



Storey, H. C. (2015) *Gris-gris: a novel and, Contextualising research: crafting the rape scene: an exploration of how Toni Morrison and Isabel Allende write rape scenes in *The Bluest Eye* and *The House of Spirits* and how their approaches influence the crafting of those in *Gris-gris. PhD thesis. Bath: Bath Spa University.**

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GRIS-GRIS: a novel

and

Contextualizing Research: **CRAFTING THE RAPE SCENE:**

An exploration of how Toni Morrison and Isabel Allende
write rape scenes in *The Bluest Eye* and *The House of the Spirits* and how their
approaches influence the crafting of those in *Gris-Gris*.

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
of Bath Spa University
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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May 2015

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Abstract

The creative component of this thesis, the novel *Gris-Gris*, explores how a mother's betrayal of her daughter and the resulting rape of that daughter is reiterated through three following generations of women within the same family. The rape of Mina in 1942 London starts the tragic wheels of the narrative turning. Later, an ambiguous sexual encounter between seemingly estranged partners in New Orleans results in the birth of twins who are the means to bring the trauma to a stop. The rape and death of one of those twins, Sylvie, grinds the wheels to a brutal halt, thereby opening the way to resolution and, finally, to the birth of a daughter, Tamsin, who embodies a kind of synthesis of views and a healing. However, the novel is also about recovering pieces of oneself that have been lost, and about less intimate betrayals in life - those, for instance, of country, birth, race, and the elements. What holds the novel together, though, and keeps it from being a miserable recounting of tragedy, is its vast insistence on the essential and redeeming hope of enduring love.

I was much more interested in writing about how the originating betrayal worked its way through time and place to influence later relationships than I was the relationship between the rapist and victim. It was important, therefore, that I did not make rape the heavy-handed focal point of the novel. Yet I still wanted these important dramatic turning points to be realistic and powerful in their depiction.

In the contextualizing component, I explore approaches to effectively crafting the pivotal rape scenes in *Gris-Gris* to avoid reducing the novel, in the

reader's mind, to being primarily one "about rape." I did not want the scenes to be pornographic or voyeuristic, metaphorical or ambiguous. I wanted them to be honest and truly affecting--but not hijack the novel's central narrative, which is how one mother's betrayal reverberates through following generations.

Two popular, literary novels with plots that hinge on rape scenes are Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and Isabel Allende's *The House of the Spirits*. The architecture and positioning of the rape scenes in these works has much to do with each novel's unique narrative power. My original contribution to knowledge, therefore, is a study--from the point of view of a practicing creative writer--of 1) how these two writers craft rape scenes in these novels and 2) how, in the writing of *Gris-Gris*, I situate and develop my own practice in terms of craft, while responding to personal and social considerations. This study will inform the creative writer who is assessing how to modulate scenes of rape or sexual violence in literary fiction. It also contributes to the wider study of rape in literature as one novelist's considered approach to the delicate balances involved in crafting such scenes.

For this purpose, I closely examine the syntax, punctuation, and music of the climactic scene in Morrison's novel. I then look more broadly at the multiple and more representational scenes of rape and sexual violation in Allende's work. I reflect upon their influence on my construction of such scenes in *Gris-Gris* in both discussions and then present more specific findings in conclusion.

I found that, rather than following my reflexive inclination to be cautious or even opaque in writing rape scenes, it is necessary to infuse the scenes with elements of the visceral, brutal, realism of Morrison's work. Indeed, striking something of a balance between the approaches of Morrison and Allende serves

my novel's purposes well. I also found that my concerns ultimately had to be those of truth to character and plot whereas interpretations of social and political meanings had to be left to the reader.

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CRAFTING THE RAPE SCENE:

An exploration of how Toni Morrison and Isabel Allende write rape scenes in *The Bluest Eye* and *The House of the Spirits* and how their approaches influence the crafting of those in *Gris-Gris*.

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INTRODUCTION

[W]hat makes a story work...is probably some action, some gesture of a character that is unlike any other in the story, one which indicates where the real heart of the story lies. This would have to be an action or a gesture which was *both totally right and totally unexpected*; it would have to be one that was both in character and beyond character; it would have to suggest both the world and eternity [italics added]. (O'Connor, 111)

-Flannery O'Connor, "On Her Own Work," *Mystery and Manners*

Minimalism and Real Life

When I first started writing fiction, I believed that to be a successful contemporary writer one needed to compose the restrained, understated stories written by *New Yorker* favorites such as Ann Beattie, who was a literary star at that time (the early 1980s). It seemed to me that the story had to be all subtext, nothing explicit was supposed to happen because *truly* good writers, those being published in prestigious places, wrote with a mysterious maturity that could move the reader without anything very physical or actively, dramatic happening.¹ I loved the drama of the literature I read in my youth, the teeth-gnashing of *Wuthering Heights* ("...only *do* not leave me in this abyss, where I cannot find you! Oh, God! It is unutterable! I *cannot* live without my life! *cannot* live without my soul! (Brontë 204)), the tragic victimization of Hardy's

¹. Ann Beattie's 1984 *New Yorker* story, "In the White Night" comes to mind, in which a woman is still mourning her dead daughter. The story begins "'Don't think about a cow! Matt Brinkley Said. Don't think about a river, don't think about a car...'", The mother seems to be spending her energy *not* thinking about the death so that, one assumes, she has no space to feel it. And although this request to "not think about" is unique to this story, its intent stands as a motif, in my mind, for much of Beattie's writing at this time. The reader is told about the event (happy or tragic), but is not privy to the character's raw feelings for it, or to the event itself. We are kept at a distance, and this seems to be what Beattie is writing about - the way people keep a distance from emotionally volatile elements of life. I focus on Beattie's writing here, but there were many others being published at this time who wrote with a dry, mechanical distance, never sullyng the text with too much description of physical or emotional messiness.

Tess, or the lover's death by asps and suicide in Shakespeare's *Anthony and Cleopatra*--and yet was embarrassed by this love for high drama, for depictions of violence, misery, ecstatic love, and lust. It seemed that, in the late 20th Century, at least, these were the features primarily of low-brow romance, not high-brow *New Yorker* fiction. I was under the impression that successful contemporary fiction must avoid detailed, active passion or messy physicality in order to be considered intellectually, aesthetically valid by those who judge such things. "Good" fiction--the most respected and impressive fiction, it seemed, was supposed to be obscure, restrained, and cerebral. Something subtle and precise could happen--Raymond Carver's narrator might draw a cathedral--but nothing dramatic, passionate, or violent was to be recreated on the page. It was as if I was being told that the best kind of writing was now the type that only *implied* the sort of gestures O'Connor evokes. I set out to understand how such fiction worked, and studied Ann Beattie along with many Ann-Beattie-esque minimalist writers being published at the time writing with, as critic Anatole Broyard characterized in a 1981 *New York Times* article, a "relatively affectless or unemotional style."² I believed that once I was able to understand--to "translate"--such stories with ease, I would then be able to incorporate the same subtlety and opacity in my own fiction and get published. The truth was, however, that I could never understand why fiction that centered upon such small shifts in character development was considered so brilliant because such stories failed to move me emotionally.³

² Bobbie Ann Mason, Tobias Wolf, Amy Hempel, are examples of those, now referred to as "minimalists," I followed. The admired and highly published minimalist writers of the 1980s were very largely associated with editor Gordon Lish, who taught, edited, and published the majority of the luminaries of the movement. In a *New Republic* article written at the height of the minimalists' popularity, Sven Birkerts referred their work as a "passive reflection of fragmentation and unease" (33).

³ Writer and critic Linsey Abrams (and one of my first writing teachers) put it this way in a 1985 article: "To my way of thinking, minimalism reflects a human retreat, a breakdown of a shared conceptual system, a literary passivity in the face of moral confusion....We suffer from a world stripped of emotion and in need of systems; even science, in the surprising investigation of quantum physics, corroborates this view. We do not need a literature that reinforces what is undermining us."

At the same time that I was studying Ann Beattie, reading and re-reading *The Burning House*, I came across Flannery O'Connor's collection, *A Good Man is Hard to Find*. I had never read anything by O'Connor previously and was mesmerized by the vivid, dramatic action of the stories.⁴ I was thrilled by, among other things, the way O'Connor writes the deepest passions in human nature, often acted out violently in her fiction to effect change (or, as she might say, redemption or grace) in her characters. Each story operates at the highest of stakes: the dramatic balance of life and death, love and desertion, and heaven and damnation. For example, here is the end of the title story of the collection. The Misfit has had his assistants murder everyone in the old lady's family except for her. She is on her knees in front of him, her dead family in the woods behind her:

"Why you're one of my babies. You're one of my own children!" She reached out and touched him on the shoulder. The Misfit sprang back as if a snake had bitten him and shot her three times through the chest. Then he put his gun down on the ground and took off his glasses and began to clean them.

Hiram and Bobby Lee returned from the woods and stood over the ditch, looking down at the grandmother who half sat and half lay in a puddle of blood with her legs crossed under her like a child's and her face smiling up at the cloudless sky (29).

Flannery O'Connor's writing is no less sophisticated than that of Ann Beattie or Raymond Carver, and yet it did what I always felt I wanted my writing to do, which was push the reader up against the very visceral life of the story, be it joy, passion, or horror (as in this example here). I studied all of O'Connor's writings with great excitement, feeling that I had found the sort of writing I wanted mine to be--literary

⁴ Likely because my secondary education occurred in England, where I read Brontë, Hardy, Shakespeare.

(not trashy), vivid and dramatic (not restrained or dependent primarily upon nuance)-- the sort of writing that will linger in a reader's mind because it has affected him on a physical and emotional and intellectual level. I don't know if I've gotten quite to that point yet, but in writing *Gris-Gris*, I have tried for the physicality and the life-or-death stakes that I so value in O'Connor's fiction.

• • •

I see Flannery O'Connor's writing technique, and particularly her approach to the story, as a guiding light in my own work and short stories in particular. In composing *Gris-Gris*, however, I was writing a novel that involved sustained development of character and plot. I therefore looked to two novelists whose work has also influenced my writing in more recent years and who write with the boldness that I so value in O'Connor's work: Toni Morrison and Isabel Allende. Both of these writers are supremely skilled in depicting the "*totally right and totally unexpected*"⁵ gesture within the structure of a novel. And, when that gesture is written as an act of rape, which is the focus of this study, they are sure-handed guides.

The novels I will discuss here, *The Bluest Eye* and *The House of the Spirits*, are rife with surprising and often horrific scenes, yet they are written in a manner that keeps the reader grounded in the physical, just as Flannery O'Connor's fiction balances near-absurdity and hard truth with great care.

My novel is about how a mother's betrayal devastates her daughter's life and how this devastation manifests itself in three generations of women to follow.⁶ The mother, Hester, arranges for her daughter, Mina, to be raped in hopes that her daughter will marry the rapist, a wealthy man in war-torn London. He rapes her, and she gives

⁵ See Appendix 2 for extended O'Connor quote

⁶ It is also about recovering pieces of oneself that have been lost, and about less intimate betrayals in life - those, for instance, of the government and of weather.

birth to his child, Kate. She refuses to marry the rapist, however, and leaves England and her mother to start a new life in the United States.

The mother-daughter betrayal is so profound that it sends the two following generations of women reeling and it is not until the third generation that the reader can anticipate recovery from this inherited trauma. The climax of the primary plot in the novel is a second rape, this one not arranged but random, that has tragic consequences.

The foundations of this story are true, as much as I hate to think of it. My British great-grandmother, someone I am glad I never knew, arranged for my grandmother to be raped by a man she wanted her to marry. Like Mina, my grandmother refused to marry her rapist. But, unlike her, my grandmother remained in England, gave birth to the rapist's child (a boy, my Uncle Peter), and then married a kindly man twenty years her senior. Together they had two more children, and one of them was my mother.

One of my interests in writing this novel was to explore how such a profound betrayal of a daughter by her mother might manifest itself, if not be reiterated to varying degrees, in following generations. My idea was that the initial betrayal and rape would release seismic waves into the lives of the mothers and daughters for several generations and cause difficulties with not only their own relationships, but those with others (particularly romantic relationships). For many reasons, I was much more interested in writing about the relationships between the women in the novel, rather than the relationships between the rapist and victim, and so it was important that I did not make rape the heavy-handed focal point of the novel. Yet I still wanted these important dramatic turning points to be realistic and powerful in their depiction.

About (Writing) Rape

While working on *Gris-Gris*, I was asked more than once to summarize my novel in a sentence. I found this task to be baffling because I had not finished the novel at the time. And, more than once, in trying to help, colleagues suggested that I say the novel was about rape: women being raped, or women recovering from rape, or the after-effects of rape. Clearly, the rape scene that I had drafted at that point (Sylvie at the reservoir) made an impact. But I resisted the suggestions because that was not the novel as I saw it. I may not have known exactly how the novel would end, but I knew that it had to do more with a different kind of damage or affront, one whose undertow pulled at the characters in a way that rape would not.

But how could I write a novel that had more than one rape in it that wasn't *about* rape? I wanted my reader to focus on the emotional destruction wrought by the mother's abandonment of the daughter and on its fallout through time. Yet I also needed the rape scenes to be affecting and to physically convey the shock, violation, and pain of the betrayal. The way I wanted the scenes to work in the novel and the realities of creatively developing such a scene seemed to rest in a delicate, worrisome balance.

Some Criteria

From this question grew my larger, overarching question for this research: How, might I, then, most effectively craft the rape scenes essential to *Gris-Gris*? To address the problem, I developed a list of five conditions that eventually guided my writing. The first of these conditions is that the scene be written in a manner that did not lead the reader to believe the entire novel was "about rape."

My second condition is that these scenes not seem gratuitous, pornographic or sensational. Unlike Brett Easton Ellis, for instance, I feared that such writing would distract the reader from the essential pulse of the plot. In revising his draft of *American Psycho*, Ellis explains: "Gary's [Fisketjon - his editor] concern was, How are we going to be able to concentrate on the next scene of social satire after we've read two pages about how a woman has been nail-gunned to a floor, and raped, et cetera, et cetera?" (*Paris Review*). Ellis remains unconcerned here, and I do think that the sexual violence of this novel overwhelms its claims to social satire.

I did not want the scenes to be lurid or pornographic, but neither did I want them to read like scenes of sexual violence one might find in a romance novel such as this example, from the 1985 romance classic, *Whitney My Love*: "Whitney writhed futilely in his iron embrace while tears of impotent rage raced down her cheeks. The more she struggled, the more insolent and punishing his mouth became, until she finally grew still, defeated and trembling in his arms" (McNaught 271).⁷

I also worried that I was not handling rape with the gravity it required, and did not want it to read as a convenience to move the plot forward. Was I being careful enough, I wondered, with such a frightening, heavy, and controversial subject? My third condition, therefore, suggests that, in *Gris-Gris*, rape scenes be written with honesty and appropriate gravity. I did not want the scenes to be so subtly written, so euphemistic in their non-lurid and non-histrionic construction, that the reader would miss them or be confused or interpret the rapes mainly as metaphors for political, social, or cultural messages. There is a point in Isabel Allende's *The House of the Spirits* where such confusion might arise. And, there is a point in Toni Morrison's *The*

⁷ I read and am referring to the first edition of this novel, published in 1985 and known partly for its scenes of rape and sexual violence. It was reissued in 2000, and in this edition, the original rape scene was rewritten to be entirely ambiguous, "consensual by having Whitney offer her virginity to Clayton" (Vail) and other scenes of sexual violence were altered to be less shocking to 21st Century readers.

