Warden’s history of abandonment encourage sympathy and compassion for the boy. At the same time, Part 3 aligns the reader with Warden in other ways, encouraging actual identification with Warden and participation in the teenager’s desire to become intimate with Fee. This identification is in tension with other ethical judgments pertaining to sex between an adult and a teenage student. More specifically, participating in Warden’s desire that he become intimate with Fee is in spite of the reader’s judgment that this encounter would also constitute child abuse and that it will further damage Fee.

Part 3 begins by disorienting the reader, throwing him/her into Warden’s perspective with few temporal or character-based anchors. In this way, it creates in the reader a sense of confusion similar to what Warden feels upon meeting Fee. Part 3 is subtitled “Warden,” indicating that the narrative has switched perspectives, but aside from this, not much is knowable. Part 3 continues in the simultaneous present tense: “A voice like a summer’s day, my grandfather says to me. I am twelve, singing out in the yard” (123). The first two sentences, referencing a grandfather, voices, and singing, continue the threads from Fee’s narration, confusing the ostensibly clear shift that Part 3 makes through the subtitle “Warden.” Furthermore, in the present tense, there is nothing yet to locate the story in time. With no reference to Fee, the reader cannot determine whether the narrative has looped back in time to another child who was twelve and part of Big Eric’s choir, moved spatially but not temporally to another child who is twelve at the time that Fee is in college and still emotionally unstable, or whether the narrative has
jumped forward in time. Warden’s background information, offering that “My mother and father are in prison,” suggests the possibility of his being Big Eric’s son, but that remains conjecture until a few pages later when he introduces himself as “Edward Arden Gorendt” (125). A later reference to “Mr. Zhe” taking over as swim coach at the boarding school is the earliest hint of Fee entering this narrative, yet it is still unclear where this section stands temporally in relation to Parts 1 and 2. The disorientation of jumping into Part 3 like this, without temporal anchors, aligns the reader cognitively with Warden. Much as Warden meets Fee not knowing much about his teacher’s past, the reader lacks important knowledge about where Fee is in his life and how he got from college to this point. While the reader’s knowledge of Fee’s past eventually allows her/him to fill the gaps and to make guesses about the time gap, the initial meeting destabilizes a reader cognitively in ways parallel to Warden’s surprise at meeting the new swim coach.

The similarities in style also confuse, and Warden’s clipped, observational mode echoes Fee’s early narration at some moments. In the beginning of Part 3, the sentences are simple, with few dependent clauses, and often single-word sentence fragments convey a kind of detached observational, reporter-like mode, either of moments as they pass or of simple background facts:

My mother and father are in prison, serving terms. That’s all I get to know about it. I’ve never known them to miss them, that I know of; they were arrested and tried and sentenced well before I was old enough to remember anything. I occasionally find myself missing something, but hard-pressed, I can’t say for sure that it is mother, father, family. My
foster mother, who had me for four years, was good to me, but also quite plain about my status. My borrowed sugar, she would say to me. Found you in a cup. (123)

The tone here echoes that of Fee when he narrates sex with the other boys on the camping trip, and the characters’ psychological dynamics are also quite similar. Warden is similarly removed in his reporting of a traumatic childhood, offering facts and basic descriptions but little about feelings and psychological state. The “I can’t say for sure” suggests a teenager used to ignoring his own feelings and needs who resorts to factual clarity to cope with a childhood lacking in love and family. Much as Fee’s removed description of sex evokes horror from a reader because of the boy’s lack of emotional response, this introduction to Warden elicits strong compassion for the boy’s history of abandonment.

Yet despite the similar tone, Warden’s experience is in many ways an inversion of Fee’s experience narrated in Parts 1 and 2. In Part 1, the trauma of the abuse makes Fee removed and distant when he narrates sex with the boys; in these moments, Fee attends to the body while ignoring the emotional/spiritual realm. For Warden, that tone and psychological dynamic are his starting-point, and ultimately, sex with Fee helps rather than hurts him.

Furthermore, Warden’s struggle with embodiment takes the form, not of yearning for disembodiment, but of a hyper-awareness of the body without complete intuition about the emotional states that generate those physical feelings. For Warden, the body sends messages about his feelings for Fee and about his beliefs about himself. From his
very first meeting with Fee, who is introduced as the new assistant swim coach, Warden experiences the encounter as a physical, visceral one: “He smiles at me, and it is a knock on my chest, as if he had reached out and rapped it. My chest opens, my heart admits him” (126). Whereas young Fee might have described a situation of love as withdrawing into his own thoughts and memories, Warden feels the impact of the meeting directly as “a knock on my chest,” after which “my heart admits [Fee].” While this description is, of course, metaphorical, substituting the bodily organ for the abstract emotions often associated with the heart (love, affection), it also suggests a trend in which Warden evinces a strong awareness of his physical body in response to Fee.

The physical/visceral effects of Fee upon Warden continue as a thread throughout Part 3. As Fee swims appears through the pool water above Warden while the boy swims, Warden experiences his teacher as “an aurora of heat and skin above me” (135). Warden’s anxiety over his love for his teacher manifests as intense physical symptoms of anxiety: nausea, vomiting, fainting. Warden refers to his recurrent nausea and vomiting as a “bird in my throat” (152, 153), a bird that “excavates me” (159). The bird, which seems to be an imagined physical manifestation of his anxiety over his newly redefined sexuality (he has a girlfriend prior to meeting Fee), and over the secrets he holds about that sexuality and about his love for his teacher, tears at him from the inside out. In a similar moment, when Warden sees Fee during summer vacation, he describes his physical reaction thus: “All I know is that all summer I’ve wanted to run into him, and now that I have, my stomach feels like it is kneeling on my guts, like I could burst into tears right here. I want to say, touch me. Please” (154). The physically affecting anxiety
and the quiet sense of intense longing and desperation, of which he feels he cannot speak, are remarkably affecting in their simplicity. The emotions overwhelm him, and they are so intense that they take the form of physical sensations.

Because of the confusion in Warden’s intense emotions, he is a sympathetic character—another one with whom a reader familiar with such youthful identity crises may identify. Notably, what Warden wants is vague even to himself at first; this vagueness makes his desire even more relatable. He only feels what he calls love accompanied with anxiety and some kind of desire, though he is not clear exactly what he desires. The reader may infer, referencing the boy’s history, that Warden desires some kind of acknowledgement, affirmation, physical touch, and affection from his teacher. This desire is by all accounts “forbidden”: Fee is in a relationship, Fee is in a position of authority over him, and most importantly, Warden is convinced he is not noticed by Fee (“it seems to me that he doesn’t see me somehow. As if I’m transparent, made of glass” [135]). Warden’s confusion and desire to be fully seen by Fee makes him all the more sympathetic and identifiable for a reader. The desire he feels is not explicitly sexual; it does not invoke the body or offer description of physical sensations and desires. If it did, the narrative would have the potential to alienate a reader. With a more specific description of sexual desire, the narrative would necessarily suggest the consequences of sex between the boy and his teacher, raising questions about the inevitable psychological damage this could do to Warden. But because the novel frames Warden’s desire as a deep emotional need—one that does not even necessarily tend toward sex—it is easier for a reader to sympathize and identify with the boy’s emotions. In other words, if the risk of
Warden actually having sex with Fee seems minuscule, as it does as long as we are in Warden’s perspective, it is easier to feel with the boy. Only once the narrative re-enters Fee’s perspective and understands Fee’s own confusion about and desire for Warden does it seem more possible earlier on.

Warden’s desire for Fee is easier to identify with in light of the novel’s implication that what is most damaging to Warden is not sex with Fee; it is the lack of emotional connection long before he meets Fee. Fee merely becomes a projection, an obsession, for him to latch onto and something to, he believes, fulfill all of his needs. Whereas the young Fee desperately wanted to love Peter but only withdrew to appreciate his friend aesthetically—that is, he never desired to actually achieve any communion, only to love from afar and admire—Warden specifically desires this communion, which he has always lacked.

Most importantly, when Warden narrates his first experience of sex with Fee, his assessment suggests that it is an entirely positive thing for him. The bird—the sign of Warden’s anxiety—does not disturb him, and he continues to want his teacher: “I remember, the bird, and my heart tatters. I worry that he will taste the bird, hit it with his tongue. But the bird lies quiet tonight. Tonight I get everything I have wanted. For the first time” (167). His self-doubt and anxiety calm as he receives the affirmation, the love, and the sexual attention he has desired. The only implications of the novel, then, are that sex with Fee is a positive experience for Warden. Whereas Fee’s early sexual experiences represent him withdrawing and separating body from spirit, for Warden, the sexual experience allows him finally to attend to the body in a different way. The body as
merely a site of anxiety is finally calmed. This positive progression stands in stark
contrast to Fee’s and the other choir boys’ experiences with Big Eric, suggesting that
Warden’s experience should not be equated as similarly abusive. Rather, in the midst of
an unloved and unloving childhood, Fee’s attention serves as something positive for the
boy.

Simultaneously, other similarities of style blur the boundaries between Warden
and Fee, encouraging affective dynamics that mirror those in Parts 1 and 2. Warden’s
growing confidence in his desire is reflected in a style that increasingly echoes the style
from Fee in Parts 1 and 2:

It’s not so much like a crush…. I make sure there is no trace of what I
am thinking. No paper (except me) for someone to find, no drawings of
his face or poems, only the worn photograph from the night at the stone
chapel, of someone he had once cherished and tried to give up. Fire, the
fortune-teller had said. Fire clings to what it burns. No weight to it, just
color, light, head. Indeed.

The fire was inside me, though, the paper boy lit up like a paper
lantern. (157–58)

The passage directly references the fire that burned Peter as he committed suicide, a
burning that the “fortune-teller” apparently sensed. The imagery thus works both
metaphorically and metonymically, moving from Fee to Warden through the physical
object of the picture and the knowledge about Peter’s death, but also metaphorically in
terms of their desire. Fire is both an indication of that desire (as when Fee, soon after

94
meeting Peter, understands spontaneous combustion in terms of his feelings about the
other boy), and a sign of the danger that person poses. Fee uses the image to explain what
he believes is his tendency to bring death to others:

Peter’s the one that burned. Zach was the one who pulled the trigger. Still,
I feel like the bullet, the fire, like I tore his head open. I set the fire.
Sometimes the scattered thoughts of their deaths run like a jagged red
seam of fire inside me and I burn from the inside out, like a lightning-
struck tree: the outside whole, the inside, that carried the lightning’s
charge, a coal. (91–92)

For Warden, too, the fire is a destructive force, the force that ultimately kills his own
father, Big Eric, but it is a sign of that desire, lighting him up from the inside, pointing to
the only thing he feels to be real in himself. The motif of fire running throughout the
novel ties the two men together in space, in time, and psychologically, but it also draws
together the affective dynamics of the different parts of the novel, encouraging similar
reader responses as the men experience similar feelings.

In noticing Warden’s intense desire and his need to calm the anxiety, we are
attending primarily to the affective dynamics of the character, which encourage readerly
identification with the character. Warden’s experience also establishes the terms for
resisting any conflation between what Big Eric did in molesting twelve-year-old boys and
what Fee has done in sleeping with his seventeen-year-old student. Warden’s judgments
about his own father, as he discovered that Big Eric was in prison because he molested
twelve young boys, further undermine this conflation. Warden himself is preoccupied
with what it would mean to sexually desire children, and his attack on his father, his
disgust at what his father did to the twelve-year-old Fee and other boys, clearly separates
the two situations in ethical terms.

Part 3 of the novel thus invites a reader to identify with and participate in
Warden’s desire rather than focusing on the inappropriateness of such a union. Such
identification happens on a cognitive level in terms of Warden’s experience meeting Fee,
as well as on an emotional-ethical level, in that knowing of Warden’s anxiety encourages
compassion. Here too the intense focus on the character’s consciousness encourages a
response steeped in understanding, identification, and compassion. The fact that
Warden’s experiences in his body are an inversion of Fee’s drama of embodiment further
supports readerly desire for the two men to connect. That is, Warden’s own experiences
and identification with his desires also mitigate, at least temporarily, some of the ethical
qualms about the relationship between the two.

The Ethical Crux of Edinburgh

As I noted at the beginning of this chapter, how the reader judges sex between
Warden and Fee is central to the overall ethical and affective import of the novel. After
identifying with Warden in Part 3, the reader comes back to Fee’s perspective in Part 4,
where ethical judgments about men having sex with boys are finally complicated and
nuanced in ways that depart from the characters’ own judgments. As the reader discovers
in the final section of the novel, back in Fee’s perspective, however, this affair is not
nearly as positive for Fee as it is for Warden. Indeed, for Fee, the entire experience is re-
traumatizing, and he becomes convinced that he is recreating Big Eric’s past crimes.

Chee’s own assessment of the ethical dynamics of the novel mirror these judgments made by Fee. The novel overall, however, guides readers to complicate Fee’s judgments and to distinguish between sex with Warden and molesting twelve-year-old boys.

Fee’s trauma manifests again as he returns to his own mind-body separation, experiencing the sex as deadening for himself, even as he understands how much it enlivens Warden: “He [Warden] is cold as the wind every time it starts, warm like a tear when you are done. Every time you feel less, every time you are more of a stone thing. And you go back every time hoping to feel again” (201). Just as his adolescent self engaged in sex hoping to feel but only able to focus on the body, adult Fee here can only experience the sex in a physical way, but not in an emotional one. (It is interesting to note that the metaphors here are metaphors of bodily sensation—cold, warm, like a stone—rather than of emotions; they primarily refer, however, to the emotional realm.) Fee believes he should be able to access the emotional realm he can access when having sex with Bridey, and he seems drawn to Warden in many ways because Warden reminds him physically of the young Peter: blonde, blue-eyed, beautiful. Fee thus experiences a rekindling of his desire to recreate Peter through another (after initially trying to recreate Peter through a college friend), both to get what he always wanted and to be able to, this time, “save” his friend from pain as he was unable to do in childhood.22 This rekindling

---

22 This dynamic is similar to the dynamic Humbert describes in *Lolita*. Humbert claims that his desire for Dolores is a desire to recapture Annabel and to finally be able to be with her. Whereas in *Lolita* that claim is undermined by the explicitly physical and sexual desire Humbert has for all young girls, here in *Edinburgh* there is legitimacy to the connection. Fee’s love of Peter is, from the beginning, represented as longing from afar,
of desire, as well as his inevitable inability to recreate Peter, and to experience sex with both mind and body, cause him to feel as if he has turned to stone instead.

Fee becomes convinced that his attraction to the seventeen-year-old Warden is further evidence that he should feel guilt for what happened when he was a child. Because he then felt “half him [Big Eric], half them [the other boys]” and seemed to understand too well Big Eric’s desire for young, blonde boys, he becomes intensely afraid that as an adult he has become his molester. In a central moment, as Fee drives Warden away from the house where Big Eric’s body has burned, Fee’s narration shifts to the second person. First addressing Big Eric as “you,” he then shifts to speaking to himself as “you”:

I knew it from the beginning, always something you wanted, always, that there was something in you you wanted to have seen: that you were like us somehow, that inside the heavy body of you was something small and heavy, fear tidied up in muscle and skin. I wanted you dead and now you are dead and now I run from what I know, now I see what you always wanted us to see, the part of you that was just like us burns free now somewhere behind me…. You want to tell this boy next to you, how his father isn’t dead. Not the part he wanted to kill. Not as long as you are there. He’s hiding inside us now, you want to say, but you drive him away

so his adolescent draw towards the long-lost love makes sense both psychologically and poetically. Moreover, the trauma of childhood and of Peter’s violent death adds another layer of depth to this longing. Fee attempts to find the long-dead and also long-lost Peter in another, even as his desire for a boy like Warden taps into the very emotions and desires that seemed to destroy Peter in the first place.
This passage is fascinating because it simultaneously offers readers the first opportunity in the novel to sympathize with Big Eric, and it creates distance between Fee and the reader, who resists Fee’s self-judgment. In this moment, Fee and Warden have become, not figures for a younger Fee saving a younger Peter, not an older Fee finally being able to love Peter, not Fee as Big Eric molesting a young boy—but both figures of Big Eric, both with the potential to become molesters. This passage is thus affectively moving because of all the pain Fee as narrator taps into—all the sense of inevitability of trauma and misery.

That said, the passage does manage to keep the attention on the realm of the individual, psychological, and emotional, and to hone in on those as the most relevant in considering how we judge the ethics of sex between men of different generations. Thus this passage re-focuses the interest, not on abstract questions of whether Fee has done wrong by sleeping with Warden but on how that sex has affected both men. Fee’s crisis of conscience suggests that the abuse is more damaging to Fee, and his own narrative of “recovery” from his past, than it is to Warden. What seems to be an ethical question in the same way Big Eric’s treatment of the boys is an ethical question becomes instead a question about the affective influence that the sex has upon the potential “abuser” figure himself.

This moment is where, just as the reader is guided to resist Fee’s childhood sense of guilt, the text also guides the reader to resist this interpretation of Fee as child molester. There are many indications that the molestation is not damaging for Warden in
the same way that it was for Fee and his friends. For instance, there is the fact that Part 3 is narrated from Warden’s perspective and reveals not only that Warden intensely desires his teacher, but also is happy with their sexual encounter. Nor is Fee represented as pursuing Warden and as “priming” him for abuse in the way Big Eric did to the choir boys. And finally, while the novel does not address this difference, it seems important to discuss the difference between having sex with a twelve-year-old and with a seventeen-year-old. Bridey may insist to Fee that Warden is just a child, but to refuse to acknowledge the differences—differences manifested in their differing understandings of mind-body relations—is to reduce complex situations to easy but problematic black and white judgments.

**Conclusion**

What is most important about Alexander Chee’s *Edinburgh* is that it redirects attention away from ways of understanding child sexual abuse that were common in the 1990s in the U.S. In these models, the representation of the child abuser is itself an extreme form of judgment, and the values are based primarily upon disgust at the possibility that an adult can have sexual desire for a child. On a plot level, in *Edinburgh*, the extremity of trauma—the multiple suicides and Fee’s long-term depression—that results from Big Eric’s abuse furthers this narrative. Yet the novel soon moves away from this focus on judging Big Eric and instead focuses upon Fee’s affective experience of the abuse and the long-term psychological consequences of that abuse in relation to his love for Peter.
While the end of Edinburgh does not actually destabilize the priorities that would lead to judging someone like Big Eric as a predator or even Fee as irresponsible, it does redirect attention onto the complexity of each character’s desires, pain, and trauma. In this respect, even if the ethical priorities used to judge Big Eric remain, the specific negative ethical judgments are tempered by understanding the psychological background of each character’s choices. Edinburgh thus initially suggests a model of strong judgment tied to negative affective responses, only to redirect and then use affective engagement in order to complicate those negative ethical judgments. Instead of using ethical judgments to logically determine how to feel about a situation, this novel suggests that feelings are a way into determining the ethics of a particular situation. In Edinburgh, Chee suggests that affective experience as an initial entry-point to a situation can be a responsible way to complicate and nuance the competing priorities in ethical judgments.
Chapter 3: Affective Witnessing in Harrison’s *The Kiss*

My second case study in examining the interrelations among affect, ethics, and embodiment entails a shift in genre, away from a novel to a memoir, Kathryn Harrison’s *The Kiss*. *The Kiss* tells the story of Kathryn’s four-year sexual relationship with her father, begun when Kathryn, at age twenty, meets her father for the third time in her life (for the first time as an adult). As many reviewers have noted, the memoir is about much more than father-daughter incest; it places that incest in the larger context of generally dysfunctional family dynamics, in particular an inverted Oedipal triangle of mother-father-daughter, with the father actively pursuing both mother and daughter.\(^2\) Raised by her neglectful and narcissistic mother and her emotionally withholding grandparents, the child Kathryn yearns for the attention and validation of a doting parent. When, at twenty, she meets a father who pays excessive attention to her, Kathryn is captivated by his power, his confidence, and his intense focus upon her.

*The Kiss* presents different questions about affect, embodiment, and ethics from those raised by Alexander Chee’s *Edinburgh*. Rather than depicting a character deeply in tune with both his interior life and the limitations of his body, *The Kiss* presents a

\(^2\) See the work of Laura Frost and James Phelan on this understanding of the primary plot dynamics. Frost situates the story in relation to the Oedipal story (55) and argues that Harrison faces particular difficulty in not alienating readers because she “speaks from a self-authorized position, which has not been historically available to women until quite recently” (66).
character who, traumatized by her history and the incest, is markedly out of touch with both her emotions and her embodied experience. As such, whereas *Edinburgh* represents this deeply felt tie through Fee’s intense aesthetic experience, *The Kiss* represents instead a protagonist disconnected from her body and for whom aesthetic experience is largely irrelevant. Indeed, the overall aesthetics of *The Kiss*—rather than following a dynamic of reader identification as they do in *Edinburgh*—instead emphasize the wide gap in experience and affect between reader and Kathryn. These differences in embodiment and affect of both character and reader experience create a very different kind of affective experience, one that refuses to affirm for readers the cathartic experience of feeling with and working through a character’s trauma. Where *Edinburgh* brings the reader into the character’s affective experience to such a degree that the ebb and flow of pain and despair and trauma almost become aesthetically pleasing, *The Kiss* demonstrates pain but instead actively refuses the reader much insight into how that pain actually feels from Kathryn’s perspective.

