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Negative Empathy:
A Case Study of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Emerald Fennell's *Promising Young Woman*

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Abstract

This thesis aims to analyse two fictional works, namely, a novel and a movie, through the lens of negative empathy. The first chapter will illustrate the different aspects that constitute the phenomenon of negative empathy, starting with the historical evolution of empathy from the eighteenth century to the modern era. Then, empathy will be examined within the contexts of literature and cinema. For each field, the different devices and techniques used to elicit empathic engagement will be dealt with, including those instances that call for negative empathy.

The second chapter will focus on the first case study, namely, Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987). First, a parallel between Medea and Sethe will be drawn in order to lay down the basis for the novel's analysis through negative empathy. Second, the implications surrounding negative empathy and the reader's response to Sethe and the infanticide will be addressed by taking into consideration the novel's main narrative strategies and the portrayal of Beloved's killing under different perspectives.

The third chapter will cover the second case study, namely, Emerald Fennell's *Promising Young Woman* (2020). The movie will be firstly considered within the contexts of the rape-revenge genre and the #MeToo movement. Finally, the focus will shift to the relation between negative empathy and Cassie's quest for revenge, also in consideration of an ending that withholds catharsis.

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Introduction

In his chapter entitled *Gangsters, Cannibals, Aesthetes, or Apparently Perverse Allegiances*, the philosopher and film theorist, Murray Smith, concludes his analysis on the dynamics behind viewers' sympathetic response and attraction towards morally dubious characters with a possible point of reflection. Smith (1999) claims that one should 'recognize our [one's] "need" for the wrongdoer, a need that is hard to accept or to admit to in reality' (p. 238). Thus, Smith's citation draws the attention to the ambivalent nature of the figure of the "wrongdoer", wherein the negative judgement associated with such figure conceals a series of complex and multifaceted issues that encompass a broad range of subjects, but also the reader's and viewer's own personal disposition.

This thesis analyses a novel, Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), and a movie, Emerald Fennell's *Promising Young Woman* (2020), through the lens of negative empathy in order to shed light on readers' and viewers' possible emotional responses towards the two main characters, whose actions may be negatively connotated from a moral perspective.

Empathy operates on both a cognitive and an affective level because as a result of one's apprehension of the other's emotional state, the subject may feel a similar emotion, which does not need to be identical (Eisenberg & Eggum 2009, p. 71). The subject is aware that they are a distinct entity from the other and that there might be divergences between them, but empathy may be said to draw them closer nonetheless. Lastly, the subject may be able to feel an empathic response also towards fictional characters, even those whose real-world counterparts would not elicit the same emotional reaction.

Fiction may be deemed a secure space where the individual is free to explore a wide gamut of different worlds and characters, including those who commit acts that may clash with the subject's moral dispositions. However, the subject might still be able to empathize or sympathize with them because they are provided with information about the character's background and motivations that may enable them to overcome a 'barrier of decency' (Morton 2011, p. 320). Lastly, fiction may be perceived as a safe realm also because the subject may be able to 'give expression to dangerous desires and to vent the damaging emotions these give rise to' (Smith 1995, p. 237), experiencing thus a cathartic release.

Morally dubious characters may be said to exert fascination over readers and moviegoers because of their rejection of moral rules and their seeming ability to get away with their actions without facing legal repercussions. However, fascination alone does not ensure a sympathetic involvement on the reader's or viewer's part. As a consequence, the character's negative features are likely to be mitigated by positive qualities in order for the subject to possibly sympathize with the character and to recognize that, in some instances, the character's actions may stem from their more humane side (Tullmann 2016, p. 128; Smith 2011, p. 74).

As a result, the subject may be engaged in a negative empathic relation with the character that is defined by a contrast between their emotional response and their own moral inclinations, wavering thus between attraction and aversion. Nonetheless, the subject should also be able to momentarily set aside their own precepts in order to enter the character's moral universe and to experience from another perspective, so that the individual is likely to reconsider their self under a different angle, but they may also gain further knowledge about humanity at large (Kieran 2010, p. 693; Hakemulder 2000, p. 84).

Character's portrayal is a key factor that may have an impact on the individual's emotional response. As far as literature is concerned, elements such as the character's name, their description, whether they may be considered flat or well-rounded, and their role in the unfolding events may influence the reader's relation with the character (Keen 2007, p. 93). In addition, another important component is 'narrative situation' (Keen 2007, p. 93), which includes features such as the narrative structure, the narratorial voice, and how the character's internal state is portrayed (Keen 2007, p. 93).

On the other hand, the visual nature of the cinematic medium may be said to shorten the distance between the viewer and the character because the human body and face occupy a central position in movies. Therefore, given the innate human tendency to emulate facial expressions and bodily movements, the viewer's relation with the character may be said to rely also on a series of phenomena connected to empathy, such as affective mimicry (Smith 1995, pp. 99-100; 2017, p. 179) and emotional contagion (Smith 2017, p. 179). Akin to literature, a corollary of cinematic devices may be used to foreground the character's inner state, such as point-of-view shots, expressive-reaction shots, and close-up shots (Gaut 1999, pp. 208-210; Smith 1995, pp. 156-161; Plantinga 1999, pp. 250-253). On the whole, the case studies of this thesis may be seen as an opportunity to take a closer look at how these dynamics may shape the subject's emotional response, but also to consider whether the subject may respond differently.

The first chapter will be dedicated to the historical evolution of the concept of empathy, its forms within literature and cinema, and how negative empathy develops according to each field. The second chapter will be devoted to the first case study, namely, Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987), where the narrative structure, language, and the polyphonic quality of the novel will be studied in order to notice how they may affect the reader’s perception of and emotional engagement with the act of infanticide and the woman who commits it. Finally, the third chapter will focus on the second case study, namely, Emerald Fennell’s *Promising Young Woman* (2020). Firstly, the general context of the rape-revenge genre will be examined in order to provide a general framework for the movie’s analysis. Secondly, the movie’s imagery, colours, casting choices, and narrative choices will be analysed in order to observe how they may influence the moviegoer’s emotional relation with the character, also in consideration of an ending that does not yield for catharsis.

Chapter One
Negative Empathy

This first chapter will focus on the theoretical aspects of the concept of empathy. In particular, the first section will be dedicated to its historical development, starting from the eighteenth century to the modern time. Then, the second section will be focused on the relationship between empathy and literature. Finally, the third section will deal with the forms that empathy takes in cinema. All three sections will tackle negative empathy, its implications and dynamics from an historical, literary, and cinematic points of view respectively.

1. From sympathy to *Einfühlung* to empathy: an historical overview

The following historical division aims to highlight the main landmarks in the evolution of the concept of empathy, covering a range of time from the eighteenth to the twenty-first century. Even if ‘empathy’ as a term was introduced in the English language at the beginning of the twentieth century, its theorization far predates it by about one hundred years earlier in Germany with *Einfühlung* and sympathy or *fellow-feeling* in England, in the eighteenth century. The two concepts are not altogether alike, but their formulation might be regarded as fundamental for the future studies of the subject. Not only will empathy and sympathy be tackled, but a specific sort of empathy called ‘negative *Einfühulung*’ and its modern forms will be addressed in order to lay down the basis for a subsequent analysis of what empathy and its negative counterpart might be like within the literary and cinematic spheres.

1.1 The eighteenth century: David Hume’s and Adam Smith’s conceptualizations of sympathy

The starting point of this historical overview coincides with two important works by two eighteenth-century Scottish philosophers who attempted to conceptualize sympathy and its social impact. The first one is David Hume (1711-1776) who, in *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739-1740), describes the process that might lead to a sympathetic arousal:

> When any affection is infus'd by sympathy, it is at first known only by its effects, and by those external signs in the countenance and conversation, which convey an idea of it. This idea is presently converted into an impression, and acquires such a degree of force and vivacity, as to become the very passion itself, and produce an equal emotion, as any original affection. (2.1.11, p. 206)

Hume identifies the 'countenance and conversation' (p. 206) as the two key factors that constitute one's 'idea' (p. 206) of the other's passion. As the subject is aware that such passion is felt by another individual (p.208), the idea is later transformed into an 'impression' (p. 206). Moreover, Hume recognizes the cognitive component of such process, whereby the imagination tries to conjure the 'causes or effects' (3.3.1, p. 368) that might have provoked the passion: 'No passion of another discovers itself immediately to the mind. We are only sensible of its causes or effects. From *these* we infer the passion: And consequently *these* give rise to our sympathy' (p. 368).

Not only does Hume consider 'a great resemblance among all human creatures' (2.1.11, p. 207) to be an element that favours a sympathetic response, but he asserts that a stronger form of sympathy hinges upon a 'relation of contiguity' (p. 207), which entails a certain congruity in regard to 'manner, or character, or country, or language' (p. 207), as opposed to distance, which hinders the reception of the other's passion. Furthermore, the issue of similarity is extended onto the workings of the human mind and feelings, making thus easier the transmission of passions from one individual to another: 'In general we may remark, that the minds of men are mirrors to one another' (2.2.6, p. 236). Such consideration is further emphasized by means of a musical metaphor, whereby a person's emotional state is perceived and reciprocated by another person 'as in strings equally wound up' (3.3.1, p. 368).

On the other hand, the second philosopher who significantly contributed to the theorization of sympathy is Adam Smith (1723-1790) in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759). Unlike Hume, Smith ascribes a greater role to imagination as a key tool that the subject employs to conjure the other's feelings:

> By the imagination we place ourselves in his situation, we conceive ourselves enduring all the same torments, we enter as it were into his body, and become in some measure the same person with him, and thence form some idea of his sensations, and even feel something

> which, though weaker in degree, is not altogether unlike them. (1.1.2, p. 12)

This is what Smith considers to be the 'source of our *fellow-feeling* for the misery of others' (p. 12, emphasis mine). Even though fellow-feeling might be applied to both positive and negative emotions, Smith makes a distinction between 'pity and compassion' (p. 13) on the one hand, and 'sympathy' (p. 13) on the other. The former is directed towards the 'sorrow of others' (p.13), whereas the latter is aimed at 'any passion whatever' (p. 13). A sympathetic arousal might occur by simply viewing the other's countenance without having any knowledge of the motivations behind it (p. 13), but Smith goes on to point out that such circumstance might not be applied to any passion. For instance, Smith argues that witnessing an individual enraged against a crowd of people might make one's sympathy bend towards the object of the anger, despite not being privy to the origins of that fury (p. 14). Smith concludes that what engenders sympathy is not the 'view of the passion' (p. 15), but rather 'the *situation* which excites it' (emphasis mine, p. 15).

Furthermore, Smith draws attention to the fact that an '*analogous* emotion' (p. 13, emphasis mine) arises in the sympathetic subject who conceives an idea of the other's feelings. However, it is one's very imagination that might open the way for a passion, which may be dissimilar from what the object of one's sympathy is feeling. Smith suggests that one might feel ashamed for someone else's impoliteness, whereas the individual in question might not appear to be embarrassed whatsoever (p. 15). The interference of imagination in picturing the other's emotional state implies that the emotion felt by the sympathetic subject will not be characterized by the 'same degree of violence' (1.4.7, p. 27) nor will it ever be entirely similar to the original but, as Smith points out: 'Though they will never be unisons, they may be concords, and this is all that is wanted or required' (p. 27).

1.2 The nineteenth century: Theodor Lipps' *Einfühlung*

The second half of the nineteenth century saw the notion of sympathy acquiring an evolutionist connotation, following the works by Charles Darwin (1809-1882) and Herbert Spencer (1820-1903), but it was in 1872 that the art historian Robert Vischer (1847-1933) translated the term 'sympathy' into '*Einfühlung*', namely 'feeling into'. Even though *Einfühlung* had been first introduced in Germany in 1778 by Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803), who had employed the word to refer at the harmonious unity among living entities (Pinotti, 2011, p. 34), Vischer's interpretation emphasised the sentiment (*Gefühl*), its separation from the subject, and its aesthetic dimension (Pinotti 2011, p. 41). However, it was Theodor Lipps' (1851-1914) formulation of the meaning of *Einfühlung* that came to be translated into English as 'empathy' by Edward Titchener (Pinotti 2011, p. 46).

Akin to Vischer, the German philosopher and psychologist Lipps was mostly interested in the empathic relationship with objects, but he ultimately broadened his studies to include human beings. Lipps regards the aesthetic experiences as a sort of 'objectified self-enjoyment' (Lipps, 1906 cited in Stueber 2006, p. 7), where the individual is engaged in a 'perceptual encounter' (p. 7) that might induce a specific inward response, which is in turn 'projected into' (p. 7) and deemed as a characteristic of the object. Citing Lipps (1903), Stueber (2006) asserts that the aesthetic pleasure one derives from objects hinges upon the recognition of a parallelism between an object's form and the 'form, movement, and expressivity of the human body itself' (p. 7). Pinotti (2011) explains that Lipps' understanding of *Einfühlung* is concerned with its instinctual aspect, which operates on two levels: the first one refers to the subject and their awareness of the psychological and physical implications of feeling a sentiment, while the second one involves the other's and the subject's ability to recognize the other's emotional state because it has been already experienced, and therefore they tend to emulate it and relive it (pp. 43-44).

This instinctual component is connected to another staple of Lipps' conception of the phenomenon, namely, 'an involuntary, instinctive mimicry of the Other' (Curtis 2014, p. 356). Addressing the occurrence of variations on the other's facial expression or body, Lipps (1907) claims that, 'This grasp happens immediately and simultaneously with the perception, and that does not mean that we see it or apprehend it by means of the senses . . . We can only experience this kind of thing in ourselves' (Lipps, 1907 cited in Jahoda

2005, p. 156). Therefore, by means of ‘imitation’ (Jahoda 2005, p. 157), the subject experiences the emotion by simply looking at the other’s gesture, while through ‘expression’ (Jahoda 2005, p. 157), the individual transforms their inner state into its outward equivalent.

In order to provide examples of fellow-feeling, Smith had used the case of a crowd which, by observing a dancer balancing himself on a loose rope, ‘naturally writhe and twist and balance their own bodies . . . as they feel that they themselves must do if in his situation’ (*TMS* 1.1.2, p. 12). Similarly, Lipps employs the case study of the acrobat to shed light on whether the separation or lack thereof between the empathizing subject and the acrobat occurs (Pinotti 2011, pp. 47-48). On the one hand, Pinotti (2011) argues that Lipps advocates for a ‘fusional identification’ [‘immedesimazione fusionale’] (p. 48) where the subject becomes one with the object, whereas Stueber (2006) points out that Lipps’ understanding of identification does not equate with an utter ‘loss of the self in its object’ (p. 8) and it differs from inference because it is an authentic occurrence, as Lipps’ own definition of empathy attests: ‘it is the name for an original and not further derivable, at the same time most wonderful fact, which is different from an inference, indeed absolutely incompatible’ (Lipps, 1907 cited in Stueber 2006, p. 9).

Stueber (2006) maintains that the philosophical reading of empathy as a kind ‘of *inner or mental imitation for the purpose of gaining knowledge of other minds*’ (p. 28, original emphasis) might be applied to Lipps’ apprehension of empathy. In particular, Lipps recognizes the objects’ ability to prompt a ‘cognitive and emotional loop between the subject and the external world in which they present themselves as a fusional unity, in the double movement of the objectification of the self and the subjectivation of the world’ (Ercolino 2018, p. 244). A ‘self-activation’ (Lipps cited in Ercolino 2018, p. 244) takes place once the subject secures a connection with an object and they detect a certain motion or ‘modality of self-activation’ (Ercolino 2018, p. 244) belonging to that object.