Bluest Eye where some might feel the description to be so specific that it is pornographic.⁸ But even in such instances, a close look at the choices these writers make helped me, as a creative writing academic, to both intuitively and deliberately refine my own process in crafting such scenes for *Gris-Gris* and so address the core of my research goals.

Balancing Morrison and Allende

I said that I developed five conditions and have thus far addressed three. The fourth condition is that the rape scene should arise organically from character development. The fifth is that the rape scene should be aligned aesthetically with the writing and the premise of the novel. These last two conditions are related to concerns of character building, narrative logic, details of syntax and plot, and other aspects that call on broader considerations of technique. There is much more to *Gris-Gris* than its rape scenes, yet it is important to address their construction on this global level because they are the novel's foundation and every aspect of the narrative ties into these scenes.

The rape of Mina in *Gris-Gris* starts the tragic wheels of the narrative turning. Later, an ambiguous sexual encounter between seemingly estranged partners results in the birth of twins who are the means to bring the trauma to a stop. The rape of one of those twins, Sylvie, grinds the wheels to a halt, thereby opening the way to resolution. I realized through this study that in order to address my concerns in constructing the rape scenes in *Gris-Gris*, I would do best to hit a balance, in some sense, between the techniques employed by Morrison and Allende. Because more than one protagonist in *Gris-Gris* endures rape, I refrain from using Morrison's close detail in each instance.

⁸ There have been numerous attempts to ban the book from school reading lists in the U.S. because of its "pornographic" content, one of the most recent being in Morrison's home state of Ohio by the Board of Education (Gates).

My sense was that multiple scenes written with the intensity of description of the single rape scene in *The Bluest Eye* may overwhelm the narrative. Although my intention was to make the rape scenes in *Gris-Gris* distressing and real, I did not want them to be as viscerally disturbing, as graphic, as the rape scene in *The Bluest Eye* which also serves as that novel's climax. I felt such weight might stop my readers in their tracks even while the novel moves forward. At the same time, I did not want to write rape scenes with such distance that they merely glanced upon the reader's emotions as mechanical plot devices or socio-political statements. This is not to imply that Allende's rape scenes are reduced to this, although critics may read them as such. They are, however, much more "casually" written than is Morrison's scene, and this--like much of the violence in the novel--is, in critic Giti Chandra's words "the point: they are meant to be seen as so much a part of the very fabric of life that their mention should excite no more comment than any other material detail of daily living (118)." The rape scenes in *Gris-Gris* are neither as detailed as Morrison's or as emblematic as most of those in Allende's work because I am interested more in the betrayal and trauma that manifests itself through rape, not necessarily in how rape affects one particular character or how it represents a larger political or gender statement.⁹

I wish to note here that this essay is not a look at the social or cultural implications of rape scenes in fiction. Such a discussion would push this brief piece far beyond its length boundaries and take it outside its remit as a document that addresses the practice of creative writing. For the purpose of this study, and in order to contribute to the field of creative writing research and, secondarily, to the critical writings on Allende and Morrison, I will train my focus on how both writers craft scenes that

⁹ Critic Karen Wooley Martin quotes Maureen Shea, who reads the rapes depicted in *The House of the Spirits* ... as an extension of the torture perpetrated by the Pinochet regime, a violence against women that "crosses class and racial barriers" in order to put women back in their place, "the kitchen, the nursery, the home" (qtd. in Martin 111).

convey rape as a physical assault of a rapist upon a victim. Limited references to these selected critical responses will provide a point of departure for a more in-depth examination of how these differing approaches affect plot and character development rather than what socio-political dynamics the violence may signify--although at times my research necessarily makes reference to these aspects.

While both *The Bluest Eye* and *The House of the Spirits* have inspired significant research and analysis from a variety of critical perspectives, little practical attention has been paid to the actual crafting of the works--much less their construction of sexual violation. In this discussion, I will show how both writers make unique choices in their craft, and I will explore ways in which these choices guided my own in developing the rape scenes in *Gris-Gris*.

How might I most effectively craft rape scenes in *Gris-Gris*? I began my work with a firm sense that such scenes must be "totally right" and "totally unexpected," to again quote O'Connor. But I needed to break this idea down to understand how writers like Allende and Morrison create uniquely convincing rape scenes in order to answer my fundamental question. In looking to *The House of the Spirits* and *The Bluest Eye* for models, therefore, I touch on a multiplicity of elements that drive these powerful scenes that--for the sake of clarity, and in summary--I will specify: (1) don't make the novel seem like it is mainly a novel about rape; (2) aren't pornographic or voyeuristic in execution; (3) negotiate the subject with honesty and gravity; (4) ring true in light of character development and (5) are aligned aesthetically with the writing and the premise of the entire novel.

Placing my discussion firmly in the context of the practice of writing, this thesis is divided into two sections that take different approaches in addressing my primary

question and, more generally, the conditions listed above. As I analyze the work of both writers, I also aim to indicate to what extent I find particular techniques useful for my own purposes. This study, therefore, is more a recording of my process in deciding how to write and frame rape in *Gris-Gris* and less an argument for or against particular approaches.

The first section closely examines how Morrison constructs the central rape scene in *The Bluest Eye* and touches on how this scene informs aspects of those in *Gris-Gris*. The second section looks at how Allende's multiple rape scenes are written in *The House of the Spirits*, and offers both a comparison to Morrison's crafting of such a scene and a more extensive, studied look at how this research heightened my understanding of my own process. In both cases and in conclusion, I will explore the varying degrees to which the rape scenes in these novels address my concerns regarding the construction of those in *Gris-Gris*. I will also, therefore, necessarily address to what extent my own choices are a response to these writers' narrative techniques and goals.

PART ONE - Crafting the Rape Scene in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*

Much has been written about Morrison's portrayal of the African American as victim within a racist, white hegemony, and the actions of all of *The Bluest Eyes'* characters can be seen to be responding to dynamics of this racial turmoil. In her discussion of women and violence in a selection of Morrison's works, critic Amanda Putnam, for instance, explains that "Without argument, Pecola accepts the shaming of her blackness, bowing to (and eventually breaking under) the heavy weight of white oppression" (28). Similarly, Pin-chia Feng, in her discussion "The Gaze of The Bluest Eye," emphasizes that "This monolithic bluest eye represents what bell hooks [*sic*] calls 'the imperial gaze -- the look that seeks to dominate, subjugate, and colonize' generated from a white supremacist culture" (56). In "The Naked Father in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*," Vanessa Dickerson argues that Pecola's father rapes her in response to "the stress of being a black man in a white paternalistic culture" (123). And in "The Politics of Abuse," Laurie Vickroy asserts that Morrison "uses the motif of trauma to suggest the overwhelming power that the larger white culture wields in its slow, relentless obliteration of the value of blackness...(206).

Indeed, the majority of critics I have encountered read Cholly's rape of Pecola as an expression of racial self-contempt. Morrison herself explains that the novel rests upon, "the damaging internalization of assumptions of immutable inferiority originating in an outside [white] gaze...." (Forward xi) and how, in developing Pecola, she "focused on how...the demonization of an entire race could take root inside the most delicate member of society...".

Although Pecola is unequivocally a victim in this novel, we are led to see that Morrison intends the reader to perceive Cholly as a victim, as well; he and Pecola are both victims of the racial conflict in 20th Century United States. And, Morrison's rape scene involving them both can be read as a painful representation of their response to these socio-political dynamics. I therefore inevitably refer to the power play and what it represents in my research, but my goal is to carefully examine the foundations--the rhetoric--of Morrison's difficult scene so that I may address how its construction informs the rape scenes of *Gris-Gris*.

Opening the Scene: The first Three Sentences

The rape scene in *The Bluest Eye* begins with a single-sentence paragraph: “So it was on a Saturday afternoon, in the thin light of spring, he staggered home reeling drunk and saw his daughter in the kitchen” (161).¹⁰ The “So” that starts the sentence is much like one that might begin a legend, fable, or biblical tale. It is both matter-of-fact, in the sense that we, as readers, might have expected what inevitably comes after the “So,” though of course we do not. In the previous paragraph, we have been told that Cholly was “dumbfounded” by his children, had no stable connection to them, and responded to them only by reacting to them, “and his reactions were based on what he felt at the moment (161),” but not that he had any inclination to rape his daughter, Pecola.

The Spring light is *thin*, not golden, glorious, or bright, which gives the impression of tepid illumination, of flimsiness, of something not full or complete, embracing, or warming. Cholly is drunk, *staggering* and *reeling*, a force not fully in possession of itself. And, from this tenuous, unsteady setting of the introductory

¹⁰ See Appendix 1 for two versions of the full text of the scene, lines numbered and as originally formatted.

clause, we are offered the heart of the sentence which, in the uncharacteristic simplicity of its innocuous subject-verb-object arrangement signals to us that something significant is about to occur: *and saw his daughter in the kitchen*.

The next paragraph sets up Cholly's approach to Pecola as she is washing dishes. It is a much longer paragraph, composed of 38 sentences, and it begins with two simple, blunt, descriptive sentences: "She was washing dishes. Her small back hunched over the sink." This is the clear, literal, objective vision of Pecola at the sink. We are being told this by the narrator, and it is not obvious whether this is Cholly's perception or that of the objective narrator (who is, debatably, the authorial voice or Claudia). Regardless, these two small sentences are profoundly effective as we move into what will be a catastrophic event that destroys the young girl. The reader is by this point very sensitive to the cruelty and injustice that Pecola has endured. She is living a terrible life, yet remains dutiful, innocent, and—so far—emotionally and mentally intact. We see her as Cholly would see her if stripped of his associations to her: a young girl performing a household chore. Morrison does not give us any further description. We are not told what the kitchen looks like or what Pecola is wearing, for instance. And this simplicity, this paring-away of all but the actual object and its action—*Pecola washing dishes*—forces us to focus in on the elemental and innocent being that is this young girl. She could be any young girl completing her chores, with as much potential for a happy life as other young girls. She is then described, but only essentially. Her "small back" is "hunched over the sink." Morrison's choice to focus on only Pecola's back, and to say that it is small and hunched, is also very moving in its simplicity and in what the image represents. Pecola's back is tiny and fragile, yet hard at work and *hunched*. And, from what we have seen already, we know that

Pecola's burdens are represented by this back that is hunched to near breaking by this point in the novel.

Morrison does not use the girl's name, Pecola, for the first half of the entire scene – in fact, not until sentence number 42 in the 60-sentence scene. Until we hear her name in this late sentence--“Pecola lost her balance and was about to careen to the floor”--Pecola is referred to only by third-person pronoun and as “his daughter,” “his eleven-year-old daughter,” and “the child.” These names force the reader to reiterate and confront what Pecola *is* in relation to Cholly--and that he is ignoring this truth. Morrison's choice to use multiple terms in emphatic quick succession (as opposed to, for instance, using just Pecola's name) denies any chance of *what* she is (a child, a daughter, his daughter) being lost, and insists that the reader confront the horrifying nature of what is about to occur.

We know this character intimately as Pecola by this point, and referring to her in these less intimate terms also propels the character into the universal, the mythic. We step away from the Pecola of the story, and see instead an actor in a tragedy. Rather than the living, breathing, sad, Pecola of the narrative, we see an objectified Pecola (a child, from behind). We are also able to experience the father-rapist's emotional distance from his victim. All of this works together to propel the action quickly forward and to give a sense that what is taking place is inevitable if not preordained.

We learn at the start of the novel that Pecola is pregnant with her father's baby, so we certainly might guess that this is the point where the sexual act between father and daughter will occur; Cholly and Pecola are alone, Cholly is drunk, and two defining humiliations of Cholly's life have been revealed earlier in this same chapter. However, these simple statements of fact in the scene's first line--Cholly's physical

state and what he sees--are more ominous than any other foreshadowing because it is the only time the reader is distanced to such an extent from Pecola and made to see her only in silhouette. There is something inherently chilling in this technique and it is one that makes good sense in preparing the reader for the destruction of a character to whom she has become attached, protective, and who she naturally hopes will prevail in some way. Up to this point in the novel, I don't think it is too presumptive to say that readers of *The Bluest Eye* will be hoping for something good to happen to Pecola--for her misfortune, her suffering, her "ugliness" to be reversed in some way. The reader has been part of Pecola's experiences in an intimate manner until now, until we are made to look at her through the eyes of her father-rapist.

Sympathy for the Rapist ~ Toward Making the Novel not about Rape

Pecola is not the only character with whom Morrison asks us to sympathize, however. She has also developed the reader's sympathy for Cholly from the first line of this chapter: "When Cholly was four days old, his mother wrapped him in two blankets and one newspaper and placed him on a junk heap by the railroad" (132). We follow Cholly's sad life through the death of his beloved adoptive mother, his first sexual experience--humiliatingly interrupted by two white men--his desire to strangle his lover and his fury at himself for being unable to protect her from the same humiliation, his search for his real father and this man's humiliating rejection of him, and finally his meeting of and marriage to Pecola's mother, Pauline, and his resulting move into depression and drink and the raping of his own daughter. It strikes me that Morrison has developed Cholly with some sympathy and a desire to convey to the reader the particular events of his past and the details of his conflicted psychological state that enable him to rape.

Devising a means through which the reader might understand the background of the rapist encourages the rape scene to arise logically from character development (condition 4 in my list). It, at least to some extent, helps the scene exist organically in the novel without defining it. In *Gris-Gris* I therefore aim to take a similar approach in my development of Mark who, in having sex with the sleeping Kate, walks the line between consensual and nonconsensual sex. Kate's love endures for him, and I do not intend for her to see the act as a rape, although the reader may do so. Kate, in fact, is more inclined to see the act as proof of Mark's unacknowledged love for her. This action, however, results in the conception of the twins Sylvie and Paige. The two rapists in the novel, Mr. Barker and the drifter by the reservoir, are depicted as unsympathetic, rather repulsive, flat characters because these two are not important characters in the novel. They are more representations, as actors (committing grievous acts), but not actors who—like Cholly, or Mark, or even Flannery O'Connor's Misfit (a murderer, not a rapist)—are living in the reader's imagination as souls capable of achieving O'Connor's "grace," or, at least, granted the potential to evolve. In the case of these two rapes, my wish is that the reader focus more on the response of the victim than any aspect of the rapist's life history or mental state.

In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison has created the conditions, a domino row of motivation, to propel Cholly to rape his daughter, yet if it were not for being informed at the opening of the novel that "Pecola was having her father's baby,"(5) I doubt that the reader would suspect that an incestuous rape was about to occur in the second long paragraph of this scene. Indeed, in her discussion of approaches to teaching Morrison, Kathryn Earle notes that '[T]he actual rape reads more like a love scene' (qtd. in Roynon 42). And although this interpretation is pushing the point, it reflects the languorous and tender syntax that is so effectively juxtaposed with the violence of the

ensuing rape. However, this most destructive of rapes (in effect, a murder¹¹), of one very sympathetic character by another less, but still, sympathetic character is something the reader can accept as possible because Morrison has built it to be, to use Flannery O'Connor's words, "an action or a gesture which was both totally right and totally unexpected; it would have to be one that was both in character and beyond character; it would have to suggest both the world and eternity" (111).