Above all, the question of ethics in *The Kiss* is much more complex than in *Edinburgh*, leading to polarizing reviews. The memoir form raises the ethical stakes of the telling, in terms both of Kathryn’s past actions and of how/why she tells her story now. The questions that arise around the ethics of the telling have to do with truthfulness, which itself taps into beliefs about her agency in the affair: Should we judge Kathryn for having sex with her father? How much agency did she have? Is her narrative accurate? Is it fair to publish now if her father cannot respond to the accusations? Such a tendency for readers to distrust tellers in the memoir form has been noted by Suzanne Keen, who
describes her students’ increased skepticism in encountering nonfiction over fiction.\textsuperscript{24}

Moreover, how a memoirist represents other individuals has ethical stakes because of the potential consequences for those others in the actual world. These factors, combined with the fact that Kathryn is twenty when the sexual relationship begins,\textsuperscript{25} give actual readers fodder either to disbelieve her story’s veracity or, believing it, to judge her as a sexual deviant, unworthy of any sympathy. At the same time, though, the memoir form in late twentieth-century America tends to focus on revealing narratives of childhood trauma, past transgressions, and addiction—all leading to recovery. Thus it relies on readers finding catharsis in the narrative move from judgment to participation to cathartic satisfaction as the author accepts guilt and achieves redemption.\textsuperscript{26} The attacks on The Kiss tend to focus on the first factor—truthfulness—though I would argue that this happens for a few reasons. First and foremost, it happens because of a visceral affective response of disgust to a story about incest, combined with sexism that leads to increased judgment aimed at Kathryn for any sexual desire she felt. This is an issue that explains a large part of the intensely negative responses, I believe, and it’s something Frost taps into when she notes that “The Kiss represents a kind of female agency that no one wants to

\textsuperscript{24} See Keen’s Empathy and the Novel, where she discusses testing the hypothesis that “fiction deactivates readers’ suspicions and opens the way to easier empathy” (29).

\textsuperscript{25} See Bolonik (49) for Harrison’s response to this skepticism that an adult can be abused by a parent. See also Elizabeth Marshall’s argument that “by refusing to reduce incest to merely a physical act between little girl and adult male, Harrison suggests that girlhood may be less about chronological markers, such as the age of consent, than about necessary attachments and the psychological and emotional ties that bind people together” (420).

\textsuperscript{26} See Nancy K. Miller’s “The Entangled Self.” Miller argues that “the recovery narrative has become the bestselling form of autobiography.” She continues, “Should we be surprised when redemption and confession steal the limelight in a tradition whose origins are copyrighted by Augustine and Rousseau?” (542).
claim” (66). However, another reason for these attacks, I argue, is because the memoir refuses to offer what readers of taboo-violating memoirs tend to expect with catharsis: an admission of guilt and request for absolution (in this case, with regard to her ostensible “choice” to commit incest). The Kiss denies this, tainting any catharsis it might seem to have, and so critics often focus instead on truthfulness. In more general terms, The Kiss deviates from the typical narrative pattern of late twentieth-century memoir, and this deviation contributes in part to some of the negative responses to it.

In this chapter, I argue that two important sources of these polarized and polarizing responses are the way The Kiss represents affect and the way the narrative connects those affective dynamics to ethics. In The Kiss, affect and ethics are in fact deeply intertwined, but in a way that sets aside the judgments critics have made against Harrison and instead holds up witnessing trauma and acknowledging the complexity of affective experience as central values. In terms of ethics related to taboo violation, Harrison has written a memoir that deviates markedly from the typical models in the late twentieth-century U.S. for memoirs about transgression, taboo, trauma, and redemption or recovery. The Kiss shuttles uncomfortably between conflicting senses of Kathryn’s degree of agency in the affair and the degree of her role as a victim of traumatic experience, each of which has consequences for ethical judgments readers make about her.

27 Brenda Daly argues that these attacks arise out of ideological stances and the need to invalidate the daughter claiming incest against the father. Daly, in other words, reads The Kiss as a credible account of father-daughter incest and examines the strategies Harrison uses that open her up to such attacks.
At the same time, the memoir also shifts the way it represents and understands affect. The first approach to affect is focused primarily in the beginning of the memoir, and it is represented as deep emotional experience that is complexly layered, with degrees of awareness and denial through which the reader must attempt to see in order to understand the enormity of Kathryn’s traumatized past. Insofar as affect is layered with denial, numbness, and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) of both experiencing Kathryn and narrating Harrison, the purpose—indeed, the ethics—of such representation seems to be to ask the reader to pause over moment-by-moment passages, delving into the complexities of affect as experienced and understood during the narration process. In other words, one major purpose of these portions is to have the reader serve as “witness” to Kathryn’s emotional experience. As the memoir moves to the end of the affair, though, when Kathryn’s mother dies, a second understanding of affect appears. Here Harrison, after resisting the standard moves of memoir, moves into a more typical model of the memoir form. She shifts gears and starts to frame her emotion as part of a larger teleological narrative of recovery and redemption, not so much with regard to the sexual affair with her father but rather with regard to her relationship with her mother. In this understanding, affect is less intuited through layers of denial and trauma and instead re-examined by narrating Harrison in more analytical models. In this latter mode, the narrative also encourages readers not to witness but to read with judgment and approval in mind.

The first model of affect is the most recognizable part of The Kiss, and it is integrally tied to what critics have called the “affectlessness” of the prose. I argue that
this model of affect does not specifically create the potential for identification; rather, it highlights for readers a presumed vast gap between Kathryn’s and the reader’s experiences—a gap surprisingly mirrored by the gap between the narration and the vast trauma the narration only obliquely hints at. I argue, drawing on trauma theory, that in these dynamics the memoir thus calls for readers to be “witnesses” to Kathryn’s affective experience. Borrowing the concept from trauma theory, specifically the work of Kelly Oliver, I focus on the idea of witnessing as attending fully to the trauma and difference of an Other and, rather than taking that trauma inside oneself, recognizing what is unassimilable into oneself. By contrast, when affect is analytically understood and described in more clinical terms, it has less intense bearing on the affective dynamics for readers. As the memoir shifts gears into a redemption/recovery narrative, it instead invites participation in an emotionally satisfying conclusion. I argue that this shift in affect moves the memoir from the affective dynamics that are most powerful to a mode that is less effective and less persuasive in affective terms.

**The Two Modes of Memoir and The Kiss**

*The Kiss* upends expectations typically associated with the memoir form in the late-twentieth-century United States. Against the backdrop of stories about child sexual abuse, Harrison presents a twenty-year-old who expresses some sense of agency as she has a four-year sexual relationship with her father. Against the backdrop of memoirs about addiction and recovery, she expresses little in the way of guilt or shame, something readers might expect even in situations where the protagonist is clearly a victim.
(compare, for instance, Fee in Edinburgh or Margaux Fragoso in Tiger, Tiger).28

Reviewers have lambasted her for untruths, for sexual deviancy, for sexuality in general, for indiscretion, for hurting her children with the narrative, and for wanting to make money, to name only a few “sins.” James Wolcott might be the most critical, pointing to Harrison’s posing on the cover of Vogue in fishnet stockings, to the “self-consciously writerly prose” that he finds unconvincing, and asking in conclusion, “Is the publication of The Kiss a responsible act?” (34, 35). Leigh Gilmore summarizes other issues of critical reviewers well: “Reviewers accused [Harrison] of marketing incest for profit and fame, exposing her own children to an inappropriate story, and subjecting her family members (who are unnamed in the memoir) to unsought scrutiny” (695). It is notable that, unlike another reviewer who “faulted [Harrison] for writing a memoir too aesthetically successful to stand as a believable index of injury” (Gilmore 695), these reviewers all believe the events narrated. Their attacks, however, rely on a reading in which Harrison was no victim, in which she had agency in the past and continues to have agency as she publishes her memoir. Their attacks, in other words, read Kathryn as a willing participant in the incest and therefore as deserving of judgment for opting into a sexually deviant relationship.

This interpretation of Kathryn’s agency is not completely off base. Gilmore notes elsewhere how Harrison frames the story to suggest that the larger constellation of

---

28 Fragoso’s Tiger, Tiger is a recent memoir (2011) that might also be said to be a real-life Lolita story. Narrated by a young woman who was sexually abused from age 7, for fifteen years until the 66-year-old Peter Curran committed suicide, Tiger, Tiger stands as a fascinating counterpoint to both The Kiss and Lolita. While its nonfiction status sets it apart from Edinburgh, the two are similar in the their attempt to capture the sense of agency and guilt felt by a young victim.
dysfunctional “family dynamics” are relevant for understanding the causes of the incest, and that experiencing Kathryn holds some degree of agency in deciding to sleep with her father. The incest appears, at least initially, to fulfill a deep emotional need unmet by her mother and grandparents since childhood. Moreover, in opposing her parents in this way, having turned to her father for the recognition her mother always withheld, the memoir suggests in at least some places that the incest was something Kathryn voluntarily chose, something she opted into in hopes that she could hurt her mother. While this implication is not consistent throughout the memoir, reading with the grain would suggest that, at least to some degree, Harrison wishes to convey some sense of agency in the sexual affair and to repudiate an identity as only a victim.

Yet at the same time, *The Kiss* represents a woman entering adulthood practically broken by the neglect of her childhood and “shell-shocked” by the trauma—the “scorpion sting”—of her father’s sexual attention. It’s interesting, for instance, that Wolcott’s review actually points to the ways Harrison frames herself as a victim, describing the metaphors well, but he does so in a sarcastic tone that reveals the centerpiece of his reading: “it recounts…a consensual act between two adults” (33). Wolcott, in other words, cannot believe the flipside of the agency question: the possibility that there is truth in the trauma Harrison narrates. Critics like Phelan and Gilmore, too, have focused on the question of Kathryn’s agency, the feature that resists the typical memoir form, so much

29 See, in particular, Phelan, *Living to Tell* (137–39, 152–53). See also Gilmore, “Jurisdictions” (710). Gilmore’s discussion focuses on the status of the memoir as anticonfessional, which I discuss shortly. Phelan’s proposes the notion that Harrison’s narration is “suppressed” and therefore does not fully report potential moments of agency. In addition, Phelan’s analysis offers an interpretation of the scene in which
that they have de-emphasized the ways it fulfills some expectations of the standard memoir form. I am interested in part in describing how the different ways *The Kiss* adheres to and rejects some aspects of one common pattern in the memoir form align with each of the understandings of affect in the memoir.

Offering terminology to discuss the way the memoir form engages the model of “confession,” Gilmore argues that the source of *The Kiss*’s transgression is its anticonfessionality. According to Gilmore, the confessional mode is characterized by the adoption of “a victimized identity as its subject” (“Jurisdictions” 710); this mode relies on embracing “injury-as-identity.” Gilmore situates *The Kiss* against the confessional mode, labeling it largely anticonfessional in an attempt to explain why the memoir enraged so many critics and readers:

> Instead of the subject-as-victim who is bereft of agency and self-knowledge beyond her victimhood and who turns to the institutions, experts, and authorities who would pathologize her for vindication, memoir is often written from a position wholly unlike that configured via the embrace of injury-as-identity. As an anticonfessional subject, Harrison refuses to behave like a victim or a criminal and attempts instead to present herself as a subject coming to terms more with the mystery of her agency than her injury. (“Jurisdictions” 710)

Kathryn damages the small kittens’ eyes by prying them open. According to Phelan, this episode is a “covert” acknowledgment of Kathryn’s agency. In my reading, this scene would represent experiencing Kathryn’s guilt, and it may well be promoted by Harrison herself, but I resist the notion that Harrison herself has any reason to feel guilty for anything about her story.
Gilmore continues later in the article:

In her refusal of the confessional position, Harrison insists she is no victim. Victims confess; memoirists, and this is disturbing, can effect a different kind of agency: they can get revenge; they can be narcissistic; they can obliterate comfortable assumptions about childhood, kinship, violence, and love, and they can offer a nonconfessional, extrajudicial testimonial ‘I’ that calls a ‘we’ to witness. (714)

In this reading, The Kiss as anticonfessional memoir moves away from issues we might expect it to highlight—ethical issues of consent, rape, violation, and “injury-as-identity”—and instead, according to Gilmore, evinces a “refusal of a conventional rhetoric of blame, judgment, and expiation” (711). The reading contends that The Kiss represents three legally mature adults making (seemingly) deliberate and agential decisions to both violate foundational societal taboos and hurt one another and themselves in ever-more appalling and damaging ways. According to Gilmore, Harrison “elaborates a tale of sex in which hunger and numbness coalesce, in which her desire is the desire for her own destruction” (715). In this reading, the memoir attempts to promote an understanding—not of how traumatic it was to be sexually abused, nor of what it was like to be a clear-cut victim with no agency, responsibility, or ability to consent whatsoever, but moving beyond all of that into understanding—but rather of how and why she could come to desire what she was also repulsed by, to “desire…her own destruction” (“Jurisdictions” 715).
Gilmore’s reading is persuasive as it captures much of the popular resistance to the memoir. It also captures some of the difficulties Harrison faced in writing such a memoir about a sexual affair with a parent begun as an adult. Due to Kathryn’s age at the time of the incest, *The Kiss*—breaking with the conventional incest narrative—cannot frame the incest as violation in the narrow ways contemporary society has of defining victim and perpetrator, especially those in the context of father-daughter incest. However, as Gilmore focuses on the subversive elements of the memoir—the elements that led to such vicious attacks—she also ends up letting the detractors set the terms of the focus. That is, Gilmore’s argument over-emphasizes the incest narrative and de-emphasizes larger family dynamics; as such, it ends up undervaluing the ways *The Kiss* also draws on more conventional modes that do align with the confessional. The opposition between “injury-as-identity” and the “mystery of [Kathryn’s] agency”—between confessional and anticonfessional—diminishes some of the complexity that occurs as Harrison situates the incest in relation to larger family dynamics. That is, while Kathryn may not seem to wholesale adopt “injury-as-identity” with regard to her father and the sexual relationship, I argue that she does in fact do so with regard to her childhood and her mother—a larger dynamic that leads to the emotional backdrop against which the affair occurs. *The Kiss*, even as it explores the role of Kathryn’s agency in sleeping with her father, does *not* abandon her “injury” with regard to the ongoing effects of childhood trauma of neglect and psychological abuse. The “injury” takes the form of Kathryn’s emotional and psychological damage, damage effected as early as her father’s departure before she was born and her mother’s neglect and damage effected through no individual’s direct
volition. (In this sense, Kathryn is the emotionally dysfunctional/fragile outcome of an unfortunate situation.)

Thus, while major elements of *The Kiss* are anticonfessional, we should not ignore the importance of the “injury” part of her story, the part that partially moves it toward the confessional mode. In this understanding, the memoir frames Kathryn as a victim of her mother, almost in spite of her explicit refusals of victimhood. That is, the memoir is largely anticonfessional insofar as it emphasizes Kathryn’s relationship with her father, but it has some confessional elements insofar as the incest is situated in the context of the larger traumatic background of her childhood. The confessional aspects come out the more we notice the trauma of Kathryn’s childhood and how it is deeply linked to her sense of agency in the affair with her father. This aspect redirects the attention away from the taboo violation, which is important only insofar as the sexual relationship is both a sign and a catalyst of her own emotional trauma (a sign of her childhood trauma and need, a catalyst of further trauma).³⁰ The affective dynamics of understanding why the incest happened and how someone can be in a position to feel like she is voluntarily opting for something so taboo are thus more important than the ethics of incest (whether incest is wrong, whether and how she can absolve herself, etc.). The emotional trauma is the center of the work, both the cause and the effect of the sexual relationship Kathryn chooses to continue with her father.

³⁰I will discuss later how my understanding of trauma relates to that of foundational work in trauma theory. In general, though, my model relies more on the medical-psychological understanding covered in the introduction of this dissertation: trauma as evidenced by feelings of disembodiment and seemingly willingly continuing to enact psychological and physical pain upon oneself.
Numbness, “Affectless” Prose, and Witnessing

Insofar as *The Kiss* emphasizes the family dynamics and Kathryn’s “injury-as-identity” perspective about her childhood, it models the first approach to affect I described above: the deep emotional experience that is narrated through layers of traumatized shutdown, denial, fear, and shame. These layers reflect experiencing Kathryn’s inability to face the complexity of her emotions, as well as narrating Harrison’s distance from those emotions. From the positive to the condemnatory, multiple reviews of *The Kiss* comment on what seems to be the emotionless quality of Harrison’s prose. Both Elizabeth Powers and Susan Cheever, the former attacking Harrison and the latter lauding her work, use the word “affectless” to describe the work. Powers, calling it a “bland, affectless presentation,” also notes “a flatness of tone that is suggestive of someone merely going through the motions of her emotions” (39). Cheever sees more complexity in the existence of emotions within and underneath the affectlessness: “Writing in affectless prose that reflects the shutdown in her feelings, Ms. Harrison describes with submerged fury and sadness what it means to be a daughter and how it feels to be a young girl yearning for a love that probably doesn't exist even in a perfect family” (11). Jeff Giles, too, comments on how the emotionless tone seems to detract from Harrison’s purported goal of catharsis: “But as catharses go, this one’s weirdly cold. *The Kiss* is written in a lovely but dispassionate prose that’s hard not to interpret as shell shock” (62).
While all these reviewers make claims about Harrison’s tone and what it suggests about her emotional shutdown during the incest, only Cheever moves toward considering the effects of this affectless presentation and its implications for our understanding of Harrison’s psychology. For Cheever, the affectless prose is tied to the “submerged fury and sadness,” though she never specifies how precisely this connection is made. It is my goal to specify what “affectless prose” means and what kinds of affective consequences this very affectlessness can have. The affectless prose is a product of a simple style focused primarily—in James Phelan’s terminology—on reporting rather than interpreting or evaluating from experiencing Kathryn’s perspective.31 The narration focalizes through experiencing Kathryn much of the time, limiting the reporting to a few disconnected details a traumatized child may be likely to notice. Yet in referencing emotions for young Kathryn, narrating Harrison tends to convey those by attaching them to other individuals in each scene. This displacement of emotion onto others reflects the way the young child—and later the young adult—could not face, articulate, or process the emotions.

In terms of the readerly dynamics of this affectless prose, perhaps, as Giles says, the dispassionate writing simply seems “cold”—and therefore off-putting—to some readers, but I argue that instead it calls upon readers to recognize the unnarrated and unacknowledged depths of emotion young Kathryn was unable to understand. Moreover, the distance also highlights the temporal and emotional distance between experiencing Kathryn and narrating Harrison on the one hand, and the wide gap in emotional experience and the typical reader. Insofar as this is true, the memoir, especially in this

31 See Phelan, *Living to Tell* (50) for a discussion of the three primary roles of narrators: reporting, interpreting, and evaluating.
representation of affect, calls on readers not to identify, empathize, or even sympathize, but to witness Kathryn’s affective experience, to delve into it and understand while reserving judgment. Indeed, in an interview eight years after the publication of *The Kiss*, this is exactly how Harrison described the project for herself: “The effort was…about ‘my vivisecting myself so I could see who I was and how I ended up in a relationship like that’” (Wald 146). The reader’s role as witness is similar in perspective; while the reader does not do the actual vivisecting, he or she does approach a vivisected Kathryn—a broken down psyche—to understand but not judge or even attempt to redeem. As witness, the reader of *The Kiss* engages in an interaction whose ethics specifically involve not judging. Unlike rhetorical narrative theory’s understanding that ethics consist of individual ethical judgments about characters’ actions, choices, and narrators’ relations with readers, I am suggesting that an ethics of reading here lies in a reader’s willingness to encounter, without judgment, the strangeness of Kathryn’s experience.

This argument builds on significant work done on ethics, such as that initially sparked by Emmanuel Levinas and then brought into the study of narrative by theorists like Adam Zachary Newton. But even more important than philosophy regarding an encounter with the “Other” is the concept of “bearing witness.” By using this concept, I turn to foundational work in trauma theory by Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman, and Dori Laub, though ultimately the most important concepts for my purposes come from revisions of the original model proposed by these theorists in the 1980s. I have been regularly talking about Kathryn’s trauma throughout this chapter, and in my terms this trauma is evidenced through her physical dissociation from the body. In this respect, my
understanding builds more on contemporary psychological studies and understandings of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder from a medical model more than it does from the post-structuralist, Lacanian model that Caruth in particular developed. According to Caruth in her foundational work *Unclaimed Experience* (1996), trauma occurs as an event that could not be processed in the moment of experience; thus it is always deferred, dislocated in time as it returns to the individual in all of its original concreteness: “Trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual’s past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature—the way it is precisely not known in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor later on” (4). Integral to Caruth’s model is a belief that trauma is fundamentally unknowable, by both the original experiencing individual and the witness subsequently hearing of the trauma: “The most direct seeing of a violent event might occur as an absolute inability to know it” (92). My understanding of trauma is more medical/psychological than this, noticing the dissociation Kathryn experiences in her body, her claims of being put to sleep by the kiss, and the seeming willingness to undergo physical, verbal, and psychological abuse, explicable in a psychological model by virtue of understanding the experiences as traumatic. Most importantly, in this model, there is a resistance to the idea that the trauma is fundamentally unknowable. My analysis about the layers of affect and the experience denied then and only now partially understood assumes that the traumatic experience, with time and processing, can become knowable and be processed.

32 See also Caruth’s edited volume *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, which demonstrates the range of work on the discipline before *Unclaimed Experience*. In this volume, Laub discusses different levels of witnessing and the possibility that some events can have no witness (“Truth and Testimony” [61–66]).
Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub were the first to build further on Caruth’s model of trauma, specifically and at length, the concept of “bearing witness.” In *Testimony*, Laub argues that the witness, “comes to be a participant and a co-owner of the traumatic event: through his very listening, comes to partially experience trauma in himself” (57–58). Laub suggests that the very intensity of the narration recreates the traumatic event for the teller, and thus also for the witness, who can to some extent thus enter into the experience of the trauma. By contrast, philosopher Kelly Oliver suggests that the process of witnessing is about acknowledging in another’s testimony what is beyond recognition, what is unassimilable into the listener’s own personal experience. Oliver’s understanding aligns better with my argument about the witnessing we are requested to do in *The Kiss*. Oliver begins by delineating two facets of the term “witnessing,” the first of which refers to “eyewitness testimony based on first-hand knowledge,” and the second of which refers to “bearing witness” to this testimony. In the second category, Oliver claims, “What makes witnessing possible is its performance of the impossibility of ever witnessing the event” (86). It is impossible to witness the event itself because the witness of the testimony will never fully know the experience of the other, but also because even what the testimony covers is often “something that in itself cannot be seen” (16). (In Oliver’s example, what cannot be seen is the possibility of Jewish resistance and survival in the Holocaust.)