Such self-activation might be distinguished between positive and negative, although both are perceived as a request coming from the object. The former is described as a ‘feeling of accord’ (Lipps cited in Ercolino 2018, p. 244) in response to the object’s demand, whereas the latter is said to originate a ‘conflict’ (Lipps cited in Ercolino 2018, p. 244) between the subject and the object. Lipps associates positive *Einfühlung* with ‘harmony’ (Lipps cited in Jahoda 2005, p. 158), which in turn, he likens to ‘sympathy’ (Lipps cited in Jahoda 2005, p. 158). Hence, positive *Einfühlung* might eventually be dubbed sympathetic *Einfühlung* because it requires an acceptance of the request coming from the object. On the other hand, the negative *Einfühlung* leads to an ‘inner rejection’ (Jahoda 2005, p. 158) in the subject who wrestles with what they deem to be an ‘enemy request’ (Lipps cited in Ercolino 2018, p. 245) by the object, favouring thus an ‘interior detachment’ (Lipps cited in Ercolino 2018, p. 245), instead of unity.

Because of Lipps’ tendency to fail to differentiate between objects and aesthetic objects, it might be difficult to discern whether his categorization of empathy is to be intended for objects per se or aesthetic objects. When addressing aesthetic objects, Lipps employs specific terms: ‘beautiful’ (Lipps cited in Ercolino 2018, p. 245) for objects of positive empathy, as opposed to ‘ugly’ (Lipps cited in Ercolino 2018, p. 245) for objects of negative empathy.

However, what appears to mark the aesthetic sphere is the absence of negative empathy, which occurs for two reasons. The first reason has to do with the representational nature of a work of art, meaning that any emotion that might arise is bereft of a ‘motivational force’ (Lipps cited in Ercolino 2018, p. 245), namely, the emotion depicted in a work of art does not affect the subject’s reality because it exists only in an ideal world. The second reason sees the negative emotion acquiring a positive connotation, since when observing a work of art depicting a suffering human being, one is reminded of a ‘shared’ humanity (Pinotti 2011, pp. 131-132).

1.3 Modern forms of negative empathy: empathic distress and personal distress

Ercolino (2018) points out that Lipps’ formulation of negative empathy might be found in the contemporary notions of ‘emphatic distress’ and ‘personal distress’ theorized by two American psychologists, respectively Martin Hoffman and Nancy Eisenberg (pp. 246-247). Firstly, Hoffman (2000) claims that his understanding of empathy that underlies empathic distress might be described as ‘an affective response more appropriate to another’s situation than one’s own’ (p. 4), although there need not be an exact match between the subject and the victim’s emotional states (pp. 5-6). Generally speaking, empathic distress designates a situation where a subject is led to feel distress as a result of witnessing another ‘in actual distress’ (Hoffman 2000, p. 4), but such description fails to illustrate its complexities.

Hoffman (2000) argues that empathic distress includes a certain level of 'metacognitive awareness' (p. 63) possessed by those 'mature empathizers' (p. 63), who are able to recognize their distress as a reaction to an inferred painful or unpleasant state of the other. Moreover, this kind of empathizer is aware of a self-other differentiation, they are able to identify and distinguish most outward and inward emotional manifestations, they know that such manifestations might vary according to the context and, if in possession of personal knowledge about the victim, they might draw on it to tailor one's response (pp. 63-64). This empathizer is endowed with what Hoffman (2000) calls 'veridical empathy' (p. 72), namely the subject is cognizant of a physical and inner distinction between them and the others, and that one's 'external image' (p. 73) is affected by one's inward state.

Not only does empathic distress occur in response to an immediate reaction, but it might arise also when the individual pictures the 'other's chronically sad or unpleasant life condition' (Hoffman 2000, p. 80). Such mental activity might feature a certain share of 'distancing' (Hoffman 2000, p. 83) because not only does the individual consider the present moment, but they also take into consideration what the other's existence must be like. Furthermore, this imaginative operation is said to lead to and to be imbued with 'empathic affect' (Hoffman 2000, p. 81), becoming thus a 'hot cognition' (Hoffman 2000, p. 81) that operates on both a cognitive and emotional level, ensuring thus its manifestation also in absentia. Finally, Hoffman (2000) claims that empathic distress directed towards social groups, compounded with a mental reproduction of the group's hardships, might be considered the most developed form of empathic distress (p. 85).

According to Hoffman (2000), what differentiates empathetic distress from 'sympathetic distress' (p. 88) is that the latter entails 'a feeling of compassion' (p. 88) and 'a conscious desire to help' (p. 88) that go beyond one's desire to relieve one's distress, prompting thus the individual to act upon it. Nonetheless, Hoffman (2000) points out that the transformative process from empathic to sympathetic distress presents some stages that are common to both forms: the 'quasi-egoistic' (p. 90) phase, veridical empathy, and the ability to imagine the victim's condition (p. 90).

While referring to Hoffman's research in the late 1970s, Batson (1987) posits that an individual might engage in two kinds of 'vicarious emotion' (p. 93) when seeing a suffering subject. The first one is '*personal distress*' (p. 93, original emphasis), which he equates with Hoffman's empathic distress, where the subject's intervention is propelled by their ‘egoistic’ (p. 93) need to decrease their distress, which includes ‘feeling anxious, upset, disturbed, distressed, perturbed’ (p. 93). The second type is ‘*empathy*’ (p. 93, original emphasis), which is associated with Hoffman’s sympathetic distress, and it is defined as an ‘other-oriented emotional response elicited by and congruent with the perceived welfare of someone else’ (p. 93). Unlike personal distress, empathy is said to be conducive to ‘altruistic motivation’ (p. 93), therefore the subject is bent on relieving the other’s sufferance.

Following Batson’s research, Eisenberg and Eggum (2009) first give a definition of empathy as ‘an affective response that stems from the apprehension or comprehension of another’s emotional state or condition, and which is similar to what the other person is feeling or would be expected to feel’ (p. 71). Thus, the presence of both an affective and cognitive element and a certain degree of similarity between the two affective states are being highlighted. In addition, empathy is claimed to entail the subject’s awareness of the distinction between one’s and the other’s inner state (pp. 71-72). Moreover, empathy might evolve into ‘sympathy’, ‘personal distress’ or both (Eisenberg & Eggum 2009, pp. 71-72).

Sympathy is described as: ‘an emotional response, stemming from the apprehension of another’s emotional state or condition, that is not the same as the other’s state or condition but consists of feelings of sorrow or concern for the other’ (Eisenberg & Eggum 2009, pp. 71-72). Therefore, sympathy is dissimilar to empathy because it does not entail a similarity between the emotional states of the observer and victim, but it is rather marked by caring for the other’s well-being.

On the other hand, personal distress is defined as a ‘self-focused, aversive affective reaction to the apprehension of another’s emotion’ (Eisenberg & Eggum 2009, p. 72) that induces the subject to diminish one’s own distress, rather than the other’s. If both sympathy and personal distress involve both an affective and cognitive component, what seems to set personal distress apart is the occurrence of an ‘empathic overarousal’ (Eisenberg & Eggum 2009, p. 72) when observing the other’s negative emotion, which leads the subject to act in order to reduce one’s distress. This is in line with Eisenberg and Eggum’s (2009) argument concerning the importance of ‘the regulation of vicarious emotion’ (p. 73) on a cognitive and emotional level as a way to avoid engaging in personal distress.

After having outlined the different definitions of Lipps' negative empathy, empathic distress, and personal distress, their common features will now be identified. At the core of all three phenomena there is a negative feeling that triggers a discomforting sensation in the individual, who, in turn, is aware that they are separate from the victim. In particular, as far as detachment is concerned, it should be noted that it is peculiar to negative empathy for Lipps, whereas in empathic and personal distress, such separation pertains to Hoffman and Eisenberg's understanding of empathy, which emphasizes the subject's awareness of their separation from the other.

To conclude, this first section has dealt with the development of the concept of empathy throughout history. The fact that its contemporary definitions share some elements that had been originally associated with sympathy or fellow-feeling signals a general tendency to conflate these two terms, especially in their everyday use. Nonetheless, the attention will be now directed towards the forms that empathy might assume within the fictional realm of literature and cinema and how negative empathy might unfold when a reader or moviegoer form an emotional bond with morally equivocal characters.

2. Empathy in Literature

Reading fiction allows readers to encounter a wide array of characters and worlds. Readers might perceive fictional characters as flesh-and-blood individuals, with whom they might share an emotional bond. This section will explore the ways in which empathy might be elicited in the reader and the significance of character identification and narrative situation. Moreover, the focus will then shift to the dynamics that render fictionality a safe space where the reader is able to revel in emotions, which would be deemed improper in real life, and why readers are likely to cultivate emotional ties with characters, whose real counterparts would be normally avoided.

2.1 Narrative Empathy

Keen (2014) defines narrative empathy as 'the sharing of feeling and perspective-taking induced by reading, viewing, hearing, or imagining narratives of another's situation and condition' (p. 521). Keen's definition encompasses some of the features regarding empathy that have been tackled in the previous part. Firstly, narrative empathy might be considered both an affective and cognitive process, since not only is reading itself a cognitive activity, but the reader is also likely to engage in an imaginative and projective endeavour, whereas the affective component is to be traced to the sensations and feelings that reading might evoke (Keen 2007, p. 28).

Secondly, the reader's imagination plays a significant role in narrative empathy because the reader is prone to enact the so-called 'role-or-perspective taking', namely imagining the emotional state of the other or one's own reaction to the other's situation (Hoffman 2000, p. 5). Simultaneously, it is also important that the reader preserves a sense of self-other differentiation. This mechanism allows them to apprehend the character's emotions and psychology while maintaining an awareness of one's own emotional state, so that the reader is able to empathize with a character when, for instance, the reader's desires differ from the character's or when the reader possesses more information (Coplan 2004, p. 148).

Specifically, Keen (2019) identifies reader's empathy as a phenomenon that involves a 'match in one's bodily sensations, mood, and motivations to a character's' (p. 821), whose intensity and duration might vary throughout time. Moreover, reader's empathic does not seem to be confined to emotions only, but it appears that 'sensations of motor mimicry' (Keen 2019, p. 822) might be experienced when the reader is given indications concerning the space of a fictional world.

In *Empathy and the Novel* (2007), Keen's suggestion that character identification is central to the reader's empathy is followed by a series of hypotheses regarding the possible scenarios that might elicit an empathic response or lack thereof (pp. 69-81). As aforementioned, character and reader need not be similar in order for identification to occur, nor do the characters require a fleshed-out characterization, but 'naming and quick situating' (Keen 2007, p. 69) seem to suffice (pp. 69-70). Moreover, the manifestation of an empathic engagement is subject to several variables that might stem from the readers, such as their identity, inclinations, knowledge, attitude towards reading, potential bias or misconceptions, but also historical and cultural periods might sway the reception of novels, hence their ability to prompt readers' empathy. It appears thus that, despite a text's potentiality for narrative empathy, other external factors might hinder its coming into being (Keen 2007, pp. 72-74).

However, there seems to be a debate concerning whether empathy or character identification comes first, although it should be noted that empathy does not necessarily lead to character identification nor vice versa. Readers' empathic and emotional predispositions do play an important role in their engagement with the text. Instances that see empathy leading to character identification might imply that the readers' innate empathy has been employed in their reading. Yet, it seems that character identification preceding empathy seems to happen more frequently, opening up the possibility for the development of the reader's morality when they are confronted with diverse characters (Keen 2007, pp. 70-71).

2.2 Character identification and narrative situation

Character identification should not be intended as a fusional relation between the reader and the character, but rather as a relation founded upon a shared 'sense of similarity' (Felski 2019, p. 79), which does not rule out differences. In fact, identification does not rely exclusively on similarities, nor does it imply that the reader ought to identify with the character as a whole. On the contrary, the reader might perceive a connection with certain traits, while feeling ambivalent towards others. The tension between similarities and divergences might lead the reader to revise certain personal features under a new light, or to gain a new perspective on the world and humanity. As Felski (2019) puts it: 'It is a matter not just of finding oneself but of leaving oneself' (p. 81). Given their fictional status, readers might be prone to identify with fictional characters, whose in-real-life counterparts would be almost certainly shunned, while at the same time, their very fictionality might be said to enhance the reader's perception of their realness (Felski 2019, pp. 84-85).

However, character identification ought not to be considered a narrative technique, but rather a possible outcome of the reading experience. It might be prompted by a series of narrative devices, such as 'naming, description, indirect implication of traits, reliance on types, relative flatness or roundness, depicted actions, roles in plot trajectories, quality of attributed speech, and mode of representation of consciousness' (Keen 2007, p. 93). On the whole, it covers a wide range of techniques that contribute to the characterization of fictional entities that might prompt the reader's process of identification and, possibly, empathy.

In addition, some other facets concerning the composition of the plot and narration are thought to have a role in the readers' empathic arousal: 'timing (pace), order (anachronies), the use of nested levels of narrative (stories within stories), serial narrative, strong or weak closure, the use of subsidiary (supplementary, satellite) plot events, repetition, and gaps' (Keen 2007, p. 94). However, it should be pointed out that the correlation between the diverse possibilities within each of these aspects and character identification have not been accurately analysed yet (Keen 2007, p. 94).

On the other hand, Keen (2007) identifies 'narrative situation' (p. 93) as another possible factor contributing to narrative empathy. Narrative situation includes elements that have to do with point of view, the narratorial persona, how the narrator interacts with the characters and from which position, and the modes of depiction of the characters' psyche (p. 93). There is an overall tendency to consider an 'internal perspective' (Keen 2007, p. 96) as the most favourable technique for readers' identification and empathy. It might be attained by means of a 'first-person self-narration' (Keen 2007, p. 96), 'figural narration' (Keen 2007 p. 96) whereby the third-person narrator remains concealed and their account is made through a primary character, or 'authorial narration' (Keen 2007, p. 96), which corresponds to an omniscient narrator.

More specifically, what is generally termed 'free indirect discourse' or 'narrated monologue' (Keen 2007, p. 96) is believed to affect readers' emotional responses to characters, since the representation of the character’s consciousness is rendered by using the same verb tense and person of the narrator. Furthermore, two more other devices are thought to be conducive to character identification and empathy. The first is ‘quoted monologue’ or ‘interior monologue’ (Keen 2007, p. 97), which is believed to be more accurate and immediate, since the characters’ mental activity is portrayed in the same person and tense of their discourse. The second is called ‘psycho-narration’ (Keen 2007, p. 97), which consists in the narrator’s account of the character’s psyche and reflections. On the whole, although these narrative devices tend to be associated with character identification and narrative empathy, Keen (2007) seems to remain sceptical about the effective correspondence between narrative techniques and readers’ empathy, calling for a further examination (pp. 98-99).

2.3 Distance and catharsis in character identification

In the previous part character identification has been described as an ‘affinity’ (Felski 2019, p. 79) that encompasses also possible differences between readers and characters. Moreover, the reader’s identification might be prompted by a series of narrative techniques that foreground the character’s inner state and consciousness.

However, identification might be regarded also as an ‘aesthetic attitude’ (Jauss 1982, p. 152) that is strictly intertwined with the degree of distance that the reader puts between them and the fictional character. Consequently, the reader might develop an ‘uninterested detachment’ (Jauss 1982, p. 152), in case of too much distance, or ‘emotional fusion’ (Jauss 1982, p. 152) when the distance is very scarce. The level of distance might vary according to each of the five forms of identification outlined by Jauss (1982): ‘associative’ (p. 164), in which the reader enacts a role of the fictional world; ‘admiring’ (pp. 167-168), which entails a certain distance between the reader and the character, so that the reader is able to recognize and imitate the qualities of a hero, saint, or sage; ‘sympathetic’ (p. 172), whereby the distance is obliterated in order for the reader to project themselves into and to be compassionate towards the flawed and tormented hero (p. 172); ‘cathartic’ (p. 177), which might lead to two possible outcomes, namely ‘tragic emotion or sympathetic laughter’ (p. 178); ‘ironic’ (p. 181), where the predicted identification might be criticized or refuted by the reader.