Building Tension: Lines 4-27

After the first three sentences of the scene, we enter Cholly's point of view and we experience his contradictory emotions of love and revulsion toward Pecola:

Cholly saw her dimly and could not tell what he saw or what he felt.

Then he became aware that he was uncomfortable; next he felt the discomfort dissolve into pleasure. The sequence of his emotions was revulsion, guilt, pity, then love. (161)

And although Pecola is no longer described from such a distance, she remains in effect a receptacle for all of Cholly's conflicted feelings and is still not fully represented as a person, a full character, in her own right. Rather, she is a "presence," a ghost of all of Cholly's failed intimacies.

Morrison moves the reader here from seeing Pecola as Cholly sees her (lines 1-3 in Appendix 1)¹² to a brief exposition of Cholly's feelings (lines 5-7). We are *told*

¹¹ The rape is the event that pushes Pecola into madness, a retreat into a fantasy world where she is no longer truly among the living.

¹² All parenthetical references to line numbers in this discussion from this point forward refer to the numbered lines of the scene as presented in Appendix 1

rather than *shown* his volatile mix of emotions. Morrison relies on abstractions to describe them--*discomfort, pleasure, revulsion, guilt, pity, love*--rather than presenting a physical description of Cholly that could effectively convey these responses. She then proceeds to outline some explanation for his feelings: "His revulsion was a reaction to her young, helpless, hopeless presence. Her back hunched that way; her head to one side as though crouching from a permanent and unrelieved blow." Given that Morrison could have chosen to use description rather than exposition to convey Cholly's feelings and thoughts,¹³ her choice here to be so bluntly explanatory has the effect of keeping the reader out of the scene, still. My sense is that such restraint, this keeping the reader at bay, makes the actual physical rape description in the next paragraph all the more powerful, engrossing, and sharp. It becomes a kind of explosion after a holding back which would not have happened had Morrison used richly vivid writing throughout the entirety of the scene. By shifting from a distant view to a told perception and then shifting again to vivid, physical action in the paragraph to come, Morrison conveys violence during the actual rape through stark description rather than resorting to abstractions of the act that could risk pushing it into the melodramatic or the grotesque.

The lines examined above are followed by a pattern of questioning, an inner dialogue, that works to good effect to heighten the suspense as we move into the pivotal rape paragraph. Cholly¹⁴ asks himself three sets of questions that are each followed by two or three reactions to these questions. The questions increase from two questions in a row, then four, then eight, and this pattern--this rhythmic increase--also has the visceral impact of heightening the tension to breaking point. Below is a visual

¹³ For example, earlier in this same chapter: "There was no place for Cholly's eyes to go. They slid about furtively searching for shelter, while his body remained paralyzed. The flashlight man lifted his gun down from his shoulder, and Cholly heard the clonk of metal. He dropped back to his knees. (148)"

¹⁴ If we assume the narrator is Claudia, we might instead say that she, or the authorial voice, is telling us her interpretation of what Cholly could be asking himself.

breakdown of the pattern I mention, the questions in boldface type. The questions represent, to me, a denunciation of all of Cholly's failings. The chant-like repetition is the echo of the chorus of a Greek tragedy and conveys (subliminally, because this is all embedded in one, single conventional paragraph, not broken down like verse, as I have it here) that Cholly's disdain is for himself and that this disdain will lead to tragedy. He, too, is "whipped," haunted, and loving. And this loving has lead him only to humiliation and a disdained vision of himself as weak, a vision that he not only would violate but murder and he transfers this perception onto Pecola. And so, when he sees her and moves to destroy her, it could be said that he is actually "seeing" himself - a self he despises and would annihilate.

In the diagram below, the questions are boxed to highlight the 2-4-8 pattern and to illustrate the question-and-answer construction that is not immediately apparent when reading the passage in its original format:¹⁵

9. Why did she have to look so whipped?

10. She was a child—unburdened—why wasn't she happy?

11. The clear statement of her misery was an accusation.

12. He wanted to break her neck—but tenderly.

13. Guilt and impotence rose in a bilious duet.

14. What could he do for her—ever?

15. What give her?

16. What say to her?

17. What could a burned-out black man say to the hunched back of his eleven-year-old daughter?

18. If he looked into her face, he would see those haunted, loving eyes.

19. The hauntedness would irritate him—the love would move him to fury.

20. How dare she love him?

21. Hadn't she any sense at all?

¹⁵ This is a section of the scene in Appendix 1, lines numbered.

- 22. What was he supposed to do about that?**
- 23. Return it?**
- 24. How?**
- 25. What could his calloused hands produce to make her smile?**
- 26. What of his knowledge of the world and of life could be useful to her?**
- 27. What could his heavy arms and befuddled brain accomplish that would earn him his own respect, that would in turn allow him to accept her love?**

28. His hatred of her slimed in his stomach and threatened to become vomit.

29. But just before the puke moved from anticipation to sensation, she shifted her weight and stood on one foot scratching the back of her calf with her toe.

All but the final answer to the questions Cholly asks represent Cholly's self-accusations and are proofs of his own inadequacy. He feels that he has nothing to give Pecola and that her love for him, because he has not earned it, is a burden.

Keeping the Reader in the Scene ~ Crafting to Reflect Gravity and Veracity

The last question of the 14 noted above (line 27 in the diagram) appears to be asked more by the narrator than by Cholly. It steps out of Cholly's inner turmoil, his inner questioning, and instead comments on Cholly from an exterior point of view: "What could his heavy arms and befuddled brain accomplish that would earn him his own respect, that would in turn allow him to accept her love?" The question, in fact, feels like a misstep on Morrison's part because it reminds the reader that the story is being told by an outside narrator and pulls the reader out of the scene, actually somewhat diffusing the tension she has worked to build. Cholly would not be reflecting upon his own "befuddled brain." Nor would he move from the prior questioning to a self-knowledge that prompts him to realize that he cannot accept Pecola's love because he does not love himself. This last question is one that is asked of the character Cholly by an outside narrator, not by Cholly of himself. My preference as a reader would have

been to remain deeply in Cholly's experience and therefore deeply within the scene, rather than to be pulled out and reminded that the entire scene is being mediated (by Claudia or the authorial voice). I believe the power, the world of the scene, would have been maintained with slightly more tension if so and it would have adhered more strictly, therefore, to my conditions (particularly 3 and 4) that a rape scene have veracity and an aesthetic that is consistent with the aims of the narrative. However, that being said, it may have been Morrison's intention to remind us that the story was being told to us by a third party, the narrative "located outside of" Cholly just at this point to diffuse tension or, as Lucy Graham writes, when paralleling this scene to a rape scene in Coetzee's *Disgrace*, to "destabilize" the reader's perspective so that the "distance between narrative voice and [father-rapist] collapses" (443). It is worth nothing, thought, that in later writings, Morrison admits some frustration with the narration in *The Bluest Eye* and the diluting effect that having an occasionally ambiguous presence of two narrators has on the work. Perhaps, however, the aforementioned shift in point of view represents the slight lapse in momentum that such narration evokes.¹⁶

In *Gris-Gris*, I work to convey my character's emotions through description and enough accumulation of motivation that the reader will be able to understand how the character is feeling without my telling him. I do so because I believe that showing the characters in action conveying "guilt," or "misery" affects the reader more immediately than telling the reader what the character is experiencing by using abstractions. It

¹⁶ There is no absolute consensus among critics as to the identity of the narrator of much of the novel, although the majority do suggest that there are two distinct narrators: Claudia and the authorial voice. In "Texts, Primers, and Voices in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*," Carl Malmgren argues that "[A] single narrator, Claudia MacTeer, has composed the text and created the voices,' whereas Stephanie Demetrakopoulos rests her analyses on the understanding that there are two narrators (31), and Morrison herself admitted that she regrets that she "resorted to two voices[...] both of which are extremely unsatisfactory to me" (253 qtd. in Malmgren).

addresses the rape with an intensity, therefore, that I feel supports the gravity of the act while maximizing dramatic effect.

Perhaps it is my cinematic, visual writing style (or preference) that pushed me when writing the traumatic scenes in *Gris-Gris* to dramatize them with a very strict focus on physical action, to avoid explication at such moments. I have been influenced by the “show don’t tell” “rule” that is upheld by many American mid 20th-21st Century books on writing technique and most notably, John Gardner’s *The Art of Fiction*. In this book, Gardner emphasizes the need to show rather than tell in order to ensure that the reader’s dream, in order to be “powerful” is “vivid and continuous” (31):

[O]ne of the chief mistakes a writer can make is to allow or force the reader’s mind to be distracted, even momentarily, from the fictional dream....He makes the scene vivid in the reader’s mind; that is he encourages the reader to “dream” the event with enormous clarity by presenting as many concrete details as possible. (31-32)

By line 27 in Morrison’s rape scene, she conveys a character’s emotional state and mental processes through exposition using abstractions. So, where Morrison writes “*The clear statement of her misery was an accusation. He wanted to break her neck—but tenderly. Guilt and impotence rose in a bilious duet,*” I would tend to dramatize the character’s feeling responsible for Pecola’s misery, to somehow convey the urge to break the neck, the rising guilt, and the impotence through description or dialogue.

However, even though I teach my students to avoid abstract language in fiction, and to stick to concrete description, I can’t say that I’m certain which approach is better any more, because Morrison’s writing here is very powerful. Perhaps a combination is one answer. There are many points in the writing where Morrison combines abstractions

with description to good effect, including the lines between the series of questions discussed, or in this example from earlier in this chapter:

Darlene put her hands over her face as Cholly began to simulate what had gone on before. He could do no more than make-believe. The flashlight made a moon on his behind.

“Hee hee hee hee heeee.”

“Come on, coon. Faster. You ain’t doing nothing for her” (148).

Creating Vertigo with Subtle Syntactical Choices: Lines 28-42

Returning to the diagram above, we can see that after the last question--the one that is posed by a narrator (line 27), the writing becomes much more descriptive and active. Cholly’s questioning moves into concrete, physical response. His stomach is “slimed,” he is on the verge of vomiting, and at the point of “puking” his hatred of Pecola/himself out. But this ejaculation is arrested by Pecola’s delicate and simple gesture—the scratching of the back of her calf with her toe. Cholly is pulled out of himself and his disgust and back to his desire to protect mixed with a sensual sweetness in recalling nibbling his wife, Pauline’s calf many years ago. He blurs that memory with the present vision of his daughter and entertains repeating the nibbling gesture with Pecola. “He did it then, and started Pauline into laughter. He did it now ” (lines 38-39).

The first of the two long paragraphs of the rape scene ends with repetition, an anaphoric “He did it then.... He did it now.” The object pronoun “it” refers to the nibbling of Pecola’s calf, but the repetition of the phrase hits harder and works as a prelude to the act of rape. Although buried within the paragraph, these two lines work something like the double four-note (and four beat) opening motif in Beethoven’s *Fifth*,

having three short/stressed beats and one longer/unstressed beat (*he did it now*). They are a virtual announcement of the most significant action in the novel. The second “He did it now,” is the dramatic and sharp end to this first long paragraph in a scene that has barreled relentlessly toward the rape in the second long paragraph. The minute pause afforded by the paragraph break further heightens the tension.

Morrison then diminishes Cholly, has him *sink* to his knees, full of *tenderness*, and *crawling*. That Cholly’s impulse to vomit is transformed into a sensual tenderness nicely conveys the antagonizing forces that propel Cholly blindly toward the rape. That he crawls like a baby/predator across the floor is an effective image choice, as well. Such tenderness and incapacity mixed with his more predatory impulses conveys not only the bedlam of his motivations but also sets the reader somewhat off balance--which works to build suspense.

Welling in Cholly is “[n]ot the usual lust to part tight legs with his own, but a tenderness, a protectiveness (line 36),” and this line captures the scene’s conflict well. We are told that Cholly does not feel his usual animal, aggressive “lust,” but rather a paternal inclination to protect. However, we know that in the telling is the implication that such lust does indeed exist, and this aggressive impulse is enacted only a few lines further when he does violently penetrate Pecola.

Morrison’s antithetical, abstract nouns (“hatred mixed with tenderness,” line 59) describes Cholly’s inner chaos but what most interests me is the way that this syntax might set the reader off balance, evoking both dread and a desire to experience a relief in the tension that moves the reader and text toward the rape. Crafting a scene to this point in effect satisfies all of my criteria. This leads me to assume that, in order to write a truly effective scene of violence, the writer must build a desire in the reader for the violence to be consummated by first leading the reader to feel a tension--a sort of

tension or desire to fulfill his objective--that the perpetrator experiences. In developing the reservoir rape scene in *Gris-Gris*, I therefore use description of setting, of the rapist, and Sylvie's ponderous move toward a realization of what is happening, to create a similar tension. Because I wanted to hint at the idea of Sylvie's fate being inevitable, I worked, also, to create a similar kind of music, or cadence, in the scene that carries the action inescapably forward to a shattering conclusion.

Morrison builds such dramatic tension from the start of *The Bluest Eye* through small syntactical choices as much as through fully developed scenes. As we can see here, her use of language--nouns of violence and hatred mixed with nouns of compassion and love--sets up a tension in the reader, a disorientation and a flying-apart of the reader's own ability to anticipate the action of the scene.

In the reservoir scene in *Gris-Gris* (pages 215 to 223), I do not write into the rapist's consciousness but do try to set up a tone of disorientation and kind of tunnel-vision/trance sense through my description of the setting and the interaction between Sylvie and the drifter that diverges from the typical, more active and dialogue-laced writing of the novel. My intention is to arouse a sense of danger, of time being out of joint, and to evoke in the reader a desire to regain normalcy, stability, and understanding of what is going on in the fiction – of a completion, a putting back together of all that has spun apart.¹⁷

In this one scene, Sylvie is raped and then murders her rapist – two dramatic actions that “seal” the scene and bring the reader relief in a very basic way (the reader may still wonder what is going to happen to Sylvie next; the dramatic action of the story has not been resolved) at the end of the scene. As I wrote the scene, I tried to

¹⁷ Upon reading this particular rape scene from *Gris-Gris*, one guest visitor to our PhD forum said that, while reading it he felt "under water," and as if he were in a dream, both responses that confirmed I was getting close to what I wanted there.

convey a little of Sylvie's self-destructive nature in her oblivion, her initial failure to acknowledge the obvious in the face of the rapist, and also the potential for danger inherent in her inclination toward risk in my description of the ominous reservoir. I was not trying to get into either character's emotions or point of view; my goal was more to convey the rape as something inevitable rather than as an emotional response of one character toward another as in *The Bluest Eye*.

This is also why I chose to have Paige narrate this rape scene. She tells the reader the story from Sylvie's point of view, and with a specificity of detail that is indicative of the strong connection the twins have.¹⁸ Sylvie has proven a somewhat unreliable narrator by this point so I wanted to have Paige moderate to alleviate any doubts the reader might have that the event occurred. But I do try to move into Sylvie's point of view, her experience, as Morrison allows her narrator into Cholly's experience, and then away, so the reader gets the impact of the action modulated by the reportage of a third party. For example, we hear from Paige: "She said that, afterwards, she could not stop seeing the slackening of his face beyond sleep, the quick, bad-dream death convulsion of his body as the rock rolled to the ground and revealed a great rupture in the shape of a star" (*Gris-Gris* 222).