Where Laub suggests that the witness can almost take on some of the trauma of the event, Oliver, then, argues that the process of witnessing is about acknowledging what is unfamiliar—possibly even unfathomable—in the speaker’s testimony. In the case
of *The Kiss*, this unfamiliar, even unfathomable, dynamic would be the emotional context of Kathryn’s life, conditions that lead her to make the choices and experience the desires she does. In asking that readers contemplate, and perhaps at least attempt to understand, this self-destructiveness in the context of *incest*—a possibly unfamiliar emotional state now enacted through an experience that departs from almost every conventional/societal narrative about sex, desire, and emotional trauma—Harrison places a heavy burden on her readers and pushes them to the limits of their capacity to listen as nonjudgmentally as possible. In this understanding, then, trauma is not fundamentally unknowable; rather, an experience may be fundamentally “other” to particular readers, and the best way of “bearing witness” is to recognize that otherness in the attempt to both acknowledge and understand.

This injunction to bear witness is something we must infer from the affective dynamics of the prose: specifically, the “affectlessness” that suggests significant layers of emotion underneath. In part, the “affectlessness,” the “dispassionateness,” the coldness, etc. are a product of the style and sentence structure Harrison uses. The short and simple sentences create a choppy effect, suggesting a simplicity that is, over and over, belied by the complexity of the situations and family dynamics that Harrison describes. Given this context, this simplicity comes to seem like a kind of tunnel-vision or obsessive focus, which arises because experiencing Kathryn (whether young or older) cannot do much beyond notice the immediate actions that occur around her. This tunnel vision is suggested on the very first page by the move from the general, iterative narration (“we meet in airports”) to the following more subjective yet oddly distant and minutely
descriptive sentences: “I feel his fingers in my hair at the nape of my neck. I feel his hot breath on my eyelids” (3–4). The subjective element (“I feel”) is undermined by the specificity of physical sensation and by the focus on the father’s actions over Kathryn’s own interiority. This disconcerting first section throws the reader immediately into the midst of the affair between father and daughter, and Harrison’s narrator evinces little apparent awareness about the incest taboo. Other than noting that they must “meet where no one will recognize us” (3), the narrator does not display obvious guilt, anxiety, or concern—none of the emotions that are typically associated with social and possibly moral transgression—over violating the incest taboo. Instead, the primary emotions seem to be a kind of fatalism and resignation regarding their already outcast status: “these nowheres and notimes are the only home we have” (4). Recognizing that they are already set apart from society by their desire for each other, Harrison’s narrator suggests that the only familiar place for them is precisely in the realm of the unreal and unfamiliar.

The second section of the memoir, which illuminates Kathryn’s childhood, contrasts markedly with the first section, in that it initially seems even more affectless, even as it provides a rich affective backdrop against which to understand Kathryn’s childhood. Where the implied emotions of the first section are linked to place and placelessness, the affects that pervade this second section are intensified as they are linked to people. Interestingly, though, they are specifically not linked to experiencing Kathryn herself. Though we will later read that the scorpion sting of the kiss numbs Kathryn, this narration suggests almost that the numbness—the beginning of emotional distancing—happens as early as age four for Kathryn. The choppy sentences continue
here, but even more notably, almost all constitute seemingly emotionless reporting of events that surround the young Kathryn, particularly reporting of the adults’ actions. Little is said, however, about the subjective experience of young Kathryn, the experiencing “I.” The affectlessness comes in because, quite literally, this section will not explicitly address with any true insight what the subjective psychological and emotional experience of young Kathryn is like. Thus, for instance, the word “I” is only ever used in combination with reported actions of others or Kathryn’s state of knowledge—but never her emotion:

“I live in their [my mother’s parent’s] house…” (5)
“I answer” (5)
“I don’t know what to say ”(5)
“I am six months old” (5)
“I stay with her [my mother] and her parents” (5)
“I sit…and watch her [my grandmother]”
“I ask to look at one [photograph]” (6)
“I can’t make out his [my father’s] features” (6)
“I am four, and when I hear my grandmother scream I fall to my knees and crawl to safety” (7)

The trends in this short second section characterize young, experiencing Kathryn’s life as defined by temporariness, metaphorical homelessness, and quiet observation without understanding—a lack of knowledge and understanding about the adults around her. The displaced feeling of young Kathryn is suggested by the use of “house” rather than
“home” in the first sentence—in marked contrast to the sentence of the first section,
“These nowheres and notimes are the only home we have” (my italics). Similarly, young Kathryn merely “stay[s]”—she does not “live—with her mother and grandparents. This sense of transience, of feeling like an imposter in her own mother’s and grandparents’ home, is amplified by the focus on unenlightened observation young Kathryn engages in. She does not understand where her father has gone, her grandparents will not acknowledge his existence, and her mother only rarely allows her to look at unilluminating photographs in which the man is simply a blur, off-center in the small picture. However, these two features—transience and confusion—are notable because they do not provide information about young Kathryn’s emotions about this state of affairs. She does not have information about her father, and perhaps the stay with the grandparents feels like an imposition, but the primary quality of young Kathryn that is implied here is a sense of watching, waiting, and not knowing. Explicit emotional information, in other words, is significantly lacking in these passages.

Such myopia and emotionless reporting is also reminiscent of victims of trauma, who, according to Cathy Caruth and other prominent trauma theorists working in a medical model, cope with traumatic situations by dissociating and observing events without understanding them. When Caruth argues that events are coded in unmediated ways into a trauma survivor’s psyche but the individual cannot easily and immediately access and process these memories (Unclaimed 4), she suggests this kind of disjunction between seemingly simple and primarily observational prose and situations that, we can infer, necessarily create complex interpersonal and emotional dynamics. Though young
Kathryn is not explicitly (yet) a victim or survivor of trauma, the first section of the memoir, which establishes the affair with the father, along with the style of traumatized observation, suggests the possibility of a kind of trauma originating in childhood neglect and culminating in adult incest.

Indeed, the notion that Kathryn is dealing with trauma is reinforced later in the memoir, when readers encounter not only her reactions to the affair (a dissociation reminiscent of PTSD) but also certain interactions between Kathryn and her father. While the childhood dynamic of need and emotional deprivation illuminates one reason that she is drawn to her father—his ability to provide the attention her mother did not—later scenes reveal a different perspective on why Kathryn continues to see her father. Simply put, her father is, at the very least, psychologically and emotionally abusive toward his daughter. He verbally attacks and shames her in a restaurant, exclaiming, “You…are a slut just like your mother” (146). He later shames her for the very sexual relationship he himself has encouraged: “We’ve talked about this, you know. How all the mistakes we make are permanent. How acts can’t be undone…. You’ve done what you’ve done, and you’ve done it with me. And now you’ll never be able to have anyone else, because you won’t be able to keep our secret. You’ll tell whoever it is, and once he knows, he’ll leave you” (188). In both cases, the father who has pressured the daughter for sex in recompense for love and attention now attacks her for the very sexuality he desires and benefits from. While the first passage aims merely at shaming Kathryn, using sexual shaming as a convenient tool for attacking any undesired behavior, the threats of the second passage are designed specifically to keep her with him, afraid to even attempt to
leave him and find a healthy relationship elsewhere. What is most notable about these
two interactions is that they are part of a pattern, only few among many of “these scenes
of recrimination and apology” (146). Such a pattern is typical of the cycles of abusive
relationships, in which the abuser tears down the victim so that she will feel no other
option is possible, and then follows the abuse by remorse and apology.

The evidence of obvious physical abuse—that is, threatening with or committing
violence—does not appear until quite late in the memoir, perhaps suggesting that the
relationship itself does not enter the realm of the abusive until later. In retrospect,
however, one can see the power he exerts over her even before these scenes occur. The
power, and the abuse of that power, stem precisely from the first explanation for the
incest: that Kathryn craves the attention she receives. The problem is that the father
abuses his position and authority to pressure Kathryn into sex in exchange for the
attention and emotional connection she craves. While The Kiss, then, may not at first
seem to be a story of a trauma survivor à la Tiger, Tiger or Mary Karr’s The Liar’s Club,
the representation of Kathryn’s early childhood retreat to emotional numbing along with
the representation of a clearly abusive relationship, taken together, suggest that trauma
may explain some of the affective dynamics Harrison describes.

Along with the affectlessness of a traumatized psyche that cannot face events
beyond narrating the surface level, the prose seems affectless because of the way it
separates all references to affect and emotion from young Kathryn’s observing
subjectivity. Only the last quote suggests the emotions and affect that actually do pervade
the selection I quote from, albeit separated from the “I” statements focalized through
experiencing Kathryn. The phrase “I fall to my knees and crawl to safety” in fact retrospectively links experiencing Kathryn to the other sentences in section 2 that do provide affective information. The primary affective information provided in this section is the following quote:

My grandmother has a talent for screaming. Her screams are not human. They tear through the veil of ordinary life—the life that moments before surrounded the unsuspecting young man in the foyer—and in rushes every black, bleak, and barbarous thing: animals with legs caught in traps, surgery in the days that precede anesthesia, the shriek of a scalded infant, the cry of a young woman raped in the woods, the long howl of the werewolf who catches her scent, who finds and devours what’s left of her.

(6)

In contrast with the careful lack of emotion betrayed by the narrator’s “I” statements, this passage reveals a marked intensity of emotion, albeit an emotion attached, not to experiencing Kathryn but to the young man arriving to pick up her mother. The implication of the phrase “in rushes every black, bleak, and barbarous thing” is that it rushes into the young man’s consciousness. But even in this case, the young man himself doesn’t actually feel the emotions; or at least, we are not brought into the young man’s subjectivity to feel them with him. Rather, the almost primitive pain and terror the animals, the patients, the infant, and the woman experience in the examples are simply referenced, never delved into as a dynamic experience of subjectivity. Yet again, Harrison’s narrative technique separates her younger experiencing self from the emotions
we must understand only she felt, given that she wasn’t likely to know what the young 
man’s subjective experience of those screams was like. This separation, however, makes 
sense given that four-year-old Kathryn was unlikely to have the language or concepts to 
be familiar with these examples of “black, bleak, and barbarous” things. Upon the phrase 
indicating that four-year-old Kathryn crawls to safety, the prose suggests that, in contrast 
with the young man who normally lives an “ordinary life” whose veil is ripped at the 
grandmother’s screams, young Kathryn regularly encounters such terror and such 
instinctive fear. Yet by ending on the simple reporting that her four-year-old self crawls 
to safety, without any explication of what other kinds of emotions that self experiences—
how she emotes and expresses her fears—the narrator suggests that, already, young 
Kathryn feels fear but has learned to repress its expression. Rather, young Kathryn crawls 
to safety and cowers but never feels safe or certain enough to ask for help. The emotions 
referenced, then, are at least two removes from four-year-old Kathryn, and because 
Harrison focalizes the narration through an emotionally repressed young experiencing 
Kathryn, the narration itself seems “affectless.”

Thus, when reviewers comment on Harrison’s “affectless” prose, they are 
referring to a combination of style, sentence structure, and material, that comprise the 
way young Kathryn’s emotional experience is (or rather, isn’t) directly represented. 
Rather than focalize the narration through young Kathryn in order to convey her 
subjectivity and emotions, Harrison inflects other people with the emotions the young 
child was feeling yet unable to face, articulate, or process. Even when Harrison describes
her younger self encountering the emotion of fear, there is a gap between herself and an intense emotion. Consider the following passage:

The ghost frightens me. He doesn’t speak or gesture. He never follows when I run from the dark rooms in which I think I see him. But he provokes me in his silence, the way he seems, without eyes, to stare. I grow afraid of the dark, and at bedtime I require night-lights, Ovaltine, my grandfather’s singing over and over the talismanic ‘K-K-K-Katie,’ and a magic row of eleven stuffed bears set along the wall by my bed. Still, I wake screaming. (10)

The word “frightens,” in its mildness (not “terrifies,” “terrorizes,” or “horrifies”) initially allows one to think the young child is frightened but easily comforted, as most children might be. And the list of objects and rituals young Kathryn requires also characterizes her young self as a standard child who requests such repetition in order to feel safe. Thus far, she seems like a normal enough child, one most adult readers can assume is experiencing natural fears that are easily assuaged by assiduous parents. But when the paragraph ends with, “Still, I wake screaming,” it becomes clear that the ghost does more than simply “frighten” young Kathryn and that the instability in her young life is not to be remedied by rituals. That is, the more general fears and instability she experiences—the lack of knowledge, the confusion, the sense of temporariness and lack of love from her mother—all of this manifests in the fears over the ghost, which persist despite what seem to be reminders of a safe, loving environment (Ovaltine, singing, stuffed bears). In part, then, the jump from an expression of a moderate emotion (“frightens”) unexpectedly to an
extreme one ("screaming") eliminates the nuances of young Kathryn’s subjective experience. While the “screaming” conveys intense affect in the final stage of experience for young Kathryn, the matter-of-fact tone of the revelation—“Still, I wake screaming”—seems to suggest that narrating Harrison retains significant distance between herself and the young screaming child. The distance itself simultaneously conveys a kind of telescopic view of intense emotion and intensifies the readerly affect surrounding the child’s emotions.

Harrison’s use of the historical present tense highlights the disjunction between the affectless tone and the intensely frightening experiences of the child all the more. Typically, the present tense works to bring the reader closer to the narrated character experience, as this way a reader can experience with the character as events unfold. The muted tone of this present-tense thus highlights even more the chasm left, not only between reader and character, but between reader, experiencing Kathryn, and narrating Harrison. All three are separated by vast expanses of time, distance, and ability to inhabit others’ emotional experience.

What reviewers have called “affectless” in Harrison’s prose, then, is ripe with the potential for affective consequences for readers. The passages I’ve noted function by reporting young Kathryn’s experiences in a detached way, simultaneously dampening and intensifying the affects representing. The dampening occurs in our awareness of what happens in experiencing Kathryn, as emotions are displaced onto others; the intensification occurs as we read as witnesses, able to delve into the complexity of unspoken fear, anger, pain, loss, and trauma. The Kiss obliquely suggests a potential,
intense affective experience for the reader even as neither experiencing Kathryn nor narrating Harrison fully experience and recognize that affect.

My conception of witnessing is, in fact, not too far from Phelan’s conception of lyric narrative, which centers on the idea that readers are not guided to judge characters ethically given that there is alignment between character and implied author. In *The Kiss*, the memoir form, I believe, makes it much easier to see significant alignment in the first place between implied Harrison and young experiencing Kathryn. Yet there are important differences in awareness of self between implied Harrison and experiencing Kathryn, which would move *The Kiss* away from the lyric mode, strictly understood. Most importantly, in my understanding of the reader as witness, I am arguing that readers are precisely *not* participants and that identification does not happen in the same simple ways it does in *Edinburgh*. Rather, in the beginning, the memoir asks readers to do significant work to intuit levels of affective experience, communicated by the implied Harrison via the restricted narration, all while refusing the potential for feel-good identification. The affective dynamics for a reader do not entail actually *identifying* with Kathryn’s emotions, but they do entail a pain of some sort, in that readers cannot know enough to experience Kathryn’s pain. Yet there is the potential for a kind of identification with the pain readers intuit. In this respect, witnessing captures the reader’s action of simultaneously recognizing the unknowability of Kathryn’s pain and partially identifying with what can only be assumed.

I would not argue that reading the narrative causes readers to take on some of the trauma, as Laub might, but I do therefore suggest that, in encountering complex and
painful emotions that are fundamentally unknowable, there is a form of pain. There is the potential pain of recognizing the affect that comes through in spite of Harrison’s distant narration, as well as pain in recognizing that there are further layers of negative affect that readers cannot access. In other words, there is pain for a reader in attempted and thwarted identification.

In other words, when the term “affectless” is used to describe Harrison’s prose, it is often used in a variety of ways, depending on the material of the section referenced, and whether that section directly mentions the affair between Harrison and her father, either to refer to a lack of expressed remorse/conscience, or to refer to the choppy style and observational, reporting nature of much of Harrison’s prose that relates her young life. In either case, though, the affectlessness, insofar as it points to something missing from the prose (emotional reflection, conscience, and guilt), points to buried affect, affect that is all the more powerful for readers insofar as it is not fully explained. This style also suggests trauma and its consequent numbing as reasons for Harrison’s surprising silence over the long period of the four-year affair.

Affect in the Recovery Model

In addition to affect as numbness, to which a reader can only respond by witnessing the unfamiliar, The Kiss also represents a more familiar understanding of affect: a teleological, redemption-and-forgiveness-oriented narrative. Later in the narrative, after Kathryn has ended the affair and is focused on her dying mother, Harrison shifts to naming the psychological explanations for her actions. That is, rather than recreating the
distance and numbness for readers, here she turns to identifying and naming what was then denied. While these two understandings of affect tend to coexist throughout the memoir, the last sections emphasize a “recovery” of sorts that cast the earlier narrative as tending toward a final redemptive resolution. In this recovery narrative, we see Kathryn marry and have two children, then “relapse” when she panics about the safety of her family, and finally come to terms with her new family stability. And most importantly, she ends the memoir on a dream in which she and her mother finally are able to pause and fully see one another. I will delineate one important facet of this recovery narrative—the denial about and finally recognition of her own anger at her mother—and the way that the memoir’s shift to redemption narrative about this relationship is jarring in contrast with the affectlessness of the beginning. I suggest that the two purposes of the memoir do not coexist well together, one calling for witnessing and another for judgment/approval, and that the dynamics of the former are much more successful both in affective and ethical terms.

Harrison frames her journey from numb, taboo-violating experiencing Kathryn to “recovered” narrating Harrison by way of acknowledgment and acceptance of a central emotion: anger. This emotional dynamic has to do with Harrison’s explanation of the central cause of the incest: her anger at and desire to hurt her mother. In *Living to Tell about It*, James Phelan argues that “family dynamics” are central to the causes of the incest. This argument is useful in that it redirects the attention to the larger constellation of mother-father-daughter and away from a simply narrative about sexual attraction, but the psychological explanation can be pushed further. While the memoir overall suggests a
complex of issues that lead to the incest, these encompassing a range of family dynamics, from Kathryn’s need for love and attention to her antagonistic relationship with her mother, Harrison highlights the anger as central—having the most power to explain her actions. Anger is the emotion she highlights as important because she was most in denial about it. In other words, the denial, which is part of what Harrison describes as numbness, leads her newly aware narrating self to understand anger as the source of her decision to engage and re-engage in incest.

In two centrally important passages, Harrison highlights the role that anger plays in her motivation to engage in an affair with her father. Most importantly, notice the difference in tone and self-awareness in these passages as opposed to the earlier “numb” ones. Here Harrison can name and identify emotions—indeed, she can practically psychoanalyze herself:

> The greatest blindness we share, my father and I, is that neither of us knows how angry we are. It’s perhaps because I cannot admit my fury that I don’t see what he hides from himself. And he, long practiced in self-deception, doesn’t see my anger either.

> Whatever passions we feel, we call love. (95)

> “Do you know,” she says, “after I’m dead, you’re going to be very angry with me.” And then she says nothing else.

> I squeeze her fingers, give them a little shake. I recognize the truth of her words without feeling them. Well, yes, I think, I guess you’re right.
But it will be a long time yet before I feel it. She’ll have been dead for years before my anger cools enough to touch. (184; emphasis in original)

Both passages point not only to anger (or “fury” and “anger”) but also, and more importantly, to a denial of this central anger. In the first passage, the denial is formulated as “blindness” and “self-deception,” an inability or unwillingness to see the “truth” of the emotions Kathryn and her father feel and express as love. In the second passage, the denial is less potent, in that Kathryn cognitively acknowledges the possibility of anger without allowing herself to feel that anger. Though this passage raises questions about the “truth” of emotions—which ones are true in the moment versus a later understanding of how one really felt—what I find more interesting is the progression from one sensation when she was younger, the “numbness,” to another labeling of the emotion as she progresses through life, as “anger.” Naming emotions is always a claim of truth from a particular moment, so for Harrison to name them from the position of writing her memoir is to narrate that trajectory toward touching the cooled anger. Naming emotions also comes from a position of power, and as we later discover, Kathryn herself undergoes psychoanalysis.

As these passages highlight the disjunction in emotional awareness between experiencing Kathryn and narrating Harrison, they imply a teleology of emotional growth and recovery from depression and trauma. In other words, Harrison’s consistent references to numbness and denial themselves point to a theory of emotional “growth” that is central to a century obsessed with interiority, the psychological, and the
therapeutic.\textsuperscript{33} Generally, this theory, often grounded in Freudian psychology, emphasizes introspection and self-awareness, and it points to a paradigm of emotional growth through which an individual first experiences denial (“blindness”) of a motivating emotion (in this case, anger), then a building cognitive awareness of it (as when Kathryn “recognize[s] the truth of her words without feeling them”), and finally an ability to fully confront and “feel” (to “touch” the cooled anger) those long-denied emotions. In therapeutic terms that emphasize experience over analytical insight, this ability to feel a once-denied or once-numbed emotion constitutes a sign of “growth,” “progress,” or “recovery.” In this narrative toward “emotional healing,” “recovery,” or “growth,” \textit{The Kiss} thus frames the ability to “feel” anger as central for progress. It is this idea of progression from denial to “feeling” anger that makes this particular emotion central to Harrison’s explanation of the reason for the incest.

What’s more, in Harrison’s terms, the denial of the anger helps to explain how Kathryn seemingly consents to incest over and over. In the following passage, Harrison provides what is probably the most explicit and succinct explanation of the reasons for the longevity of the incestuous relationship. As much as she claims that the initial kiss and later, seeing her father naked, puts her to sleep, here she reclaims agency by equating self-preservation with what she variously calls “numbness,” “[literal] sleep,” “self-anesthesia,” “psychic sleep”:

\textsuperscript{33} See the introduction to the volume \textit{Inventing the Psychological: Toward a Cultural History of Emotional Life in America} as a good introduction to the way these interests in American culture developed since the introduction of Freudian theories in the 1920s. (Pfister and Schnog 3–8).
So yes, I sleep because I’m shocked, and because I’m frightened. I want to avoid contemplating the enormity of what we’re doing—an act that defines me, that explains who I am, because in it is all the hurt and anger and hunger of my past, and in it, too, is the future.

It’s anger that frightens me most. I sleep to escape my rage. Not at him, but at my mother. To avoid owning a fury so destructive that I would take from her what brief love she has known, because she has been so unwilling for so long to love me just a little. (138–39)

In other words, as Harrison frames the affair when she claims some agency, she commits incest because she wants to “take from her [mother] what brief love she has known.” Ignoring the enormity of the incest and perpetuating it, then, is a way of ignoring the anger itself, which thus becomes the key to understanding the motivation for almost all of Kathryn’s actions. Anger, then, is central to both the denial that allows the affair to continue and to the narrative of emotional and psychological growth implicit in one version of the memoir form.