Among these five types, cathartic identification will be further analysed because its implications are relevant to the reader’s engagement with unlikable characters. Drawing on Aristotle’s formulation of catharsis, Jauss (1982) describes ‘cathartic identification’ (p. 177) as the aesthetic attitude that unties the spectator from their real-world emotional attachments so that, by means of placing themselves in the ‘suffering and beset hero’ (p. 177), the spectator is able to achieve ‘liberation through tragic emotion or comic relief’ (p. 177). However, it is important to point out that the attainment of such outcome depends upon the spectator’s ability to maintain a certain amount of distance that enables them to properly evaluate and ponder upon the representation.

Therefore, a cathartic distance does not entail a fusional union, but rather an emotional release that operates on both the outside and the inside. According to the classical reading of ‘aesthetic catharsis’ (Jauss 1982, p. 95), emotional identification with the hero might occur insofar as the spectator abandons their real-life affairs in order to lay down the basis for ‘pity and fear’ (Jauss 1982, p. 95), which are considered to be the requisites for identification and catharsis. Moreover, the imaginative quality of the tragedy and the fact that the represented action does not supposedly have consequences on the spectator's real life enhance their emotional involvement, their pleasure and, possibly, lead to a sort of purgation (Jauss 1982, pp. 95-96).

The issue of distance is dealt with also by Hume in his *Treatise of Human Nature* where he argues that one's sympathy might intensify if it is directed at a subject who is oblivious to their misfortunes, giving the example of people who are murdered in their sleep or of a young prince being kidnapped by his enemies (Hume 2007, 2.2.7:6, pp. 239-240). This asymmetrical relationship might be transposed to a narrative context, whereby the characters might be considered unaware of the readers' sympathy (Pinch 1996, p. 30).

Moreover, the connection between distance and pleasure was resumed later by Edmund Burke in *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757). Burke argues that 'a delight in the suffering of others, real or imaginary' (1.15, p. 44) and the ability to sympathize with someone else's adversities is possible as long as one's life is out of danger, hence there ought to be a certain distance. Finally, distance is crucial also to experiencing delight when feeling terror, pain, or danger. As Burke affirms, 'when danger or pain press too nearly, they are incapable of giving any delight and are simply terrible; but at certain distances, . . . they may be, and they are, delightful' (1.7, pp. 36-37).

In addition, the reader's enjoyment of negative emotions, such as anger, fear, or sadness, should not be explained only in terms of distance, but also as a matter of control. Control and distance should be regarded as complementary to one another, since distance allows the individual to exert control over a situation that does not involve them directly, hence managing the intensity of negative emotions might become easier (Morreall 1985, pp. 100-101). Furthermore, if in real situations negative emotions may become a source of distress when they get out of control, it seems that within a work of art, such situations are less likely to occur. In fact, Morreall (1985) claims that it should be the artist's duty to design situations in such a way that the reader or spectator is able to maintain control and actually enjoy the negative emotions. For instance, the artist should frame the story in a coherent and structured way, and they should not fall into a graphic portrayal of violence (pp. 101-102). This latter argument might not take into consideration that the author may purposefully create a character that is likely to evoke distress in the reader who, in turn, might turn away from their reading or they may overcome their resistance in order to dwell upon their engagement with such character (Keen 2007, p. 134).

2.4 Overcoming barriers within fictionality and authorial empathy

Morton (2011) provides an interesting insight into the existence of barriers and how empathy might help understand and overcome them. When a subject is being hesitant towards committing a certain deed, which usually goes against their moral principles, they incur into a ‘barrier of decency’ (Morton 2011, p. 320). However, if this sort of barriers arises also when a subject is trying to empathize with actual criminals, the scenario might be different when empathy is directed at those fictional characters that the reader may consider evil. Within a text, the reader is likely to be provided with an account of the character’s motivations and background, which prompts the reader’s imagination to concentrate on certain details, usually about the character’s reasoning and motives, while considering some others understood. Consequently, the reader’s empathic response might be said to be a product of the ‘limits of imagination’ (Morton 2011, p. 325) and the individual’s reluctance to regard oneself capable of committing serious crimes.

Distance might be said to intersect with fictionality, insofar as the latter may be seen as a safe arena where readers, free from the real-world constraints, can adopt different perspectives and indulge in emotions. This claim might be even more consistent with those empathic responses directed at morally problematic characters. If on the one hand, empathizing with these characters might be considered a fruitful exercise in recognising their human side, on the other hand, readers might be aware that their empathic response may be looked at askance (Keen 2007, p. 74). However, these instances might reinforce the hypothesis that identification might ensue also when a character is not morally praiseworthy, when their characterization is not thoroughly depicted, or when they might not be among the author’s favourites. In fact, as Keen (2007) suggests: ‘empathy for a fictional character need not correspond with what the author appears to set up or invite’ (p. 75).

Nonetheless, authors might deliberately encourage narrative empathy for morally vicious characters because they have empathized with those characters in the first place. In this case, two empathy-related phenomena might occur in the reader. Keen (2007) advances the hypothesis that ‘empathic distress at feeling with a character whose actions are at odds with a reader's moral code may be a result of successfully exercised authorial empathy' (p. 134). As it has been discussed in the previous part, empathic distress might be considered a contemporary form of Lipps' formulation of negative empathy. Within the narrative context, during their reading process, the reader has the opportunity to gradually get to know the fictional world, its moral norms, and the character's history, all of which might inform their empathic response. However, the author might design their work in such a way that the reader is led to develop empathy for characters who would not normally be the object of their empathy. Consequently, the reader might feel discomfort at their own empathy because they might disapprove of the characters' conduct and behaviour, or since the characters' actions are morally frowned upon, they might fear that their emotional response may be judged negatively.

Furthermore, readers who empathize with morally problematic characters might be regarded as 'victims of emotional contagion communicated through a text' (Keen 2007, p. 135). Emotional contagion is defined as 'the tendency to automatically mimic and synchronize expressions, vocalizations, postures, and movements with those of another person's and, consequently, to converge emotionally' (Hatfield et al. 1993, p. 96). The relation between narrative empathy and emotional contagion might be interpreted twofold: textual cues and sympathetic portrayals might be said to partly 'manipulate' the readers' empathic response or, as Keen (2007) avers, authors might force certain emotional responses on readers as a way to purge themselves of their first-hand empathy with fictional characters (pp. 135-136).

Consequently, authorial intentions and the way the events and characters are framed might be said to largely influence the readers' emotional reaction. Narrative artistry might be described as the 'manipulation of artistic techniques, imagery, thematic exploration, and structuring' (Kieran 2010, p. 686) in order to evoke an empathic or sympathetic response, especially for those morally objectionable characters. Among these techniques figure free indirect discourse, alternation among different points of view, and narrative suspense (Kieran 2010, p. 686).

2.5 Readers' relationship with morally vicious characters

Turning again the attention towards the reader, the conflict between the reader's moral outlook and their empathic relation with a character might engender what Caracciolo (2016) terms a 'cognitive dissonance' (p. 34), which includes 'feelings of strangeness' (p. 46). Such view is in line with Coplan's (2004, p. 148) argument about the importance of self-other differentiation in an empathic relation, which allows the reader to get acquainted with the fictional world 'through the narrow gap between being ourselves and being another' (Caracciolo 2016, p. 46). Therefore, it follows that as the reader's viewpoint diverges from the character's, this gap may widen. When such opposition occurs, two possible scenarios might ensue: the first sees the reader putting the book aside or avoiding the character's perspective, whereas the second envisages the reader entering a sort of 'gray area' (Caracciolo 2016, p. 48) where they waver between opposition to and assimilation of the character's perspective. This latter scenario is described by Caracciolo (2016) as 'defamiliarization' (p. 48), which is characterized by a feeling of cognitive dissonance and feelings of strangeness that originate from a conflict that operates on two interconnected levels: the first is concerned with an opposition between the reader and character's standpoints,[1] while the second revolves around the reader's hesitancy between adopting and withstanding the character's perspective (Caracciolo 2016, p. 49).

As it has been hinted at before, the reader's empathy does not involve only an emotional connection, but it calls upon also a cognitive component. The cognitive element might be said to play a part also in the reader's appraisal of their own empathic response. In fact, Hakemulder (2000) argues that the reader might examine their empathic response through the lens of social and moral appropriacy (p. 69). In case of a positive evaluation, they might allow their response to develop, but if not, their empathic response might evolve into 'counterempathy' (Hakemulder 2000, p. 70), where they either curb or deviate their emotional reaction. The moral evaluation of the reader's empathy is thus strictly interrelated with the reader's propensity to resort to their pre-existent moral beliefs to form their emotional response and to assess the moral stance of the characters.

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[1] Caracciolo (2016) utilizes the term 'worldview' (p.48), alluding to 'everything from personal dispositions and personality traits to evaluations, goals, past and present experiences, and so on' (p.48). Therefore, when referring to a reader or character's perspective, this should be intended as a term that encompasses not only a personal disposition, but also cultural and social influences.

Another important aspect to take into consideration is the ‘moral universe’ (Kieran 2010, p. 692) of the fictional work. The reader is provided with a description of the fictional world and its moral norms and values, which might diverge from their actual moral beliefs. Notwithstanding, the reader should attempt to lay aside their own convictions in order to assimilate and morally partake in the fictional world’s moral system; a practice that might be made easier if the characters’ portrayal encourages narrative empathy. For instance, the events may be narrated from the character’s perspective, or the character might possess certain qualities that make them stand out among the other characters. As Kieran (2010) asserts:

> Our capacity to play such imaginative games of make-believe and respond emotionally to works as we ordinarily would not depends upon our capacity to suspend moral judgement, norms, or values in order to explore different ways of seeing, feeling, responding to, and valuing the world. (p. 693)

As the last part of the above citation attests, another reason for the reader to set their moral beliefs aside is the prospect of obtaining a sort of cognitive reward. For instance, if an author aims to cultivate an empathic or sympathetic response for an immoral character, rather than depicting them as either good or evil, then the work is likely to be fraught with depictions of violence, abuse, treachery, power dynamics, sexuality, and so forth. Therefore, if the fictional realm allows the reader to indulge in emotions that may go against their moral code, it is also true that readers might gain further insight into the different facets of human nature, passions, and morality through those very characters (Kieran 2010, p. 687, 696-700).

Such cognitive reward is not solely concerned with humanity at large, but it might affect how the reader regards their own self. Hakemulder (2000) claims that reading narratives can alter the reader’s self-perception, in particular the reader’s ‘self-concept’ (p. 84). Hakemulder (2000) argues that ‘self-concept’ should be considered an all-encompassing term, which includes not only the ‘present selves’ (p. 85) and the ‘past selves’ (p. 85), but also the ‘possible selves’ (p. 85). Although the past selves may no longer be relevant to the current time, they may have still contributed to the formation of the present selves, whereas the possible selves may comprise both ‘ideal selves’ (Hakemulder 2000, p. 85) and those selves one might fear of becoming. As Hakemulder

(2000) puts it: ‘our self-concept is not a statistic unity but a dynamic conglomerate of selves undergoing temporal and situational changes’ (p. 86).

On the whole, past, present, and future selves seem to converge during reading. Reading fiction might lead the reader to reconsider past events under a different light, but they might be also seen as a possible starting point for the reader’s reflection on their present self, their values and misconceptions. In turn, such examination might prompt the reader to re-apprise their values and perhaps modify them in view of their future self (Hakemulder 2000, p. 86). This latter argument may prove to be correct especially in relation to narratives that posit ethical issues. Readers’ questioning what their course of action might have been in that particular situation does not seem to be guided mainly by the rightness of norms, but rather by what they deem to be appropriate, also in respect to themselves. Consequently, when a reader identifies or empathizes with a character, they are likely to apply this reasoning to the character itself, by taking in consideration also their knowledge of the character’s attitude and moral world (Hakemulder 2000, pp. 88-90).

In conclusion, this second section has delved into the emotional side and the moral aspect of the reader’s relationship with a narrative, its characters, and world. On the one hand, the author might be said to have a great role in the work’s construction, including an array of devices that might enhance the reader’s empathic engagement. On the other hand, the reader’s own attitude, background, and moral disposition ought not to be neglected. Moreover, the wide gamut of fictional characters gives readers the chance to confront themselves with those characters that they deem villainous and their moral worlds. Such relationship entails complex dynamics that affect the reader’s self-perception and their moral values, to the extent of questioning them and perhaps changing them.

3. Empathy in movies

Movies are a visual medium, which arguably enhances the moviegoers' perception of closeness to characters. This section will deal with the diverse understandings of character identification and empathy within cinema. Moreover, given the pivotal role that the human body and face occupy in movies, it will be explained how filmmakers can take advantage of the innate human predisposition to mimicry and to apprehend the meaning behind facial and bodily movements. Finally, the nature of the allure that morally problematic characters exert on audiences will be closely analysed in order to shed light on such disturbing phenomenon.

3.1 Different perspectives on character identification

Before dwelling upon the significance of and forms that empathy might assume in films, I will present different views of character identification, since such phenomenon is still a debated subject.

Carroll (1990) rejects the notions of character identification that either contemplates a fusion between the audience member and the character or that sees possible an 'exact duplication' (p. 90) of the character's mental and emotional attitude on the audience's part. The former acceptation is refused on the grounds that the audience member is aware that they are not the protagonist, whereas the latter is refuted mainly on the belief that the relation between the audience member and the character can hardly be symmetrical (pp. 90-91). In fact, Carroll (1990) argues that the viewer's emotional response might be affected from an advantageous standpoint of knowledge and it is generally broader, since it involves not only a sympathetic attitude towards the character, but also the character's very emotional response (pp. 90-93).

In addition, since the term 'identification' would not be adequate to imply a limited emotional congruence between the audience and the protagonist, Carroll (1990) suggests that the concept of 'assimilation' (p. 95) would better convey the nature of such relation. Assimilation requires the viewer to first understand how the character perceives and subsequently evaluates their situation. In doing so, not only does the viewer adopt the protagonist's internal perspective, but they resort to an additional 'external view' (Carroll 1990, p. 95), which is comprehensive of elements that are either unknown to or are not part of the character's interest. In particular, Carroll (1990) highlights that in order to apprehend a situation from the inside, the viewer need not to identify with the character, but rather 'only have a sense of why the protagonist's response is appropriate or intelligible to the situation' (p. 95). In conclusion, Carroll's position rests on the idea that identification ought not to be used because an asymmetrical, rather than a symmetrical, relation between the viewer and the protagonist is likelier to occur, since the viewer's perspective and their emotional response diverge from the character's.

Thus, Carroll's understanding of identification excludes a partial congruity in the viewer's response towards a character, whereas Gaut's (1999) view of identification lies on the assumption that identification is 'aspectual' (p. 137). Firstly, Gaut (1999) puts the emphasis on the imaginative endeavour of what he terms 'imaginative identification' (p. 208), which implies that one imagines being in the other's situation, which comprises both physical and psychological features. The aspectual characteristic relies upon the variety of psychological properties pertaining to the character, namely, perceptual, which refers to the character's visual perspective on the fictional world; affective, that is how a character feels about the events; motivational, which has to do with the character's motives towards such events, and epistemic, that is their opinions about the occurrences. Thus, the viewer is free to identify with whatever aspect they deem to befit their imaginings (Gaut 1999, p. 205, p. 208).

Gaut (1999) introduces then another important kind of identification, namely, 'empathic identification' (p. 208), that is sharing the character's emotions as a result of imaginatively projecting oneself into the character's situation. The act of imagination retains still a fundamental role, but the empathic sort expects the viewer to actually feel what they imagine the character might be feeling.

Two other possible responses are that of sympathy and its antonym, antipathy. Sympathy signifies that the viewer cares for the well-being of a character, they might pity the protagonist, feel happiness for their triumphs, or be worried about what the protagonist has to face, but sympathy does not call for a match between the viewer and the character's feelings, nor does it necessarily entail an imaginative or empathic identification (Gaut 1999, p. 104; 2010, p. 140). Finally, in case of antipathy, the viewer might wish that things go awry for the character (Gaut 2010, p. 138).