Morrison's rape scene is also narrated by a character who is not part of the event. However, in this case, Claudia as *writer* is able to convey Cholly's thoughts. The difference in approach does make Morrison's rape scene more immediate, I believe, than the Sylvie rape scene. By experiencing Cholly's inner life and physical experience, we are instantly closer to the horror of Pecola's pain.

It is at the point when Cholly makes physical contact with Pecola by catching her foot, that Morrison finally uses Pecola's name in the scene. I mention earlier that

¹⁸ See Appendix 3 for a full excerpt of this scene

she is referred to only as what she represents to Cholly – a daughter, a child, or a “her” who recalls Pauline. When Cholly finally touches the girl, though, the reader is forced to see her as the full, round *Pecola* she has followed through the novel.

The language here is reflective of the sexual mechanics described later, in that Cholly catches Pecola's foot in an “upward stroke,” and she immediately loses balance, about to “careen to the floor.” At risk of stating the obvious, these two sentences could be said to work as a metaphor for the act of rape and its toppling aftermath. And, they are an example of how Morrison heightens tension further by metaphorically conveying the threat and act of rape to the reader, as if in a series of subtle and subliminally distressing codes so that we are told what is happening (Cholly is raping his daughter) before it happens.

The first use of the proper noun, *Pecola*, is paired with a description of her losing her balance: “...he...caught the foot in an upward stroke. Pecola lost her balance and was about to careen to the floor (lines 41-42).” And it is at this point of vertigo that the action of the physical rape begins.

Sexual Terminology, Pornography and What Rings True: Lines 43-54

Cholly “saves” Pecola from falling, his last “paternal” move before shifting entirely to the sexual, and he then brings his trembling mouth to the back of her leg and encroaches further by *digging* his fingers “into her waist.” No trace of the paternal caretaker is present as Cholly interprets Pecola’s “shocked” and “stunned” silent response as sexually stimulating rather than a call for protection. Note that Pecola is physically described only as “rigid,” “shocked,” “silent,” and “stunned,” and in the same sentence she is juxtaposed with Cholly’s memory of “Pauline’s easy laughter.” And it is this animal fear, this shock, that pushes Cholly to his own animal response.

The narrator then explicitly states “The confused mixture of his memories of Pauline and the doing of a wild and forbidden thing excited him (line 48),” a writing choice that I question, as I tend to feel that moving instead to the action would have engaged the reader in the emotional, physical, and vivid reality of the scene more powerfully and adhered better to the aesthetics and truth of the scene (as set out in my introductory conditions). I don’t think it’s of monumental importance in light of the whole, but this move of Morrison’s, her extra bit of exposition, did pull me out of the scene as a reader momentarily because that information had already been delivered more effectively in the previous sentence: “...was better than Pauline’s easy laughter had been (line 47).” To be told that this excited him so overtly served, on a minute level, as a slight dampener on the action. At the same time, Morrison may have chosen to have the narrative step back from the scene at this point to remind the reader that Cholly was not at all self-aware, that his confusion, for instance, was not something he could ever acknowledge let alone understand.

Returning to the text, and moving from the first explicative half of this sentence, we see that Morrison goes on to employ graphic imagery to indicate that Cholly’s sexual excitement has shifted entirely from the mental to the physical: The confused mixture of his memories of Pauline and the doing of a wild and forbidden thing excited him, *and a bolt of desire ran down his genitals, giving it length, and softening the lips of his anus* [italics added] (line 48). Morrison moves from abstract to very specific here. She uses the clinical nouns “genitals,” “lips,” and “anus,” to wrench the reader soundly into the reality of the very physical act that is about to occur. The sentence continues, “giving it length, and softening the lips of his anus.” And the careful wording here, the use of “it” as well as the ambiguous grammar (the pronoun does not agree with its antecedent, “genitals”), and asks that the reader understand that

the “it” stands instead for “penis,” enabling the writer to leave out that clinical term and allowing her to include the quite clinical, yet effectively descriptive phrase, “lips of his anus” while avoiding weakening the scene with a distractingly graphic array of private part terminology.

In reading a number of discussions and practical guides on how to write sex scenes as research for this discussion,¹⁹ it struck me that many people were concerned with how to write scenes that were effective, rather than pornographic, “literary” rather than sensationalistic, sophisticated rather than schlocky. In *Making Shapely Fiction*, Jerome Stern outlines the problem:

A particularly vexing problem is what word to use. Sexual activities have a vocabulary range from lyric to coarse and from polite to obscene.... Sexual parts, however, have names that sound either clinical (penis), childish (wee-wee), vulgar (cock), or porno-euphemistic (tower of power). Often nothing ever sounds right. (214)

In developing the rape scenes in *Gris-Gris*, I looked largely to Morrison and worked to write sex in a manner that skirts pornography and conveys the physicality of sex without romanticizing it or tending toward the romance novelist swooning “porno-euphemisms” (Stern). I experimented with using blunt sexual terminology, analogies, euphemisms, and the like and settled on a combination of terminology and description would convey the act as I wanted it to be portrayed--and as demanded by the tone of the particular narrative--tempered by my own taste. The following is an excerpt from such a scene in *Gris-Gris*:

¹⁹ A simple Google search will bring up, for instance calls up many such questions from concerned writers : <http://answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid=20130817122908AAQyHbi>, along with many varied answers: <http://fuckyeahcharacterdevelopment.tumblr.com/post/25915791430/writing-rape>

Mark kissed her shoulders and lowered himself so his body brushed hers, then he mouthed the back of her neck, grabbed hard onto both of her arms, and in one sharp move, plunged into her.

Kate started out of sleep and let out a deep cry.

"Quiet, baby," Mark rasped and held her down hard. He continued thrusting with a rhythmic efficiency. "Quiet." He moved more quickly against her, mouthing "quiet, quiet," and bit into her shoulder until he finished in a silent shudder and relaxed down onto Kate's back.²⁰

I admire and learn from Morrison's approach in this rape scene because she writes sex with language blunt enough to involve the reader quite vividly in the scene but modulates the description with euphemism. Her lyricism here echoes the style of the rest of the prose of the novel and avoids distracting the reader from the scene due to an unexpected barrage of sex terms that are not used elsewhere in the novel and that can bring with them associations that pull the reader entirely out of the scene as it was written. "...[A] bolt of desire ran down his genitals..." (162) is an example of a description where I feel she achieves this balance. There is a rather poetic sounding "bolt of desire" that terminates in a straightforward non-romantic "genitals," forcing the reader to realize that there is nothing romantic at all taking place.

In the two sentences that follow those noted above, Morrison uses juxtaposition to heighten the reader's sense of the conflict in Cholly's perceptions and desire, in effect repeating something that we've already been told. His "lust" is outlined by "politeness," he wants to "fuck" her "tenderly." Thanks to the description earlier in this scene, the reader is well aware of Cholly's conflicting impulses by now and I initially questioned the need for further explication of Cholly's duality at this point in

²⁰ See Appendix 3 for a full excerpt of this scene

the action. However, in following the literal progression of action, it's clear that these two sentences--followed by "But the tenderness would not hold," --are less an explanation than a description of the present-action swirl of conflict that drives Cholly to the act of penetration.

We are not told overtly that he has entered Pecola in this scene. The reader is moved instead to a description of what makes the knowledge of penetration unavoidable: "the tightness of her vagina was more than he could bear"(line 52), and then to Cholly's release to his urge, "his soul seemed to slip down to his guts and fly out into her," followed by his "gigantic thrust." The word "bear" is an interesting choice, because it implies an attempt at self-control, implies that Cholly was, until that moment still capable of recoiling from the act (that he could control himself until this point, until he was forced to capitulate animal excitement by the allure of his daughter's tightness). And the word tends to lift responsibility from Cholly, although I cannot say if this was Morrison's intention because, at the same time, the word hints that in Pecola's girlish tightness, Cholly senses the destruction his transgression will wreak--that he cannot *bear* the buried recognition that he is raping his daughter, and yet revulsion toward his actions, toward himself, arouses and drives him onward in one "gigantic thrust."

Morrison does not linger on Cholly's experience after entering Pecola, something that could seem important to write when the act lies at the core of the novel, but this works to good effect. She instead writes the act as an accumulation of conflicting, abstract impulses and moves the reader into an unusual and much more vivid description of Cholly's (and, now, Pecola's) experience of resistance within the immediate action, the "tightness" insisting upon force, and the clinical term "vagina" insisting upon stark physical reality as "the gigantic thrust he made into her then

provoked the only sound she made—a hollow suck of air in the back of her throat.

Like the rapid loss of air from a circus balloon."

The language in the first independent clause in this sentence, "His soul seemed to slip down into his guts and fly out into her...", verges on the operatic, the romantic, and if it had not been tempered by the word "guts," would have been. Souls flying into the bodies of others upon orgasm is, to me, the territory of the Romantic Poets, and a contemporary writer would be at risk of melodrama to use the concept. But in the context of the gritty world of *The Bluest Eye*, we read the cliché as a romantic dream that Cholly, like Pecola, longs for – a soul connection—that it is his fate to blindly decimate. The concept, in this case, does not strike me as hackneyed at all. Of course, the fact that Morrison describes Cholly's soul as having to traverse his "guts" (genitals?) in order to "fly out into" Pecola does much to dampen the loftiness of the conceit.

The second independent clause within this sentence, following the conjunction "and," reads "the gigantic thrust he made into her then provoked the only sound she made--," and it puts into action the abstraction just mentioned as well as throwing Pecola into relief. There is then a dash--a pause demanded by the author that works to add emphasis to what follows, which is the haunting adjective clause, "a hollow suck of air in the back of her throat." The words a "hollow suck," resonate profoundly of emptiness, as if all that is within Pecola—her air, her *soul*--evacuates, which is indeed the final outcome. Around the image is wrapped Pecola's shock, her pain, the realization of her violation and possibly the shame she feels within that. The image is so strong that the simile Morrison adds to close this paragraph, "Like the rapid loss of air from a circus balloon." seems almost unnecessary. However, I can also see the value of evoking the image of the deflated circus balloon with its implication of

deflated childhood to close the paragraph. All hope of flight, buoyancy, festivity, and joy has been spoiled. The balloon's deflation further represents an exit of the life force from Pecola's body.

Immediately After ~ the Rhetoric of Honesty

The first line of the following paragraph, line 55, conveys the dissipation of Cholly's sexual frenzy, and his awakening to the physical presence of his daughter as she grips his wrists. We are brought back to the vivid, concrete reality of Pecola, whose hands are "wet" and "soapy" and whose fingers were "clenching" his wrists. The very real Pecola, who has been pulled from her innocent occupation of cleaning dishes, is again thrown into relief which is very effective, and almost essential at this point because the tension and horror that the reader feels while reading the actual rape is unsustainable and would, if continued longer, perhaps overwhelm any possible impact of the action that follows (for instance, the introduction of Soaphead Church, Pecola's poisoning of the dog, and the final depiction of Pecola talking to herself).

When Pecola grabs Cholly's wrists, it is the only time that we see her take action during the rape scene:

"Following the disintegration—the falling away—of sexual desire, he was conscious of her wet, soapy hands on his wrists, the fingers clenching, but whether her grip was from a hopeless but stubborn struggle to be free, or from some other emotion, he could not tell" (line 55).

However, Morrison does not define the goal of the action. I, as the reader, hope that the gesture signifies Pecola's attempt to resist Cholly, to protect herself – a sign of true

agency. But Morrison denies the reader even this small comfort by failing to confirm (through Cholly's point of view) "whether her grip was from a hopeless but stubborn struggle to be free, or from some other emotion...". So, the realism of the rape is supported by the very mundane, very honest real-life nature of its aftermath and in this way fulfills all of the elements I've come to see as essential to the rape scenes in my own work.

That Morrison writes Cholly as being capable of entertaining the thought that Pecola is grabbing his wrists for any other reason than "a hopeless struggle to be free," conveys the character's narcissism, delusion, and his chaotic mindset. And it also conveys the bitter hopelessness of this eleven-year-old girl having even her most obvious desires (to get away, to protect herself) misinterpreted, not valued, not seen. However, I think its greatest effect lies in its near throwaway placement within a fast-moving, intense scene.

The observation on Pecola's grip comes at the end of this one-sentence paragraph (the only occasion in the scene where a single-sentence paragraph appears other than at the very opening and concluding paragraphs) and is sandwiched between Cholly's penetration and withdrawal. This single line/paragraph can, therefore, be seen to represent the point of intercourse. It is a note easily missed, but one that works on the reader's consciousness to confirm that Pecola's desires, her self, have absolutely no hope of ever being valued. Morrison could have easily drawn emphasis to the point by simply breaking the winding sentence into two complete sentences. But isolating the description of Cholly's uncertainty would have possibly engaged the reader more than would be useful in the action of the scene because it would ask the reader to stop and contemplate the possible alternatives.

Before leaving discussion of this one-sentence paragraph, I would also like to make note of a rhetorical technique that Morrison uses here. At the start of this paragraph, Morrison uses two nouns (one noun, and one noun phrase) to describe the dissolution of sexual energy: “Following the *disintegration*—the *falling away*—of sexual desire...”[italics added]. Morrison could have chosen one or the other-- “disintegration” or “the falling away” -- because they both perform the same basic task. However, in combination they more fully convey the sense of an impulse crumbling in retreat – a full retraction. Morrison uses this method of refining description often in this novel, for example: ...[Cholly] was indeed an old dog, a snake, a ratty nigger" (18), “The total absence of human recognition—the glazed separateness (48),” or “The restraint, the holding off, the promise of sweetness that had yet to unfold...(145). The phrasing in such cases is lyrical, regardless of the subject, and evokes multiple degrees of description that enrich the emotional power and descriptive accuracy of the text.

The next paragraph consists of four sentences that mix concrete action with exposition of Cholly’s motivation to powerful effect. We move from one physical image in the previous paragraph--Pecola’s soapy hands grabbing Cholly’s wrist—to the painful removal of Cholly’s penis from Pecola in this paragraph. The clinical description is vivid and serves the purpose of conveying the action of the scene as Cholly “snatched his genitals out of the dry harbor of her vagina.” And, at the same time, the image of breaking loose, “the hopeless but stubborn struggle to be free,” is echoed. The description implies that both characters are experiencing physical pain, while it also reflects the tragic destiny neither will escape - again supporting the premise of the novel. In his snatching, Cholly likely causes Pecola greater pain than his own, but her response is absent.

The next sentence “She appeared to have fainted” echoes this absence. Why Morrison does not write definitively that Pecola fainted, or passed out, instead of telling the reader what “appeared” to have happened leads me to wonder if she intends for the reader to think Pecola could also have died at this moment, which is metaphorically what occurs. The ambiguity also implies a chilling lack of concern on Cholly’s part as to the condition of his daughter – as to whether or not she is even alive. The distance with which Pecola’s collapse is described not only heightens suspense at this point by alarming the reader again, it also conveys the action in a manner that is both shocking and more evocative of Cholly’s own spiritual death than a straight description of the young girl falling to the floor would manage.

When Cholly stands, he is still unable to “see” Pecola. He only sees her “grayish panties, so sad and limp around her ankles.” The only visual images of this paragraph are Cholly’s “genitals,” and Pecola’s “vagina,” “grayish panties,” and “ankle.” Our eyes are presented with a series of crime-scene fragments, emotionally void images that, like the gray panties, exist “sad” and “limp” in a scene stripped of color that on every level reflects the outcome of the rape.