*The Kiss* thus sets up an expectation that readers will, alongside the numbness, see this drama of learning to feel and to touch the anger once it cools. There is, though, an important difference between touching and feeling the anger. To *feel* the anger would suggest that for progress to occur, Kathryn needs to fully experience the emotions she never fully experienced as a child, to re-inhabit her younger self in order to process those emotions and move forward. To “touch” the cooled anger suggests something more impersonal and less experiential. We might see “touching” the cooled anger as being able
to recognize it and speak about it, while not necessarily feeling it. Touching the anger would just be talking about it in a clinical sense; feeling it would entail recreating for the reader the experience of finally feeling it after the years of numbness.

In terms of the latter paradigm, narrating Harrison, even as she recreates her experiencing self’s affectlessness, provides insight into her emotions and motivations in a way that suggests growth. In contrast with the young woman who experiences “blindness” and “self-deception,” narrating Kathryn, it is important to remember, has in fact undeceived herself, made herself able to see and locate past self-deception and denial. Consider the earlier-cited passage about Kathryn’s and her father’s “greatest blindness” alongside the following passage; the two together highlight the discrepancy between the characterization of narrating Harrison as intellectually insightful and experiencing Kathryn as unable to have that insight or to feel the emotions she denies and represses.

Passage 1:
Looking at him looking at me, I cannot help but fall painfully, precipitously in love. And my loving him is inseparable from a piercing sense of loss. Whenever I am alone—in my bedroom, the bathroom—I find myself crying, sometimes even sinking to my knees. (63)

Passage 2:
The greatest blindness we share, my father and I, is that neither of us knows how angry we are. It’s perhaps because I cannot admit my fury that
I don’t see what he hides from himself. And he, long practiced in self-
deception, doesn’t see my anger either.

Whatever passions we feel, we call love. (95)

Passage 1 shows the way in which experiencing Kathryn separates herself from her emotions, as she didn’t when a child and she woke screaming every night. Rather than consciously feeling and acknowledging the emotions in the moment, she seems to be unaware of them until behaviors considered “signs” of these interior states overtake her; thus, she “find[s] [her]self crying.” The tears seem outside of her; the emotion overtakes her; the power is beyond her. At the narration level, this passage encapsulates how even as narrating Kathryn tries to convey the intensity of emotion she experienced—this is before she deadens herself, or the kiss deadens her—the narration itself also minimizes the intensity of that experience. “I find myself crying, sometimes even sinking to my knees.” The link between these two actions is not specified; the reader has to infer that the force of the crying, of the despair, is so intense that she cannot stay upright. In this instance, then, part of the reader’s job is to read past the “affectlessness” of the prose to infer the force of the emotion. At the same time, Harrison’s language indicates the beginning of the trajectory she is on to complete emotional numbing and denial, for, as she notes, the lessons in ignoring and hiding her own emotions from herself began as early as childhood when both her grandmother and mother rebuffed her affections and expressions of need. This passage, then, reflects the work that goes into maintaining the numbness that is successful for Kathryn elsewhere. That is, it suggests her attempts to separate herself from her emotions, only to find them overtake her in intense physical
form. Thus while this passage does not convey experiencing Kathryn as numb, it
demonstrates the inevitable consequences of trying so desperately to numb herself to the
emotions she is nevertheless feeling.

In contrast with both the numbness of the narration and the sense of
powerlessness in the face of the emotions that Passage 1 suggests, Passage 2 highlights
how narrating Harrison has moved toward a kind of analytic insight that, in one
paradigm, might indicate emotional/psychological growth. Whereas the reader in Passage
1 has to infer the unacknowledged emotional intensity underneath the numbness of the
narration, in Passage 2 Harrison explicitly names the acknowledged emotion as “love,”
and the then un-acknowledged emotion as fury/anger. The emotional experience itself is
two-fold, as is the emotional experience of finding oneself crying in Passage 1: there is the
emotional experience Kathryn thought she had at the time during her conversations with
her father, what she calls “love”—in this case, “love” for Kathryn’s mother. Then there is
the deeper layer of experiencing Kathryn, the intensity of the “anger” and the “fury.” But
because narrating Kathryn so clearly explains these two emotional levels in her past, we
now also have an awareness granted by narrating Harrison. The result of this identifying
of emotion is twofold and paradoxical. It provides more analytic insight into the layers of
emotional experience (unlike the numbness of the narration in Passage 1), but it also
distances the reader from the intensity of the felt quality of the emotions Harrison names
(unlike the intensity of describing herself being overcome by emotion such that she
“finds herself crying”). Thus, in the analytic paradigm, Harrison’s narration here
indicates some progress beyond the inability to identify or name emotions betrayed in
Passage 1. Yet in the context of the paradigm established by the need to *feel* the anger, Harrison has moved forward but still has much distance to grow toward truly feeling as well as analyzing and parsing the emotions.

In later passages, we see how this denial adds at least two more levels to the levels of affect we already have. In the previous passages, we recognize the affect of the experience and the way that the narration masks the intensity of the affective experience even when Harrison was not yet in full emotional denial, even before the kiss (or, the transforming sting of the scorpion). In later passages, we add a layer underneath each of the already existing layers. But because this layer comes in the form of analytical insight rather than the ability to fully feel emotions, it does not bear out the expectations about what emotional growth would look like that the memoir itself has set up early in the narrative.

Thus, the memoir works around multiple conflicting paradigms of emotional growth, one that emphasizes feeling the once-numbed emotions and one that privileges analytic insight and naming of emotions to reach recovery. The extensive focus on affectless prose sets us up to privilege the former. It’s rather disappointing, then, that despite this setup, Harrison never actually dramatizes the process of coming to feel that anger that she makes us expect to see worked out. She does represent the ability to come to name the anger, as indicated by these passages, but other than that, the narrative simply jumps shortly afterward to the dream, which serves as culminating evidence that she has reached “recovery.” There is thus a tension between these two models of psychological growth, between seeing increasing ability to *feel* particular, denied emotions as growth,
and demonstrating increased analytical insight into one’s own various (sometimes conflicting) affective experiences of an event. Representing feeling the anger would present a more persuasive account of how Kathryn reaches the final “recovery” moment of the dream, when she feels that she and her mother are finally able to see each other and, to some degree, reconcile. In a narrative so dedicated to representing the complex layers of emotion, denial, and numbness, it is simply jarring not to have the same attention paid to that process in order to reach the final moment of the memoir.

Part of what makes the memoir so powerful is not the naming of the anger but rather the signs of instability that come through in spite of the denial and Kathryn’s inability to face her own emotions. What is moving, in other words, is that it is clear that under that numbness and deadness are seething emotions of shame, guilt, and anger, even if Kathryn never acknowledged or fully felt those emotions as she sleepwalked through the affair with her father. In other words, a major part of what makes The Kiss so powerful is the affectlessness, which is, in part, tied to Kathryn’s physical disconnect from her own bodily sensations—that is, to her actual disembodiment. The affectlessness of the narration about Kathryn’s childhood that I discussed earlier does not at first convey numbness as a physical experience, but once Kathryn’s father kisses her, the psychological numbing that began long ago becomes physical. This is to be distinguished from Fee’s deeply felt sensation of being trapped by the body he wishes to transcend. Kathryn, by contrast, actually disconnects from her physical body, as many victims of trauma do in the process of dissociation.
Harrison describes this dissociation by comparing her father’s kiss to a scorpion sting:

In years to come, I’ll think of the kiss as a kind of transforming sting, like that of a scorpion: a narcotic that spreads from my mouth to my brain. The kiss is the point at which I begin, slowly, inexorably, to fall asleep, to surrender volition, to become paralyzed. It’s the drug my father administers in order that he might consume me. That I might desire to be consumed. (70)

The physical numbness is in part how Harrison accounts for what seems like agency in choosing to have sex with her father and even to move in with him and his new wife and children. Wolcott, ever skeptical, responds to this claim by noting that, “Harrison is doing an astral float in order to preserve some core of innocence” (34). Yet Harrison provides other evidence of the disconnect she experienced between mind and body—a disconnect that becomes apparent primarily in its absence, when the body impinges upon Kathryn’s awareness. To return to the phenomenon of “dys-appearance” proposed by Drew Leder that I discussed in the previous chapter, here again it is important to recognize how the body disappears in healthy times but “dys-appears” (that is, appears in the focus of awareness) in unhealthy times, even for untraumatized individuals. In The Kiss, Kathryn’s dissociation and disconnect from her physical body only intensifies this dynamic, such that when her body finally impinges upon her awareness, it is in extremely painful situations and precisely as a sign of the very anxiety she seeks to avoid and deny. The emotions break out on her body in physical form, in the shingles that make her
unable to move her arm and in the pneumonia that reduces her to requiring the physical beatings of her father’s wife so that she can cough up the phlegm from her lungs. These two illnesses take on both metaphorical and clear mimetic power. Literally, we can see that the stress of the entire affair and of using so much effort to numb herself leads Kathryn to serious illness. Metaphorically, both illnesses indicate the pain, shame, and guilt Kathryn is feeling, as they reduce her even further in her interactions with others. These instances, in addition to conveying the intensity of the affect roiling under the numbness, also convey the important and protective role that numbness plays in much of Kathryn’s life.

_The Kiss_, then, does not represent embodiment as an ideal in the way _Edinburgh_ does; instead, it represents dissociation from the body as a sign of trauma. Moreover, the extent to which we notice the body reveals Harrison’s inability to accept the body and live within it comfortably. The most visceral and felt bodily passages in the narrative are the scenes in which Kathryn pries open the kittens’ eyes and in which a gynecologist uses probes to break her hymen. As Laura Frost says, both of these moments “center on the narrator’s sadistic relationship to a body—an animal, an insect—and they are intensely evocative of visceral, bodily feelings of penetration and tearing” (Frost 64). While others have commented upon these passages and their role in conveying Kathryn’s sense of agency and guilt, what I’m interested in is the extent to which these moments betray a near-hatred of the body and pain that emanates from the body. Indeed, she enacts this kind of violent pain upon her own body as well, as she disavows it, refusing to eat or vomiting what she has eaten. The concept of embodiment is thus another useful way of
attending to the same pain and trauma that are apparent when we read beneath the affectless prose. The way the narrative evokes these unspoken emotions creates a powerful affective experience for the reader, who experiences his or her own pain upon recognizing the impossibility of fully understanding.

Yet despite the power of this early part of the narrative, *The Kiss* turns to the other paradigm of emotional growth focused on redemption and recovery: that is, to the paradigm of working past and through anger in order to progress. The final scene of the memoir, when Kathryn dreams that she sees her mother’s ghost and the two of them finally acknowledge and accept one another, suggests a movement away from the anger that she was always afraid to acknowledge and toward emotional equilibrium, compassion, and acceptance. The very last section of the memoir begins thus:

I don’t keep a journal of my dreams, but on February 7, 1997, I have one so unusual that I mark the date on my calendar, writing the word *Mother.* For myself there’s no need to record what happens in the dream. I know that I will always remember everything about it.

My mother finds me in my kitchen. (205)

The scene in which the dream-Kathryn recognizes and initially speaks to her dream-mother continues, and it builds to these final moments, also the final paragraphs of the memoir:

Nothing happens then, and yet everything transpires. My mother and I look closely at each other. We look closely into each other’s eyes more deeply than we ever did in life, and for much longer. Our eyes don’t move
or blink, they are not more than a few inches apart. As we look, all that we have ever felt but have never said is manifest. Her youth and selfishness and misery, my youth and selfishness and misery. Our loneliness. The ways we betrayed each other.

In this dream, I feel that at last she knows me, and I her. I feel us stop hoping for a different daughter and a different mother. (206–207)

In terms of actual conflict between mother and daughter, this ending certainly seems to resolve the issues Harrison has raised. Mother and daughter, who have felt so much bitterness, anger, and hurt, finally “look closely into each other’s eyes,” with a gaze that symbolically undoes the years of Kathryn’s childhood when her mother, hiding behind a sleeping mask, refused to look at her daughter, that is, refused to metaphorically “see” her as she needed to be seen and acknowledged. This dream also suggests resolution in the fantasy that by simply looking, two people can convey “all that we have ever felt but have never said” and that, by “knowing” each other in this way, each will “stop hoping” for the other to change. The language of seeing each other, acknowledgement of all qualities, good and bad (“selfishness and misery”), and acceptance suggests a complete resolution of the central tensions between Harrison and her mother. Because her mother is already dead by the time of this dream, the resolution is complete insofar as it represents Harrison’s ability to stop wishing for a different past and hoping for a future that never could be. She manages a resolution through something she herself creates.

This ending, however, seems unearned. What’s most disconcerting about The Kiss is that for all this setup of “emotional growth,” “progress,” and learning to “feel” her
anger, Harrison’s memoir never actually shows or dramatizes this process of coming to face and work through that anger; it just jumps from being in the midst of the anger to an (unpersuasive) end-point where Harrison has ostensibly already worked through it. By using the phrase “work through,” I adopt an explicitly Freudian concept to illuminate not only Harrison’s own psychological make-up but also how she memoir itself frames her psychology and her own personal experience and journey. I turn to Freudian language not because I want to suggest that it accurately captures the entirety of the human psyche but because its concerns with the therapeutic project are foundational to contemporary popular ideas of psychotherapy, trauma, and recovery from trauma, as often reflected in the typical memoir. Harrison herself, in an interview, reinforces this link between psychotherapy, personal growth and recovery, Freudian approaches, and her own writing. As Harrison explains, the memoir came at a time in my life when I’d been in therapy and analysis for years and just beating at the whole thing. I wanted to know what my culpability was. I literally had this fantasy of a pie graph of all the players involved, and this much is your fault, this much is your fault. I wanted that. I wanted to know exactly how bad I should feel. At some point, God bless my analyst, I hit the wall. I realized that all of this cerebral going around and around and around was not only failing to produce the desired effect, but was preventing me from approaching my own history. There was one moment, where I thought, there’s only one thing I can do with this, and that’s to tell the story. (Underwood; my italics)
Harrison’s own terminology of “analysis” and “analyst,” to refer to specifically Freudian notions of psychotherapy,” over “counselor” or “psychologist,” the more catchall contemporary terms that can reference a psychologist, a marriage and family therapist, a social worker, or a licensed professional counselor, highlights the specificity of a Freudian lens here. What’s more, her claim that she “hit the wall” in therapy and then decided to write the memoir to get past that wall suggests that her focus in the memoir is, as I have suggested, on capturing and promoting the process of working through the anger.

According to Mark Sedler in “Freud’s Concept of Working Through,” “[W]orking through names a battle to be fought and a labor to be done which the neurosis has, for so long, only served to postpone. This is the struggle within oneself; it is the labor of transformation that makes possible the rejection of the neurotic encumbrance and its symptomatic trappings in favor of a novel and presumably healthier mode of life” (Sedler 75). In Harrison’s terms, we might consider the symptom of her neurosis to be the incest itself, given that she describes the choice to commit incest as coming at the cost of her ability to stay “awake,” to feel, to understand herself. By the same token, her marked ability to shut down her emotions, to exist in a kind of affectless state of numbness, is also a symptom of neurosis, something that was once a useful and productive coping mechanism but, now that it allows her to engage in incestuous behavior without self-reflection, has become a damaging coping mechanism. Notice, also, the common threads between Sedler’s notion of working through and Harrison’s description of what she was trying and failing to do with her analyst. For Sedler, working through is likened to a
“battle” and “labor,” the difficulty of which is captured by Harrison’s describing how she was “beating at the whole thing” and ultimately “hit the wall” in her efforts to work through her anxiety and guilt over the affair with her father. *The Kiss* suggests that, in order to work through that initial anxiety, guilt, and depression, Harrison had to confront and work through the anger, a crucial motivation for her actions.

Yet *The Kiss* itself does not demonstrate or constitute a working-through of the anger. It merely, in passing, refers to the anger that underlies the numbness and the self-deception. Thus an ending in which Harrison has reconciled psychologically with the memory of her mother doesn’t seem completely earned. The dream is a convenient way to suggest the resolution of her anger against her mother, but without her fully delving into that anger and without her dramatizing what it was like to experience and work through that anger, the outcome of doing so is not very convincing.

What would it mean to work through that anger? One way would be to recognize that the anger itself is not actually the sole motivator of her actions; rather, it might also be seen as a sign of deeper emotional truth that narrating Harrison does not yet understand. Whereas Harrison reserves explicit explanation to address the role of anger in her reasons for committing incest, she never explicitly delves beneath that anger, to consider the emotional sources of the anger itself. The sources are implied, particularly in the scenes about her childhood, when grandparents and mother regularly neglected or even emotionally abused her; or in, for instance, her account of the child Kathryn watching her mother sleep and feeling as though if she is not seen, she will fall into an abyss, while it is precisely her father’s gaze that draws her in. Yet the often surprisingly
insightful analysis does not extend to understanding the source of the anger and to having compassion for herself and her own reasons for feeling the need to hurt her mother. Thus, when I argue that The Kiss never presents the difficulty and process of working through her anger, I mean that Harrison doesn’t demonstrate what it was like to do more than simply identify, name, and label that anger, but rather to experience it, to “touch it,” as she says, and to understand the source of that emotion. This dynamic leads to such a self-blaming statement that she provides in the interview quoted above: “I wanted to know what my culpability was…[T]his much is your fault, this much is your fault.”

In other words, The Kiss sets up an expectation that it will offer a particular emotional resolution, a narrative of coming to feel the anger in opposition to all the numbness we have read past, and yet when it does move out of affectlessness, it merely moves into analytical insight rather than embodied emotional experience the initial instability sets us up to expect as the appropriate resolution). The end of the memoir returns the reader to such expectations by showing the results of such working-through, without having shown the process of the working-through. Thus, I argue, the ending of the memoir seems distinctly une earned given the way that Harrison describes and enacts emotion throughout her memoir. In the response to the memoir, this critique has not been offered often, as most are preoccupied with judging Harrison either for sleeping with her father or—whether victim or not—daring to tell her tale. Yet Christopher Lehmann-Haupt does express a similar concern, albeit with concerns about the actual Harrison rather than paradigms established by the prose:
What remains inexplicable is how Ms. Harrison survived not only incest but also rejection by both her parents as a young child, which led in turn to bouts of anorexia, bulimia and suicidal depression. How, given such a history, could she have become an academic star, a successful novelist and a wife and mother? How could she have survived at all? … In the end, the mystery of her healthy survival remains a flaw in her memoir.

While my focus is on wishing to see the process of working through the anger, Lehmann-Haupt expresses disbelief that with such extreme trauma, one could ever survive. In either case, though, the critique rests on the lack of story about how Kathryn ever gets to the point when she can dream a reconciliation with her mother.

Another way to understand the final dream of the memoir is to see it as a result of the process of memoir-writing itself. Phelan argues that the dream itself functions as the end-point of a recovery narrative that includes the writing process: “[T]he placement of the dream suggests that it results from Harrison’s willingness to tell her story. That placement presents the dream as the culmination of what Harrison has worked through in breaking the secret, her reward for her effort to come to terms with what Gilmore calls ‘the mystery of her agency’” (Living to Tell 141). This take explains the dream by considering the writing process itself, the effort of narrating, to be an act of re-seeing the past that would allow Harrison to understand herself and her mother in ways that would allow her to forgive her mother. It would seem, though, that if the writing-process itself had prompted some of the “recovery,” then we would see some of the shift in the writing itself, gradually moving from numbness through experience to analytic insight. Yet the
gap persists. One can only conclude either that Harrison has been unsuccessful in narrating the process toward her recovery for readers, or that she is actually narrating before reaching something that—based on the terms established by the memoir—would look like full recovery. Either way, this leaves the final dream unsatisfying and unpersuasive for the goals it is attempting to accomplish.

**Conclusion**

Surprisingly, the more *The Kiss* emphasizes recovery and redemption toward the end, the more it also moves into the realm of what Gilmore calls the “neoconfessional,” thus shifting further away from the originally described anticonfessional traits. The request that readers be witnesses is largely not in line with the typical neoconfessional memoir project. Gilmore claims that the neoconfessional

[promotes] new normativities in life narrative that displace histories of racial and gendered violence with tales of individual hardship and redemption. The redemption narrative thus both forms the storyline of the memoir and structures how the scandals that come after will be read; namely, by casting two newly wounded protagonists—the writer who now suffers the humiliation of public exposure, and the reading public whose collective good faith has been dealt a blow—who overcome their pain as they perform anew the redemption narrative. ("American Neoconfessional" 658)
The “new normativities” allow the public to determine what counts as “hardship,” specifically hardship that will create “the scandals that come after,” and what kinds of hardships will lead to “the humiliation of public exposure.” In other words, the focus on redemption in the neoconfessional narrative requires that the narrative include some kind of transgression and sin from which the memoirist be redeemed. In contrast, the earlier portions of the memoir—the portions that are affectless and recreate the experience of dissociation and numbness—resist that emphasis on normativities and the judgments (ethical and otherwise) that often come along with them.

*The Kiss* thus shifts among a number of different modes with regards to how confessional, anticonfessional, or neoconfessional it is, and by extension, it shifts between two different conceptions of understanding and representing affect, one of which is tied to this project of requesting witnessing, which relies on a moment-by-moment attention to the complexity of affect in the experiencing moment. The other, instead, is teleologically driven, focused on the story of Kathryn’s affect over time leading to her ability to write the memoir, and tied to more mainstream narratives about recovery and redemption that permeate the memoir genre in the late twentieth century. When we consider affect in terms of witnessing it, the only ethical obligations a reader has are to observe and recognize the extent of what is not narrated in Kathryn’s experience, and how far the reader’s experience is from Kathryn’s. When, however, we consider affect in the growth-and-recovery oriented mindset, Harrison inadvertently opens the potential for readers to re-examine that affective history and judge the “growth” as unpersuasive.