Gauts (2010) further articulates the aforementioned modes of engagement in terms of internal and external imagining. He posits that identification and empathy demand 'internal imagining' (Gaut 2010, p. 139), whereas sympathy might entail internal imagining, since one can sympathize with someone by imaginatively assuming their perspective, but also external imagining. Furthermore, the conception of internal and external imaginings plays a role in the argument that Gaut (2010) raises in favour of a pluralist view of identification.

Carroll's (1990) objection to identification lied in the impossibility of an identical emotional response on the part of the viewer and the character, whereas Gaut (2010) allows for an emotional incongruence because either the viewer's disposition might be dissimilar to that of the character, or they happen to possess more information than the protagonist. The former scenario is consistent with the internal imagining process, since the viewer might empathize and sympathize with a character, without the character replicating the same emotions. On the other hand, the latter scenario hinges upon access to external imagining (Gaut 2010, pp. 145-146).

Gaut (2010) refers to a scene in *Jaws* (1975) that well exemplifies the co-existence of these phenomena. The scene sees a girl swimming peacefully, heedless of the imminent attack by a shark. Therefore, there is a clash between the spectator, who might feel afraid for the girl because they are aware of the presence of the shark, and the girl enjoying her swim instead. Yet, Gaut (2010) argues that the additional knowledge possessed by the spectator does not preclude the viewer from still being able to engage with the character internally, hence picturing her enjoyment of the swim, and possibly empathizing with her (p. 143, pp. 144-145). Moreover, Coplan's (2004, pp. 148-149) claim that self-other differentiation is an important component in an individual's empathic engagement with a fictional character further reinforces the feasibility of Gaut's proposition. On the whole, Gaut holds that the process of identification should not be intended as either a fusional or a symmetrical relation between viewer and character, but it should be construed as a phenomenon that comprehends a variety of combinations that reflect the complexity of the cinematic experience on the audience's part.

A middle-ground position between Carroll and Gaut might be the one of philosopher and film theorist, Murray Smith. Like Gaut, Smith (1995) emphasizes the role that the imaginative endeavour plays in a viewer's engagement with fiction, enabling them to make inferences and assumptions in order to better understand and interpret fictional worlds and their inhabitants (p. 74). However, Smith (1995) discards the term 'identification' in favour of 'engagement', which he describes as a 'complex, heterogeneous set of interacting responses – autonomic, cognitive, affective – to what we know to be fictional entities' (p. 230). Smith's main issue with identification is that it seems to consider the relation between viewer and character as primarily grounded on a constant central imagining, ignoring thus the possibility of an external, or acentral, perspective (pp. 80-81). Moreover, Smith (1995) argues that a theory of 'plural engagement' (p. 93) is better suited to transmit the multifaceted quality of fictional engagement, since not only does the viewer's response towards a character vary throughout the movie, but the viewer might interact differently with various characters at the same time (p. 93).

At the centre of Smith's (1995) model of character engagement lies what he calls the 'structure of sympathy' (p. 75), which comprises 'recognition, alignment, and allegiance' (p. 75). These devices should not be understood as merely 'inert textual systems' (Smith 1995, p. 82), but rather as responses that integrate both the viewer and the filmic narrative. The interrelation between these sorts of engagement and the viewer is regulated by two 'modes of imagining' (Smith 2010, p. 252), namely, acentral and central imagining. Acentral imagining involves the spectator imagining the character acting within a certain setting, while taking into consideration the general narrative action or the unfolding events up to a determinate moment; it is equated with 'feeling for' characters, hence the concept of sympathy (Smith 2010, p. 252). On the other hand, central imagining entails that the viewer's engagement with the narrative is based on the character's perspective, namely an empathic response (Smith 2010, p. 252). On the whole, the two modalities are not mutually exclusive, but they co-exist.

Before delving into the cinematic renditions of empathy, I will briefly explain the components of the structure of sympathy. Recognition is concerned with the 'spectator's construction of a character: the perception of a set of textual elements, which in film they would correspond to the image of a body, as an individuated and continuous human agent' (Smith 1995, p. 82). Recognition is informed by the 'mimetic hypothesis' (Smith 1995, p. 82), according to which, while recognizing the fictionality of the narrative and the characters, one transposes the characters' characteristics onto those of real human beings, although narratives often tend to subvert those pre-existing beliefs (Smith 1995, p. 55, p. 82).

Alignment consists in the ways in which the narrative of the film allows the viewer to become acquainted with the characters' actions, their knowledge, and feelings (Smith 1995, p. 83). Finally, allegiance is concerned with the viewers' moral assessment of the characters. In order for the viewer to morally appraise the character, they ought to have access to the character’s mental states and the circumstances surrounding their actions; thus, the appraisal encompasses both an affective and cognitive component (Smith 1995, p. 84). In turn, these assessments contribute to the making of the viewer’s ‘moral structures’ (Smith 1995, p. 84), whereby the characters are allotted according to one’s preferences.

The reason why these processes constitute the structure of sympathy is that, on the whole, they do not seem to require the viewer to simulate the character’s mental and emotional states. In case of recognition and alignment, the viewer is generally expected to apprehend that the character is endowed with certain features and mental attitude, whereas, although allegiance calls also for an emotional involvement, it does not necessarily implicate a simulation of the character’s emotions (Smith 1995, p. 85).

Overall, the different views about the implications of character identification seem to converge on a simplistic or pluralistic reading. The former interpretation mainly conceives it as either a fusional or a symmetrical relation between the viewer and the character, whereas the latter might either broaden the concept in order to encompass possible varieties, or it might favour another term that still does not discard identification in its entirety. Despite all these theories, identification might be looked at also as an opportunity for the viewer to evolve both emotionally and values-wise because as Gaut (1999) attests: ‘[But] identification functions to drive the lesson home, to show that the values and attitudes under attack are the audience’s own, and thus to create the possibility of a real, lived change in their basic commitments’ (p. 216).

3.2 Faces, bodies, and empathy

Smith’s (2017) association of central imagining with empathy is part of his understanding of empathy itself, namely, an imaginative act that allows the subject to first apprehend the other’s mental and emotional states by means of imagination, and then to replicate their feelings, either in their totality or to some degree; the imagining is said to be defined by a ‘conscious, qualitative awareness of the state imagined’ (p. 182). Although his definition is more oriented towards a ‘gradual and cumulative substitution of elements appropriate for myself with those appropriate for another’ (Smith 2017, p. 183), rather than the idea of ‘putting myself in someone else’s shoes’, Smith (2017) argues that as far as fictional engagement is concerned, these two modes might overlap (pp. 183-184).

Furthermore, given the crucial role that facial and bodily expressions play in a movie, it might be important to delve into a corollary of phenomena belonging to empathy that are strictly connected to the face and body: emotional simulation, affective mimicry, emotional contagion, and automatic reactions (Smith 1995, pp. 97-102; 2017, 179-182; Plantinga 1999, pp. 243-244; 2009, p. 114, pp. 124-129). Emotional simulation is concerned with simulating the emotions ascribed to the other by means of imaginative projection, thus it comprehends both a cognitive and an emotional effort (Smith 1995, pp. 97-98). Affective mimicry relies upon the involuntary and constant human tendency 'to mimic and synchronize their [one's] movements with the facial expressions, voices, postures, movements and instrumental behaviours of others' (Hatfield et al. 1994, p. 10). Therefore, the viewer's consistent exposure to vocal, bodily, and facial alterations of the characters might affect their emotional state.[2]

In addition, the propensity to mimicry and its subsequent influence on one's emotions underlie the so-called phenomenon of 'emotional contagion', whereby 'people tend to "catch" others' emotions, moment to moment' (Hatfield et al. 1994, p. 11).[3] Finally, akin to affective mimicry, automatic reactions occur involuntarily, but one does not need to be engaged with the character because it stems from the 'represented visual or aural environment in which the character moves' (Smith 1995, p. 102), such as being startled by a piercing noise or a sudden movement within the frame.

Before turning to the cinematic devices employed in order to evoke the audience's empathic response, I will summarise the discovery of mirror neurons and their functioning, since they might be considered to occupy a relevant position in the viewer's understanding of the character's inner state. Mirror neurons were firstly detected in the monkeys' cortical convexity of F5 in the 1990s. These neurons activated both when the monkeys would perform an action and when they would witness someone acting (Rizzolatti & Sinigaglia 2006, pp. 79-80).

These sorts of neurons were then found also in the human brain. However, the human mirror neuron system is dissimilar from that of monkeys, since it is able to decipher both transitive and intransitive (i.e., actions that are not aimed at an object) motor acts, it is able to decode both the purpose and the motion of the act, and as far as transitive actions are concerned, the object does not have to be physically there because the neurons are triggered also when the action is solely imitated (Rizzolatti & Sinigaglia 2006, p. 114, p. 124). Nonetheless, despite these differences, it is important to keep in mind that the main objective of the mirror neuron system is that it enables individuals to apprehend the significance behind others' actions in an unmediated way, since it relies upon one's repertoire and knowledge of acts, which underlie one's very ability to act (Rizzolatti & Sinigaglia 2006, pp. 124-125).

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[2] Smith (1995; 2017) points out that affective mimicry is enacted at the sight of so-called 'basic emotions', such as happiness, sadness, fear, disgust, and anger, which are generally externalized through recognizable facial and bodily expressions (1995, pp. 99-100; 2017, p. 179).

[3] Plantinga (1999; 2009) observes that emotional contagion might occur also within a group of moviegoers, for instance with laughter (1999, p. 243; 2009, pp. 125-126).

This process might be applied to emotions, too. The visual perception of facial and bodily externalizations of emotions are transmitted to the cerebral area of the insula where a mirror system is activated, allowing thus the codifications of these visual stimuli and their subsequent transformation into 'visceromotor reactions' (Rizzolatti & Sinigaglia 2006, p. 189). It should be pointed out that these visceromotor reactions might not necessarily evolve into effective emotions, but they still play a significant role in the comprehension of the others' emotions (p. 190).

Although the arousal of visceromotor responses cannot be equated with an empathic state, it should be noted that the brain's ability to discern the others' faces and movements based on one's own experience, and their resulting conversion into visceromotor reactions, inform the 'neural substrate' (Rizzolatti & Sinigaglia 2006, p. 192) of empathy.

Therefore, as far as movies are concerned, the centrality of the human body and face is not the only aspect that is related to mirror neurons. In fact, thanks to the activation of mirror neurons, a subject is able to predict intentions behind an action by only hearing sounds or even when the action is not totally visible. Finally, mirror neurons activate also in response to eye movements. Thus, in a movie when a character is looking off-screen, the observer is aware that they too are about to see the object of the character's attention because they are following the character's look by simulating the movement of their gaze (Gallese & Guerra 2015, pp. 58-63).

3.3 Cinematic devices

In order to prompt the viewer's identification, filmmakers might employ certain cinematic devices, such as point-of-view (POV) shot and expressive-reaction shot, as a way to foreground the character's emotional reactions.

A POV shot is said to be the 'locus of perceptual identification' (Gaut 1999, p. 208), since it encourages moviegoers to imagine seeing what the character is looking at, but it might also elicit affective identification, meaning that the viewer might also imagine what the character may be feeling, without necessarily sharing in the character's emotions (Gaut 1999, pp. 208-209). Finally, a POV shot might engender an epistemic identification, namely picturing oneself believing what the character fictionally thinks, limiting thus the extent of one's knowledge to that of the character (Gaut 1999, p. 209).

Yet, Smith (1995) argues that POV shots might conceal a conundrum. In fact, although they might disclose some traits of the character's subjectivity and the object of their attention, they do not display the character's facial expressions, which are a strong indicator of their inner state. Hence, there might be a margin of misinterpretation on the spectator's side (pp. 156-157, pp. 160-161). As a result, in order to better communicate the character's emotional state, POV shots might be juxtaposed with other techniques, which range from voice-over, expressive sound, and music to camera movements, such as a 'shaking camera' (Gaut 1999, p. 210) to hint at confusion and incertitude. In addition, the position of cameras with low-angle shots might indicate the character's sensation of being overpowered by other characters, or the POV shot might be distorted to reflect the character's troubled mental state (Smith 1995, p. 158; Gaut 1999, p. 210). Nonetheless, although a POV shot might not be thoroughly accurate, the narrative context should be always taken into consideration in one's imaginings and evaluations of a character's inner state.

On the other hand, expressive-reaction shots are described as a 'shot in which the character reacts to the words or actions of another character, or to some discovery' (Smith 1995, p. 158). Thus, the facial movements of the character acquire a primary status, paving the way for those empathic phenomena that have been discussed above.

This sort of shot is believed to raise a stronger empathic or affective identification, since the character's face is at the centre of the frame, usually in a close-up. As a matter of fact, Plantinga (1999) defines this type of shot as the 'scene of empathy' (p. 239), wherein the pace of the movie usually slows down in order to draw the attention to the character's face displayed in a close-up, 'either in a single shot of long duration or as an element of a point-of-view structure alternating between shots of the character's face and shots of what he or she sees' (p. 239).

The choice of the moment when a scene of empathy should occur is strictly linked to the filmic narrative itself. Plantinga (1999) argues that these scenes usually take place at the end of a movie because not only do emotions tend to linger, but their potential cathartic effect might be enhanced. In addition, positioning them towards the end implies that the viewer is likely to have been acquainted with sufficient information about the character, which might inform their empathic response (Plantinga 1999, p. 250, pp. 252-253). However, a scene of empathy is not exclusively relegated to the conclusion, but it might be placed also within the movie in particular instances, such as after the character has gone through a hardship, when they are approaching death, or after their actual death (Plantinga 1999, p. 253).

Furthermore, the empathic response might be influenced by the viewer's allegiance and their belief that the character's emotional state is true, which is why these scenes often find characters alone in their privacy, or at least, in situations where they think that they are not being looked at (Plantinga 1999, pp. 250-251). Lastly, despite their undisputed relevance to the viewer's empathic response, character engagement and the narrative context should also be considered along with other noteworthy components, such as the employment of specific stylistic choices or the use of music to accompany a scene of empathy (Plantinga 1999, pp. 253-254).

In summary, the movements and alterations of the human body and face occupy a central role in the cinematic medium. The viewer's biological conformation and their active participation in identifying and grasping the character's mental and emotional state is upheld by the employment of distinct techniques and filmic conventions, which highlight the characters' interiority and the world in which they move.

3.4 Alignment and Allegiance

Two components of Smith's (1995) 'structure of sympathy', namely, alignment and allegiance, will be further explained because of their relevance to the purpose of the next part, namely, dwelling upon the viewer's engagement with morally ambiguous characters.

After having identified and acknowledged the presence of characters (recognition), the viewer becomes familiar with the characters' actions and their internal states and beliefs (alignment) by means of what Smith (1995) terms 'spatio-temporal attachment' (p. 83) and 'subjective access' (p. 83). The former focuses on the agency of a single or multiple characters, whereas the latter revolves around the character's subjectivity, hence what they 'desire, believe, feel, think and so forth' (Smith 1995, p. 143).

As far as subjectivity is concerned, it should be mentioned how the 'performance style' (Smith 1995, p. 151) might affect the viewer's perception of their closeness to the character. In fact, the filmmaker might want to enact a scenario of 'false subjectivity' (Smith 1995, p. 151), whereby the viewer is deceived into believing that they have a clear grasp of the character's psyche. On the other hand, the director might aim to hinder the viewer's understanding of the character's internal state by adopting an 'opaque subjectivity' (Smith 1995, p.151). Although these two modalities still entail a certain degree of subjectivity and they are generally disclosed towards the narrative's denouement, what is put under the microscope is the 'reliability of external and behavioural cues' (Smith 1995, p. 151) in the depiction of the character's mental and emotional states.

The viewer's alignment with characters might produce alterations in one's knowledge. The viewer might not always be attached solely to the protagonist because they might become privy to more information, or the protagonist's subjectivity itself may be concealed from the viewer by focusing, for instance, on their limbs or the modulations of their voice rather than their face (Smith 1995, pp. 152-153, pp. 175-176).