Morrison circles back one final time to the abstract telling of Cholly’s driving emotions: “Again, the hatred mixed with tenderness.” This statement is followed by a recitation of the effects of both emotions, conveyed in rhythmic and syllabic symmetry: “The hatred would not let him pick her up (10 syllables), the tenderness forced him to cover her” (10 syllables) (line 59). And this repetition has the effect of a final couplet, a closure that encapsulates the warring impulses represented by Cholly that result in Pecola’s being left unconscious, covered (not picked up) as one might cover a corpse.

Not many readers would read this scene with the sort of microscopic focus that I do in this discussion, and my guess is that such a comment on Pecola’s state both in

this scene and in the world of this novel works primarily on the general reader's subconscious to underscore the tragic message of the entire novel: People make assumptions about others that reflect their own needs and in so doing negate the truth of the "other." Pecola's truth, her very self, is obliterated by this act. Many critics have written of Morrisons broader goal of showing the Euro-American reader what racism feels like to the African-American--asking them to acknowledge that "other."²¹ The rape scene, therefore, fully underscores the premise of the entire novel, one of the conditions I feel to be an essential quality to the sort of rape scene I would wish to include in *Gris-Gris*.

Starting and Ending with Mother

The final paragraph of the rape scene is, like the opening paragraph and the aforementioned paragraph occurring during the act of intercourse, one single sentence. It is also a rich combination of the elements that make Morrison's scenes so powerful—the delicate blending of explication, vivid detail, and implication. Like the first paragraph, it begins with the epic, Biblical, concluding "So" that--as I note earlier--implies the inevitable, the eternal, and the almost mythically incontrovertible. Yet this "So" also somehow avoids sounding too grand, too overblown or melodramatic because Morrison quickly moves away from the grand implications, the drum-roll of the "So" and into the gritty, practical reality of the scene. Pecola has again lost her name, and is referred to as "the child," which is a brilliantly effective choice because it so sharply contrasts with the sordid adult imagery, the genitals, the pain, that she has

²¹ For instance, Jerome Bump writes "...Morrison enables white readers sensitive to their own imperfections to feel the tragedy of racism more deeply" (156). He also points out that "To feel compassionate grief for Pecola, to feel her pain, is to take the first step toward breaking out of the habits of racism" (157).

just experienced. Pecola is on the kitchen floor, which places us back in the setting mentioned at the rape scene's opening.

Morrison then moves from setting to the immediately and centrally physical, the "pain between her legs." Pecola tries to make sense of this pain and the vision of "the face of her mother looming over her," a mother who betrays her daughter as Hester betrays Mina in *Gris-Gris*. In both of these narratives, the mother's betrayal can be said to lead to (or manifest itself in) rape. These daughters are not the daughters of *The House of the Spirits*, who, as Shea discusses in her work, find salvation ("protection against patriarchal aggression" (225)) through "female solidarity originating from mother love" (224). Morrison's decision to close the rape scene with the "looming" (not nurturing, not rocking, holding, or caressing) mother punctuates the scene and seems, possibly, to point to the mother as the true instigator of the destruction of Pecola, something that is clearly an aim in the rape scene of Mina in *Gris-Gris*, as well. That she is afforded no protection--none through society or either parent--produces a resonant hopelessness that remains with the reader long after this scene's end. It is within this moment of poignantly "trying to make sense," that we leave both the scene and Pecola – or rather, the sane and pitifully hopeful Pecola of the first 80% of the novel-- and turn to Isabel Allende's use of quite different tools in constructing scenes with similar content.

PART TWO - "The Wink of an Eye:" Writing Rape in *The House of the Spirits*.

Where Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* centers upon one rape scene, rape and sexual violation is woven with regularity into Isabel Allende's 1985 novel, *The House of the Spirits*. This novel was an inspiration when I wrote the foundations of *Gris-Gris*, particularly in its focus on multi-generational female bonds and repeated behaviors. One of the two narrators of the novel, Esteban Trueba, in fact commits the rape that is the seed of the tragedies that befall his own family and leads to the nearly fatal abuse and rape of his beloved granddaughter, Alba, the other narrator of the novel. I also appreciated the sense one gets of realistic violence and sexuality in the novel in combination with, or balanced by, romance and whimsy. The novel documents with veiled accuracy the brutal rise of the Pinochet dictatorship in Chile, and is framed by very pointed political observation and history while also often operating through a fantastical, fairy-tale like world of the women of the novel.²² We are told early in the work that "It was a world in which time was not marked by calendars or watches and objects had a life of their own, in which apparitions sat at the table and conversed with human beings, the past and the future formed kaleidoscope of jumbled mirrors where everything and anything could happen (82)." The novel's plot hinges upon dramatic events, passionate longings, and violent outbursts much like those of *Wuthering Heights*. The aim is more political than Brontë's work, but it is at the same time

²² Allende's work is commonly referred to by critics as one of "magical realism," defined nicely by critic Charles Rossman as "[T]he interweaving of realism, or verisimilitude, with fantasy, and treating both the empirically "real" and the fantastical as equally valid objective experiences..." (52).

tempered by magical realism and a touch of the gothic absurd similar to that of Flannery O'Connor.

Contemporary critical studies on *The House of the Spirits* focus on a number of subjects, most notably the novel's representation of Chilean politics leading up to the Pinochet dictatorship (1973-1990),²³ Allende's use of magical realism (and its similarity to that used in the fiction of Gabriel Garcia Marquez),²⁴ and the novel's feminist content.²⁵ The novel's rape scenes and scenes of sexual violence are almost always mentioned in reference to these particular areas as representations of political/historical, philosophical, or gender dynamics (or a combination, see Weldt-Basson). However, while *The House of the Spirits* has inspired significant research and analysis, very little practical attention has been paid to the actual crafting of the work. My approach in exploring the construction of Allende's scenes of rape and sexual violence is not as microscopic as my study of Morrison's scene. Rather, it involves a look at how the layering of multiple scenes, the allusions contained in the scenes, and the language used to craft the scenes impacts the narrative and the reader. Allende's approach to constructing rape differs markedly from Morrison's, yet her approach also satisfies the criteria that I constructed as I worked to write those in *Gris-Gris*. For instance Allende's novel has many scenes of rape and violence--far more than in *Gris-*

²³ Critical works studied for this piece that have a strong focus on the political underpinnings of the text include Karen Wooley Martin's "Isabel Allende's House of the Spirits Trilogy," Giti Chandra's "Narrative Violence, Constructing Collective Identities," Carrie Sheffield's excellent essay "Voices from the Political Abyss: Isabel Allende's *The House of the Spirits* and the Reconstruction and Preservation of History and Memory in 1970s Chile and Beyond," and Norma Helsper's "Binding the Wounds of the Body Politic: Nation as Family in *La casa de los espíritus*."

²⁴ Rossman also defends Allende's unique approach against the many critics who, especially early in the novel's publishing history, dismissed it as a poor copy of Marquez' *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Philip Swanson also argues that *The House of the Spirits* "invert[s] the Garcia Marquez model" to powerful effect (218).

²⁵ Critical reading done for this thesis in relation to the writing of rape centered on feminist writings, including those by Nelly Z. Martinez, Helene Carol Weldt-Basson, the work of Sorcha Gunne and Zoe Brigley Thompson, Karen Wooley Martin, Maureen E. Shea.

Gris--and still, the novel does not read as one "about rape," and it is for this and many other reasons I chose to examine it for this study.

Using Oppositions to Develop a Climate of Rape: Innocence and Necrophilia

The novel's first scene of sexual violation occurs when one of its main characters, Clara, is ten. Her older sister, Rosa, has been accidentally poisoned and killed by brandy that was meant for her politician father. Clara peeks through a window at night and sees Rosa, "on the marble slab, a deep gash forming a canal down the front of her body" with what she thinks is "a supplicating and humiliated expression on her...face" and watches as the autopsy is performed by a beloved doctor, a "wonderful old man" (53) but who in Clara's vision "had been transformed into a dark, fat vampire...".²⁶ Assisting him in the cleanup is an unknown younger man who "kissed Rosa on the lips, the neck, the breasts, and between her legs; until he wiped her with a sponge, dressed her in her embroidered nightgown, and, panting, rearranged her hair" (54).

This is not exactly a rape scene, although it is a violation of a body--and the effect upon Clara of observing the necrophilia is comparable to that of a rape victim; she does not speak for nine years after observing it.²⁷ Allende's choice of words in this scene, the "blood" and, somehow even worse, "the viscera," of the once luminous beauty, Rosa, work to turn the reader's stomach before the actual fondling of the body occurs.

In this scene, not only is dissonance created by conveying such a disturbing vision through the eyes of a little girl, but also by the application of a child's

²⁶ See Appendix 4 for a full excerpt of the scene

²⁷ This is the first of what Weldt-Basson refers to as "hyperbolic silence" that represents a "rebellion against the sexual abuse of women (113)."

imagination to the clinical, sexual act. Clara's interpretation of her dead sister's look as "supplicating and humiliated" is one example. Such juxtaposition of a fantastical lens placed upon sexual violation sets the tone for nearly every rape scene that is to follow in the novel and the manner in which Allende writes these scenes invites the reader to observe them not only as violence and rape but as the evisceration of the female victim's innocence and/or her romantic expectations. Here, the corpse of Rosa is perceived as seeking supplication, of experiencing a pathos-inducing humiliation in the imagination of Clara. Rosa is quite literally eviscerated in this scene, her "intestines beside her on a salad platter" (53). But the greater violence is the affront to Clara's childhood innocence as she witnesses the kindly family doctor and his assistant as violators.

After fondling Rosa--the first of a number of females in the novel who are unable to resist--the young assistant dresses her in an "embroidered nightgown," and rearranges her hair, as if he were a parent laying a child down to bed (panting, nonetheless, as he does so). The choice of an embroidered nightgown, something virginal, child-like, and feminine, contributes to the building of a sexual dissonance that pervades the novel. That a genuine, living, innocent child is the witness to the necrophilia of her "humiliated" sister develops a sense of perversion of romantic and sexual expectations that Allende uses as a tool to heighten the shock or emotional impact of her scenes of sexual violence.

This technique of placing together contradictory images--and invoking opposing expectations in the reader--seems to fuel the horror of each rape scene in the novel, enabling Allende to avoid describing any of the truly horrific details of realistic sexual violence such as those we see in Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*. Allende uses juxtaposition to powerful effect on a number of levels throughout *The House of the*

Spirits. She blends hard political reality with a dreamy, imaginative reality throughout the novel in a way that makes the political (and generally masculine) machinations of its world seem more harsh and intractable than they may seem without the contrast. The incongruities she sets up present the victims of the injustices of these politics as dreamers and in some ways as infantilized (and soft or feminized, but not always feminine), and they are also highly sympathetic. For example, in this first scene, both the deceased Rosa and the young Clara can be seen as vulnerable, sympathetic victims deserving and needing (parental) protection.

Because the conflict is character-driven and reflects a larger theme that underpins both *The House of the Spirits* and *Gris-Gris*, (protectors failing to protect) it naturally fulfills several levels of my conditions for a successful rape scene (and particular 4 and 5). This technique of Allende's was instructive, therefore, when developing Mina's rape scene in *Gris-Gris*. On the night of this rape, Mina is sent to bed by her mother--her protector turned betrayer--and falls asleep to images of dancing couples of 1940s film. She is, however, brutally wrenched from her own childhood dreaminess by a "partner" far from the Clark Gable she imagines.²⁸ Innocence and dreamy, girlish hope are juxtaposed with Barker's foul smell and "his fleshy palm across her mouth, his hard, wide knees shoving her legs apart " (*Gris-Gris* 6).

After this first scene of sexual violation in *The House of the Spirits*, Allende presents the reader with another disturbing image of sexual assault that presages the form of sexuality upon which the novel's action develops. The first and last lines of the novel begin "Barrabas came to us by sea..." (11). Barrabas is a puppy that grows into a beloved, innocent, and distracted dog of gigantic proportions who follows Clara everywhere. He is described as loving and as having "the captivating ways of a

²⁸ See Appendix 3 for a full excerpt of this scene

frolisome kitten” (32). It is not until after the scene in which Clara observes Rosa’s body that Barrabas is brought back to our attention in a way that accentuates the sense of threat and sexual perversion that infuses the novel and alludes to its myriad rapes.²⁹ We find out that as Barrabas matures and takes to spending nights out, he is unwittingly killing the smaller female dogs that he finds to mount. The scene described is gruesome and although it cannot be called a rape scene, it does imply a certain inevitability of natural, brute, sexual violence: “He always returned with the poor bitch hanging off him, suspended in the air, impaled on his immense masculinity.... [L]ater, Barrabas became unstuck from his beloved, leaving her to die in the courtyard...”. The disturbing motif - that of a female meeting her death through violent sexuality -- is another example of how Allende "writes" rape by layering allusions to rape throughout the novel. Allende does not linger on the dog,³⁰ but this interlude implies that following animal instinct – no matter how innocent the impulse -- can be fatal. The horrific imagery also serves to settle in the reader’s consciousness as a companion to the descriptions of sexual assault between human beings that will occur later in the novel.

In these scenes and in many others, Allende presents us with imagery that, in other hands, could seem needlessly perverse, if not patently pornographic, and uses it to substantiate the active human rapes that occur later in the work. These are only two of many times that Allende employs a productive dissonance to build a "climate" of rape that reaches its full power by the end of the novel.

²⁹ I don’t discuss the most stereotypically sexually perverse character in the book, Jean de Satigny, because although his sado-masochistic lifestyle and dungeon is shocking, his journey in the novel is less about how rape is written than about Satigny as personification of pretend sexual violence.

³⁰ Except to have him violently killed a chapter later by a butcher and then turned into a rug by Esteban as a wedding gift for Clara.

Rape Scenes Without the Specifics

The character who is depicted as committing rape repeatedly over the life of the novel is one of its narrators, the patriarch Esteban Trueba. The death of Rosa is the catalyst for these rapes; Esteban had planned to marry her, and in his grief, he moves to his family's *hacienda* and begins to rape the peasant women there. His first victim is the virgin peasant girl Pancha García, who will as a result give birth to the father of the brutal Esteban Garcia, who will grow up to rape Trueba's beloved granddaughter, Alba (the second narrator). By raping Pancha, Esteban therefore plants the seed from which the destruction of what he loves will grow. This first rape scene is the most vividly described of all of Esteban Trueba's rapes.³¹

This rape scene is vivid, visual, and active, but it lacks the specific detail of the act of rape--and how it is experienced physically by the rapist and the victim--that we see in the rape of Pecola in *The Bluest Eye*. Esteban "hunts" Pancha from horseback, *violently hurls* the load she is carrying, and *sweeps* her up into the saddle with a *grunt*. He then attacks her "*savagely, thrusting himself into her*" with "*brutality*" (74)." Active, dramatic adjectives and verbs and adverbs are used, but in a way that conveys the energy of the rapist rather than the visual or physical specifics of the act, the sensation of the rape, the experience of the victim, or the rapist's climax.