Most importantly, the shift to the recovery narrative, with the dream ending and
the mother-daughter resolution, seems unearned because the memoir has not represented Kathryn’s process of facing and acknowledging the anger she hints at elsewhere. The teleological mindset is, on some level, at odds with the implications of the affectless sections, which suggest that, to move forward—when she can—Harrison would need to take the time to deeply feel all of the emotions that were muted or that she has tried to forget or dissociate from. In other words, focusing too much on emotional growth or recovery or resolution diminishes the power of what Harrison seems to be doing before this return to the rhetoric of progress takes over later in the memoir.

It’s important to note that what I’m judging has more to do with a gap in the memoir’s story of progress than anything about Kathryn’s actions in the past or her choice in publishing a memoir about the incest. On both of these fronts, I do not believe that there is any reason to judge Harrison negatively. I have argued that what is most successful and distinctive about *The Kiss* are the affectless parts: the parts of the narrative that encourage attention on experiencing Kathryn’s emotional state at the time, along with an acknowledgement that, to some degrees, readers will be unable to fathom this affective experience. The ethics in play in these dynamics are a responsibility placed upon the reader to witness the complexity of experience and narration that I’ve described. In attending to the emotional dynamics that led Kathryn to feel as though she chose a sexual affair with her father, the reader is not in a position to judge her actions as unethical.

As far as the ethics of the telling go, there is likewise little to judge negatively on Harrison’s part. I have argued that, while Kathryn may feel a sense of agency, it is clear
that the complex affective dynamics reveal that she did not have the agency she claims to
have had. Given this, any qualms about writing about her father without giving him an
opportunity to respond are also unfounded. Harrison’s tale is one of sexual abuse of a
child—an adult child, but still one who experiences the power imbalance a child
experiences with a father. With this kind of abuse behind her, she writes in the tradition
of memoirs that have focused on revealing traumatic histories, from which the authors
have emerged as survivors. Harrison, publishing *The Kiss* with Random House, is
without question a survivor of a traumatic childhood and young adulthood. In practice,
putting her story out there opens her up to judgment, especially from readers who lament
the popularity of memoirs that share private traumas and life histories. Wolcott’s critique,
for instance, begins with a rant about the general state of publishing and an American
populace that doesn’t seem to fondly remember a time when “guilt and repression were
powerful enforcers” (32): “With so many memoirs covering so many addictions and
afflictions, the confessions have gotten kinkier and more gossipy” (32). But Wolcott’s
dissatisfaction does not mean that readers cannot hold themselves to higher standards and
cannot engage as the form often requests: with an empathetic (as much as empathy is
possible) attending to the pain described, without judgment from those who do not yet
understand the full experience.

The question of negative ethical judgments about Kathryn’s affair with her father
in *The Kiss*, then, is answered as we determine that Harrison is a victim of abuse. In this
respect, ethics overall and affect work in concert, with our judgments about Harrison’s
father, to some degree, reinforcing the willingness to attend to her trauma. At the same
time, though, the request that readers *witness* Harrison’s experience does not necessarily assume that she is a victim; this dynamic, which the memoir requests by virtue of focusing so thoroughly on affective experience, could also be relevant if Harrison were unethical as well. The power of the memoir lies in its unsettling shifts between the models of the memoir form, asking for witnessing, acknowledging the taboo and sometimes suggesting a feeling of agency, and finally offering an un-earned catharsis, many of which resist the standard form that readers expect based on common features of the genre.
Chapter 4: Lyrical Address, Identification, and the Moment in *Lolita*

In comparison with *Edinburgh* and *The Kiss*, Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita* presents the most complex and difficult case for exploring how much embodiment accounts for affective dynamics and how affective dynamics relate to negative ethical judgments. In *Lolita*, in order to explore how the body ties into affective dynamics, I will connect the notion of embodiment deeply to Humbert’s communicative modes and his experience of emotions in the present moment. In particular, I will examine Humbert’s experiences and appeals to his audience in particular passages of the novel that I identify as appeals to a *lyrical addressee*. Because Humbert’s narration is so fraught with damaged notions about the body, sexuality, and embodiment, the closest thing we find to experiential embodiment in *Lolita* are moments where certain linguistic moves suggest a particular kind of experience during the narrating process itself. In these moments, I contend, we can see the potential for the novel to emphasize affective experience that exceeds ethical concerns. In considering the larger relations between affect (emotions and embodiment) and ethics in *Lolita*, I turn to the work of Martha Nussbaum. I examine her contentions that ethics and emotions are deeply, causally interrelated and that novels work on varying levels of specificity and generality, and I argue that in passages aimed at the lyrical addressee, *Lolita* demonstrates important moves toward certain levels of generality in
order to encourage identification with Humbert and temporarily set aside negative ethical judgments against him. In these moments, identification becomes a kind of reprieve from reminders of Humbert’s unreliability—and thus from the suspicion and judgment readers must exercise so consistently in reading Lolita.

**Humbert’s Fraught Relationship with the Body**

The reasons for the difficulty of thinking about the body in Lolita are manifold, and some of them may initially seem too obvious to elaborate. First, Lolita is the only narrative of the three analyzed in this dissertation that is narrated by the perpetrator of sexual abuse; thus, it significantly complicates the ethical implications of a reader closely experiencing the character-narrator’s drama of experiential embodiment. While The Kiss somewhat complicates matters more than Edinburgh in that Kathryn is technically an adult and seems to have agency in having sex with her father, at least in The Kiss agency remains a question. As we turn to Lolita, we can start our discussion with the long-established premise that, try as Humbert might to say that the twelve-year-old seduced him, he is an unreliable narrator, and readers following Nabokov’s guidance, in spite of Humbert, will see that he does not report, interpret, or evaluate the events of the story reliably.34 What this means is that to address affect and the possibility for identification in

---

34 Some early readings of the novel seemed completely persuaded by Humbert’s account, such as Lionel Trilling’s argument that it is about “passion-love” and that it is “not about sex, but about love.” After Trilling and other contemporary critics, though, Wayne Booth’s analysis in The Rhetoric of Fiction raised questions about the rhetoric of the novel as a whole given Humbert’s unreliability. Most criticism since Booth has used this as a starting point, either arguing or acknowledging as a backdrop that Humbert is clearly unreliable. My argument comes to the conversation from a place where this truth has
this novel is incredibly difficult—perhaps impossible given the repugnance many readers will experience encountering Humbert’s various, often valiant but ultimately unsuccessful attempts at justification.

Moreover, *Lolita* presents especially strong challenges to my approach to affect here because, at first glance, the body seems to be so surprisingly *absent* from Nabokov’s novel. In many ways, this is not surprising. Of course the story, narrated by Humbert, would background the physical body, because this body is not simply physical. In the plot of *Lolita*, the physical body is the sexual body, either Humbert’s body that rapes Dolores or the child’s body that is raped continuously over two years. In other words, as I proposed in the introduction, the described body (the physical body) becomes so deeply intertwined with the sexual body when we are talking about narratives of sexual abuse that it is unsurprising that, coming from a defending perpetrator, most mentions of the physical-sexual body are either avoided, glossed over quickly, or recast as issues of abstract desirability rather than physicality (for instance, Humbert’s many comments that he is handsome and looks like a famous movie star). It’s not surprising, then, that Humbert’s goal to persuade the narratee that he is not guilty of sexually abusing Dolores leads to an attempted sidestepping of the physical-sexual body, if not the physical fantasy
body.\textsuperscript{35} And yet, in spite of Humbert, the physical, described body does slip in; it is in these moments that we often see Nabokov guiding the reader, encouraging distance from Humbert’s reporting and interpretation.

Most often, descriptions of the physical body occur along with an insistence that the crime of sexual abuse or rape was either not exactly rape or not very damaging to Dolores. For instance, in this passage, Humbert might well come the closest to describing the sex that occurred, regularly, over the year of their first road-trip:

> On especially tropical afternoons, in the sticky closeness of the siesta, I liked the cool feel of armchair leather against my massive nakedness as I held her in my lap. There she would be, a typical kid picking her nose while engrossed in the lighter sections of a newspaper, as indifferent to my ecstasy as if it were something she had sat upon, a shoe, a doll, the handle of a tennis racket, and was too indolent to remove. (165)

While the passage does little to concretely describe the physical body, aside from Humbert’s “massive nakedness,” the immediately following “as I held her in my lap” elicits a bodily image, not of parental affection but rather of Humbert’s much larger, older sexual body violating her. The image eventually becomes more concrete as Humbert continues the narration, first eliding the body by referring to his penis as “my

\textsuperscript{35} Humbert’s frequent allusions to his handsomeness that, by his account, captivates Dolores is different in that his attractiveness becomes more about fantasy surrounding him in the girl’s mind and less about his actual, physical body.
but then promptly comparing it to other objects, attempting to downplay the event of penetration as mundane: “something she had sat upon, a shoe, a doll, the handle of a tennis racket.” The everyday objects move toward the realm of the concrete—thus also toward Dolores’s physical experience—and away from Humbert’s subjective experience of “ecstasy.” Yet it is also clear that Humbert is intentionally misinterpreting Dolores’s emotional experience. She is not “a typical [indolent] kid picking her nose”—the critique Humbert levies often against Dolores in response to almost any time she expresses a wish or desire, most often one any typical preteen of the time would want. The reader concludes, instead, that her feigned disinterest covers a traumatized child coping by either dissociating or feigning nonchalance. The physical body here, elided but suggested through metaphor and generality (“nakedness,” “ecstasy”), reminds the reader of Humbert’s refusal to acknowledge the actual harm he causes the child by raping her continuously over two years. In short, in *Lolita*, the physical body reminds the reader of negative ethical judgments against Humbert’s abusive actions and refusal to face Dolores’s emotional states, and the moments where the physical body is acknowledged are moments that serve to distance the reader from the narrator in ethical judgment.

When the physical, sexual body does appear through the cracks, it tends to be in spite of Humbert’s performed nonchalance or insistence that Dolores actively participated in the sexual relationship as an equal. That is, in these moments, we might say that Humbert’s attempts to convey nonchalance are overshadowed by Nabokov’s hand

---
36 “My ecstasy” as a metaphor for his penis also highlights Humbert’s attention to his own affective state in the past moment even as he willfully misreads Dolores’s affective state to serve his own rhetorical ends.
revealing the actual physicality of the abuse. The moments when the physical body appears, then, are divorced from intense emotion and (Humbert’s) character affect. The readerly affect that elicited in such moments is a product of judgment: an affect of disgust or a feeling of being appalled, and it comes not from Humbert’s intentional guidance but in spite of it. The implied Nabokov, by having Humbert so nonchalantly narrate Dolores’s detachment, evokes an understanding of what kinds of emotions could underlie that detachment. The readerly affect is thus a dynamic of detachment from Humbert in these moments, as well as a sense of horror at Humbert’s attempts to minimize Dolores’s trauma and his willingness to believe in her self-protective detachment.

The other kind of embodiment I am interested in, experiential embodiment, is more difficult to find in *Lolita*, but it is apparent in some moments when Humbert conveys a kind of intensity of affective experience. Often, these moments are located in passages where narrating Humbert stops to reflect, in the present moment, upon his embodied experience in the jail cell. Whereas the physical, sexual body is primarily a part of the past with experiencing Humbert, the potential for experiential embodiment remains in the present day with narrating Humbert. Let’s first turn to a passage that speaks to both physical and experiential embodiment within a few sentences. The shifting we see between the two types of embodiment is a microcosm of the ways *Lolita*, on a larger scale, shifts between levels of specificity and generality, encouraging affective response in some places over ethical judgments.

The moment when Humbert first kisses Dolores right before she leaves for camp functions well as a microcosm of the larger dynamics between physical body and
experiential embodiment. Consider the following two passages, the first when Dolores runs up the stairs to bid Humbert goodbye and the latter after Dolores has departed:

    A moment later I heard my sweetheart running up the stairs. My heart expanded with such force that it almost blotted me out. I hitched up the pants of my pajamas, flung the door open: and simultaneously Lolita arrived, in her Sunday frock, stamping, panting, and then she was in my arms, her innocent mouth melting under the ferocious pressure of dark male jaws, my palpitating darling! (66)

    I marched into her tumbled room, threw open the door of the closet and plunged into a heap of crumpled things that had touched her. There was particularly one pink texture, sleazy, torn, with a faintly acrid odor in the seam. I wrapped in it Humbert’s huge engorged heart. A poignant chaos was welling within me—but I had to drop those things and hurriedly regain my composure, as I became aware of the maid’s velvety voice calling me softly from the stairs. (67)

What I am particularly interested in is the word “heart” as metaphor and how that shifts between these two passages, as well as how the first passage alone progresses from one meaning toward the second understanding. In the first sentence of the first passage, before we get to the information about Dolores’s mouth “melting under the ferocious pressure of dark male jaws,” the word “heart” seems to capture a more metaphorical relationship. In “my heart expanded with such force that it almost blotted me out,”
Humbert’s narration captures the physical experience both quite literally and metaphorically, with “heart” as a way to capture what at first seems to refer to his emotional experience of feeling overwhelmed with emotions such as love and adoration, which he has regularly described as central to his feelings about the girl, alongside the lust. In this reading, the heart expanding is both a way to capture a quite literal sensation in the chest that is caused by intense emotion and a metaphor for increasing, intensifying emotional experience. With the revelation at the end of the passage about the “ferocious pressure of dark male jaws,” the initial sense of expanding heart as love shifts to lust. In the second passage, this transition is complete: “I wrapped in it Humbert’s huge engorged heart.” Here “heart” becomes a much more concrete, bodily metaphor, this time instead a stand-in for his penis. Indeed, with this moment, it becomes possible to reassess the former passage with the new metaphorical meaning: “My heart expanded with such force that it almost blotted me out.” Given Humbert’s prior intense attention to his sexual attraction and the lust incited by Dolores, this could well apply, describing an immediate erection and his sensation that the rest of his being is blotted out by his attention only to sexual desire.

However, the new metaphorical relationship does not fully undo the original one. The dual interpretation (the heart equates to subjective emotional experience; the heart equates to the penis) remains possible, with each emphasizing either negative ethical judgments about how he acts upon his lust or affective experiential embodiment. When readers are reminded of the physical, lustful desire that Humbert has for the young girl and the strong threat of that desire (further emphasized by the description of her
“innocent mouth melting under the ferocious pressure of dark male jaws”), ethical judgments against that lust and the threat of that lust are encouraged. When we consider Humbert’s experience as a physical one centered in his heart (his affective core) with the possibility that he feels “blotted out” by the intensity of feeling—an event that could, potentially, lead him to become less of an actual threat to the girl—there is the potential for identification with this kind of overwhelming affective experience, the intensity of feeling that seems to blot out the sense of individuality because of one’s focus on the other. This moment is not as affecting as moments in the narrating moment in the present tense that we will see aimed at the lyrical addressee, but these passages do help to illustrate the tension between the described body and the affective dynamics of experiential embodiment I am trying to describe. While there is a progression from one understanding of “heart” to another, the potential for engaging affectively and emphasizing intense experience with which one can identify over judgments remains as a moment in the reading process.

Moments of experiential embodiment that are lyrical address do not often layer two potential metaphorical meanings in this way. Rather, they function as singular moments that exist as a kind of pause button in the story progression, and they grant us insight into Humbert’s psyche. We find these moments of experiential embodiment most

37 Peter J. Rabinowitz also speaks to the tendency of critics to metaphorize moments in Lolita, in particular the moment when Humbert buys the girl sanitary pads after they first have sex. According to Rabinowitz, reading the pads as a metaphor of her entry into womanhood misses the metonymic explanation—tearing—that, instead, highlights the brutality of Humbert’s rape. While Rabinowitz thus sees ethical force in reading metonymically, I find here that the interplay and affective metaphors grant us more insight into the potential to identify with Humbert.
often in the present-day narrating Humbert because there is a deep interconnection between this notion of “experiential embodiment”—consciously attending to one state of being within the body in the present moment—and the extent to which Humbert as narrator attends to the present moment. This deep interconnection is conveyed via the use of the simultaneous present-tense narration in *Edinburgh*, even as we also know the narrator writes from an older perspective. In *Lolita*, the only potential focus on the present moment comes as Humbert pauses his narration to reflect, diary-like, on the present moment in his jail cell.

Secondly, the setting in the jail cell, with few items and little stimulus around Humbert, leaves only memories, words, and the feeling of being in the body to attend to. This sensory deprivation opens the possibility for narrating Humbert to notice his experience of the present moment and what it is like to be living within his body in that moment. This is in direct contrast to the past when the immediate availability of Dolores’s body made for a constant outward focus, an attention to externally created sensations and feelings rather than internally arising ones. Therefore, while attending to the physical described body necessarily highlights the appalling nature of Humbert’s repeated rape of Dolores in the past, attending to experiential embodiment brings to the fore moments when narrating Humbert struggles with his story about his past body in relation to attempting to inhabit his body in a completely new way—without sexual desire—in the present moment.

In the jail cell, the physical body seems to be absent but for different reasons and in different ways from how it appears in the past. Humbert—like Fee in *Edinburgh*—
ignores the body, thinking it irrelevant when sexual desire is not pressing. In other words, Humbert is not a victim of sexual abuse—unlike Fee, who was attempting to protect himself from the trauma of abuse—but he does similarly separate sexual desire and the physical body from how he perceives and narrates intense emotional experience. In these moments in the present, the body, with sexual desire, does not at first seem to be relevant. Yet upon attending to the present moment and how the process of narration itself shifts Humbert’s emotional, affective, and bodily states, we notice how the body intrudes in subtler ways, conveying the force of emotions and the oppressiveness of loss.

**Audience and Affect in Moments of Lyric Address**

Much critical work has been done on Humbert’s rhetorical choices in service of persuading his readers to exonerate him, feel sympathy for him, or even root for him. Much of that work has focused on Humbert’s ever-shifting appeals to the narratee—a figure who is sometimes invoked as a jury member, sometimes a reader, sometimes a skeptic, and sometimes practically a willing participant who would urge Humbert on in his schemes, were that possible.

In a foundational argument about persuasion in *Lolita*, Nomi Tamir-Ghez argues that Lionel Trilling’s famous reading of *Lolita* as “the best love story of our time” is at best naïve, because Nabokov “ensures that Humbert’s arguments are not airtight and that enough incriminating information leaks out” (18). According to Tamir-Ghez, “throughout the novel, while Humbert does his best to justify himself the reader is made aware of his rhetoric, and this awareness counteracts any feelings of empathy that might have
developed” (18). Phelan similarly cautions readers against naïvely misinterpreting Nabokov’s use of unreliable narration, which shifts between bonding and estranging and includes “complex coding [that] gives the narration many marks of bonding unreliability but ultimately marks it as estranging unreliability” (“Estranging” 232). In both understandings, readers who detect the complex coding or incriminating information must be rational, impartial, detectives of the text—only in this case, much more discerning and cautious detectives, who are always anticipating and ready to detect trickery from either the narrator or the author.

In a different mode, Matthew I. Laufer explores the role of the law in *Lolita* and focuses specifically on the narratee as jury member, arguing that this figure is an attempt to “[manipulate] our reading experience” and to “[confuse] the distinctions between legal and literary modes in an attempt to postpone our judgment” (56). Addressing Humbert’s preamble to the famous davenport scene, when Humbert appeals to the reader for “impartial sympathy,” Laufer argues, “Such a preamble as this, were it to be taken literally, would have the effect of paralyzing a reader. A reader cannot ‘participate’ emotionally and ‘examine’ scientifically at the same time. A reader cannot be both ‘impartial’ and ‘sympathetic’” (67).

For these critics, to read *Lolita* appropriately is to emphasize reason and the skills required of a skeptical jury-member: the judge’s standards of “impartiality,” unemotional “scientific” examination, and critical-analytical reading skills. The ultimate result—and perhaps the ultimate goal—of emphasizing this way of reading *Lolita* is to render the novel ethically gratifying, improving, and above all, stable.
Yet in the passages of lyrical address, the narrative offers a kind of reprieve from the suspicion and judgment encouraged by the rest of the narrative. Negative ethical judgments about Humbert’s actions are therefore temporarily set aside while affective engagement exceeds ethics. In these localized passages Humbert’s narration shifts so dramatically in purpose, self-awareness, and even in communicative status that, I argue, the reader is not encouraged to assess or judge but rather to simply experience the affective intensity of such moments along with Humbert. I use the term “lyrical” because the communicative situation of these passages invokes the lyric mode, in James Phelan’s sense of the term, and I use the term “addressee” rather than “narratee” to reflect how minimally the passages characterize this audience position: Humbert never explicitly names or describes a figure in these passages but rather speaks primarily to himself. Actual readers can either choose to distance themselves from Humbert’s emotions, or they can opt for an affective response that results in a more complex and nuanced affective reading experience.

In these moments, Humbert focuses “inward,” that is, on his present-day emotional state rather than on past events or on his audience (the narratee). By

---

38 In *Experiencing Fiction*, Phelan contrasts the lyric mode with narrative. Whereas narrative leans on the relation between implied author and characters—and thus on readers’ ethical judgments of characters in accordance with the implied author’s norms—the lyric mode creates an alignment between the implied author and the character. Phelan claims that in the lyric mode, “the authorial audience is less in the position of observer and judge [as it is in narrative modes] and more the position of participant” (22).

39 Significant work has been done on narratees in Nabokov’s work. See, for instance, Tamir-Ghez, who discusses how Humbert’s rhetorical ploys reveal themselves. See also Lisa Zunshine’s *Why We Read Fiction* (100–18), which describes the subtlety and rapidity of shifts in Humbert’s narration, which could explain actual readers’ tendency to be persuaded by him.
turning to the nebulous and primarily emotion-focused experience of the present
day, Humbert moves away from the particulars of his narration about the past and
the complexity of his rhetorical appeals to his various narratees. The all-pervasive
emotions of the present-day are deeply tied to Humbert’s inability to inhabit his own
body in the moment and diminish the suitability of ethical judgments while
simultaneously providing multiple points of entry for readers to identify with and
participate in Humbert’s emotion.

Specifically, the primary features of passages in the lyric mode are that (1)
the narrative-communicative situation itself breaks down, leading to more emphasis
on Humbert’s relation with his own emotions in the present, and in particular to
more emphasis on Humbert’s emotions created by his just dawning sense of
experiential embodiment due to the context of the solitude in the jail cell; and that
(2) represented emotions become so generally diffused through multiple characters
and timeframes that they become instead moods, as Greg Smith understands them in
his work on moods and film (I will turn to Smith’s work in detail when I discuss
moods later in this chapter).