As the viewer is progressively introduced to the character's world and their internal state, the process of allegiance might be prompted. Generally speaking, the viewer is likely to strike an allegiance with the character who possesses a 'morally desirable (or at least preferable) set of traits, in relation to other characters within the fiction' (Smith 1995, p. 188), leading thus to a sympathetic or antipathetic – should a negative assessment occur – disposition towards the character.

It should be remarked that there are other factors at play in the formation of a viewer's allegiance. The viewer's evaluation might be influenced by the 'character action' (Smith 1995, p. 190), in particular an active and considerate attitude towards the underdog, children, the elderly, and domestic pets might lead to a favourable appraisal. Moreover, given the cognitive component inherent to allegiance, 'iconography' (Smith

1995, p. 191) should be taken into consideration, insofar as general beliefs, misconceptions, conjectures about a possible connection between outward appearance and morality, and genre conventions affect the viewer's evaluation (Smith 1995, p. 192). Character action and iconography might be considered together with another component, namely, 'star charisma' (Smith 1995, p. 193). In fact, the viewer's familiarity with the actor playing the character might sway not only the audience's assessment, but also enhance the fictionality of the character itself (Smith 1995, p. 193; 1999, p. 227); such aspect will be particularly relevant in regard to the casting of Fennell's *Promising Young Woman* (2020). Finally, music and an array of 'linguistic techniques' (Smith 1995, p. 193), including dialects associated with particular social classes and names endowed with a symbolical meaning, play a part in the viewer's moral estimation.

The moviegoer's allegiance does not solely rely upon their real-world beliefs and principles, but the 'internal "system of values" – or moral structure – of a text' (Smith 1995, p. 189) has a certain heft in one's appraisal. In addition, the moral structure should be viewed in conjunction with another element, namely, 'moral orientation (Smith 1995, p. 216), that is how the moral structure is presented. Although there are other varieties of moral structures, the attention will be drawn to what Smith (1995) defines 'the graduated moral structure' (p. 207), since its characteristics are consistent with the topic of this dissertation. In fact, this sort leans towards the depiction of a 'spectrum of moral gradations rather than a binary opposition of values' (Smith 1995, p. 207). The characters associated with this structure are not labelled as either good or bad, but they rather possess a mixture of both culturally positive and negative features, forming thus a sort of 'alloy' (Smith 1995, p. 209) that blurs the lines of their moral stance and might complicate the viewer's response.

3.5 Attraction to the devil

When watching a movie that portrays a character that the viewer may deem morally dubious, they might be surprised by their sympathetic or empathic response towards that very character who, if met in real life, would not be the object of the same emotional response. This phenomenon is what Smith (1995) calls 'sympathy for the devil' (p. 217), which is linked to the 'rhetoric of the internal moral structure' (Smith 1995, p. 217) that enhances the character's potential for sympathy by means of their appeal.

In fact, when such dynamics come into play, two peculiar kinds of allegiance might arise. The first sort is a ‘perverse allegiance’ (Smith 1999, p. 222), wherein the value of desirability lies in the characters’ possession of morally and socially forbidden traits that the viewer might wish to have. However, it is important to point out that a perverse allegiance implies that the viewer’s sympathy is aimed at both the character and their actions, not in spite of them, meaning that, ‘we do not sympathize with the murderer because he is subsequently beaten up, but because he murders’ (Smith 1999, p. 223).

On the other hand, the second sort takes interest in the so-called ‘attractive-bad character’ (Smith 1999, p. 225), whose immoral and abhorrent tendencies are mingled with attracting qualities. A compelling example might be that of Hannibal Lecter, whose cannibalistic and murderous propensities run parallel to his charm, cleverness, and refined tastes, which attract the viewer’s attention, despite his vicious acts. As a result, the viewer might foster a sympathetic attitude towards the positive traits, while simultaneously being repulsed by the character’s immoral actions, striking thus a ‘partial allegiance’ (Smith 2010, p. 244).

Nonetheless, it might be argued that the viewer’s allegiance towards a character may be the result of what Carroll (2008) terms ‘criterial prefocusing’ (p. 167), which refers to the implementation of an array of techniques and devices on the part of the filmmaker in order to elicit a specific emotional response. This argument suggests that the viewer’s emotional response might be orchestrated, leaving thus little room to the audience’s own independent reaction.

Criterial prefocusing should not be discarded entirely because, as it has been discussed above, filmmakers may decide to employ certain cinematic devices or to arrange the filmic narrative in a particular fashion in order to prime the audience’s emotional reaction. Yet, at the same time, because of their identification with or empathy for a character, the viewer might experience a conflict between their independent appraisal and their emotional response, as a result of their connection with the character.

Moreover, immoral characters might be said to exert fascination over viewers and arise their curiosity. For instance, morally deviant or psychopathic characters might be perceived as entities whose viciousness and peculiarity distance them from humanity, but all the while they might be regarded as a reminder of ‘our most basic vulnerabilities’ (Robert Solomon cited in Smith 1999, p. 234).

Their apparent ability to raise above human laws and principles surely constitutes a source of appeal, but the character's display of more 'humane' qualities, such as weaknesses, or having to deal with relatable hardships might also reinforce the viewer's sympathetic response. In fact, in his analysis of the reasons behind the fascination provoked by a character such as Tony Soprano, Smith (2011) argues that not only is the viewer prone to identifying with his more 'mundane' side and responsibilities (p. 74), but the audience also recognizes that his violent behaviour and outbursts of brutal anger are often intertwined with his 'vulnerabilities' (p. 76) and sense of guilt, affecting thus their moral evaluations.

Therefore, Tony Soprano might be thought of as a character deserving of a partial allegiance, since some of his features might encourage a sympathetic response and perhaps identification, but some others might be disdained (Smith 2011, p. 86). At the same time, the audience's fascination with Tony might be prompted by the 'allure of the transgressive' (Smith 2011, p. 84), which consists in his ability to get away with criminal activities and disregard moral rules. On the whole, the combination of a partial allegiance and fascination assures that not only is the viewer attracted by Tony's ability to break the law without incurring legal consequences, but they are also sympathetically engaged with him and prone to subject him to a moral appraisal.

On the other hand, another explanation is provided by Carroll (2004) who argues that, among all the other characters of *The Sopranos*, the viewer is likelier to strike an alliance with Tony because his mixture of moral and immoral features elevates him above everybody else (pp. 129-133). However, this line of argument refrains from shedding light on the very nature of the audience's positive attitude towards morally ambiguous characters.

An interesting perspective might be that of Tullmann's (2016) 'fascinated attention approach' (p.127).[4] Tullmann draws on the issues of fascination and curiosity that have been previously tackled by Smith (1999, pp. 233-236; 2011, p. 82), who claims that fascination on its own cannot be said to encompass a moral involvement, but it rather entails a 'combination of focused attention with a kind of moral detachment' (p. 82). While retaining Smith's position, Tullmann first expands on the characteristics of fascinating objects and then, she proceeds to identify what is likely to engender a sympathetic response in the audience.

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[4] Tullmann's 'fascinated attention approach' might be applied also to literary examples.

Tullmann (2016) determines the three main features that make up a fascinating item or individual. Firstly, the audience’s curiosity should be titillated by the object’s ‘unusual, unique, different or exotic’ (p. 125) traits; thus, they are generally marked by an exceptional essence. Secondly, there should be a certain share of attractiveness, be it because of their physical appearance, intellectual prowess, or aesthetical beauty for objects, such as a painting or a sculpture. Finally, viewers are likely to be mentally stimulated by these fascinating objects, which might be regarded as sources of knowledge and as a starting point for different perspectives on oneself or the world (p. 125).

However, as Smith had previously pointed out, fascination alone might not always ensure sympathy. Therefore, fascination should be conjoined with a practice of ‘focused attention’ (Tullmann 2016, p. 128), whereby the audience’s attention is drawn to the character’s more positive and endearing traits as a way to mitigate the character’s amoral actions and negative features. On the whole, Tullmann’s position (2016) rests on the fact that although fascination cannot be equated with caring for a fictional entity, when morally vicious characters are at the centre, fascination – and its components – should be deemed as a requirement for sympathy (p. 128).

In sum, this third section has tackled the different ways in which a moviegoer can identify with characters or, in other terms, the distinct components that inform the audience’s relationship with the movie and its characters. Although imagination is still an important feature of the viewer’s engagement, the visual nature of the movie allows the viewer to benefit from an immediate representation that may sway their empathic response. In turn, such empathic response might be aimed at those villainous characters who are able to seize the audience’s attention and emotional reaction because of their allure and sympathetic portrayal.

Even though the modalities of one’s acquaintance with a fictional character may vary according to each medium, one may still be able to provide a general definition of negative empathy within the aesthetic realm. Ercolino (2022) describes it as an ‘aesthetic experience’ [esperienza estetica] (p.70) that entails an empathic relation of a cathartic nature with characters endowed with negative and seductive features that are able to elicit ‘deep empathic distress’ [profonda angoscia empatica] (p.70) in the subject. Moreover, they might prompt the subject to reflect morally and to possibly take an ethical stand (although the latter is contingent on the subject’s personal disposition). Finally, negative empathy might be also seen as an aesthetic experience that may induce the subject to adopt pro or anti-social behaviours or it might remain within the subject’s interiority (Ercolino 2022, pp. 70-71).

Chapter Two
Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987)

This second chapter will focus on the analysis of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) through the lens of negative empathy. A brief comparison between *Medea*'s eponymous heroine and *Beloved*'s main character, Sethe, will be drawn in order to foreground the main object of the novel's analysis, namely, the readers' response towards and moral evaluation of the infanticide and the woman who commits it. Moving on to the novel, firstly, its main narrative structures and the authorial intentions behind them will be tackled in order to observe how they can influence the readers' engagement. Secondly, the infanticide will be considered under three perspectives, whose differences may affect the reader's ethical assessment of Sethe's choice. Thirdly, the focus will shift to the novel as a whole in order to trace the pieces of information that are connected to the main thematic centres of Sethe's perspective. Finally, by taking into consideration all of the above elements, this chapter will show that readers might have difficulty at taking a clear ethical stand on Sethe's deed, but their judgement might be redirected instead at the historical institution that prompted Sethe to take such extreme measures: slavery.

1. Medea and Sethe

The infanticide at the centre of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) might recall another infanticide at the heart of a famous Greek tragedy, namely Euripides' *Medea* (431 B.C.). The eponymous character of Euripides' tragedy is responsible for killing her sons as a way to take revenge against her husband, Jason, who has abandoned her to get married to the daughter of the king of Corinth, Creon.

The moral and ethical stakes implicit in the act of infanticide and the characterization of Medea might be regarded as a starting point for the analysis of Morrison's novel through negative empathy. In one's attempt to understand the nature and motivations behind a mother who kills her own children, reframing the act in more general terms might be helpful. Di Benedetto (1997) argues that one of the reasons why Medea has exerted such fascination throughout different eras is that the audience might be familiar with the experience of being determined to commit a certain act, which could possibly hurt them, but they cannot stop themselves from going through with it (p.23).

On the one hand, Medea's act is aimed to punish Jason for his infidelity, while on the other, her act is strictly interrelated with her suffering and her own being, leading thus to a series of internal conflicts (Di Benedetto 1997, p. 23). In the previous chapter, monologues were said to be narrative devices that could enhance the reader's empathic engagement with characters, and in *Medea*, the audience is given access to Medea's psychological struggles by means of monologues.

For instance, after having laid out her plan concerning the death of Creon's daughter by means of poisonous gifts brought by her own sons, Medea's firmness seems to waver when she describes the killing of her sons as an act that is 'more than unspeakable' (*M*, 782). Yet, the prospect of having Jason and his future offspring destroyed or the possibility that she may become the laughingstock of her enemies embolden Medea and fuel her pride (*M*, 782-788). Not only does Medea's determination rest on her already existent state of isolation and desire for revenge, but she seems to find authorization also in her own torment, which is unlike any other: 'Advice like yours lacks nerve and my experience with grief and suffering' (*M*, 805-806).

Sorrow does not seem to have lost its grip on Medea, even after the plan has been already set in motion. After having been informed that Creon's daughter received the gifts, Medea appears inconsolable, she weeps and claims that, 'Sadness is everywhere!' (*M*, 983, 985). As the killing of her sons comes near, grief appears to have taken over Medea: 'Grief is all that's left. My vengeful schemes and the gods' help have made it so' (*M*, 990-991). Moreover, in her last monologue, Medea's resoluteness seems to waver once more at the sight of her children's countenances to the point of almost changing her mind about their demise: 'Why should I make them suffer to revenge their father and make my own suffering so much worse? No, farewell' (*M*, 1023-1025). Yet, again, her doubts seem to vanish at the idea of her enemies' mockery, reinstating thus her role of murderer of her sons: 'The children must die. I gave them life and now I'll take it. No more wavering. It's settled' (*M*, 1037-1039).

However, this newly found resolution does not eliminate Medea's suffering and awareness of the entity of the deed: 'I can bear no longer to look at you. The horror of my evil overwhelms me. Horror of what I'll do' (*M*, 1053-1055). Jason's punishment does not represent a way out of her misery, but it will rather cause a further deterioration in Medea's emotional state and suffering, since the violence that will be inflicted on her children will reverberate on Medea herself (Di Benedetto 1997, p. 26, p. 34).

If the portrayal of Medea's internal struggles might encourage a sympathetic response from the audience, the tragedy's closure might hinder it instead. Medea's forlorn state seems to have been supplanted by a fierce ruthlessness that places her in stark contrast to Jason, drawing the attention to her pride in having accomplished her plan to chastise her husband (Di Benedetto 1997, p. 42). Medea's insistence on denying Jason the chance to see and to bury his children and her revindication of her vengeful desires (*M*, 1353-1357, 1374, 1379-1380) do not seem to leave space to her previous unhappiness.

In the closure of the tragedy, Jason's remarks on Medea further highlight her vindictive and murderous traits, respectively: 'a vengeful woman' (*M*, 1344) and 'executioner!' (*M*, 1367). Furthermore, the overall vengeful and prideful nature of Medea's infanticide might halt an empathic response, or it might lead the audience to declare Medea's act as immoral (Walters 2007, p. 110, p. 112). Medea's aristocratic origins and her magic powers augment her distance from Sethe, the woman who attempted to kill all her children, but succeeded in killing just one, Beloved. Sethe is a former slave who was a victim of frequent episodes of physical and verbal abuse by the hands of her slave owner, schoolteacher, and his nephews. However, Walters (2007) claims that 'by stripping Sethe of mystical qualities, Morrison allows us to see a more vulnerable image of Medea' (p. 110), despite the undisputed dissimilarities existing between these two infanticides and these two female characters.

In fact, Sethe's motivations do not originate from revenge, but rather her murderous act is rooted in Sethe's drive to shield her children from being enslaved. Yet, both Medea and Sethe's deeds might be considered within a context of resistance. In particular, Haley (1995) suggests that Medea's filicide might be interpreted as an act of defiance against a patriarchal system that devalues women and their role, thus this reading might consider Medea's murdering her children as a way to exact revenge on a societal structure that has debased her (p. 199). On the other hand, in Sethe's case, her resistance might be regarded as an attack against slavery, since not only is she aware that this act is going to negatively affect schoolteacher's finances, but her infanticide might be also seen as a testimony to Sethe's authority on her children's lives (Walters 2007, p. 111). Therefore, the background surrounding Sethe's infanticide may complicate the reader's moral stance, and as Walters (2007) suggests: 'in Morrison's novel perhaps the bigger question is not the immorality of child murder but rather the immorality of slavery' (p. 112).

Both Medea and Sethe's acts might be said to be intertwined with their suffering. Both women seem to be cognizant of the fact that they will have to live with their share of guilt and that their actions will be subject to their communities' judgement, which will contribute to their alienation. Although Sethe's filicide is condemned by both female and male members of her community, in this part the attention will be drawn to Medea and Sethe's male partners' responses. Medea's act is immediately registered as inhuman, leading Jason to call her a 'lioness' ['leonessa'] (*M* 2015, v. 1342)[5] and to compare her to 'Scylla' (*M*, 1316), a sea monster. By the same token, another former slave and Sethe's old acquaintance, Paul D, condemns Sethe's act by associating her with an animal: 'You got two feet, Sethe, not four' (*B*, p. 194).