This scene is a step less specific than the earlier scene involving Rosa's body, which does at least refer to some specifics of Rosa's anatomy. Here, Pancha is depicted as the victim and Esteban as the rapist, but there is no descriptive detail of the sexual act. Instead, the two are surrounded by a whirl of active, romantic, and melodramatic images of violent passion culminating in "thrusting" and a blood-spattered dress. So, in this case, it seems that the act of rape is written more as a

³¹ Please see Appendix 4 for a full excerpt of this scene.

representation of the act, in effect, although Trueba's "thrusting" and Pancha's virginal blood provide the scene with some grounding in physicality.

Inverting Chivalry and Writing the Protector as Rapist

An even more effective writing technique than Allende's description of rape in this scene, however, is what I perceive to be Allende's perversion of the chivalric code,³² understood here as a cultural understanding that informs Western contemporary concepts of courtly manners and romantic behavior.³³ Allende has written the scene in a way that sets the reader off balance and evokes a cloying sense of alarm with each scene of sexual violence in the novel. As in the scene where Rosa is being prepared for burial, Allende leads us to expect a kind of care and protection that is in the end quite the opposite of what occurs. Here, Allende invests Trueba's rape of Pancha with the motifs of romance in a uniquely disturbing manner. Esteban searches for Pancha on horseback, invoking the image of the knight. He then swoops down upon Pancha and relieves her of the sheaf, as if to relieve her of her burden. He hoists her onto his horse in a parody of knightly valiance and gallops away with her to the river where they "fell arm in arm among the eucalyptus leaves." To describe the two as falling "arm in arm" implies a love scene, which it seems to me is what Allende is, on one level, telling us *should* be taking place if this world were one of knights and maidens and fairytale. But, in the very next sentence we are told that Esteban "attacked her savagely, thrusting himself into her without preamble, with unnecessary brutality," and the reader is shocked out of any fantasy that this assignation is consensual or romantic.

³² With much thanks to my Bath Spa University Director of Studies, Dr. Tracy Brain, for her suggestions in tutorial concerning the scene's evocation of chivalric imagery.

³³ It should be noted that as Susan Brownmiller writes, "Permissible rape as an act of manhood infused the theories of courtly love propounded by the social arbiters of the Middle Ages" (290). I am referring more to the idea of chivalry as most would think of today--that of Christian virtue, courtesy, nobility, and honor.

By perceiving these rapes through the language of courtly romance and chivalry, the reader is subject to a dynamic similar to that described by Lucy Graham in her writing on rape in J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*, one she describes as "the disjunction between allegiance to an ideology of aesthetics and allegiance to the ethical, revealing Western artistic traditions and perspectives that may condone unethical acts (441)." While Allende perverts the romantic tradition to achieve a particular sting, she also diffuses condemnation by aligning Trueba's actions with those of romance and fairytale. The reader is led, thereby, to withhold judgment of his unethical acts, paving the way to the novel's concluding emphasis on forgiveness. Though the depiction of rape through the lens of the courtly love narrative is disturbing, the effect still does not, to my mind, make the rape as "real" as the rape of Pecola, for instance, which is described with distinctly clinical, physical detail.

Pancha lies "on her back, staring at the sky with terror," during the rape, and "whimper[s] softly." The twisting of the courtly manners familiar to most any reader continues as Esteban gallantly "help(s) her to her feet," and lifts her onto his horse. He whistles as he returns her to her home, and she weeps. And, before he drops her off, he "kissed her on the lips," as if this were the end of a date. "Starting tomorrow. I want you to work in the house," he says as his goodbye, further perverting the romantic ideal of courtly love. Esteban has just raped the virgin Pancha, and yet behaves as if she is complicit, as if nothing but sweetness and romance has passed between them. And unlike the courtly lover who would typically elevate if not worship his lady, Trueba confirms his dominance and Pancha's subjugation by stating that she is now to become his house servant.

The Effect of Elision

Trueba goes on to rape many women on his hacienda and beyond after he commits this first rape, and these rapes are depicted with little or no detail:

He looked out the window and saw a slender little girl hanging up the wash on a wire. She could not have been more than thirteen or fourteen years old, but she was fully developed. Just then she turned and looked at him: she had the expression of a woman.

[Text break]

Pedro García saw his patron whistling on his way to the stables and he shook his head in wonder. (80)

Or,

Not a girl passed from puberty to adulthood that he did not subject to the woods, the riverbank, or the wrought-iron bed. When there were no more available women in Tres Marías, he began to chase after those from the neighboring haciendas, taking them in the wink of an eye, anywhere he could find a place in the fields, usually at dusk. (81)

In the latter of these two examples, we again see Allende using the writing of fairy-tale, of romantic myth, to depict the unspeakable actions of Esteban Trueba as he rapes nearly every young girl in the area. Allende is even less graphic in writing about the collective than when writing earlier about Pancha García or Rosa's body. In writing about these multiple rapes, there is no mention of physical contact at all, no struggle, no cry, no pain, no genitals. Rape, here is "read in its absence" (Graham 434), and as Higgins and Silver suggest in *Rape and Representation* "the elision of the scene of violence in texts about rape both emphasizes the violence and suggests the possibility of making it visible" (qtd. in Graham 434). The absence of the detailed act may, then, have just as powerful an effect on the reader as its graphic presence does in

The Bluest Eye. The fact that there are so many rapes in the novel may also demand such *elision*, creating an enduring sense of the damage rape represents while not bombarding (or numbing) the reader with multiple accounts of brutal, violent, sexual detail and, in so doing, rendering the novel overwhelmingly "about rape."

Rather than physical contact, we are presented with a recounting of how each victim was "subject[ed] to the woods, the riverbank, or the wrought-iron bed." The iamb-rich sing-song of the phrase recalls a nursery rhyme and the first two images -- the woods, the riverbank -- are typical nursery tale settings. The woods and the riverbanks convey a sense of nature, softness, and idyll. The final image, though, that of the "wrought iron bed," (rather than, say, a fluffy feather mattress) represents a cadence that conjures images only of sharpness, possibly pain, possibly bondage, and worse. In the rhythm of Allende's recounting of the multiple rapes, it is easy to skim past this last image, but its difference resonates enough to remind the reader that what is going on is not pastoral romance.

Rape Written as Play

That Trueba "finds a place in the fields, usually at dusk," indicates that he (or the narrator, Alba, or the authorial voice) continues to subvert the imagery and setting of romantic love. Instead of writing that Trueba was "raping them," he is said to be "taking them in the wink of an eye (81)." This playful terminology could be used because Allende needs to convey Trueba's compulsion to dominate (or his rampaging sexual need) while maintaining the reader's sympathy for the character. But my sense is that in using playful, lighthearted "winking" as an euphemism for rape, Allende is more calculatedly invoking the chilling contradictions that in this novel often stand in for the literal details of rape that we see in Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*.

When Clara grows up and Esteban eventually marries her, he loves her powerfully yet is unable to find sexual excitement with her. “In a rage,” we are told, “Trueba sometimes reverted to his former sins, rolling with some robust peasant woman in the tall rushes of the riverbank ... (154).”

I won’t dwell further on the renewed, lush pastoral references,³⁴ but again wish to point out that “rolling” implies consensual playfulness, not rape, when we know that Esteban did not engage in anything more romantic than grotesque approximations of chivalry. That the peasant woman is “robust” is an interesting shift from the young girls described earlier, but again the description only serves to imply complicity, perhaps that Trueba is somehow raping an “equal” who is sturdy and possibly capable of self-defense or self-determination. Given the nature of Trueba’s power and violence and his belief that he has a right to sex with these women,³⁵ however, we know this to not be the case.

When talking about his own behavior as a rapist later in the novel, Allende brings Esteban (as narrator) back to the language of the Pancha García rape scene:

“I tried rape again...but time and the earthquake had taken a toll on my virility. I no longer had the strength to grab a sturdy peasant girl by the waist and swing her up onto my saddle, much less rip her clothes off and enter her against her will. I was of an age when you need help and tenderness...” (212).

Here, Trueba talks of “ripping” clothes off and “entering” a woman “against her will” with impunity. He describes his violence as if it were good-natured fun, a sport

³⁴ Though I would like to include here Karen Wooley Martin's interpretation of the river by which Trueba rapes as a "damp, calm, fertile space, one defined by qualities typically linked with the feminine realm, into a hellish place usurped for and devoted to sexual abuse" (107). Her interpretation is a deeper look into the perversion of the pastoral idyll to which I refer.

³⁵ At a later point in the novel, we are told that Trueba "... was not a man for whores. He did not like to pay for what he could get for something he could get by other means" (88).

he used to play but for which he no longer has an appetite. One could argue that, in writing most of Trueba's rapes as a kind of play, Allende allows Trueba, his granddaughter Alba, and possibly the reader to forgive Trueba's blustery obliviousness to the ramifications of his actions. Indeed, we are asked to pity Trueba in his need for "help and tenderness" rather than pity the women he has raped without any sense of the damage he has done. Giti Chandra makes an interesting point in discussing violence in *The House of the Spirits*, pointing out that violence is presented by Trueba as if it is something that "*happens to* Trueba; something that has him in *its* grip rather than something which he initiates" (113). And by writing rape in this somewhat abstract way ("an abstract act existing independent of the agent" (113)), Allende gestures toward the apparent concluding message of the novel, which seems to be that these rapes cannot be avenged because they are organic, inevitable--even essential--features of these characters' lives. As Alba explains in the novel's Epilogue:

The day my grandfather tumbled his [Esteban García's] grandmother, Pancha García, among the rushes of the riverbank, he added another link to the chain of events that had to complete itself. Afterward the grandson of the woman who was raped repeats the gesture with the granddaughter of the rapist, and perhaps forty years from now my grandson will knock García's granddaughter down among the rushes, and so on down through the centuries in an unending tale of sorrow, blood, and love. (490)

Knowing the Rapist ~ Character Development and Sympathy

When Alba is imprisoned at the end of the novel, Esteban receives three of her fingers in the mail from her captors. He asks his old friend, Transito Soto, to help him save Alba and tries to convince her that he has reformed, but we are shown that he never truly understands the destruction his actions have wrought. When trying to

convey his newfound sympathy for the people he has brutalized and expelled from his hacienda, he refers to them as “poor souls,” and says that “it wasn’t their fault they were taken in by that damned agrarian reform...I’ve forgiven them and I’d like them to return to Tres Marías...I’ll have no choice but to shake their hands, they’re like children...” (477). He still does not believe that his workers deserve the equality initiated by “agrarian reform,” and does not understand that he is the one who needs forgiveness. He is also oblivious to the irony that many of these “poor souls” actually *are* his children through rape. By the end of the novel, Allende presents Trueba as having softened without, however, truly acknowledging the novel’s spiral of rape and violence that was spawned by his earlier cruelty.

I think that Allende enables the reader to sympathize with Trueba despite his final lack of self-knowledge or repentance because she does not ever write his rape scenes in particular detail. The reader is not confronted with the horror felt by the victim, not jarred by lurid descriptions of genitalia or anything close to pornographic language. If, in any of Trueba’s rape scenes, we were instead lead to see the grimace on his victim’s face, take in the adolescent innocence of his victim’s body, experience the blow of being thrown to the ground and the pain of the actual intercourse—as in Morrison’s scene—the reader would be more likely to internalize the horror of the rape experience. It seems, therefore, that the more a reader is able to experience a rape scene physically and emotionally through the writing—the more likely it is to lodge deeply in the reader’s consciousness and affect judgment of the characters involved. And, in this case, providing the sort of specific detail that we see later in scenes with Esteban García and Alba would compromise the premise of the novel by rendering Esteban Trueba unsympathetic and Alba unreliable.

Allende's rape scenes up to this point in the novel are generalized and often void of detail. However, they are effective given the nature of the narrative and Allende's aim to create a "climate of terror" (and, essentially, rape) (*Conversations* 188). I chose a similar approach for similar reasons in developing the two primary rape scenes in *Gris-Gris*. I chose, also, to keep the rapists themselves quite flat, because unlike Esteban Trueba, my narrative did not depend on my reader having any understanding of their backgrounds. My intention was to convey the scenes with essential accuracy and weight, but to not let them carry the novel in the same sense that Morrison's scene does. In the two primary rape scenes in *Gris-Gris*,³⁶ the violence is described to some extent, particularly in the rape of Sylvie, but no specific details of the physical act--visual depictions of genitalia or descriptions of physical pleasure or pain--are given. The two rapists in *Gris-Gris* are both flat characters who exist, in effect, to function in service of the plot. Mr. Barker, the butcher, is repellant and entirely flat at the time of the rape. In the rape scene with Mina, he performs an act that is the result of the mother's betrayal of the daughter. I do not develop him until the very end of the novel,³⁷ because my goal at the start of the novel is for the reader to focus more on Hester's betrayal of Mina by her mother, and less on the horror of the rape. The drifter who rapes Sylvie is even less developed than Mr. Barker, though fairly vividly drawn in the actual scene. I wanted him to appear out of the blue, an instrument of fate. I knew that I wanted Sylvie to kill her rapist, and I did not want the reader to have any investment - any sense of history or personality-- in the rapist so that her action would stand on its own. I hoped that her response and consequent action would approach the sort of "gesture" Flannery O'Connor is talking about when she says

³⁶ See Appendix 3 for a full excerpt of these scenes

³⁷ And then, only as a slightly more fleshed-out, pitiful old man, but also one who perceives what has happened and actually tells Paige without her quite comprehending what she is being told.

it must be "both totally right and totally unexpected; it would have to be one that was both in character and beyond character; it would have to suggest both the world and eternity" (*Mystery and Manners* 111).

The third character who may be interpreted as having raped,³⁸ but who is fully fleshed-out, is Mark Guilbeau, Kate's ex-lover, the father of Sylvie and Paige, and the grandfather of Tamsin. The scene in which Mark has sex with Kate while she sleeps, excerpted previously, occurs between the other two obvious and violent rape scenes. In it, Mark pushes his way into the hotel and to Kate's room to have sex with her out of an impulse that confuses self-disdain with an overriding desire to continue to possess her.³⁹ It presented implications that I struggled with possibly more than the other scenes, although it is much less elaborate in depiction. My intention was for it to be an ambiguous rape because I wanted Mark to veer very close to the unforgivable in the novel (sexually and also through his racism). I also wanted this act to echo the other two devastating rapes in the novel so that Mark may be seen to have evolved by its end and to have redeemed himself and attained a degree of grace. I left the scene before the reader could see a response from Kate because I thought the ambiguity was realistic and also suspenseful. The reader goes on to see that Kate returns to Mark and longs for his attention and commitment. So, although Mark's decision to have sex without the explicit consent of the sleeping Kate could be framed or read as rape,⁴⁰ as Ann Cahill defines in her analysis *Rethinking Rape*: the "imposition of a sexually penetrating act on an unwilling person," (qtd. in Brigley Thompson, *Breaking* 274), nowhere in the

³⁹ The act representing, as Graham (and as other feminist critics would assert) a version "of imperialism, where the desire to penetrate and possess the other's territory overlaps with instances of sexual violation (442)."