Philosopher Martha Nussbaum, a proponent of literature’s potential to guide
readers ethically, also promotes this way of understanding ethics and affect. In Love’s
Knowledge (1990), Nussbaum claims that narrative fiction expands readers’ capacity to
make appropriate ethical judgments, because

literature is an extension of life not only horizontally, bringing the reader
into contact with events or locations or persons or problems he or she has
not otherwise met, but also, so to speak, vertically, giving the reader
experience that is deeper, sharper, and more precise than much of what
takes place in life. (48)

The second of the two reasons that Nussbaum gives—that literature provides “experience
that is deeper, sharper, and more precise”—suggests that such ethical exploration is
intimately connected to another facet of the reading experience: the emotional and
affective dynamics created by narrative form and felt by actual readers. Indeed, elsewhere
Nussbaum claims that emotions are fundamentally cognitive and, as such, are “intelligent
parts of our ethical agency” (41); thus, for Nussbaum, emotions of actual readers follow
from prior ethical judgments that are reached via reason.

Elsewhere, addressing how emotions work in response to literature, Nussbaum
claims that there are “multiple levels of specificity and generality” on which “[readers’]
emotions operate,” and “there are numerous options for the spectator, particularly in
negotiating levels of generality, and connections between the work and one’s own life”
(Upheavals 243). My argument, following this premise about readers’ options in
“negotiating levels of generality,” is that Lolita shifts in the degree of specificity and
generality of affective and ethical engagement that it encourages from readers. This
oscillation to certain “levels of generality” offers readers the opportunity to temporarily
sideline specific ethical concerns and instead to participate in the emotions that Humbert
enacts through his narration.

In Humbert’s rhetorical appeals aimed at specific narratees that Tamir-Ghez and
Laufer analyze, what is most important is the narrative’s specificity—specificity of
narrated event, of character emotion, or of reader affect—because this specificity provides space for the reader to emphasize a reading practice based in skepticism and use ethical judgment to distance her- or himself affectively from Humbert emotional experiences. This emphasis on specificity and particularity is, in fact, in line with Nussbaum’s discussion of ethics, when she says that the novel has a commitment to the “priority of the particular” (37). For Nussbaum, the particular and the specific are central and important to the novel because they prioritize the reader’s discernment and “[fine] responsiveness to the concrete,” both of which, Nussbaum believes, are essential for a responsible ethics.

The passages that invoke the lyrical addressee are grounded on fundamentally different assumptions about Humbert’s purpose in writing, as well as about the range of possibilities for reader engagement. These passages open up the possibility of participation in—a general kind of identification with—Humbert’s own emotional state, because they background the specificity of emotion and communicative situation that encourage ethical judgments against Humbert. When that specificity of past event and sensation is foregone in favor of a more nebulous present-day experience—in evoking a moment of present-day emotion and lyric stasis rather than the movement and competing interests between characters integral to narrative—it can be difficult to maintain an emphasis on ethical considerations.

*The Communicative Breakdown and Humbert’s Ability to Access Present-Day Emotion in Lyric Passages*
In contrast with the rhetorical self-awareness Humbert exhibits elsewhere, passages of lyrical address in *Lolita* reveal a narrator who temporarily abandons his project of speaking directly to any of the specific narratees he has previously addressed. The foundations of narrative, as described by rhetorical theorists like Phelan, rest on seeing the narrative situation *always* as a communicative, rhetorical situation from author through narrator and narratee to reader. According to Phelan, an author tells a story (shares content/events with) to some audience for some purpose and to have some particular effect upon that audience.\(^{40}\) This definition uses authorial purpose to link together three primary components: the speaker (narrator), the audience, and the content (in this case, the events of the past). These three components are all clearly defined in parts of *Lolita* where the narratee is explicitly defined, Humbert has a clear rhetorical purpose (defend his actions or evoke sympathy in a reader), and the content primarily remains focused on the specifics of the narrative events of the past.

In passages in the lyric mode,\(^{41}\) however, Humbert shifts dramatically away from either the audience or the content/events of the past and instead toward an almost myopic

---

\(^{40}\) There are many iterations of this general definition, but one overview instance from *Narrative Theory: Core Concepts and Critical Debates* is useful: "Narrative is somebody telling somebody else, on some occasion, and for some purposes, that something happened to someone or something" (3, ital. in original).

\(^{41}\) In contrast with narrative communication, which leans on judgment, ethics, and evaluation, in the lyric mode, Phelan explains that "[e]vent gets displaced by thought, attitude, belief, or emotion," "ethical judgment drops out and is replaced by participation, an entering into the speaker’s situation and perspective without judging it" and "[t]hat participation in turn influences the affective side of the experience—we share the speaker’s feelings or take on the speaker’s thoughts, beliefs, or attitudes." (*Experiencing* 152) When I refer to the lyrical addressee, I am building on this sense of reader feelings that can participate in and mirror or echo those of characters.
focus on his own emotional and embodied experience in the moment of narration. Lyrical
address, in my understanding, tilts so drastically toward the speaker’s experience that, in
fact, it begins to lose many features of narrative communication. The rhetorical model
does allow us to position these lyric moments in the larger context of communication
from Nabokov through Humbert to the reader. I do not want to dispute this larger
characterization but instead focus deeply on the affective potential of certain localized
moments.

In a similar opposition between past narration and present-day lyric moments,
where the past tense can privilege the described body, the present moment and
experiential embodiment, felt too intensely, can lead to a loss of a sense of temporality. In
*Edinburgh*, the use of the simultaneous present tense intensified the reader’s participation
in Fee’s experiential embodiment and the feeling of being constrained by and wishing to
transcend the body; these moments focused just on embodiment themselves attenuate the
narrative forward drive.

Similarly, in certain moments of *Lolita*, there is a similar stopping of time when
experiential embodiment is emphasized. There is little past or future, only Humbert’s
present-moment emotions, their intensity, and desire. The concept of desire, indeed,
might seem to contradict the notion that time and narrative have halted, especially given
foundational arguments like Peter Brooks’s that desire itself is constitutive of narrative
experience. The distinction in these lyric moments, however, has to do with both the kind
and location of desire. That is, Brooks’s argument hinges on a reader’s desire for the plot
to advance, for totalizing knowledge and satisfaction based upon frustrated and finally
satisfied desire in the form of resolution. Certain lyric moments when Humbert fully owns his own desire without defending it do not create a corresponding desire in the reader. Furthermore, Humbert’s desire in these lyric moments is markedly different from his explicitly sexual desire and his narrative of lust experienced in the past. Instead, Humbert’s desire for “Lolita”—a concept that, as has been noted, is itself a fabrication of Humbert’s, not to be confused with the real girl—becomes so unspecified, capacious, and general that the desire becomes a stand-in for everything he desires in life and in the moment. This kind of desire is less about sex and more about noticing a kind of hole at the center of Humbert’s being, which he has tried to use the fabrication of Dolores to fill.

Such a vague and unspecified kind of desire, characterizing Humbert’s moments of experiential embodiment, is, in contrast with Brooks’s theory, associated with a slowing or stoppage of narrative momentum. That is, while Brooks’s model sees delay and deferral as necessary and valuable to the experience of the plot, in this understanding, readerly desire is associated with moving forward despite that delay and deferral. Overall satisfaction, then, occurs because the plot forces a reader desiring to move forward to pause over certain moments. By contrast, I am locating Humbert’s desire as central to the stoppage of narrative momentum, but not to the larger trajectory to a satisfying end.

The classic example of this breakdown of narrative features occurs as Humbert, coming closer to having to narrate his first violation of Dolores, pauses to consider his present-day emotional state. In attempting to so fully experience the present moment, he loses connection to both a narratee and to the past, and eventually to narrative progression itself:
This daily headache in the opaque air of this tombal jail is disturbing, but I must persevere. Have written more than a hundred pages and not got anywhere yet. My calendar is getting confused. That must have been around August 15, 1947. Don’t think I can go on. Heart, head—everything. Lolita, Lolita, Lolita, Lolita, Lolita, Lolita, Lolita, Lolita, Lolita. Repeat till the page is full, printer. (109)

This passage stages two important tensions between the present moment and requisite facets of the communicative situation. The first tension is between living fully within the emotions and desires of the present moment, on the one hand, and narrating specifics of past events, on the other. The second tension is between that present moment and, not the past, but rather the audience for whom Humbert often performs—that is, the audience that, in other passages, he figures as either the juror narratee or the reader-consumer narratee. The more Humbert attempts to capture the emotional experience of the present moment—or, in another sense, the past moment—the more difficult it becomes for him to retain the specificity of detail about Dolores’s body, of the situation being described, or even of metaphor that he uses to indicate his emotional state in other passages—that he generally uses to reach his audience.42 Literally, instead of seeing physical details that he’s previously noted such as the “slightly feline outline of a cheekbone,” (17) the

---
42 Granted, neither the past nor the narratee is thoroughly effaced—they are still suggested, through the “calendar” Humbert references and through his implied awareness that a narratee would expect a clear calendar and would expect him to “go on” with his story. Humbert, that is, is aware of the expectations placed on him as a narrator, but in this passage he expresses the desire to eschew awareness of the narratee and clarity about specific events in the past; instead, he expresses the desire to simply sit within the emotions of the present moment.
“twitching at the side of her dust-powdered ankle” (41) and the “silky shimmer above her temple grading into bright brown hair” (41), he is reduced instead to both a generic repetition of her assigned name and the broader details of “heart, head.” Ultimately, even the specificity of distinguishing the larger organs of “heart” and “head” from each other breaks down, and his focus becomes on “everything.” The repetition of “Lolita” nine times is similarly a generalizing move, a way in which Humbert indicates that he sees “Lolita”—a projection of what is most desirable and meaningful to him—in everything and thus also that he sees everything in her, precisely because she is an idealized fabrication of his own. What is notable is that this move toward intense generalizing, away from the useful specificity of detail about past events or about a narratee, breaks down the progression of the narrative and the narrative communicative situation itself. By the time he repeats the name Lolita nine times, his ability to see beyond himself toward the past or an audience overwhelmed, Humbert is no longer talking to a specific and characterized narratee but rather to a more vaguely figured position I have called the addressee. The addressee, like the narratee, has access to Humbert’s words, but unlike the narratee’s situation, for the addressee, those very words reveal that Humbert has temporarily forgotten his audience.

By the end of the passage, there is in fact a specific narratee, the “printer” Humbert commands to “Repeat till the page is full.” With this sentence, Humbert’s narration returns, in part, from the inwardness to an awareness of an eventual audience. Yet because the command is also to an audience member to complete this action in some distant future, the inwardness partially remains, as we can imagine the character Humbert
issuing this command in order to return to his inwardly focused state, even if he does not communicate this further in writing. The metatextual nature of this narratee—Humbert’s acknowledgement here that he is writing a text for publication—increases the sense of physical and temporal distance between himself and readers of his text.

The progression of the passage also moves from one of the few reflections of Humbert’s awareness of the physical body in the jail space—“daily headache,” “opaque air”—through the body on a more and more abstract level—“Heart. Head. Everything”—to the highest level of abstraction, the repetition of “Lolita,” the word itself a creation of what he wanted the twelve-year-old girl to be. With the “daily headache,” this passage begins in the realm of the physical, which Humbert has revealed he often cannot attend to except in the realm of the sexual. Humbert’s narration moves from this attention to the physical (but not sexual) to an attention to abstract desires. This move conveys an internal experience of wishing intensely, desperately, and physically to transcend the body in order to attain what is desired. To some degree, this dynamic is parallel to Fee’s intensely felt embodied experience of wishing to transcend the body.

The explicit narratee disappears in lyric passages because, counter to Humbert’s expertise with language elsewhere, the novel suggests a central tension between the ability to experience and “capture” in language a present-moment emotion. In writing lyric passages, Humbert abandons his normal communicative modes because, rather than focus on the past, he attempts instead to write his way through the experience of present-moment emotions and feelings associated with embodiment. Due to the complex interrelation between these emotions and language, however, what appears to be a failure
of aesthetics and of communication in the standard narrative communication model can be re-interpreted as Humbert’s attempts to inhabit and influence his own emotions in the moment. The effect of this attempt is to render Humbert as less obviously adept at aesthetic choices, but also less calculated, more confused and genuinely moved by emotions in the moment.

To understand how the lyric passages exhibit the difficulty of language to “capture” a stable emotion, I turn to the work of William Reddy, an anthropologist of the emotions. Reddy has argued that statements of emotion, such as “I am angry,” should be seen as neither of the two extremes proposed thus far: neither simply descriptive statements about factual reality nor purely constructionist statements that create reality. That is, to say “I am happy” does not refer directly and accurately to a stable pre-existing reality of happiness, but nor does the other extreme understanding—that to say “I am happy” constructs and creates happiness—apply. Building on J. L. Austin’s speech-act theory that proposed a distinction between the descriptive constative and the acting performative, Reddy proposes a new category: the emotive. Emotives “seem at first glance to have a real external referent, to be descriptive or constative,” but in voicing an emotive, a speaker alters his/her own emotion, which “emerges from the act of uttering in a changed state” (331). “Emotives,” he continues, “are themselves instruments for directly changing, building, hiding, intensifying emotions” (331).

emotive—albeit a descriptively unclear one—that both describes and changes Humbert’s emotional state. These sentences suggest an equivalence between “heart, head, everything” and “Lolita.” In other words, Humbert feels the loss of the girl so acutely that in losing her, he feels the loss throughout his body, from his “heart” to his “head” and throughout “everything” in his body and surroundings. The tomb-like nature of the jail cell, in its oppressive bareness, emphasizes his loss and the sense of distance between himself and the object of his longing. The repetition of the name “Lolita” is thus a sign of the loss that he feels so acutely that the jail cell reflects it back to him, but even more interestingly, it is also an attempt—albeit perhaps not a conscious one—to further inhabit and even intensify the desire associated with that loss. In focusing on the idea of an “attempt” here, I am not thinking of an effect he aims to produce in readers but rather an effect he produces in himself; by allowing himself to fully inhabit the emotion, he intensifies and reinforces it. Thus while we might also call this a kind of spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings, the concept of the emotive adds to the discussion the potential that talking about that overflow of feelings changes or intensifies or modulates those very feelings. Effectively, Humbert repeats the name in an attempt to actually make “Lolita” be everything in his reality in that particular moment.

While the final sentence, “Repeat till the page is full, printer” may seem to suggest a renewed awareness of audience and thus of the concretely realized communicative situation, it is also a way for Humbert, by abandoning the physical task of writing, to even more fully inhabit—potentially in his awareness of his body—the loss and desire felt in the present moment. One might, for instance, imagine him continuing to
repeat the name to himself even after the pen has stopped moving. These statements of emotion perform the function of intensifying emotion for Humbert himself, but much less so to reach and/or persuade any kind of specific audience. At the same time, the return of the narratee in the form of the “printer” serves to highlight the contrast between Humbert’s glib self-aware narration and the loss of control apparent in the repetition of “Lolita.” That is, the moment of lyric address can be seen as one when Humbert’s mask falters and we see the real pain. Realizing this pain, he recovers and returns to the self-conscious narration characteristic of the rest of the novel.

This reading of the repetition of “Lolita” as an emotive changes the understanding of Humbert’s motivations in this moment. While skeptics may question whether Humbert “merely performs” emotionality in order to disarm and draw in a reader, the lack of explicit narratee before the printer appears suggests a different purpose in these lyric passages. The purpose in this case is a self-focused attempt to inhabit and continually modify through intensification the emotions evoked by repeating the name Lolita. The lyrical addressee is left only to witness, from the outside, a process of emotional experience and subtle modification. Yet being “outside” of Humbert’s emotions in this case does not encourage distance and judgment. The indirect form of the emotives (repeating “Lolita” rather than stating directly, “I am sad” or “I feel loss”) de-emphasizes Humbert as separate subject and instead places the lyrical addressee within the emotional experience, leading to a kind of affective participation in Humbert’s expressed and intensified pain and loneliness.

Reading Humbert’s narration in lyric passages as emotives also highlights a more
general problem that *Lolita* suggests about the difficulty of simultaneously narrating and fully inhabiting emotions. This difficulty explains, in a more nuanced way than merely dismissing the chapters as “mawkish and self-regarding… artful and hackneyed” (as Michael Wood\textsuperscript{43} labels Humbert’s claims to pain and guilt), why narrative and communicative breakdown is associated with emotional outbursts that, because of the very breakdown, should be read as genuine representations of Humbert’s emotional experience and his difficulty in accessing present-moment emotional experience.

Consider the following passage, where Humbert’s struggle to narrate past events leads him irrevocably, against his wishes, away from the past into considering his emotions in the present day. Upon Humbert’s being forced to consider those present-day emotions, the momentum of the sentence falters:

> We had been everywhere. We had really seen nothing. And I catch myself thinking today that our long journey had only defiled with a sinuous trail of slime the lovely, trustful, dreamy, enormous country that by then, in retrospect, was no more to me than a collection of dog-eared maps, ruined tour books, old tires, and her sobs in the night—every night, every night—the moment I feigned sleep. (175–76)

This passage does not immediately seem to be one that represents Humbert’s struggle with accessing and expressing present-moment emotions; the overall focus is a

---

\textsuperscript{43} See Wood’s “Lolita Revisited” (42). Wood here uses a term presented by Humbert himself, who anticipates a reader dismissing him as “mawkish” (109). Wood’s claims here address, specifically, passages where Humbert expresses a final awareness of guilt (*Lolita* 277, 308) rather than the lyric passages I’ve noted thus far. However, the distrust of Humbert’s claims to emotion creates a similar dynamic of skepticism over an intangible reality that Humbert can never definitively prove.
retrospective account of what the “long journey” actually was, in ethical terms, for Humbert, Dolores, and for the hope and idealism suggested by the “lovely, trustful, dreamy, enormous country.” Accordingly, Phelan discusses the passage as an example of dual focalization in order to demonstrate how it reveals Humbert’s changing ethical interpretation of the past; I discuss this interpretation in more depth below when the concept of dual focalization helps me to explain my understanding of mood in this passage.

In order to reach the distance necessary for such retrospection and re-interpretation of his past, Humbert must orient himself in the present moment of narrating; that is, he must notice that he “catch[es] [him]self thinking today” (my emphasis) as he contemplates the past events. This present-moment experience does not at first lie in the realm of emotional experience; rather, it consists of re-interpretations and re-evaluations of the past, that is, the realm of “thinking.” This realm is the same one occupied when readers read as detectives, focusing on suspicion and judgment; it is a realm of factual specificity about audience and about story of past events. Hence, the list of items collected on their trip moves toward a specific collection of items acquired in the past, but it does not initially capture emotional experience. In addition, the collection of items (the maps, the tour books, the old tires) suggests a repetitiveness of the actions associated with road trips, as well as a focus on mere acquisition (each item suggests constant movement and desire for new places and things), all of which also suggests a power to numb whoever experiences such cycling of objects designed merely to lead to replacements. The numbness and the factual specificity place these facets in the realm of
the narrative about the past, the realm of thinking, and of non-emotionality.

The more the sentence progresses specifically toward describing the emotions evinced by Dolores herself, the more it moves toward description—not of a general repetition of maps, tour books, and tires—but of a collection of specific, individual moments, each of which has its own emotional force. The narration moves from the general repetition of concrete objects like maps and tour books first to the repetition of Dolores’s “sobs in the night,” which in its difference in kind begins the new direction of the sentence. The sentence then moves on to even more specificity and individuality of “every night” “the moment” Humbert “feigned sleep.” (The “every” indicates a collection of individual nights, not the collectivity of “all the nights.”) The momentum of the sentence, which has been increasing through the list of maps, tour books, tires, and sobs, falters immediately after the “sobs in the night,” indicated by the dash. The falter can almost be imagined as Humbert narrating “sobs in the night” and only then realizing what he has said and pausing to feel the force of those sobs. The repeated “every night, every night” between dashes does not merely report past events but also effectively works as a pause and a reminder of the present-moment emotions amidst narration of past events.

Acknowledging the realm of emotional experience in the past, then, in fact forces Humbert to face his own emotional experience in the present moment; by facing and narrating the force of each individual moment in the past, Humbert is also forced to feel, in the present moment, as he narrates. The faltering pause and the repetition of “every night, every night” further suggest the extent of Humbert’s difficulty in facing emotions of the past, as well as in facing and expressing his intense feelings in the present moment.
This passage does not lead to the same kind of narrative and communicative breakdown apparent in the repetition of “Lolita,” but it points to a similar dynamic wherein Humbert’s efforts to capture emotions in the present moment and the intensity of those feelings in the present moment necessarily lead to a faltering of the connection he focuses on with explicitly described narratees elsewhere in his narrative.

This passage illustrates the extent to which *Lolita* represents a fundamental opposition between experiencing and verbalizing emotion. Such an opposition accounts for the way the communicative pathway from narrator to narratee breaks down in lyric passages where Humbert attempts to capture his own emotions; it is impossible simply to “capture” emotions with language, thus the loss of focus on both narratee and specificity of past events. Much as the repetition of “Lolita” both refers to and modifies (in this case, intensifies) an emotion, words describing emotions, according to William Reddy, are inevitably doomed to a certain kind of failure. Emotions are nebulous, always shifting, and often so all-encompassing that attempts to capture them in words will always seem inadequate. Specifically, emotions activate “thought material” (such as memories about past events) that, in turn, affect the emotions; however, “the range and complexity of thought material activated at any given time can be so great” (269) that focusing one’s attention in order to “[attempt] to summarize or characterize the overall tenor of such material [will] inevitably fail” (269). In fact, it is precisely this failure that, Reddy says, creates the emotive effect, by which verbalizing an emotion may result in confirming, disconfirming, intensifying, or attenuating the emotion itself (269). Reddy thus grants primary influence to the role of language and words in affecting, even intensifying,
emotions, precisely because of the unbridgeable gap between language about emotions (verbalizing emotions) and the emotional experience itself, something that often feels internal and not always embodied, even when it is. In *Lolita*, this fundamental gap between emotion and language is confirmed by Humbert’s difficulty with fully expressing present-day emotions. The very breakdowns in lyric passages that I describe indicate the struggle, the failure, and the consequent emotive effect upon Humbert that Reddy’s philosophy describes.