However, if their infanticides seem to position them within the animal realm, one ought not to forget that their acts also feature a certain degree of maternal love. Unlike Sethe, motherhood does not seem to define Medea, who is rather characterized by a form of pride that Haley (1995) describes as a 'masculinist heroic pride' (p. 181), which may be seen as the primary catalyst for Medea to act. In fact, she appears to find the strength to commit the crime by temporarily dismissing her role of loving mother, but she declares that after the deed will be done, she will mourn them (*M*, 1220-1223), concluding that: 'For even if you kill your sons, you once loved them dearly' (*M*, 1224-1225).

On the other hand, Sethe deliberately ascribes the role of mother to herself, and the source of her pride might be traced back to her love and her willingness to do everything in her power to assure her children's safety (Haley 1995, p. 186, p. 188). Thus, her 'motherlove' (*B*, p.155) might be said to be a far more determinant factor in her decision to commit infanticide, as Sethe's own claim attests, 'Love is or it ain't. Thin love ain't love at all' (*B*, p.194). Moreover, in regard to Sethe's love and her status as a mother and slave, Haley (1995) points out that these two roles are part of Sethe's resistance, since during slavery family bonds were often disrupted and mothers could not lay claim to their children (pp. 199-200).

Finally, both mothers seem to prefer to have their children's death at their own hands, rather than at someone else's. In different instances, Medea underlines that it is her who is going to kill her children because she is the one who gave birth to them and she will not let her children be at the mercy of her enemies (*M,* 1038-1039, 1210-1213). As mentioned above, Sethe's act is motivated by her maternal instinct to protect her children from a dehumanizing and degrading life under slavery and under schoolteacher's control. Both acts might be said to be premised on a common source, namely, pride, albeit of a different nature. However, these acts could also be considered evidence of their agency and self-assertion. Medea might be said to 'usurps [usurp] the masculine ideal of the hero' (Haley 1995, p. 204), adopting the practice of killing and having the final word on someone else's fate, which were thought to be an exclusive male dominion. Instead, Sethe's act might be read as the ultimate gesture to signal that it is her who has the authority on her children's lives and that she will not let them succumb to the pain, violence, and humiliation that she herself had to withstand.

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[5] This citation is taken from the Italian translation of *Medea* (Bur Rizzoli, 2015), since the English translation (Oxford University Press, 2006) omits the animal comparison. From now on, further citations taken from the Italian translation will also include the year of publication (*M*, 2015) in order to distinguish them from citations taken from the English translation, which do not report the year.

In sum, this preamble to the analysis of *Beloved* aimed to briefly introduce the character of Medea and the theme of infanticide, since the latter is a key element in Morrison's novel. The two women present clear divergences, as far as their upbringing, social background, and motivations behind their deeds are concerned. However, Sethe's story might help the audience to consider Medea under a different light and, perhaps, it might also make them reconsider their emotional response. Consequently, they may not reject Medea altogether, but they might realize that their engagement is ambivalent and that her act might be more than just a vengeful retaliation.

2. Narrative structures, authorial intentions, and the reading experience

Morrison's fifth novel is characterized by a complex narrative structure, which has challenged both critics and readers alike. Thomas R. Edwards' (1987) review starts with the critic's admission that 'A novel like Toni Morrison's *Beloved* makes the reviewer's usual strategies of praise and grumbling seem shallow' (p. 78). The novel's complexity does not rest only on its narrative framework, but the latter is strictly intertwined with one of the novel's major themes, namely, memory and remembrance.

Furthermore, the novel is populated by a multitude of characters, each corresponding to a single point of view, forming thus a mosaic of perspectives. Each character remembers and narrates their recollections through free indirect discourse and, sometimes, their memories overlap, coalescing into a 'collective memory' (Page 1992, p.38), a definition which might be also applied to the novel itself, for slavery underlies the novel. However, not only do these characters reminisce about their past, but they are also trying to grapple with the entity and limits of their freedom as freedmen and freedwomen, coming to the realization that: 'Freeing yourself was one thing; claiming ownership of that freed self was another' (*B*, pp. 111-112).

The novel is set in the aftermath of the Civil War in Cincinnati, Ohio, where Sethe lives at 124 with her daughter, Denver, and the temperamental ghost of her other daughter, Beloved, who died when she was two years old. Sethe is a former slave who managed to escape with her children from a slave farm in Kentucky called Sweet Home, and to reach her mother-in-law, Baby Suggs, at 124. However, the novel does not focus solely on Sethe's story, but it might be considered a tapestry of several characters' voices, whose memories about slavery resurface from time to time, blurring thus the lines of past and present. Therefore, as Rigney (1991) puts it: 'concepts like linearity, progress, chronology, even development are not primarily valuable in an analysis of her [Morrison's] works, nor do they form a pattern for the structure of her novels' (p. 31).

As a consequence, it might be difficult to refer to *Beloved*'s story in terms of "plot development" or to frame the events according to a structure of "beginning, middle, end". Rigney (1991) argues that although Morrison's novels do present a plot, the unfolding events are presented through a 'process of compilation of multiple points of view, varieties of interpretation of events (and some of these contradictory), through repetition and reiteration' (p. 31). Thus, such description might be said to fit also *Beloved*, insofar as the two keynote events of the novel, the infanticide and the return of the dead daughter, are filtered through different perspectives.

Moreover, the novel might be said to follow a circular movement where 'each tale, each aspect of the monomyth, is retold, elaborated upon, rendered in circles and silences by every character in the novel' (Rigney 1991, p. 33). The circular nature of the narrative is made explicit in the scene where Sethe is going to tell Paul D about Beloved's killing. The emphasis is put on Sethe's hedging attitude, which is reflected by her physical movements and her approach to the subject. In fact, Sethe is said to be 'spinning. Round and round the room' (*B*, p. 187). She is incapable of staying put and her movements are compared to that of a wheel that 'never stopped' (*B*, p. 187), to the point that Paul D feels 'dizzy' (*B*, p. 189) and he realizes that Sethe is actually 'circling him the way she was [is] circling the subject' (*B*, p. 189).

The way action is propelled in the novel and its main narrative framework might be said to mirror Sethe's circular motion; in fact, although the plot does not unfold linearly, a certain structure might be noticed. Phelan (2013) argues that the novel features a 'fixed instability' (p. 358), whereby a 'static disequilibrium' (p. 358) is bound to be upended by a new entity that will alter the characters' existences. For instance, the 'baby's spirit' (*B*, p. 14) is made to leave by Paul D's arrival (*B*, p. 22), but the appearance of a mysterious girl called Beloved on the steps of 124 will cause a general upheaval in the lives of 124's inhabitants. Paul D's hope of finally having a family with Sethe is thwarted when Paul becomes Beloved's 'rag doll' (*B*, p. 148) and he is forced to move out of the house, whereas the initial harmony and happiness among Beloved, Sethe, and Denver turns into a conflictual and morbid relation that will be detrimental to Sethe's health (*B*, p. 295), until the final climax where Beloved will vanish (*B*, p. 310). Sethe herself appears to have noticed such recurring cycle when she wonders whether there might be a 'pattern' (*B*, p. 204) where 'every eighteen or twenty years her unlivable life would be interrupted by a short-lived glory?' (*B*, p. 204).

On the other hand, the reader is not given information straightforwardly, but they ought to keep track of the different facts in order to piece them together subsequently. In fact, Page (1992) suggests that an unknown circumstance is not immediately explained away, but it is rather 'drop [dropped] on the reader' (p. 35). What follows is the repetition of a pattern that consists of a change of direction of the narrative towards other issues, then the narrative 'circle[s] back with more information about the initial fact' (Page 1992, p. 35), only for it to deviate once more, and to go back again.

Such pattern can be immediately detected from the very first page. In *Unspeakable Things Unspoken* (1989), Morrison commented upon the two first sentences of the novel: '124 was spiteful. Full of baby's venom' (*B*, p. 3). She claimed that she was aware of the risks of presenting the reader with a sentence that could not be fully understood, yet she wanted it to be 'abrupt' (Morrison 1989, p. 32) in order for the reader to be 'snatched, yanked, thrown into an environment completely foreign' (Morrison 1989, p. 32). She maintained that such stylistic choice was motivated by her decision to configure a disorienting and confused sensation that would dominate the reader and characters' first encounter, so that the reader would feel 'snatched just as the slaves were from one place to another, from any place to another, without preparation and without defense' (Morrison 1989, p. 32).

Only at the third sentence does the reader understand that 124 is a house, but the nature of the house's spite and the identity of the 'baby's venom' (*B*, p. 3) are still unclear. The reader is given some more information about the period in which the novel is set, 1873, and about the current inhabitants of the house. Sethe and Denver are described as the ghost's 'only victims' (*B*, p. 3), since Baby Suggs is dead, and Sethe's two other sons, Howard and Buglar, fled the house because they could not withstand the baby's ghost's whimsical temperament any longer. On the whole, Morrison aimed to orchestrate the first page in such a way that the reader could perceive the same 'compelling confusion' (Morrison 1989, p. 33) as the characters: 'suddenly, without comfort or succor from the "author", with only imagination, intelligence, and necessity available for the journey' (Morrison 1989, p. 33).

In addition, the very first page introduces another recurrent motif of the narrative that is, fragmentation. Travis (2010, p. 234) points out how this theme emerges in the images of a broken mirror and that of 'two tiny hand prints' (*B*, p. 3), but more importantly, in how the family is already portrayed as a fractured unity, since the departure of the two brothers: 'first one brother and then the next stuffed quilt packing into his hat, snatched up his shoes, and crept away from the lively spite the house felt for them' (*B*, p. 3). The theme of fragmentation occurs throughout the novel: body parts that cannot be held together (*B*, p. 157, 321), the difficulty to put together words in order to describe one's memories (*B*, p. 189, 192), which, in turn, hinders the characters' recollecting. Overall, fragmentation might be said to reflect the characters' inability to regard themselves as a unity, both in their physical and conscious selves, so that the act of remembering cannot follow an exact order, but memories often spring up unexpectedly.

In an interview, Morrison stated that she employed the modalities of remembering as a 'guiding principle' (Maya Cade, 2020), meaning that one does not immediately grasp the significance of a certain event until later, when additional information is given. Thus, she aimed to duplicate the 'cumulative effect of memory and the cumulative effect of deliberately not remembering' (Maya Cade, 2020). She went on to point out that in the novel, such effect can be observed right from the very beginning, since having the house being haunted by this mischievous presence is a way for Sethe to remember despite her efforts to forget (Maya Cade, 2020).

As a result, such way of remembering is conveyed through the narrative itself. Page (1992) argues that Sethe and Paul's remembrances are often prompted by a word, an image, or a particular that conjure their past: ‘Cautiously, they relive the memory, rethinking and sometimes retelling it bit by bit, then dropping it, only to circle back to it later, with or without purpose’ (p. 36).

This process is outlined from the first pages where the suddenness of these memories is highlighted. Although Sethe is busy with another activity and there seems to be nothing around her that could trigger her recollections, she is suddenly hit by ‘something’ (*B*, p. 7), which might be a sound (‘plash of water’, p. 7) or the sight of surrounding objects like her shoes, her stockings, or even her dog, Here Boy (*B*, p. 7). What follows is Sethe seeing ‘Sweet Home rolling, rolling, rolling out before her eyes’ (*B*, p. 7) and being struck by the contrast between the farm’s ‘shameless beauty’ (*B*, p. 7) and her memories of death and the physical and psychological mistreatment inflicted upon her and the other slaves: ‘there was not a leaf on that farm that did not make her want to scream’ (*B*, p. 7). More specifically, Sethe describes the act of remembering as a ‘rememory’ (*B*, p. 43), which contains both the words “remember” and “memory”. Page (1992) argues that Sethe’s understanding of memory consists of ‘an actual repetition of real events and a repetition of a memory, a re-memory, a circling back in one’s mind to what was previously there both in reality and in its recall’ (p. 37). In fact, Sethe explains to Denver that even if a place does not exist anymore, its ‘picture’ (*B*, p. 43) is still ‘floating around out there outside my [her] head’ (*B*, p. 43), meaning that its presence can still be felt because ‘nothing ever dies’ (*B*, p. 44). Therefore, she warns Denver against setting foot at Sweet Home because ‘even though it’s all over – over and done with – it’s going to always be there waiting for you’ (*B*, p. 44).

Thus, the novel is affected by Sethe and Paul’s way of remembering, which is discontinuous because the memories are evoked disorderly and the pain and the emotional toll that these memories take on these characters is so disruptive, that they cannot be always tolerated, so the past ought to be dealt with piece by piece. Hence, Page (1992) asserts that ‘Form follows content, thereby forcing the reader to experience the same difficulty as the characters’ (p. 36). On the whole, the motif of fragmentation might be said to affect the reading experience, since the reader might not be able to understand everything on a first reading, but they are encouraged nonetheless to weave all the bits and fragments dispersed throughout the novel.

Page’s (1992) view might be considered along with Morrison’s use of language and its implications for the reading experience. In an interview with Claudia Tate (1985), Morrison described her language as ‘quiet’ (p. 125) in order to elicit the reader’s engagement, asserting that ‘My [Her] writing expects, demands participatory reading’ (Tate 1985, p. 125), a requirement which she attributed to literature as a whole.

She went on to explain the dynamics of the relationship between her language and the reader’s participation:

> It’s not just about telling the story; it’s about involving the reader. The reader supplies the emotions . . . My language has to have holes and spaces so the reader can come into it. He or she can feel something visceral, see something striking. Then we [you, the reader, and I, the author] come together to make this book, to feel this experience. (Tate 1985, p. 125)

Morrison’s claim emphasizes not only the communal nature of the reading experience, whereby the reader and the author collaborate to maximize their sensorial experience, but also the peculiar characteristic of the language that enhances the reader’s involvement. In another interview to *The Paris Review*, Morrison stated that one of the problems she had whilst writing was to employ a language that could ‘work quietly on a page for a reader who doesn’t hear anything’ (Schappell & Brodsky Lacour, 1993). Therefore, she believed that it was important to operate carefully on ‘what is *in between* the words. What is not said. Which is measure, which is rhythm, and so on’ (Schappell & Brodsky Lacour 1993, emphasis original), locating thus the source of power of the written word in what is not written.

Furthermore, in Morrison’s view, language should be regarded in conjunction with images. In an interview with *The New York Times*, Morrison underscored the fundamental role that the ‘controlling image’ (Rothstein, 1987) plays in relation to her use of language. She stressed the importance of visualizing a certain image, such as ‘the shape of [Beloved’s] scar’ (Rothstein, 1987) or the orange scraps in Baby Suggs’ quilt, as a starting point for her writing process and as the determinant factor for the choice of language. Envisioning the image is significant for Morrison because she claimed that that was the place where the ‘information’ (Rothstein, 1987) resided: ‘When I know where the white space is, when I know where the broad strokes are’ (Rothstein, 1987).

Language and visualization are not relevant only in regard to the author’s writing process, but they also inform the reading experience. In the interview with Claudia Tate

(1985), Morrison affirmed that she strived to endow language with an ‘oral quality’ (p. 126), which entails elements of ‘intonation, volume, gesture’ (p. 126), so that she could differentiate each character by their way of speaking. In particular, she would prioritize the reader’s envisioning characters and situations over the written word, since ‘If you can see the person experiencing the thing, you don’t need the explanation’ (Tate 1985, p. 127), but also because by picturing what the character is seeing, the reader gets the chance to feel what the character is feeling: ‘It’s a question of how to project character, experience from that viewpoint’ (Tate 1985, p. 127).