⁴⁰ There are many places to go for definitions of rape, and as a baseline, I will turn to the U.S. Department of Justice's definition for the Uniform Crime Reporting system. Prior to 2013, the definition was "The carnal knowledge of a female forcibly and against her will." After 2013, the definition was changed to "Penetration, no matter how slight, of the vagina or anus with any body part or object, or oral penetration by a sex organ of another person, without the consent of the victim" (UCR).

novel do we get the sense that Kate feels it was rape. I am aware that this interpretation--and having Kate react in this manner and absolving Mark--could be seen as somehow supporting rape culture,⁴¹ I am also sensitive to theories that would interpret Mark's action (and Kate's non-response) as the negative "patriarchal love".⁴²

The reflexivity of this research project lead me to finally view this particular scene not as a rape but as one of several scenes of sexuality in the novel in which sex, power and love are blurred. The scene with Sylvie and Mike in the hotel courtyard, the later lovemaking scene with Jorge and the shattering mirror, Kate's early lovemaking with Maurice, and the scene where Paige and Lolis finally make love, are all variations on the fine-balancing of physical desire, love, and power, that interests me greatly and in many ways buoys the novel's action. My aim here is to enable the reader to see Mark's weakness and his failings very distinctly so that his evolution throughout the novel is striking enough to earn him a measure of forgiveness--somewhat like Esteban Trueba.

The Nature of Power ~ The Rape Scene as Allegory

Considering what has been left *unsaid* (the real horror of the victim, the struggle, the pain, the possibly ruined life/lives) in light of Alba's conclusion that this chain of rapes is prescribed or inescapable, it appears that rape serves Allende primarily as a representation of the dynamics between oppressor and oppressed in this novel. In

⁴¹ In their most recently published article, Brigley Thompson and Gunne write "In recent years, one of the most important areas of feminist studies has been retheorizing sexual violence. A number of feminist authors (e.g., Marcus; Burfoot and Lord; Bourke) have called for a new feminist theorizing of rape culture focusing on proposing resistance strategies, analyzing myths, and uncovering the gender scripts that promote sexual domination and coercion of women by men. (273).

⁴² Maureen E. Shea quotes Huanani Kay-Trask's definition: "Patriarchal love, then, is possessive and abusive, relying on personal and political domination, economic bondage, and physical threat. Erotic passion becomes a vehicle for vengeance, savage possession, even outrage and murder, under conditions of patriarchal inequality" ("Love" 224).

other words, could Allende's reason for constructing Trueba's rapes as she does be to make a political statement--to present a metaphorical rape of a people by the ruling class, as numerous critics have suggested? If this is the case, it would partly explain why the physical act is written euphemistically more often than not. And it would also explain, I think, why the rape scene in *The Bluest Eye* has more emotional impact, more weight and reality, than any of those in *The House of the Spirits*. Through the power of detail, rhythm, and character, Morrison creates one brief rape scene that is more devastating and more personal than possibly even the combined power of all rapes in *The House of the Spirits*--including that of Alba, who, like Pecola, is a developed character.

My sense is that the generalized and mythical quality of the action in the scenes of Allende's novel keeps the reader at a distance from all of the characters in it, which does not happen in Morrison's book. Both novels present profoundly heavy, tragic, events that center upon rape, but Morrison's has a more intensely immediate sting and is invested with a profound pathos. In comparison, Allende's writing of rape reads, for me, as a dynamic that exists for the subtext it represents rather than to necessarily move the reader. One could say that in Allende's novel, rape is depicted to make a larger point about the nature of power. As I've outlined earlier, many critics have written about Toni Morrison's emphasis on the politics of racial domination and oppression, and one could argue that the rape scene in that novel is a metaphor for the same dynamics. But Morrison's scene is much more precise in detail and therefore, in my reading, makes for a more powerfully visceral connection between the reader and the character's experience than do the scenes in *The House of the Spirits*.

Another explanation for why Allende's rape scenes may seem veiled or to be serving an allegorical purpose could simply be because--as noted earlier--there are so

many of them in the one novel. If each scene were as intense as Morrison's, the novel may indeed seem to be a novel primarily about rape when I doubt this would have suited Allende's aims. The single rape scene in the *Bluest Eye*, however, serves as the novel's climax, is powerfully vivid, emotionally weighted, and involves the novel's main character.

Pre-rape Scenes

As the action of *The House of the Spirits* progresses, Trueba's rapes become more abstract in their description, and we are introduced to a second rapist whose actions seem more sinister than Trueba's, in part because Allende describes them with more sensory detail. This character, Esteban García, is the illegitimate grandson of Esteban Trueba and Pancha García (Trueba's very first rape victim). Trueba has not only refused to accept his grandson as a relation but has humiliated, cheated, and bullied the boy. Allende has built the character so the reader understands that the boy's hatred is pure and is fueled by the knowledge of his grandmother's rape, the cruelty of Trueba to the people of Tres Marías, and his resentment of the Trueba family wealth in light of his own poverty: "He hated Esteban Trueba, his seduced grandmother, his bastard father, and his own inexorable peasant fate"(220). And although he never says as much to his grandfather, we learn that "...he always reproached Trueba for the dark existence he had forged for him, and he felt constantly punished, even in the days when he had reached the height of his power and had them all in his fist" (221). We see García's disadvantaged life from childhood. So, much like Morrison's Cholly, he is written so we have a deeper ability to sympathize with—or to at least understand—his behavior than we do that of Esteban Trueba. Yet Allende's depiction of his sexually threatening interactions with Alba are so sinister in tone and so particular in detail that

they translate to a hatred and unique sense of violence that leaves the reader with a strong impression of a bitter complexity that far exceeds that of Esteban Trueba.

Before Alba's capture and rape at the end of *The House of the Spirits*, the reader experiences two scenes in which Esteban García sexually and murderously threatens Alba in childhood. These two scenes are written with close attention to physical detail to chilling effect and foreshadow the rape and torture of Alba when she is in the custody of the new military dictatorship. The first scene occurs when Esteban García has come to (the now Senator) Trueba's city house to ask him for a recommendation to the police academy. He is made to wait in the library, where six-year-old Alba is playing. He "put his nose against her neck and inhaled that unknown perfume of cleanliness and well-being," then becomes "violently aroused" imagining strangling her, and "took her hand and placed it on his stiffened sex" (328).⁴³ Esteban Trueba enters at this point, surprising García who jumps away so the former suspects nothing. Trueba is not aware that García is his grandson -- and a reflection of his darkest impulses. Rapist-grandfather comes face to face with future rapist-grandson in the presence of the granddaughter Alba, the girl who will grow up to be raped.

This is a significant intersection, but the reader is possibly more likely to be aware of a reflexive unease in response to the imagery Allende presents here. One of the more powerful approaches Allende takes in this section is to constantly juxtapose innocence with evil, and wellbeing with danger. García smells Alba's "perfume" of "wellbeing" and is filled with "hate." He strokes her above her "embroidered socks," and moves to strangle her. She is "so tiny," as to be needing protection, but he wants to feel her "writhing and kicking" as he kills her. He becomes aroused at the idea and reaches under her dress, touches the closely detailed "lace" of her petticoats, the

⁴³ Please see Appendix 4 for a full excerpt of this scene

"elastic bands" of her drawers and places her hand on his "stiffened sex." The imagery—noun and verb choice, in particular—here is far more particular and anatomically explicit than any of the earlier scenes of rape involving Esteban Trueba. We see parts of Alba's body: her "dimpled" knees, her "child's neck." And we see Esteban García's hands around that neck and travelling her legs. We also see images of the two *touching*, first García's nose on Alba's neck, then Alba's hand on García's penis.

As with Rosa's nightgown, we are drawn to the tender, sweet detail of innocent, girlish dress, the embroidered socks, the lacy petticoats, and at the same time we are pulled sharply out of the dreamy innocence of six-year old Alba when she is asked to identify something as one might identify a picture in a children's book. "What is this?" García asks, and with a bright, blunt, accuracy Alba identifies what she has in her hand as "Your penis...". The details are so much more focused, particular, and physical than the rape scenes earlier in the novel that such detail represents a turning-up of the volume, a signaling to the reader that something even worse is to come. The use of juxtaposition heightens the discordance of the descriptions so powerfully that the scene lodges in the reader's experience and serves to build toward the horror that Alba will endure at this character's hands later in the novel.

The next time Alba has an interaction with Esteban García, she is fourteen. He is now a policeman and has come to visit her father again. When García finds Alba sitting on a bench in the yard he sits down beside her, squeezes her shoulder with a familiarity and force that frightens her, and tells her he has a "present" for her, which consists of her "first kiss": "She smelled his scent of stale tobacco and onion, and his violence. García's tongue tried to pry open her lips while his hand pressed against her

jaw until he forced it open. She imagined that tongue as a warm, slimy mollusk, and she was overcome by a wave of nausea" (373).⁴⁴

This scene is quite similar to the previous one, although Garcia goes from imagining strangling Alba to actually trying to strangle her. And there are again physical details that bring disturbing elements of the action to life, including references to specific areas of the body (face, tongue, lips, jaw, hand, neck, cheeks), and violent nouns such as *forcing, pry, tighten, and pushed*. However, this section differs from the first in its comparative abundance of adjectives and adverbs, which in this scene add an increased precision to the action and imagery and intensifies the sense of threat and impending peril. In the earlier scene with Alba and García, the adverbs were thin and only one, "violently," (used once) offers any sense of the danger or sexual violation. In this scene, however, modifiers that are evocative of trauma or threat abound: *firmly, brutal, rough, badly shaven*, ("the scent of") *stale tobacco and onion, and his violence, warm, slimy, hard, ferocious, red, rapidly*.

Alba is older at this point, so the narrator (also Alba) may be describing García's advances with a more sophisticated set of similes to indicate her more mature awareness. However, the action is also more completely sexually aggressive; García actually enters Alba's mouth with his tongue and she chokes in response to the strangling hands around her neck. The reader is confronted with a more full sensory experience here, as well, from the description of skin being scraped and the scent of tobacco and onion to the "slimy mollusk" feel of García's tongue. Such vivid writing, like that in Morrison's scene, can produce a rooted bodily experience, a very physical response, in the reader that helps to emblazon the fear and revulsion Alba experiences upon the reader's consciousness. One could conclude, therefore, that Allende is

⁴⁴ Please see Appendix 4 for a full excerpt of this scene

already "writing" the later (and generally less vivid) rape scenes here by foreshadowing in increasing detail the brutality that is to come.

It is also important to note here that Allende again calls on the perversion of the romantic ideal to accentuate the violence and affront to innocence that the scene represents. It is Alba's fourteenth birthday, and she has "curled her hair for the occasion." When García sits beside her, he tells Alba "I have a present for you," And he gives Alba "her first kiss" that is in fact an enactment of murderous desire. By framing their encounter in these terms, Allende sets the reader up to be shocked and repelled by the contradictory, brutal interaction that results.

The transition from these two childhood scenes to the final, culminating, rape of Alba is marked by a brief interaction between García and Alba when she is a college student and involved in rebellion against the regime change that García supports. Alba is caught unprepared by a heavy menstrual period during the demonstration, and is met by a police patrol:

“...Alba found herself a few inches from a green uniform, with a pistol aimed directly at her nose. She raised her eyes and looked into a dark face with the eyes of a rodent.

“What’s the matter with you?” García asked, pointing at Alba's pants. “It looks like an abortion.” (371)

Although nothing more happens between Alba and García at this point, the exchange foreshadows the elements of rape: the weapon as stiff phallus, the rodent eyes, the vaginal bleeding. This sinister foreshadowing is another example of how Allende writes violence into her rape scenes before we get to the actual the scene itself.

Veiled Rape Scenes

After the coup takes place, Alba is taken into captivity by the political police ostensibly as a means to locate her college boyfriend, Miguel, who is with the resistance. Alba is blindfolded and molested on her way to being delivered to their leader, Esteban García. By this point, the reader is aware that the end of the novel is near; Alba is captured on page 459 and the last page of the novel is 491. Alba's rape has been clearly foreshadowed, and the reader is expecting a culmination of the sexual violence that has been initiated in the past. However, rather than launch into a vivid and devastating description of the horrors inflicted upon Alba by García, the torture and rape she endures is conveyed obliquely – in retrospect, or second hand, or through euphemism.

The horrors of Alba's captivity and torture are presented largely through descriptions of what happens to others who are imprisoned in the same facility. "Alba heard the screams, the long moans (461)" and smelled the "stench of sweat, excrement, blood, and urine..." or she hears the howl of a man who is bound and then run over by a truck. She comforts another prisoner, Ana Diaz, after "one of the beatings had caused her to lose the child she was carrying" (468), and Alba learns their captors had raped this same woman "in the presence of her lover and tortured them together" (467). And, as mentioned earlier, we learn that Esteban Trueba has received three of his granddaughter's fingers in the mail when he begs Transito Soto for help "...before some madman sends me any more chopped-off fingers or starts to send me cut-off ears...a package in the mail and in it only three human fingers, cleanly amputated.... [H]ave pity on me and look for my granddaughter Alba before they send her to me in the mail all cut up in little pieces...." (478).

The existence of violence is conveyed to the reader in the form of sensory impressions, tales, and terrifying predictions. However, we are in fact never specifically told that Alba has been raped, and there is not an actual climactic rape scene such as that in *The Bluest Eye* (or the rape of Sylvie in *Gris-Gris*), although one could say that all of the previous scenes have built an expectation of one. We only learn of her actual rape (though of course we are given every reason to assume that it is taking place), when we read that Alba has to be reminded by Ana Diaz that she was “not the only woman who had been raped,” (484) and this is later confirmed by Alba’s own reference in the Epilogue to Garcia’s repetition of Trueba’s rape “with the granddaughter of the rapist,” (490) and when she refers to her unborn child as the “daughter of so many rapes” (491).

Although there is never a point during Alba’s incarceration when rape is described, Allende does go into some detail when describing the brutality Alba endures in García’s hands. She does not cloak any of the prison torture with chivalric irony or use the shock effect of juxtaposition described earlier. Here, Allende writes with a direct clarity that nevertheless avoids any depiction of rape. For example, during one of Alba’s first prison meetings with García, Allende writes only of sexual molestation, although we could guess that rape is involved:

A brutal slap knocked her to the floor. Violent hands lifted her to her feet. Ferocious fingers fastened themselves to her breasts, crushing her nipples. She was completely overcome by fear.... [T]hey manhandled her, pulled off her blouse, and she could no longer think.... (462)

Later, Alba is tortured on a machine that is reminiscent of the iron bed of Trueba’s rapes years earlier:

“Take off your clothes!” García ordered in another voice.

She did not obey. They stripped her violently, pulling off her slacks despite her kicking.... Two hands lifted her up, and four laid her on a cold, hard metal cot with springs that hurt her back, and bound her wrists and ankles with leather thongs....

Alba heard another voice.

“I’ll work the machine,” it said. (465)

Here, as at other points in this phase of the novel, torture is described with some specificity (*cold, hard, metal cot, leather thongs, and a pain that filled her body*) but the acts of sexual violence are not described with a parallel physical detail. I do not get the sense that Allende wishes for her reader to experience the trauma of the rape that Alba endures the way Morrison, for instance, insists the reader experience Pecola's. Rather, it seems that as we near the end of the novel, Allende is possibly more concerned with laying the groundwork so that we will believe that Alba is capable of the forgiveness she advocates in conclusion. In fact, during the imprisonment, Alba's ability to feel compassion towards others grows and she also comes to understand the motivations behind García's treatment of her. Garcia vacillates between treating her violently and caring for her, "spooning soup into her mouth" (467), and when he finally shoves her head into a bucket of "excrement," she understands "that he was not trying to learn Miguel's true whereabouts but to avenge himself for the injuries that had been inflicted on him from birth" (467). Allende also describes a momentary "softening" of García during his last session with Alba as he finds "himself caressing Alba like a lover and talking to her of his childhood in the country...". He tells her how he "swore that one day he would make her pay for her arrogance and avenge himself for his cursed bastard fate." Here again we see a perversion of a romantic idyll; Garcia caressing Alba "like a lover" while expressing his urge to punish her. The paradox inherent in

such scenes is stomach-turning; Garcia gains the greatest pleasure from his violence when it is framed by false romantic gestures. And perhaps it is exactly this disequilibrium that Allende aims to evoke in her readers as a substitute for the sort of nauseating--and the case of *The Bluest Eye* strikingly effective--details Morrison uses in writing the rape of Pecola.