While Reddy’s philosophy is useful to understand Humbert as character and how his language can be seen to affect his emotional state, it also stops short of what I’d like to say about the relationship between emotions and language. Humbert uses language for an emotive effect upon himself, and these moments reveal a kind of breakdown of the narrative situation given that Humbert is entirely self-focused. However, it is also possible to see these moments as a breakdown in language itself. Reddy notes that there is always a gap between language and the emotion itself, and the end of the passage in the jail cell suggests how this gap can, in some cases, become overwhelming, leading to a loss of faith that language will ever fully capture the complexity of the emotion. Language in these moments breaks down for Humbert in particular because it is clear that he lacks the ability to attend fully to emotions as they arise in the body. Since his attention to the body otherwise only appears as attention to sexual desire, Humbert has little experience with the language to convey that emotional and embodied experience. This means, all the more, that the breakdown in language also parallels a corresponding attention to what is left when there is no story or language: only the self, in the jail cell,
and the feeling of the body.

While this lack of attention to the body is not highlighted in these moments themselves, noting it points us to how Nabokov otherwise makes Humbert seem more sympathetic in deflecting attention from questions of the body. Moreover, noting it highlights some of the remarkable similarities between victims Fee and Kathryn and Humbert, who—while not a victim—clearly dissociates himself from his bodily experience in any moments that are not only about lust and sexual desire. We might see this dissociation as simple evasion to try to persuade us, or we might see it as further evidence of his depravity. But when he is alone in the jail cell, powerless and lost, his inability even then to attend to his bodily experience is notable and, like the passages that constitute emotives, not designed to have a particular effect on his audience.

Nussbaum’s philosophy of emotions, in contrast, ignores this central aspect of *Lolita*. Her approach instead rests upon a direct causal relationship between beliefs about reality and consequent emotions; thus, beliefs are the best interpretive signpost for correctly identifying an emotion one is experiencing, and emotions based upon incorrect beliefs are easy to change deliberately if one simply corrects those beliefs. Because *Lolita* focuses in part upon the very process by which its narrator inhabits, expresses, and thereby modifies his emotions in the present moment, Nussbaum’s philosophy seems

---

44 For instance, Nussbaum states, “[T]he feeling of agitation all by itself will not reveal to me whether what I am feeling is fear or grief or pity. Only an inspection of the thoughts discriminates” (*Upheavals* 29–30). The thoughts or beliefs—in this case, Nussbaum’s personal beliefs about whether a flight attendant intended to be hurtful—exist already, and the “inspection” allows one to determine a stable emotion. Because incorrect beliefs, according to Nussbaum, can be modified by a close examination of reality, their associated emotions can also be predictably modified as beliefs are corrected.
inadequate to account for the dynamics of character emotion. Reddy’s philosophy grants what the novel suggests about the complexity of the relation between emotive language and emotions themselves, as well as the inevitably nebulous nature of our cognitive grasp of the emotions.

The lyrical addressee, then, is an audience position designed by Nabokov to resist the assumptions that privilege ethical judgments, assumptions like those we find in Nussbaum’s philosophy and Phelan’s similar approach to literary criticism. Nabokov’s project in these moments aimed at the lyrical addressee is to represent Humbert’s very struggles with present-moment emotion and language. The attendant breakdown in the standard features of narrative communication is what re-directs readers away from interrelating ethical judgments and affective response as Phelan and Nussbaum claim that narrative modes, with an emphasis on specificity and particularity, encourage them to do. Passages aimed at the lyrical addressee instead shift into a more general perspective on ever-shifting character emotions, and, in contrast to the effects of the juror narratee and the reader-consumer narratee, lack of specificity about past events and audience in the figuration of the lyrical addressee temporarily discourages ethical judgments.

*The Fuzziness of Mood and Character/Reader Emotions in Lyric Passages*

In addition to the breakdown of the communicative situation, which points to Humbert’s struggle to inhabit his emotional experience and to experience embodiment, passages in the lyric mode also encourage feeling with Humbert by evoking what I call a particularly fuzzy mood and thus by reflecting Humbert’s current emotional experience
across character and temporal boundaries. Moods, according to Greg M. Smith are “expectancies that we are about to have a particular emotion, that we will encounter cues that will elicit particular emotions”; moods, in other words, are “tendencies toward expressing emotion” (113). “Emotion markers” are the specific events that intensify and re-establish the more general mood (118). When we focus on the mimetic (rather than the synthetic) aspects of the narrative, Lolita works by first establishing and then building on and intensifying a mood of sadness, guilt, despair, and pain, even though one might expect there to be events and character emotions that would contradict this mood. Instead, Humbert’s narration creates a consistent mood by using similarly painful emotion markers from a variety of individuals and time periods—even from characters and contexts that one might think should conflict with each other. Accounting for this distinctive use of emotion markers, I use the term “fuzzy” to describe the mood of Lolita precisely because of the way that it is created not only by Humbert’s current emotional state but also by the emotions of other characters, as well as various settings, all of which blend together to establish a more pervasive, even oppressive, sense of heartbreak. The

---

45 Smith is talking about how mood functions specifically in film, because “films provide a variety of redundant emotive cues, increasing the chance that differing audience members (with their differing preferences of emotional access) will be nudged toward an appropriate emotional orientation” (115–116). Lolita’s rapid shifting between voices and tones results in such potentially contradictory information that it becomes necessary for a reader to locate an emotional thread— that is, a mood—to follow in order to respond affectively to the novel.

46 See Phelan, Reading People (20) for a discussion of the mimetic, synthetic, and thematic components of narratives.

47 This use of “fuzzy” builds, to some degree, on work by Jean-Louis Hippolyte, who adopts the concept of fuzzy sets from mathematics to explain how semantic ambiguity translates into ontological uncertainty in work by avant-garde French writers. My use of
mood permeates present and past, as well as the specific emotions of other characters aside from Humbert. The extent to which this mood transcends Humbert’s individual emotional experience further renders ethical judgments against Humbert alone more difficult, and it also allows for the mood to seep into the lyrical addressee’s affective experience of the novel.

In the passage discussed above (the one that ends by describing “[Dolores’s] sobs in the night—every night, every night—the moment [Humbert] feigned sleep”), the affective dynamics arise out of more than just what was discussed in the previous section: the intensity of Humbert’s emotion taking over his narrative control as he narrates. The character emotions suggested in this passage in fact spread over both Humbert and Dolores, and across the past and present, in a way that creates a fuzzy mood of pain, heartbreak, despair, and resignation. Such a reading resists numerous critical accounts of this passage. I will first describe a common way of reading the passage and then, to parse out the inherent ambiguity, turn to Phelan’s account of dual focalization within the passage. Phelan’s account will help me to make my case for the fuzzy mood against the standard reading.

One common way to read this passage is to resist all ambiguity of emotional location and instead to identify emotions specifically within individual characters: to consider Humbert’s emotions as against Dolores’s and to see their respective happiness as mutually exclusive. Dolores’s sobs, such a reading might argue, arose because of Humbert’s happiness, while her sobs would have ended and her happiness would have “fuzzy” likewise sees blending across temporalities and character boundaries that we would most often like to keep clear and distinct.

188
increased upon Humbert’s experiencing the grief of losing her. This reading encourages ethical judgments against Humbert because he reveals such selfish unconcern over Dolores’s emotional state, “feign[ing] sleep” every time he had to face the fact of her unhappiness that paid for his happiness. Even were a critic to attenuate these ethical judgments by emphasizing Humbert’s growing sense of guilt—guilt felt and finally acknowledged in the present day but also existing in the background even in the past when he hears Dolores’s sobs—such a reading would still remain focused on weighing character emotions against each other and on the ethical dynamics of how characters influence each other’s happiness. This reading is astute, but it also ignores the fact that the passage specifically does not mention happiness, only unhappiness. The speculations about Dolores’s unhappiness equaling Humbert’s happiness and vice versa do not respond to the tone of the passage, which only mentions Dolores’s sobs and only implies Humbert’s present-day growing sense of loss and of guilt.

Such a way of reading character emotions, in addition, leads to an oversimplification and a tendency to feel it necessary for readers to choose between Dolores’s or Humbert’s pain, as though for a reader to identify with one character is to negate the other’s suffering. For instance, Linda Kauffman advocates for finding “a woman in the text” by paying attention only to Dolores’s emotional reality and by actively disbelieving Humbert’s claims to emotional truth. Kauffman first critiques John Ray, Jr.’s foreword

48 For instance, one might argue that the fact that Humbert had to feign sleep, rather than being able to fully ignore her and sleep deeply, suggests that even in the past Humbert felt guilt over the pain he inflicted on the girl. Such incipient guilt, which Humbert only fully experiences and acknowledges in the moment of narration, may attenuate some of those ethical judgments that he is completely callous and selfish.
because it “reveals an utter disregard for Lolita’s suffering” and “effaces her entirely,”
while “focusing solely on Humbert’s ‘supreme misery’” (160). Kauffman’s solution to
this imbalance, though, seems not to be to acknowledge Dolores’s suffering as well as
Humbert’s, but to invalidate the very “supreme misery” Humbert lays claim to. Pointing
to passages where Humbert avoids details because they address “a despair that surpasses
his powers of description,” Kauffman claims, “But from The Sorrows of Young Werther
to The Turn of the Screw, guilty narrators have taken refuge in the ineffable: whatever
they want to evade they claim is impossible to describe” (162). Kauffman’s
dismissiveness here about Humbert’s claims to emotional pain is remarkable not because
of her disbelief in Humbert’s genuineness, but because of her implicit assumption that a
reader of the novel Lolita cannot both find a woman in the text and acknowledge and
even experience Humbert’s pain.49

Reading the passage another way leads to recognizing the fuzzy mood, which
does not directly address ethical judgments or even an ethically grounded “sympathy.”
Such a mood arises because of the central ambiguities of where and when certain
emotions in the passage are situated. Pointing to this ambiguity, Phelan claims that this
passage constitutes an example of what he calls dual focalization, when both the narrator
of the present and the character of the past “see” the events of Dolores sobbing every
night, and when “story and discourse overlap” (119). Specifically, this overlap occurs

49 Such skepticism from Kauffman could also appear in an approach where one would
find it easier to dismiss Humbert’s pain because, one might say, he brought it upon
himself, whereas Dolores is not at all responsible for her pain. This critique, however,
focuses only on the facet of Humbert’s pain that is guilt, whereas the other pain of loss
and thwarted desire—and even the more general loss that his desire in the first place
seeks to fill—would exist in any case.
because the text leaves vague whether narrating Humbert or experiencing Humbert is the one who, “in retrospect,” saw the journey as “no more than a collection of dog-eared maps…”: “the phrase ‘in retrospect’… can refer either to a retrospect from the character’s present moment or to one from the narrator’s” (118). Where Phelan examines this question in terms of focalization and thus through the metaphor of vision, I want to consider the consequences of this ambiguity for where and when emotions are situated. The ambiguity of “in retrospect” also means there is ambiguity about whether specific emotions that are tied to this assessment happen in the past, to the experiencing Humbert, or in the present, to the narrating Humbert. Such ambiguity leads more generally to a melding of the two timeframes, a melding that ultimately renders fuzzy the very boundaries that we often establish between individuals’ emotions. The fuzzy mood, that is, occurs because the ambiguity blends Dolores’s pain and sobs of the past with Humbert’s pain and despair of the present day—pain and despair that are, indeed, also part of his recognizing that he was the cause of her sobs every night in the past—such that the conflict between the two in the past is muted.

Blending the past and present, the passage thus creates an unspecified and unlocalized mood of heartbreak and despair, guilt and pain, which, for the lyrical addressee, transcends the conflict between the two characters. I’ve already talked about the heartbreak, despair, and pain in the passages that include emotives. These passages are related in that the emphasis is on affect but different in that Humbert’s present-day sense of guilt is layered with those other emotions as well. Thus, at least insofar as mood is established here, ethical judgments against Humbert’s actions are not wholly irrelevant.
Yet because the guilt is mixed with other emotions, I suggest that what is more important than judging past Humbert’s actions is attending to way the passages meld the emotions of both characters and timeframes into a general mood. This mood allows readers to enter into the emotions evoked, whoever experiences those emotions, and, also, in a very general way, to feel with Humbert as well as with Dolores. The specifics of temporal location, character goals and conflicts, and of ensuing ethical judgments are largely irrelevant to the pain, evidenced by both Humbert and Dolores, that this passage can evoke and in which the lyrical addressee is invited to participate. This moment does not completely ignore ethical dynamics and judgments, but the potential for an affective experience, one in which the lyrical addressee experiences a kind of identificatory pain, makes it possible to temporarily sideline these very real ethical questions and open up the possibility of affective response that does not answer to ethical judgments and the need to validate one character’s emotional reality over the other’s. The general nature and the pervasiveness of these emotions provide a broader framework so that actual readers looking to enter the lyrical addressee audience position have multiple points of entry and can then, from different perspectives, still all participate in certain facets of Humbert’s emotional experience.

The ambiguity of the fuzzy mood is furthered by the physical description of the narrating space, which in these passages is so devoid of specific physical stimuli that, in addition to creating a broad, oppressively empty atmosphere, also creates an alignment between Humbert and the lyrical addressee. The following passage, considered alongside the “daily headache in the opaque air of this tombal jail” (109), highlights the way that
similar affects of oppressive, vast emptiness pertain in remarkably different settings:

[W]hat I feared most was not that she might ruin me, but that she might accumulate sufficient cash to run away. I believe the poor fierce-eyed child had figured out that with a mere fifty dollars in her purse she might somehow reach Broadway or Hollywood—or the foul kitchen of a diner (Help Wanted) in a dismal ex-prairie state, with the wind blowing, and the stars blinking, and the cars, and the bars, and the barmen, and everything soiled, torn, dead. (185)

The prison cell, oppressively claustrophobic (enclosed, allowing no movement, “tombal”) and “opaque,” is in many ways the opposite of the vast expansive desolation of an “ex-prairie state, with the “wind blowing, and the stars blinking,” but the affective import of the two settings is remarkably similar: desolate and bare, either in their expansiveness or their claustrophobic closeness. There is also a vast emptiness—a feeling of loss and “lost-ness”—figured by both settings, and mirrored in Humbert’s mental state and echoed in the lyrical addressee’s affective state. The “ex-prairie-state,” we might imagine, is located in what we can imagine is the Midwest, perhaps Nebraska or Kansas, in a region that was once idyllic as prairie-land but has been damaged by civilization; the phrase “ex-prairie-state” that is, taps into a sense of lost innocence and purity, making it apt that Dolores, also damaged by Humbert’s abuse, could only end there, where Humbert anticipates the “barmen” would be likely to attract her. The vast emptiness of the ex-prairie-state is figured quite literally as the physical space of the country; the “dismal ex-prairie state, with the wind blowing, and the stars blinking” itself is oppressive, the wind and stars
themselves highlighting the lack of other resources, as well as the lack of human amenities to fend off the desolate natural world. And yet, the ex-prairie state is dismal insofar as civilization in it has also failed, the cars, bars, and barmen are all “soiled, torn, dead,” having given up in the inhospitable environment (185).

The passage evokes the heartbreak of Humbert realizing how the desolation he describes would have been better than what he provided her—indeed, that the trauma he enacted upon her would directly lead to such a depressing future for the girl—but that desolation is also inflected by atmosphere of the previously described prison cell, where Humbert himself ends affectively. Yet again, all temporal moments—the moment of narration, the past, and even Dolores’s counterfactual dream reality in the “dismal ex-prairie state”—become inflected with similar affects of desolation, despair, loneliness, and “lost-ness.” This happens even though, as with the “her sobs in the night” passage, his growing guilt realizing during the process of narration also taps into ethical judgments against his past actions. Because the guilt is central to the emotional dynamics of the present moment, once it is experienced and expressed, the emphasis shifts away from the judgment and onto experiencing the guilt, pain, despair, and desolation that characterizes this passage.

The jail cell seems less obviously vastly empty, but the invocation to the lyrical addressee as Humbert repeats “Lolita” nine times does create a similar kind of emptiness as it reduces Humbert’s experience there to his interiority, with no physical objects to create or affect his reality. While “air” may be an actual thing, its quality of “opaqueness” is as unverifiable and subjective as Humbert’s sense of a “headache” or his sense of loss,
pain, despair, longing, etc. The literal emptiness of the space of the jail cell, filled only with air, reflects Humbert’s mental emptiness without stimulation—an emptiness he feels compelled to fill on the page, not with events about the past but with a sign of his desire, the name Lolita repeated endlessly. Thus as much as the jail cell itself is oppressive and claustrophobically induces a headache, its emptiness also evokes the vast emptiness of the countryside that, like prison, is equally inhospitable. These settings literalize the sense of Humbert’s loss and feeling of being lost without, literally, stimulation to guide him, or figuratively, desire to pursue.

The lack of physical stimuli in the jail cell, the lack of markers of protective civilization in the ex-prairie state, the unspecified location and temporality of emotions all work together, building on and influencing each other to create a mood of heartbreak and despair, pain and loss. Because the location of such emotions transcends individual characters, moments, or even general timeframes, the mood is distinctively “fuzzy,” unspecified, and thus relatable for readers entering the audience of the lyrical addressee from a variety of entry-points. One may, for instance, enter the mood through feeling with Humbert’s self-expressed pain, but one may equally enter the mood through sympathy for Dolores’s “sobs in the night.” The brilliance of Nabokov’s novel and Humbert’s narrative is that both author and narrator efface the boundary-lines between the emotions of what many want to be—and what, from an ethical perspective, are—conflicting parties.

Moreover, the emptiness and lack of stimuli and movement in the jail cell directly parallel the stimulus-deprivation in the lyrical addressee’s affective experience of
Humbert’s narrative. The jail cell present-day moment in Chapter 26 functions both for the reader entering the audience position of lyrical addressee and for Humbert as a suspended moment of emptiness, a moment with little to no stimulation of mind or body. The repetition of “Lolita” provides no new information for the lyrical addressee, and the “calendar…getting confused” also withholding useful information. Chapter 26 creates a sense of empty space around a reader who desires to move forward in narrative time but is instead held still, stagnant, with no obvious cues providing sensory or cognitive information. The narrative itself for a moment becomes a “tombal jail” for the lyrical addressee; the lyric moment becomes one of emptiness for the reader too. In the loss of outside and information-providing stimuli, as well as in the resistance to such emptiness, then, the lyrical addressee and Humbert are further aligned affectively. The alignment, in this case, effectively forces the lyrical addressee to enter into Humbert’s emotional experience, temporarily setting aside the negative ethical judgments that would lead to distance. This kind of sensory deprivation—a lack of embodiment that reminds one of the limitations of embodiment—echoes the dynamics of certain passages of *Edinburgh* as well.

These moments that mirror Humbert’s emotions and directly encourage affective participation from the lyrical addressee work separately from ethical judgments precisely because they are founded on general emotions and on a lack of physical, sensory experience—experiential embodiment—that would specify events (such as the passage described earlier about Humbert having sex with Dolores). By contrast, in other parts of the novel that do not invoke the lyrical addressee, a fundamental separation between
reader and protagonist is established as Humbert often focuses on his sensory experience (descriptive embodiment), which is prompted by his physical surroundings and by interactions with (often, sex with) Dolores. In these moments Humbert’s physical experience does not align with a reader’s interaction with his/her environment; whereas Humbert interacts with and is physically moved by (often aroused by) his world, the actual reader temporarily ignores his/her own physical world. More importantly, Humbert’s physical sensory experience separates him from readers on ethical grounds because that aroused sensation of “nymphet love” is fundamentally sexual. Focusing on Humbert’s physical, sensory experience—his specifically sexual desire—is inseparable from addressing the ethics of his desire for a prepubescent girl and the desire to sexually abuse Dolores. Physical, sensory experience in response to the young girl thus reminds readers of the ethical judgments they may make against Humbert.

By contrast, the lyrical addressee is invoked in passages where the emotions are distinctively not responses to sensory experiences.50 Such emotions are in fact evoked by the lack of sensory input in Humbert’s jail cell and sometimes by his memory of his own past experiences. Thus, the emotions are general in that they are not tied, as Nussbaum would have it, to the specificity and concreteness of Humbert’s situation in the moment of interacting with Dolores. Such moments also provide multiple points of entry allowing

---

50 By noting that Humbert’s emotions are not responses to sensory experience, I do not mean to say that the emotions he feels do not result in physical sensations in his body. Indeed, many fundamental definitions of emotions suggest that an emotion is an awareness of physical changes in the body. I, however, mean that his emotions—because they are evoked by a setting without much stimulation—are more general and not grounded in the kind of specificity of physical/sexual experience felt during his past interactions with Dolores.
for an individual reader to enter the audience position of lyrical addressee. When we consider these lyric moments alongside Humbert’s inability to attend to his own experience of embodiment, as well as the elision of his physical (sexual) body, *Lolita* starts to seem like a novel that is centrally about *denying* the body. But just as in *Edinburgh*, the attempts to deny the body and to transcend it remind one of the body in spite of everything.

General emotions suggested in these passages are ones that are more relatable to most readers, in that they address basic feelings, such as anger, sadness, surprise, or disgust, that many psychologists posit all humans can feel. In the field of psychology, scholars have attempted to define and describe what they call either the “basic” or the “primary” emotions—emotions, that is, that are common to all human experience irrespective of culture. While there are many disagreements over *what* the basic emotions are (some psychologists posit six basic emotions, while others posit eight or twelve), it is telling that almost every description of the basic emotions includes a category for what we can generally describe as “sadness.” Plutchik; Ekman, Friesen, and Ellsworth; Oatley and Johnson-Laird; and Weiner and Graham all name “sadness” as one of the basic emotions. Arnold names “dejection” and “despair” along with “sadness.” Frijda includes “sorrow,” while Izard and Tomkins characterize this emotion as “distress.” Whether we call it a general kind of “sadness,” “distress,” or “sorrow,” this negative feeling of having lost something important to one is captured by these words and is evoked in a very general way in Humbert’s invocations of the lyrical addressee. By focusing on the general nature of Humbert’s feelings and his sense of loss, *Lolita* at least momentarily
encourages affective participation in the audience position of the lyrical addressee, through a variety of entry-points and depending on individual readers’ personal experience.