Hence, the reader is given the chance to experience a certain event from a wide array of points of view, but the polyphonic quality of *Beloved* might be explained also in other terms. In the interview for *The Paris Review*, Morrison stated that she wanted to eschew a ‘totalizing view’ (Schappell & Brodsky Lacour, 1993), which depicted black people as ‘one indistinguishable block of people who always behave the same way’ (Schappell & Brodsky, 1993). Instead, Morrison aimed to highlight the ‘singularity’ (Schappell & Brodsky, 1993) and heterogeneity of black people, by endowing each one of them with a different voice. In addition, such commitment is in line with Morrison’s desire to focus on the characters’ interiority during a time, slavery, where black people were dehumanized and regarded as animals, rather than humans (Rothstein, 1987).

Morrison’s intent to favour the characters’ inwardness also affects Morrison’s portrayal of slavery. In the interview for *The Paris Review*, Morrison stated that while perusing research material on slavery, she wanted to ‘translate the historical into the personal’ (Schappell & Brodsky, 1993) and to convey ‘what slavery *felt* like, rather than how it looked’ (Schappell & Brodsky, 1993, original emphasis) to the reader. Thus, Morrison wanted to concentrate on the slaves’ perceptions as a way to reframe a historical and public issue within a more private and individual context as a way to ‘putting [put] the authority back into the hands of the slaves, rather than the slave owner’ (PBS NewsHour, 2019).

In conclusion, this section aimed to outline *Beloved*’s main narrative structures by relying both on a critical analysis and excerpts from interviews with Morrison to integrate the author’s own explanations about her stylistic choices. *Beloved* might be considered a challenging reading where the reader is encouraged to actively engage with a narrative that is moulded by the characters’ endeavours to remember and to forget. As the characters flow in and out of time, the reader might have to go back and forth in order to piece all the scattered pieces together.

3. Beloved's killing under three points of view: white men, Stamp Paid, and Sethe

This section will be concerned with the analysis of the infanticide scene depicted according to three different perspectives. By also considering the author's commentary on this crucial moment, these scenes will be examined by looking at what aspects of Beloved's killing are emphasized and how each point of view might affect the readers' ethical evaluation and their empathic response to Sethe.

Before delving into each perspective, the germ of the novel and the modalities in which the reader is primed for the infanticide will be discussed. Sethe's infanticide is based upon the story of a real former slave named Margaret Garner who was placed under arrest because rather than having her children go back to the slave owner, she had attempted to kill her children, but had succeeded in murdering just one (Morrison 1987, p. xi). What seemed to have struck Morrison was the fact that Garner did not seem to display any sign of mental illness, but she rather had 'the intellect, the ferocity, and the willingness to risk everything for what was to her the necessity of freedom' (Morrison 1987, p. xi).

Furthermore, in an interview with Bill Moyers, Morrison defined Garner's decision to kill her child a 'dilemma' (Moyers, 1990). Given her past as a former slave, Garner was aware of what her children might have had to endure, thus she had to choose between consigning her children to a life of hard labour, abuse, and humiliation or to physically remove them from that future. In the same interview, Morrison described Garner's act as 'noble' (Moyers, 1990) because it was the result of Garner's '*identification*' (Moyers 1990, emphasis mine) and the assertion of her will. However, if on the one hand, Garner's gesture might have been prompted by an act of identification, on the other hand, Morrison stated that, despite having tried to put herself in Sethe's position, she did not know whether she could have done the same, but she believed that her stance could be summarised as such: 'it was the right thing to do, but she had no right to do it' (Moyers, 1990).

In the interview with *The Paris Review*, Morrison stated that she wanted the reader to be acquainted with Beloved's death right from the beginning, but the act had to remain 'deferred, unseen' (Schappell & Brodsky Lacour, 1993), so that the reader could be ushered to the scene with a certain knowledge about the circumstances leading to and following the infanticide. As a result, the shadow of Sethe's act is cast over the novel from the very start, although the reader is not made privy to the identity of the culprit until the end of the first part.

Upon a second reading, the reader might notice that the first chapter already contains some important clues about the infanticide, but also about future events. The reader comes to know that the ghost is Sethe's daughter who died when she was not even two years old, but more importantly, the extent of Sethe's love for Beloved and her desire for her daughter's return are immediately stated: she wishes Beloved would come back, so that she 'could make it clear to her' (*B*, p. 5). However, the information about Beloved and Sethe's wish are juxtaposed with another detail, which might go unnoticed upon a first reading, but it might be telling of two key instances of the novel, namely the infanticide and Beloved's sudden disappearance.

It is said that '*outside*' (*B*, p. 5 emphasis mine) 124, a driver passing by has 'whipped his horse into the gallop local people felt necessary when they passed 124' (*B*, p. 5). This sentence appears to disclose the negative aura associated with the house and its inhabitants, which leads the community's members to avoid them, heightening thus 124's isolation. Furthermore, the figures of the driver and his horse might recall not only the arrival of schoolteacher and his crew at 124 on the day of Beloved's death (*B*, p. 174), but they might also anticipate the appearance of Edward Bodwin, an Abolitionist who gave Baby Suggs 124, prevented Sethe from being convicted for murder, and helped her find a job as a cook in a restaurant. In particular, towards the end of the novel, as Mr Bodwin is driving his cart towards 124, he is mistaken by Sethe for schoolteacher, prompting her to run towards him with an ice pick in her hand (*B*, pp. 308-309).

Going back to the third page of the first chapter, right after Sethe asserts that her love for Beloved is far more 'powerful' (*B*, p. 5) than the ghost's tantrums, a memory is conjured. The reader is informed that Sethe was able to get her daughter's headstone engraved with the name "Beloved" in exchange for sex:

> ‘Not only did she have to live out her years in a house palsied by the baby’s fury at having its throat cut, but those ten minutes she spent pressed up against dawn-colored stone studded with star chips, her knees wide open as the grave, were longer than life, more alive, more pulsating than the baby blood that soaked her fingers like oil’. (*B*, pp. 5-6)

Hence, this memory may be regarded not only as a further demonstration of Sethe’s affection for her dead daughter, but there are also two more important elements that come to light, namely the fact that Sethe was present at the moment of Beloved’s death and how the baby died.

The image of blood is later conjured when Paul enters 124 for the first time: ‘[he] followed her through the door straight into a pool of *red* and undulating light that locked him where he stood’ (*B*, p. 10, emphasis mine). Such ‘evil’ (*B*, p. 10) presence seems to impede Paul from entering the house, but he then realizes that Sethe was right in saying that the ghost is not evil, but rather ‘sad’ (*B*, p. 10) and bereaved: ‘Walking through it, a wave of grief soaked him so thoroughly he wanted to cry’ (*B*, p. 11). Further information about Sethe’s past resurfaces from a conversation between Paul and Sethe where the reader learns that, while Sethe was pregnant with Denver, she managed to get herself and her children out of Sweet Home, the slave farm where Paul was one of the slaves, together with four other slave men, including Halle, Sethe’s husband (*B*, p. 9, p. 13). From the same conversation, Paul is informed of a crucial episode occurring right before Sethe’s running away. Sethe emphasizes the fact that ‘I [she] had milk for my [her] baby girl’, so that she had to reach her child as soon as possible to ‘get my [her] milk to my [her] baby girl’ (*B*, p. 19). But before Sethe could make her escape, schoolteacher’s nephews, who are referred to as ‘those boys’ (*B*, p. 19), first took her milk and then they repeatedly lashed her, leaving a ‘chokecherry tree’ (*B*, p. 18) on her back.

This exchange is not relevant only for the information per se, but it might contribute to enhance the reader’s perception of Sethe’s maternal dedication. Phelan (2013) draws the attention to the divergence between Paul’s response and Sethe’s answer. In fact, Paul seems to be mainly shocked by the ‘greater physical violation of Sethe’s body’ (p. 361), focusing on the fact that they beat a woman who was pregnant, whereas Sethe’s stress on having her milk stolen seems to highlight ‘the violation to her role as mother’ (p. 361), repeating twice that: ‘[And] they took my [her] milk’ (*B*, p. 20). Overall, a great emphasis is put on Sethe's determination to join her daughter to feed her milk and how she was deprived of that milk, which was her daughter's main source of nourishment.

Finally, the first chapter concludes with a violent confrontation between Paul and the baby's ghost, leading the ghost to vanish from the house. The first chapter's last words are entrusted to Denver's perspective, which conveys her increased loneliness after having been separated from 'the only other company she had' (*B*, p. 23).

The interest devoted to the first chapter is due to the fact that even though the reader is catapulted into a situation that does not yield for clarity, they are still given a glimpse into some defining moments of Sethe's past that contribute to her characterization. What seems to stand out is her deep love for and her devotion to her children, even at the cost of being sexually and physically abused. Thus, these two traits might be said to hold a sway over the reader's first encounter with Sethe. All in all, at the end of the first chapter, the reader is still left with several unanswered questions, including the specifics about Beloved's death, but, unknowingly, they have already been presented with crucial hints for what will ensue.

The chapter preceding the first telling of Beloved's death is narrated from Baby Suggs' perspective and it intertwines the events that occurred before Beloved's killing in 1855 with Baby Suggs' memories about the beginning of her new life as a freedwoman, after her son and Sethe's husband, Halle, had bought her freedom. In the interview with Claudia Tate (1985), Morrison stated that if there was a death, she would make sure to insert a series of 'omens' (p. 124), so that the reader would not be completely taken aback by the event:

> You're going to find out about it, but it's not going to be a big surprise, even though it might be awful. I may hurt you, but I don't want to tear the rug out from under you . . . I just want you to feel the dread and to feel the awfulness without having the language to compete with the event itself. (p. 125)

Therefore, beside the previous hints at the death of Sethe's daughter, this section might function as a sort of preamble to the three following sections that correspond to the three different points of view on the infanticide, respectively those of schoolteacher and his crew, Stamp Paid, and Sethe. What appears to kick-start a series of ominous events is Stamp Paid's picking blackberries 'for some private reason of his own' (*B*, p. 160). Stamp

Paid is another former slave who helped Sethe and her then newly born Denver cross the river in order to reach 124, thus his motivation might be found in his desire to celebrate Sethe and Denver's well-being. Since the blackberries amount to 'two full buckets' (*B*, p. 160), a banquet is thrown: 'Ninety people who ate so well, and laughed so much, it made them *angry*' (*B*, p. 161, emphasis mine).

The banquet may be seen as the crucial moment after which events start to escalate. In fact, the day after the banquet anger seems to seize the participants, who appear to be annoyed by Baby Suggs' seemingly abundant and generous life where she is believed to have been gifted the key to freedom by the hard labour of her son, without enduring any pain or suffering as they did instead. Their fury and pride are so strong that they seem to pollute the air with a 'heavy scent of their disapproval' (*B*, p. 162), which is promptly noticed by Baby Suggs herself.

Interestingly, this ominous ambiance appears to jar with the surrounding atmosphere where there is 'not one touch of *death* in the definite green of the leaves' (*B*, p. 162). However, in addition to 'this free-floating repulsion' (*B*, p. 163), Baby Suggs seems to scent something else, which she is not able to identify yet because it is almost covered by that other smell, but it is still perceived as something 'Dark and coming' (*B*, p. 163). As Baby Suggs attempts to grasp the significance of this obscure and forthcoming entity, the reader might be puzzled once more by the sudden change of atmosphere, which signals that the tensions surrounding Beloved's death might begin to unravel.

3.1 White men's perspective

The first depiction is filtered through the lens of the 'four horsemen' (*B*, p. 174): schoolteacher, one of his nephews, a slave catcher, and a sheriff. Although the perspective shifts from one man to the other, the overall tone sets this chapter apart from the others. The character's names are supplanted by racist designations that include slurs, such as 'nigger', which is often repeated throughout the chapter, or 'coons' (*B*, p. 177), or 'pickaninnies' (*B*, p. 175), and associations with animals, such as 'bull' (*B*, p. 175), 'roar' (*B*, p. 174), 'cat' (*B*, p.175), 'mewing' (*B*, p. 175). Moreover, the narration is characterized by the slaveholders' perception of black people as their property. From the beginning, it is stated that 'Unlike a snake or a bear, a dead nigger could not be skinned for profit and was not worth his own dead weight in coin' (*B*, pp. 174-175). Therefore, not only does the reader immediately perceive an alteration in the narratorial voice, but they are also made aware of the main objective of schoolteacher's return and what is at stake for him, should his endeavour go awry.

This distance also informs the portrayal of the infanticide from the slavecatcher's angle, which omits the moment when Sethe cuts Beloved's throat, since the white men arrive at the shed only after:

> Inside, two boys bled in the sawdust and dirt at the feet of a nigger woman holding a blood-soaked child to her chest with one hand and an infant by the heels in the other. She did not look at them; she simply swung the baby toward the wall planks, missed and tried to connect a second time, when out of nowhere – in the ticking time the men spent staring at what there was to stare at – the old nigger boy, still mewing, ran through the door behind them and snatched the baby from the arch of its mother's swing. (*B*, p. 175)

The above description is followed by schoolteacher's perspective, which frames the act in terms of a loss of property and casts Sethe in the role of a 'horse' (*B*, p. 176) and of a 'hound[s]' (*B*, p. 176) that starts rebelling against their master. Schoolteacher believes that if Sethe was able to commit such an act, it is because his nephew had overdone her punishment, since they are '*creatures* [that] God had given you the responsibility of' (*B*, p. 176, emphasis mine); therefore, slave holders cannot mistreat them too badly, otherwise they would lose their value and decrease the slave owners' profit. On the whole, Sethe's extreme act is perceived by schoolteacher as further evidence of the dangers behind this ‘little so-called freedom *imposed on* people who needed every care and guidance in the world to keep them from the cannibal life they preferred’ (*B*, p. 177, emphasis mine). Schoolteacher’s racist and degrading perspective is once more reaffirmed, but it is important now to focus on what this external perspective might achieve in terms of the reading experience.

All in all, the sum of the white men’s points of view might lead the reader to feel ‘emotionally, psychologically – and ethically – jarred by seeing her [Sethe] from what is such an alien perspective’ (Phelan 2013, p. 367). As it was mentioned above, the narration deviates from what readers have been accustomed to up until this point, confronting them with a narrative that is dehumanizing and embedded with racist terms, which take away the personal and intimate tones of the characters’ voices. However, not only does this strong clash draw the attention to the ‘ethical deficiency’ (Phelan 2013, p. 366) of these white men, but it also underlines the gruesome nature of Sethe’s act. More specifically, Phelan (2013) points out that the appalling effect evoked by the slavecatcher’s depiction is mainly due to his focus on the ‘physical description’ (p. 367) that elides any adjectives, except for ‘blood-soaked’ (*B*, p. 175), which further accentuates the dreadfulness of the scene (p. 367).

Moreover, if the reader might be shaken by the horrific sensation evoked by this scene, Morrison herself had trouble materializing this scene on the page. In the interview for *The Paris Review*, Morrison recalled that writing the part where Sethe cuts Beloved’s throat caused her physical distress: ‘Each time I fixed that sentence so that it was exactly right, or so I thought, but then I would be unable to sit there and would have to go away and come back’ (Schappell & Brodsky Lacour, 1993). Such uneasiness derived from Morrison’s effort to maintain the deed ‘understated’ (Schappell & Brodky Lacour, 1993), which required a subdued language that would not border on the ‘obscene or pornographic’ (Schappell & Brodsky Lacour, 1993). Thus, although this point of view does not go into the details of Sethe’s murdering her child, its racism and the distance between the narratorial voice and the reader contribute to enhance the horrific nature of such act.