Garcia perceives his momentary gentleness toward Alba as a "crack in his eagerness to torture her" and in response, sends her, "rigid and absent" into solitary confinement,⁴⁵ presumably, to die (469). This miniscule lapse--and Garcia's possible recognition of the seed of his own violence--could be a move to open the way for the reader to accept Alba's decision to forgive at the end of the novel. Garcia puts the pieces together clearly, much as Alba does when in explaining her decision to forgive: "Each piece has a reason for being the way it is, even Colonel Garcia" (490).

The Epilogue is narrated by Alba, and in it she elaborates on some of the action recounted (by Esteban as narrator) in the previous chapter. She mentions that she became delirious because her hand was infected and describes the days before her release. There is, however, no reflection upon the violence or the rape she endured. Nor is there any sense of anger or desire for vengeance, but rather an acceptance of all of the rapes in the novel as somehow being necessary. She says that she is "beginning to expect that nothing that happens is fortuitous, that it all corresponds to a fate laid down before my birth, and ... Esteban Garcia is part of the design" (489). His actions are just another "link" in a "chain" of rapes started by her grandfather, Esteban. In fact, she is reconciled to the possibility that "perhaps forty years from now my grandson will knock Garcia's granddaughter down among the rushes and so on...(490). Revenge, Alba feels, "would be just another part of the same inexorable rite."

⁴⁵ "...[A] small sealed cell like a dark, frozen, airless tomb"(469).

That there is a distinct move away from any description of rape or sexual violence at exactly the point when the most brutal versions of rape takes place in the novel is curious to me, and makes me wonder if I have made a mistake in subjecting my own very sympathetic character, Sylvie, to rape and suicide in *Gris-Gris*. Does Allende shield the reader from the sexual violence imposed upon Alba because she believes it will repel the reader? Or cause the reader to lose sympathy for the novel's denouement--or for the novel as a whole? Or does Allende avoid such description because she feels that its absence (and the suspense of the oblique approach, the power of the "rhetoric of elision")⁴⁶ more powerfully conveys its horror? Allende herself concludes that she does not include explicit sex or detailed violence in her novels because her mother is still alive and reads her work (*Conversations* 188). My sense, however, is that she avoids detailed rape scenes here because including them would have contradicted, if not nullified, Alba's (and, so, the novel's) conclusion that everything that happens in life is predetermined and a result of other events and that therefore, no one person should be completely blamed for the wrongs he commits.

I would not have liked reading a rape scene involving Alba, of course, but at the same time the absence of even euphemisms (tumbling, winking) makes the conclusion of the novel feel slight and truncated to me. When I have taught the novel (at the secondary and college level), I find that students are confused as to whether or not Alba was raped, and they find the mention of her daughter possibly being the daughter of "so many rapes" to be perplexing, as well. They know that she has been tortured but have not witnessed sexual violation. At the same time, I tend to think that the happier, conciliatory ending--one where Alba decides her "vengeance" will take the form of storytelling--helped this book to become the worldwide bestseller that it is.

⁴⁶ (qtd. in Graham 434)

Allende makes distinct writerly decisions in her approaches to representing rape. In this portion of my study, I have identified these approaches as, in summary, a perversion of popular ideas of romance and the chivalric code; as play; as juxtaposed imagery and action that represent sexual violence; and rape as represented by quite obtuse reference and a use of details that accumulate to represent rape. Each of Allende's approaches has a very particular function in building the dramatic tension of the novel, terminating in Trueba's death from old age and Alba's conclusion that all that remains for her to do is write the pages that make up the novel "while I carry this child in my womb, the daughter of so many rapes or perhaps of Miguel, but above all, my own daughter."⁴⁷ These rape scenes are crafted through techniques that, overall, differ significantly from those used by Morrison. However, they too fulfill the criteria I feel is necessary for my own work (and, therefore, for an effective rape scene) by generating scenes that evolve organically from the narrative yet are also shocking, powerful, enough to carry the weight of the plot.

One might think that Alba's reference to her unborn daughter would provide the best possible last line for this novel, but instead, Allende chooses to evoke one final image of Barrabas as she returns to the guileless, hapless sexually destructive canine that we met in the very first lines. Alba circles back in conclusion to Clara's notebooks, which begin: "It begins like this: *Barrabas came to us by sea...*," and we are either brilliantly, or sadly, brought back to the doomed dog, his female partners, and their own particularly inexorable fate.

⁴⁷ That Alba seems nonchalant about who fathered her child -- a rapist or her lover -- could be said to further underscore her forgiveness. It also, however, seems to lighten the weight of the rapes she endured, for their result (her own daughter) is positive and paralleled with that of sex between lovers.

CONCLUSION

The catalyst for this study was my initial, general, worry that I was including too many violent or extreme events in *Gris-Gris*. After all, the novel includes not only rape, but murder, suicide, madness, and a few natural deaths. I worried that there was something too melodramatic, unethical, naive--or not *literary*--in this accumulation of so much tumult, but I was most concerned about the particularities of how I would write the novel's rape scenes. While the rapes are key to the novel's dramatic momentum, they represent disturbing, ugly, unspeakable crimes in real life. If I was going to include such distressing scenes in the novel, I wanted them to be as good as I could make them. They had to be sincere, powerful and vivid; they had to earn their presence. And, they had to maintain the reader's "fictional dream" while also being distressing (but not sensational) in an ideal balance that served the plot and the momentum of the narrative.

I read numerous texts concerning the writing and representation of rape in completing this contextualizing piece. The question that such study brought to the fore was asked by many, but in *Public Rape: Representing Violation in Fiction and Film*, Tanya Horeck summarizes it nicely: "What are the ethics of reading and watching representations of rape? Are we bearing witness to a terrible crime or are we participating in shameful voyeuristic activity (vi)?"

This question of participation--as a writer of fictional rape--bothered me, and was one factor that led me to initially write the Mina rape scene with no physical description of her rape at all. I mention this here as an illustration of one of my most practical findings, and one that permeated my vision of the novel. I also worried that, because *Gris-Gris* already had one disturbing rape scene, including two seemed risky,

if not excessive. The work of this study, however, encouraged a successful shift in approach.

A Brief Example

In my first draft of the opening of *Gris-Gris* ("Mina - 1942") the first scene closes as Mina sees the form of Barker in her bedroom doorway. The chapter starts basically as it stands now, so the reader would have assumed that sexual violation would occur, but the reader does not witness any contact between Barker and Mina.

I chose to write the rape scene obliquely in my first draft because I thought a more physical, vivid scene of rape may detract from my intention that the reader see that the *true* violence of the story of the story lay in a mother's betrayal of her daughter. It wasn't until I began to work on this contextualizing thesis that I realized in order for the scene to have the dramatic weight it needed, I had to bring the actual, detailed, act to the fore. I saw that *not* writing the scene fully would be taking the event too lightly--particularly in regard to its importance in the plot--and would also let the reader down. Simply implying that the act occurred by leaving the rapist's form in the bedroom doorway would risk (as I've experienced in teaching *The House of the Spirits*) letting the rape go by without much notice or, at worst, be confused with something else or simply get lost in the winding narrative.

In other words, this scene, along with the other rape scenes in *Gris-Gris*, needed to meet the criteria that arose from this research, and which I listed in the introduction to this thesis. A quick glance back to this shows that--as is the case to varying degrees in both the Allende and Morrison scenes--the scene would ideally be written so it (1) does not overwhelm the rest of the action of the novel. *Gris-Gris* is not a novel about rape, but the genesis of its narrative is rape. My second and third conditions are that

the scene should (2) not be pornographic or sensational yet should (3) handle the subject honestly and with appropriate weight, and these conditions particularly address my concerns over "participation." The scene should also (4) ring true in light of character development (be it rapist, victim, or related characters) and, finally, (5) be aligned aesthetically with the writing and the premise of the novel.

I returned to the opening chapter of *Gris-Gris* and revised with Toni Morrison's scene in mind. And although I admire the power in the way Morrison constructs her scene--its effective (disturbing) poetry, its stark, painful focus on Pecola--I felt writing the Mina rape scene in this extremely explicit, detailed manner could work against my goals here. In its position at the opening of the novel, the reader would have no sense of character, motive or background--any narrative context--from which to view the rape. So, using graphic physical detail here may have unintentionally pushed the scene into the realms of pornography or sensationalism and set a tone for the work that I did not want.

Although I wanted this--and all the rape scenes in *Gris-Gris*--to be shocking and disturbing, I wanted the betrayal of Mina by her mother to be the most significant affront and the clear catalyst for action in the novel. And if I had more closely followed Morrison's approach in writing Mina's rape, I think the weight and sickening nature of such a scene may have overwhelmed Hester's betrayal and called too much attention to itself, and to the rapist, as a climactic scene too early in the novel and in doing so failed to fulfill my condition (5) by conflicting with the novel's premise.

If, on the other hand, I had chosen to follow Isabel Allende's example, and referred to Mina's rape as an abstract event, or just implied that rape had occurred that night at the pub, or written it in a way that it commented as much on a social or political truth as it conveyed the occurrence of rape, it would have lacked the impact

that the punishing betrayal meted out by Mina's mother should have had. It would not, in a sense, have handled the topic with enough gravity (condition 4) or served the purpose of the premise effectively.

My set of conditions provides a practical lens through which I have been able to evaluate and build the rape scenes particular to *Gris-Gris*. So with them in mind, I decided that the strongest response to my question--how to best write a rape scene here--would be to construct a brief scene that would linger in the reader's memory because of its physical imagery but not dominate the novel (as, for instance, Morrison's brief, powerful rape scene does).⁴⁸ The Mina scene is still subtle, still nowhere near the gritty, physical, detailed event of that in *The Bluest Eye*--but it now conveys the struggle and has enough physical detail for the incident to resonate for the duration of the novel.

The Power of Detail and Climate

Another useful finding of this research was the understanding that the more a reader is able to experience a rape scene physically and emotionally through vivid, detailed, writing, the more likely the scene is to lodge deeply in the reader's consciousness and affect judgment of the characters involved. And I have learned that it possible to modulate this experience through particular rhetorical choices. It may be intensified by employing the combined physical detail and rhythmic and syntactical arrangements outlined in my analysis of the *Bluest Eye* scene, or diffused but still made present using one of the variety of techniques Allende puts into play.

⁴⁸ See Appendix 3 for a full excerpt of this scene

In discussing her approach to writing about torture, Allende explains that she has "found that it works better if you create the climate of terror. You force the reader into the mood of terror and let him imagine the details. Just give a hint of what is going on, the smell, maybe the sound, and let the reader do the rest. It is usually much more effective" (*Conversations* 188).

This idea of a "climate" is one that embodies what I found especially valuable in studying Allende's approach to writing rape. It describes much of what influenced the rape scenes in *Gris-Gris*, and I worked to instill a climate of rape (and betrayal) in the chapter before Mina goes to bed: she is conscious of the tightness of her skirt, the staring man, the mysterious bartering. I also returned to the Sylvie rape scene and developed what I intend to be a more potent climate of rape there, too, evoking the ominous, stark atmosphere of the reservoir and the perplexing presence of the fishing man. I wanted this to reflect the equally grim and starkly final events that will occur and--in so doing--allow glimpses of physical detail.

The scene in which Sophie is raped combines the techniques of Allende and Morrison. It is more explicit than that of Mina's rape, but its impact also relies on Allende's concept of "climate" being built around the scene. Although I don't describe genitals or penetration, I try to ground the scene in the grim physicality of the event. Sylvie passes out before penetration occurs, so neither she nor the reader experience the actual intercourse. I did not want this to be evasive, a kind of cop-out; my intention was to be true to the trauma of the experience and Sylvie's character. Nonetheless, the reader is privy to the immediate after-effects of the rape: the painful throat, vomiting, the "warm semen run[ing] down the inside of her thighs," the burning pelvis. Similarly, I have foreshadowed her seemingly inevitable fate gently throughout the novel, somewhat similar to, though less directly than, the way Allende foreshadows

Alba's eventual torture and rape. And it is my intention that by writing more vivid, specific detail into this second rape scene, the reader will be more physically repelled by the action, or at least affected enough that Sylvie's own violent response will be believable.

One Last Finding: Leaving the Judging to the Reader

The scene in which Mark has sex with Kate while she sleeps occurs between these other two obvious rape scenes. Wrestling with the implications of the ambiguity of this scene provided yet another important finding that helped me to clarify my responsibilities as a novelist dealing with what could be interpreted as a variety of shades, or definitions of, rape. In a 2009 *Times Higher Education* article on their collection *Feminism, Literature and Rape Narratives*, SORCHA GUNNE and ZOE BRIGLEY THOMPSON write: "Rape, which is both a political and an intensely personal crime, needs to be investigated. We believe that demythologising sexual violence and destabilising its unspoken social acceptability should be a part of scholarship" (40). I agree with them implicitly and have determined that, as a novelist, I must be true to what I think my characters would do (and not "confine sexual violence to acceptable rape narratives" (39)) rather than what the social, political, psychological or theoretical positions on rape would argue. This finding ties in most obviously the fourth of my conditions, being that the rape scene must ring true in light of character development, yet it essentially appeals to all five conditions. So I can also conclude that, to craft strong scenes that reflect this honesty, I look to Morrison and Allende who, beyond technique, have taught me that in writing this fiction--which is about much more than rape--I must give over possible interpretations and moral assessments of this and the novel's other acts of sexual violation to the readers.

Honesty can be Extravagant

One unexpected result of this research has been a new understanding of what such honesty in writing entails when crafting the extremes of human emotional and physical experience. When I began writing fiction, I tried to emulate the clean, sharp, cool of the minimalists. I thought my inclination toward writing the rollercoaster narratives of life's messiness and joys was immature or outdated or embarrassingly gothic. But my first published story was one crowded with love, death, and dramatic loss. This, and even more pyrotechnically "totally right and totally unexpected" tales followed, written with some worry but also some pleasure--and all buoyed by Flannery O'Connor's model. In a 1993 interview, Isabel Allende pronounced that "Minimalist literature is dying. We are seeing a return to great narrations, to the baroque narrative. We are seeing a return to artistry in words, in sentences, in the extravagance of the story itself (145 *Conversations*)."

I don't know whether Allende predicted accurately or not (my guess is that minimalism has survived but in newer, savvier guises). But the possibility that *Gris-Gris* may be counted as part of this "return" she mentions, and be enjoyed for its baroque construction or even its "extravagance" despite its drab and bitter source, is one that frames the findings of this contextualizing research with particular hope.

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Appendices

Although referenced closely in this work, these appendices are for reference only and a full reading of them is not necessary for the cohesion or understanding of the thesis.

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