The Ethics of Identifying with Humbert

*Lolita* may initially seem to be a text that encourages readers to engage affectively in ways that support the rhetorical model’s understanding of ethics and affect, as well as Nussbaum’s theory of emotions. That is, the central ethical situation of child sexual abuse may seem to encourage readers to emphasize their ethical stance toward and their individual judgments of Humbert. But it is not simply the fact of child abuse that encourages readers to focus on the specificity of situation and action—and most importantly, the specifics of how they differ from Humbert—in order to judge the narrator. It is even more importantly the way that Humbert shifts often among multiple narratees, often appealing to reason and an assumed juror’s skepticism as he pleads his case. Such appeals often lead to a critical reading practice aimed at seeing the narrative as a puzzle to solve: Read past Humbert for the truth of the events as suggested by the implied Nabokov, we are told, and a reader will not be manipulated. That reader will thus be able to finish the story from a stable ethical position.

By contrast, I have argued that other passages of the novel, those which invoke a lyrical addressee, rest on very different appeals—and not on specificity of either situation or reader position but on a breakdown of that specificity as Humbert’s narrative communication itself breaks down in such moments. These moments thus also rely on
Humbert’s emotives and focus on overwhelming emotional experience, which leads to his attending to experiential embodiment. Specificity also dissolves as the emphasis leans away from easily ordered dynamics of situation toward a “fuzzy mood” that transcends individual characters’ emotions, and toward an emphasis on general, “basic” emotions. All of these features that dissolve specificity allow readers multiple points of entry to achieve a kind of affective identification with Humbert.

These moments are important because they discourage a focus on emotion, affect, and embodiment that is derived primarily from beliefs and ethical judgments. In Nussbaum’s approach to the emotions, the ethical judgment against Humbert would be so strong that it would preclude any possible “feeling with” or identification with Humbert. In my reading, outside of these moments of lyrical address, the negative ethical judgments about Humbert’s abuse of Dolores remain and run throughout the narrative, but they do not override these moments. These moments offer a kind of reprieve from the extent to which readers are expected to read as detectives, with suspicion and judgment and their guard up, throughout the rest of the narrative.

I’ve focused on these moments of lyrical address without considering them as having their own ethical implications for our otherwise negative ethical judgments against Humbert because I do not believe they change the power of those judgments we make elsewhere in the narrative against him. These moments, asking readers to attend to and feel with Humbert’s pain and loss and emotions in the moment, do not make a persuasive plea about whether Humbert deserves judgment, sympathy, or forgiveness. Much ethical criticism of the novel either downplays the emotional power of these
moments or finds ethical stability in the final assessment by re-interpreting the overall ethical goals of the novel. The moments of lyric address do not attenuate the ethical judgments made elsewhere; they simply exist as suspended moments when readers can attend and identify. Essentially, I am arguing directly against Tamir-Ghez’s point that “any feelings of empathy” are “counteract[ed]” by awareness of Humbert’s rhetorical ploys. For Phelan, the final ethical stability arrives through Humbert’s growing guilt as he re-sees his past actions, recognizes how he stole Dolores’s childhood, and concludes that he deserves life in jail for rape (not murder). Laufer concludes that *Lolita*, in its play with conventions of literature and the law, allows Humbert to confuse readers but that, ultimately, the novel attempts to describe a critical “middle distance point of view” that negotiates between these two extremes (68).

I do not disagree with these interpretations that it is possible to find ethical stability in what take away from *Lolita*, but I find that it dilutes the fascinating power of the novel. It is true that later passages of *Lolita* reframe readers’ understanding of the moments I have described, making those moments more ethically palatable, but the experience of identifying with an unethical character remains in one’s experience and memory. Humbert finally facing his guilt in the last pages of the novel intensifies the affective experience of feeling with his pain, but it does not undo the implications of identifying with him when guilt was not yet explicitly owned.

It might seem possible, then, to conclude that Nabokov is indeed not offering an ethical reading experience, in the sense of Wayne Booth’s concerns that “many, perhaps most of [Nabokov’s] readers will be unsuccessful, in that they will identify Humbert with
the author more than Nabokov intends” (419). Despite identification with Humbert, I am reluctant to judge Nabokov as creating an unethical reading experience, as in the end, I am more interested in the potential of narrative to create powerful experiences, whatever their ethics. That is, ethics about sexual abuse in these narratives are interesting as a background against which we encounter the affective dynamics I have delineated—dynamics struck through with empathy, identification, pain, and discomfort over that identification. Whether intended or not, I find value precisely in that discomfiting experience, and I think this is precisely what makes Lolita so powerful and uncomfortable: that the unsettling but also affirming implications of the affective dynamics of those moments can stay with readers even when readers later find ethical comfort in the conclusion of the novel.
I have argued that these three narratives, *Edinburgh*, *The Kiss*, and *Lolita*, which begin from a starting-point of acknowledging sexual abuse and which push past simple judgments about abuser figures or taboo violators, use affective dynamics to complicate those judgments. How exactly they relate affective and ethical dynamics varies, as we have seen, as there is not always a one-way relationship between ethics and affect. Whereas I suggested in the introduction that the readings in the rhetorical model tend to privilege ethical judgments and discuss affective experiences in a narrow range of ways, often with affective dynamics as *consequences* of those ethical judgments, the chapters in this dissertation demonstrate more possibilities for the relationship between affective identification and negative ethical judgments. Sometimes, as in the case of *Edinburgh*, the affective dynamics lead to a recasting of the ethical dynamics established earlier in the narrative. Other times, as in the case of *The Kiss*, affective and ethical dynamics are deeply intertwined in a different way, where attending deeply to the complexity of Kathryn’s affective experience is itself the ethical project of the narrative. And finally in *Lolita*, with the most difficult ethical situation of all wherein the perpetrator tries initially to excuse his crimes, there are isolated lyric moments of affective intensity—moments when affect exceeds ethics—that offer the potential to feel with Humbert. This does not
mean that ethical judgments against Humbert are undermined, but in these moments they are temporarily backgrounded in favor of other dynamics.

All of these narratives use character-narrators whose personal storytelling focuses closely on their own subjective experience, particularly their affects, embodied experience. Whether that relationship with the body is acknowledged (as with Fee), deeply felt or denied due to trauma (Fee, Kathryn) or denied due to taboo desires (Kathryn, Humbert), it is integral to understanding the role of trauma and guilt the narrator continues to experience in the moment of the telling. In these readings, attending fully to the character-narrator’s affects and embodied experiences offers these insights that lead to the potential for identification of some sort. In Edinburgh, this identification can take the form of a reader’s increased awareness of the body occurring when Fee experiences his own intensely embodied moments. In The Kiss, identification can only occur in the reader’s attention to the pain located beneath the surface of Kathryn’s narration, but, even more, what is notable is how much the narrative refuses the reader full access to the depths of this pain and trauma. In Lolita, the potential for identification occurs insofar as Humbert’s attention to his emotions in the present tense are general enough that a reader can simultaneously enter into the pain and loss of the present moment and, from a broader perspective, feel the pain and loss of both Humbert and Dolores together.

All of these narratives begin with a general ethical situation that encourages strong judgments against a perpetrator, or, in the case of The Kiss, complex reactions insofar as actual readers initially consider that Kathryn may have had agency in choosing
to have sex with her father over four years. In the cases of *Edinburgh* and *Lolita*, these ethics are not deeply rethought: Sexual abuse and violation continue to be horrific crimes, the victims continue to face consequences for life, and the perpetrators continue to seem like cartoon-villains in their level of threat, much as Jenkins describes the pedophile figure in the late twentieth century.

If these ethics are not fundamentally upended, what does it mean for the narratives to encourage identification with characters who choose unethical actions or, in Harrison’s case, seem to choose actions we react viscerally against? The discomfiting experiences created by these narratives, which bring readers inside the perspective of unethical perpetrators and those who feel and act upon taboo sexual desires, is to some degree, an ethical experience that highlights the power of fiction to draw readers into other perspectives, even when those perspectives advocate unethical actions and perspectives. That is, the system in each novel that encourages disapproval of unethical (abusive) actions is still complicated by another layer that values experiencing the emotional depths of someone who would easily be misunderstood in other contexts.

In this respect, I suggest that these narratives offer one potential reading experience that does not centrally rely on judgments so much as it emphasizes possibilities of feeling deeply and remaining open to either identifying or empathizing with surprising, sometimes unethical, Others. In choosing these particular narratives and focusing on affective dynamics, I have thus described a kind of reading that de-emphasizes the specific ethical judgments surrounding abuser figures even as it values a particular way of reading and being in the world. Booth’s model of books as potential
good friends looks for stories and implied authors that offer fundamentally ethical experiences. As Booth explains, ethical judgments are inherent to the conflicting choices a reader faces as she or he reads:

The plot, in such stories, does not just present virtue and vice in conflict; the story itself consists of the conflict of defensible moral or ethical stances; the action takes place both within the characters in the story and inside the mind of the reader, as he or she grapples with conflicting choices that irresistibly demand the reader’s judgments.

(“Why Ethical Criticism” 26)

Above and beyond this, in *The Company We Keep*, Booth does spend a good deal of time focusing on the critic’s own ethical responsibility to opening oneself up to experiencing and author’s vision and world.

My interest is in remaining open as a value in itself, without necessarily moving on to judging the quality of that experience. Like Booth, I see continuity between reading and being in the world. That is, I believe who we are when we read matters. But this is true less so in terms of the content of individual stories and more so in terms of what attitude we bring to the stories. In other words, I place my emphasis on the facet of Booth’s model that encourages critics’ understanding before overstanding, highlighting the need for readers’ openness to attending fully to others’ emotional experiences, whatever the background circumstances. This can be an ethical end in itself.

To some degree, I find value in Charles Altieri’s description of the lyric potential of literary experiences, wherein readers experience texts in order to experience deeply
and intensely. In contrast with Booth’s notion of good friends, Altieri “I suspect[s] we would rather have some of the texts we value highly prove interesting enemies rather than all be admirable friends” (“Lyrical Ethics” 38). Altieri argues that “lyrical” literary experience emphasizes readerly identification over distance and judgment; that is, the reader experiences the work’s intensity as worth contemplating in itself. Elsewhere, he explains that affect and intensity of experience stem primarily from readerly desire and emotions. Desire in any of its forms—real or imagined, satisfied or frustrated—is crucial to literary emotions. In the following passage, Altieri builds on and responds to Richard Wollheim, a theorist of emotions, who argues that desires directly cause emotions:

States such as wonder, love, and sympathy seem less dependent on specific preexisting desires than on quite general interests in being moved or finding value in our lives. These states do not so much derive from desire as play roles within a process of developing what we then experience as desires. The causes of love or wonder or sympathy have more to do with appraisals and what inspires them than with reactions and what enables us to adjust to them. So it seems necessary to admit that some of our most basic satisfactions occur in relation to desires that follow or accompany emotion rather than precede it. (The Particulars of Rapture 79)

In other words, for Altieri, emotions do not stem from already-existing specific desires; instead, in affective literature, emotions evoked by a text can cause readerly
desire. The affective works because it responds to “general interests in being moved or finding value in our lives,” but desire only becomes specific after affect creates it as something specific. Furthermore, Altieri himself addresses the importance of judgment in narrative experience—the “appraisals and what inspires them”—but, we should note, these appraisals exist primarily to evoke emotions, which then translate into the intensity of “love or wonder or sympathy” and desire.

Most importantly, I want to emphasize Altieri’s point about “quite general interests in being moved or finding value in our lives.” That is, we can expand beyond even the states list of “wonder, love, and sympathy” and include a general interest in being moved. In the case of reading the narratives covered in this dissertation, being moved occurs by virtue of attending deeply to the affective experience of the character-narrators who share their stories of trauma, loss, and taboo sexual desires.

Recasting Negative Affective Responses: A. M. Homes’s The End of Alice

Some next steps in this study could be to turn to other narrative representations of sexual abuse that have the potential to be deeply uncomfortable affectively. Yet there are few other works that have similarly discomfiting dynamics that would be worth exploring alongside these. There is Ian McEwan’s The Cement Garden (1979)—not for specific abusive actions but rather for the extreme list of taboo sexual dynamics throughout. Another potential is A. M. Homes’s The End of Alice, which recasts the Lolita story not in terms of speaker as some have argued Harrison’s The Kiss does but in terms of
affective dynamics. Homes’s *The End of Alice* seems to be an experiment in imagining what *Lolita* would be if we took a similar plot and stripped away everything beautiful, intense, and moving in the affective dynamics.

*The End of Alice* is narrated by Chappy, a pedophile incarcerated for murdering a twelve-year-old girl named Alice whom he met one summer while her family vacationed near his cabin retreat. Homes has created parallels between Chappy’s story and narrative situation and that of Humbert’s from *Lolita*: both aging male narrators want to connect with a reader to explain their situation, to make a reader understand how they met, fell in love with, and sexually abused their victims. Homes, however, adds another layer of pedophilia and sexual perversion to this story: a young nineteen-year-old co-ed writes to Chappy about her own sexual interest in a pre-teen neighborhood boy. Chappy’s story centers initially on this young woman’s fantasies and her conquest of the child, though much of Chappy’s narration constitutes his own fantasies about the young woman’s exploits. Such fantasies about the young woman bring back Chappy’s own past in flashes and glimpses, from his early childhood through the experience with Alice. The culmination of the present-day prison narrative is two-fold. The young woman reveals to Chappy that, since she contacted him, she knew about his crimes, as she grew up in a nearby neighborhood deeply affected by parents’ fears in response to the gruesome murder. She directly confronts him with the far-reaching consequences his abuse and murder of Alice had for the community. This confrontation is followed by Chappy’s meeting with legal counsel to review an appeal of his case; both events combine to cause a breakdown in Chappy, one where the previously blocked memories about his final days
with—and murder of—Alice resurface and, integrating with other blocked memories of Chappy’s own childhood abuse and trauma, create a complete picture of distant and recent trauma that led to the current figure in the prison cell.

*The End of Alice* does not function as do the other narratives in this study, by displacing discomfort the protagonists feels onto reader. Unlike *Lolita*, it does not create such dynamics by creating affective moments that temporarily set aside ethics, encouraging identification even when the awareness that Humbert is ethically guilty lingers. Instead, *The End of Alice* initially makes its pedophilic narrator Chappy fully revolting, both ethically and affectively, to such an extent almost as to encourage putting the book down after the first page. The trajectory of the novel is to lead the reader through such revulsion to a more complex political and ethical point, highlighting mitigating factors in determining Chappy’s guilt, even as it continues the affective revulsion. The final tension, then, is similar to what we see in *Lolita*, but it works toward a particular, more focused political end.

Aside from the obvious plot-based similarities between *The End of Alice* and *Lolita*, A. M. Homes begins her novel in Chappy’s voice with remarkable echoes of Nabokov’s novel. But whereas *Lolita* is designed to pull a reader in via Humbert’s aesthetic skill and, later, his intense feeling, Chappy’s narration seems from the first sentence to be design to elicit outright disgust. Chappy’s position, finesse with language, awareness of a specific audience outside of prison—even the progression of information sharing—all move along much like Humbert’s narration does. In both novels, these dynamics establish the pedophile narrator’s unreliability and establish the role of the
narratee as one suited to judge the story the narrator presents. Consider, for instance, just the first four paragraphs of Homes’s novel in relation to the first chapter of Nabokov’s *Lolita*:

*The End of Alice:*

Who is she that she should have this afflicted addiction, this oddly acquired taste for the freshest of flesh, to tell a story that will start some of you smirking and smiling, but that will leave others set afire determined this nightmare, this horror, must stop. Who is she? What will frighten you most is knowing she is either you or I, one of us. Surprise. Surprise.

And perhaps you wonder who I am to be running interference, to be acting as her translator and yours. Mine is the speech, the rhythm and rhyme of an old and peculiar man who has been locked away for too long, punished for pursuing a taste of his own.

Fair to say that I see in her the seeds of my youth and the memory of another girl I couldn’t help but know.

Alice, I hand you her name gently, suggesting that if you hold it, carefully as I do, pressed close to the heart, you might at the end of this understand how confusing the beating of two such similar hearts can be and how one finally had to stop. (11)
Lolita:

Lolita, light of my life, fire of my loins. My sin, my soul. Lo-lee-tah. The tip of the tongue taking a trip of three steps down the palate to tap, at three, on the teeth. Lo. Lee. Tah.

She was Lo, plain Lo, in the morning, standing four foot ten in one sock. She was Lola in slacks. She was Dolly at school. She was Dolores on the dotted line. But in my arms she was always Lolita.

Did she have a precursor? She did, indeed she did. In point of fact, there would have been no Lolita at all had I not loved, one summer, a certain initial girl-child. In a princedom by the sea. Oh when? About as many years before Lolita was born as my age was that summer. You can always count on a murderer for a fancy prose style.

Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, exhibit number one is what the seraphs, the misinformed, simple, noble-winged seraphs, envied. Look at this tangle of thorns. (9)

The parallels here are pointed. There is the direct address to “you” a reader. There is the abundant alliteration. There is the handing of the young girl’s name to the narratee, either explicitly or indirectly through breakdown repetition, and the narrator relishing the name itself as central to the girl’s identity (“Alice, I hand you her name gently” compared to “Lo-lee-ta: the tip of the tongue taking a trip of three steps down the palate to tap, at three, on the teeth. Lo. Lee. Tah.”) There is the revelation that the narrator is in prison, in both cases whether from murder or child abuse remaining unclear. There are the
questions that the narrator speaks for the audience. (“Who is she?” vs. “Did she have a precursor? She did, indeed she did. … Oh when? About as many years before she was born as my age was that summer.”) But what is even more remarkable is that, despite these similarities, the affective dynamics of these initial chapters are so drastically divergent. Whereas _Lolita_ elicits heartbreak, beauty, loss, and longing in this first chapter, _The End of Alice_ elicits confusion, growing awareness, and eventually as Chapter 1 progresses further, revulsion.

The extremity of reaction against Chappy’s narration, though, is ultimately grounded in more than just ethical judgments against his prior actions. It is grounded in reactions to the body. Whereas my exploration of _Edinburgh, The Kiss_, and _Lolita_ focused on what I call experiential embodiment, _The End of Alice_ focuses more on the described, physical body. That is, Chappy’s narration does not shy away from describing the ageing body in all of its infirmity. Chappy describes the physical experiences of getting older with worse digestion and constipation, an erection that will not go away, being raped by his cellmate, and other indignities of losing control of the body on a physical level. The focus on sexual organs in the midst of this bodily experience initially highlights Chappy’s history and sexually perverse desires for children (“that oddly acquired taste for the freshest of flesh”), leading to a kind of revulsion that initially seems bound up with ethical judgments against both Chappy’s desires and his actions.

However, as the novel progresses, it becomes clear that this focus on the physical body is another way of highlighting the degradation of living in prison, with no control over one’s own body. It also becomes clear, as we see Chappy’s physical infirmities
increase, that the novel initially suggests this connection between the physical body and unethical sexuality in order to then call out the reader for misunderstanding the source of that revulsion. In other words, initially that revulsion seems to be solely a source of ethical judgments about sexual abuse, but the novel highlights later that it is also partly a source of ageism and personal fears over watching the body degrade. Ultimately, then, the novel problematizes the negative affective responses it initially invites.

**Moving Forward**

I started this dissertation by acknowledging that, to some degree, it is impossible to talk about affective responses and readers’ bodies without talking about real readers. I then proceeded by focusing instead on character affect and embodiment, suggesting that by virtue of their deep focus on these characters’ subjective experiences, these narratives invite identification as a value in itself. Another facet of this argument that appears in the analysis of *Lolita* was to consider how such isolated moments of identification fit within the context of the novel as a whole, given that there the affective dynamics do not, in the end, alter the ethical judgments about Humbert’s actions.

The next step of exploring readers’ affective responses would be, then, to turn to actual readers. That is, the kind of study I envision would, in the end, be either a sociological study or a deeply psychological one, probing readers’ experiences and their explanations for those experiences. It could look a lot like Janice Radway’s *Reading the Romance*, complete with interviews, or it could look even more like a therapeutic book-club where the investigator records the conversation and then discourse analysis allowed
researchers to code those recorded conversations to find trends. In particular, I would be interested not only in how readers describe their affective and ethical responses, and whether they ever describe those as separated or separable. I would also be interested in how readers with initial interpretations respond to conversations in that group setting wherein others aim to convince them of different readings. If, as I have proposed, sometimes affective responses are either prior to but in synergy with ethical judgments or in conflict with ethical judgments, does that mean that affective response is not changeable by logical persuasion? The investigation, in other words, would focus on how much individual readers are able to change their initial affective responses in response to conversations that include persuasion about textual evidence and a different understanding of the text’s overall rhetorical goals.

This kind of study, then, would largely set aside questions about the implied author, except insofar as the attempts at persuasion in the group discussion might appeal to such a concept, in theory if not in name. Such a study would grant interesting insight into the dynamics I started the introduction with: a classroom wherein students have strong, visceral affective responses, and the classroom discussion itself may be aimed at challenging those responses. I have personally often wondered whether the classroom discussion made any difference, and to some degree, you cannot know, given that the instructors’ relative power over the students means that you cannot fully trust the motivation behind a changed interpretation.

To care about the sources of changed interpretations may appear to fall under the prosocial altruism thesis about reading fiction that Suzanne Keen debunks in Empathy
and the Novel. But I am actually less interested in trying to change readers’ minds in service of an altruistic, prosocial end, and more interested in simply understanding the mechanisms by which readers experience affective responses to stories, as well as when and how those affective responses change. Marshall Gregory discusses ethical engagements over time with Wuthering Heights and David Copperfield, charting his changing relationship in particular with Bronte’s novel. My approach would be somewhat similar, though I would avoid a teleological approach and assuming that readings over time become more accurate. Rather, I am interested in how readings at certain times serve particular purposes for readers at particular moments, and in what this means for changing affective responses in response to changing understandings of the ethics of the novel. Ultimately, to talk about affective responses to narratives representing fraught ethical situations is to talk about individual responses, and moving in this direction is the natural next step of this study.
Works Cited


217


223