3.2 Stamp Paid's perspective

The chapter's very first sentence, 'That ain't her mouth' (*B*, p. 181), does not disclose the identity of the narratorial voice yet, but these words will become a sort of motif that will accompany Stamp Paid's telling. Stamp's narration is prompted by his decision to inform Paul about Sethe's act by showing him a newspaper clip with a drawing of Sethe's face. However, Stamp is confronted with Paul's denial and his conviction that that woman's mouth is not Sethe's. Moreover, his disbelief finds further reason in the fact that 'there was no way in hell a black face could appear in a newspaper if the story was about something anybody wanted to hear' (*B*, p. 183). In fact, what was considered ordinary violence inflicted upon black people did not make it on the newspaper because it was not considered newsworthy: 'Nor was it there because the person had been killed, or maimed or caught or burned or jailed or whipped or evicted or stomped or raped or cheated, since that could hardly qualify as news in a newspaper' (*B*, p. 183). Therefore, Paul reasons that what Stamp is showing him must be 'something out of the ordinary' (*B*, p. 183) but, above all, something that could capture the white people's attention. As Stamp's narration begins by recounting the events preceding schoolteacher's arrival, the image of Sethe's mouth becomes distorted, signalling Paul's bewilderment and shock.

Stamp's account gives the reader some more details about the events prior to Sethe's deed. Stamp and Baby Suggs were not paying heed to what 'was coming down the road' (*B*, p. 184) because their minds were so caught up in their neighbours' 'meanness' (*B*, p. 185), that their gazes were looking at the stream, instead of the road. Stamp underscores that no one of their neighbours had warned them about the white men's arrival because it was as if they wanted to gauge the extent of Baby's apparent fortune. Although Stamp is not able to tell Paul the whole story because of his constant refusal, Stamp's telling proceeds. As in the previous account, Sethe is described in animal terms, but the difference lies in the fact that if schoolteacher equates Sethe with a horse or a hound, Stamp uses an animal comparison to illustrate 'the how and why' (Phelan 2013, p. 369) of the infanticide. In Stamp's description, Sethe's body seems to morph into a 'hawk' (*B*, p. 185):

> So Stamp Paid did not tell him how she flew, snatching up her children like a hawk on the wing; how her face beaked, how her hands worked like claws, how she collected them every which way: one on her shoulder, one under her arm, one by the hand, the other shouted forward into the woodshed filled with just sunlight and shavings now because there wasn't any wood'. (*B*, p. 185)

Stamp's comparison might help the reader grasp Sethe's promptness, but the reader has not been given access to Sethe's psyche yet, thus Stamp's point of view may still be considered an external one (Phelan 2013, pp. 368-369). However, Stamp's account gives the reader a new piece of information about the murder weapon, namely a handsaw: 'Nothing but sunlight. Sunlight, shavings, a shovel. The ax he himself took out. Nothing else was in there except the shovel – and of course the saw' (*B*, p. 185). Phelan (2013) argues that in Stamp's account, the dreadful nature of Sethe's action is conveyed by a belated revelation of the weapon, which occurs at the very end of Stamp's list of the items inside the shed.

Even after Stamp has read the newspaper report aloud, Paul refuses to believe that it is Sethe because 'that ain't her mouth' (*B*, p. 186). Paul's 'sweet conviction' (*B*, p. 186) of Sethe's innocence seems to instil doubt also in Stamp's reminiscence, but the very end of the chapter reinstates Sethe's role as a murderous mother: 'a pretty little slavegirl had recognized a hat, and split to the woodshed to kill her children' (*B*, p. 186). In regard to this very last sentence, Phelan (2013) identifies two possible sorts of readers' responses: the first one is that the explicit assertion about Sethe's deed and the emphasis put on the physicality of the white men's account might induce the reader to condemn Sethe's action; the second one posits that, by taking into consideration the patronizing description of Sethe, the reader's pre-existent sympathy for her, and the absence of an internal perspective, the reader might postpone their moral evaluation (p. 369).

3.3 Sethe's perspective

From the very first sentence, 'She was crawling already when I got here' (*B*, p. 190), the reader might understand that the character who is talking is Sethe, since she has often referred to Beloved as the 'crawling-already? girl' (*B*, p. 110, 116, 178) in the intervening pages. As it was mentioned above, Sethe's telling is characterized by her circular movements, which mirror the narrative framework of the novel itself and the movement of memory. However, Sethe's circular motion also reveals her difficulty at articulating the death of Beloved because 'she could never close in, pin it down for anybody who had to ask. If they didn't get it right off – she could never explain' (*B*, p. 192). Revisiting the events of that day at the end of August 1855 means facing once more the past, which is for Sethe a hurtful experience that cannot be even translated into words at times: 'She and Baby Suggs had agreed without saying so that it was *unspeakable*' (*B*, p. 69, emphasis mine). Conversing with Paul D about their past does not seem to help Sethe either, since her already 'greedy brain' (*B*, p. 83) appears to always crave for more and more information about the past because 'her brain was not interested in the future. Loaded with the past and hungry for more, it left her no room to imagine, let alone plan for, the next day' (*B*, p. 83).

Therefore, Sethe's tendency to avoid dwelling upon the past ought to be overcome in order for her confession to Paul to occur. If on the one hand, Sethe's avoidance might augment the tension surrounding the revelation, on the other hand, her hedging might shed a light on certain issues that might affect the reader's moral evaluation. Her narration is immediately framed within the context of motherhood, specifically the problems that a new mother, who was also a slave, might have had. Being the only slave woman at Sweet Home, Sethe could not rely upon anyone's help thus, she resorted to makeshift methods that she had seen at the place where she was before Sweet Home: 'It's hard, you know what I mean? By yourself and no woman to help you get through' (*B*, p. 189).

In addition to motherhood, another major theme in Sethe's narration is her maternal love and the destructive force that is concealed within it. However, it is also Paul D's 'upfront love' (*B*, p. 190) that gives Sethe the fortitude to continue her narration, which then shifts the focus to her agency. In her account of what it felt like to flee Sweet Home, her agency is highlighted by the repetition of 'I' and 'me': 'I did it. I got us all out. Without Halle too. Up till then it was the only thing I ever did on my own . . . I birthed them and I got em out and it wasn't no accident. I did that' (*B*, p. 190). Her agency is strictly interrelated with the implications inherent to her role of mother as a slave and after. Deciding to run away from the slave farm is described by Sethe as a 'kind of selfishness I [she] never knew nothing about before' (*B*, p. 190), but her decision also affected her maternal love. In fact, Sethe believes that once she was out of Sweet Home, her love for her children became stronger because she was finally free to love them without restraints:

'Looked like I loved em more after I got here. Or maybe I couldn't love em proper in Kentucky because they wasn't mine to love. But when I got here, when I jumped down off that wagon – there wasn't nobody in the world I couldn't love if I wanted to' (*B*, pp. 190-191).

Thus, this part is very important in terms of Sethe's characterization and its underpinning themes. Sethe's pride in her motherhood and in her maternal love appears to have been a major component in her decision to flee Kentucky, but escaping also meant that she could lay claim to her children, which she could not do back at Sweet Home, since all the slaves, including their offspring, were part of schoolteacher's asset. The impossibility to form emotional attachments or to keep a family united during slavery is shared by Paul who believes that, in order to safeguard one's sanity, one ought to satisfy oneself with little gestures and to avoid 'anything bigger' (*B*, p. 191). Thus, he empathizes with Sethe's claim because 'He knew exactly what she meant: to get to a place where you could love anything you chose – not to need permission for desire – well now, *that* was freedom' (*B*, p. 191, original emphasis). And it is also that side of that newly found freedom that prompts Sethe to act on a day of late August 1855.

Drifting away from the present moment, the narration shifts towards Sethe's remembering. As soon as Sethe sees a group of white men approaching 124 and identifies schoolteacher's hat, she springs into action:

> Simple: she was squatting in the garden and when she saw them coming and recognized schoolteacher's hat, she heard wings. Little hummingbirds stuck their needle beaks right through her headcloth into her hair and beat their wings. And if she thought anything, it was No. No. Nono. Simple. She just flew. Collected every bit of life she had made, all the parts of her that were precious and fine and beautiful, and carried, pushed, dragged them through the veil, out, away, over there where no one could hurt them. (*B*, p. 192)

Similar to Stamp Paid's account, the bird imagery occurs also in Sethe's telling. However, here it is not used as a comparison, but rather as a signal of the imminent danger that prompted Sethe to act. Moreover, Sethe's recollection foregrounds both the emotional forces that drove her to act through a series of adjectives, namely 'precious, fine, and beautiful', and the physicality of the action itself with a series of verbs, 'carried, pushed, dragged', which seem to accentuate the physical effort and Sethe's determination to ensure that her children would be out of schoolteacher's clutches.

However, unlike the two previous accounts, Sethe's telling seems to refrain from delving into the specifics of Beloved's death by skirting altogether the act of killing: 'By the time she faced him [schoolteacher], looked him dead in the eye, she had something in her arms that stopped him in his tracks. He took a backward step with each jump of the baby heart until finally there were none' (*B*, p. 193). This passage appears to draw the attention to Sethe's unflinching demeanour, which does not make her avert her eyes when seeing schoolteacher. Furthermore, schoolteacher's leaving seems to be synchronized with Beloved's dying heartbeat, meaning that the disappearance of the one signifies the death of the other.

Sethe's remembrance fades and the narration goes back to the conversation with Paul where she explicitly states the reason why she acted that way: 'I stopped him . . . I took and put my babies where they'd be *safe*' (*B*, p. 193, emphasis mine). Not only does this assertion call attention to Sethe's agency, but it also highlights the fact that Sethe's idea of safety implies that her children's death might be a better prospect than a life spent under the shackles of schoolteacher's authority. As Walters (2007) points out, the motivation behind the infanticide might conceal a conundrum, since Sethe's ideal of 'preservation' (p. 200) implies that in order for her children to shun slavery, she has to assume the role of 'executioner' (p. 200), which will halt the progress of both her and her children's existences.

The counter response to Sethe's perspective comes from Paul who exposes the fallacy of Sethe's conviction: 'it occurred to him that what she wanted for her children was exactly what was missing in 124: *safety*. Which was the very first message he got the day he walked through the door' (*B*, p. 193, emphasis mine). Phelan (2013) points out that Paul D's argument might reflect the 'authorial audience' (p. 372), insofar as the reader has been often provided with evidence about the instabilities of 124, which have been rooted in the disruptive force of the ghost's presence first and, more generally, in Sethe and her family's alienation from their community (pp. 372-373).

However, if, on the one hand, the reader might rely upon a more objective angle, it is also true that an external perspective can coexist with an internal one. In fact, the reader has been made privy to Sethe and Denver's endearment for the baby's ghost. Despite their 'perfunctory battle against the outrageous behaviour of that place' (*B*, p. 4), Sethe and

Denver have developed pity for that ghost who is 'not evil, just sad' (*B*, p. 10) because they seem to be aware of the reasons behind its erratic temperament. In particular, Denver's attachment to the ghost might be considered ambivalent because even though the ghost's 'anger' (*B*, p. 15) would 'wear her [Denver] out' (*B*, p. 15), after Paul's arrival and the subsequent ghost's departure, she still seems to yearn for the ghost's return. Even if the ghost led Denver's brothers away and it has contributed to heighten her family's isolation, it still represents a sentimental anchor for Denver: 'Her brothers had known, but it scared them; Grandma Baby knew, but it saddened her. None could appreciate the *safety* of ghost company. Even Sethe didn't love it. She just took it for granted – like a sudden change in the weather' (*B*, p. 45, emphasis mine). Therefore, although the reader might perceive the ghost as a disruptive force that has worsened 124's familial unity and alienation, they are still able to also retain Denver's perspective which positions the ghost as her only companion left after 'all that leaving' (*B*, p. 14).

Turning again the attention towards Paul's reaction, he seems to take distance from Sethe's point of view by underlining the inconsistencies in Sethe's motivations. Paul's defamiliarization leads him to see Sethe under a new different light:

> This here Sethe talked about safety with a handsaw. This here new Sethe didn't know where the world stopped and she began. Suddenly he saw what Stamp Paid wanted him to see: more important than what Sethe had done was what she claimed. It scared him. (*B*, p. 193)

Paul's remark about Sethe's love being 'too thick' (*B*, p.193) is contrasted by Sethe's assertion that, 'Love is or it ain't. Thin love ain't love at all' (*B*, p.194), which further cements Sethe's unbounded love for her children. However, the violent side of Sethe's love is condemned by Paul D, whose final comment determines his temporary exit from Sethe's life.

Although the reader might not immediately grasp the personal import that Paul's observation has for Sethe, its animal comparison may still remind them of schoolteacher's point of view: 'You got two feet, Sethe, not four' (*B*, p. 194). In fact, later in the novel, the reader comes to know that Sethe overheard schoolteacher instructing his nephews to distinguish between Sethe's 'human' (*B*, p. 228) and 'animal' (*B*, p. 228) characteristics. Not knowing the meaning of the word "characteristic", Sethe turned to Mrs. Garner, the wife of Sweet Home's previous owner, who told her that a "characteristic" is 'a thing that's *natural* to a thing' (*B*, p. 230, emphasis mine). Hence, from a white racist perspective, animality was believed to be an innate characteristic of black people that set them apart from humanity, which implied that they were thought to be undeserving of a humane treatment.

Furthermore, Sethe's reaction to schoolteacher's comment might remind the reader of Sethe's distress at the sight of schoolteacher's hat at 124 where she felt a pinching sensation on her head caused by what she believed were the 'needle beaks' (*B*, p. 192) of hummingbirds. In fact, Sethe recalls that after hearing schoolteacher's remark 'My [her] head itched like the devil. Like somebody was sticking fine needles in my [her] scalp' (*B*, p. 228), presenting thus a similar physical perception provoked by needles. Therefore, the belated revelation of schoolteacher's comment is another piece of information that helps the reader to better apprehend Sethe's motivations and the significance of Paul's comment.

Lastly, Phelan (2013) observes that the succession of these three points of view corresponds to a 'progression of possibilities for ethical judgement' (p. 371). The first perspective underlines the inhumanity of Sethe's action, whereas even though the second perspective does not condone the infanticide, it still might be considered a sympathetic portrayal that captures Sethe's instinctive nature. Finally, unlike the two previous external perspectives, the third internal one sheds light on Sethe's motivations, agency, and her conviction that what she did was the only way to achieve what she wanted for her children, namely, safety (Phelan 2013, p. 371). However, Phelan (2013) goes on to point out that unlike Sethe's narration, the two external perspectives do not omit those details that convey the dreadfulness of her act, namely the crime weapon, how the baby was killed, the blood, and Sethe's attempt to kill her other children (p. 372). Thus, although the reader might be inclined to align with Sethe's angle, the three points of view present the reader with different perspectives on the infanticide, which however might not suffice to form a final moral evaluation of Sethe.

4. Putting the pieces together

Sethe's narration encapsulates some important themes that occur throughout the novel by reporting the other characters' experiences. As a consequence, these personal backgrounds provide the reader not only with a composite picture of the larger historical theme underlying the novel, but they also constitute further evidence of what Sethe was trying to protect her children from.

4.1 Motherhood

The first major subject is that of motherhood and its significance within the context of slavery. In the very first chapter, this theme is immediately introduced with Baby Suggs' reprimanding Sethe for having suggested that they could move out of 124 because of the ghost's tantrums. The reader learns that Baby believed Sethe had to count her blessings, since she still had three children out of four, whereas she had eight children, but she was left with none: 'Be thankful, why don't you? I had eight. Every one of them gone away from me. Four taken, four chased, and all' (*B*, p. 6). Baby Suggs' children were fathered by six different men, including a 'straw boss' (*B*, p. 28) who had promised her that she could keep her third child in exchange for sex, but the child ended up being 'traded for lumber in the spring of the next year' (*B*, p. 28) anyway, and Baby was left pregnant with that man's baby: 'that child she could not love and the rest she would not' (*B* p. 28). In fact, Paul's reluctance to form too deep emotional attachments seems to apply also to Baby Suggs, who refrained from observing her new-borns for too long since, 'it wasn't worth the trouble to try to learn features you would never see change into adulthood anyway' (*B*, p. 163). Except for Halle, whom she was allowed to keep, 'all seven were gone or dead' (*B*, p. 164).

Turning the attention to another motherhood's experience, Ella is the woman who helped Sethe get to 124 together with Stamp Paid. However, Ella's past is marked by a story of repeated sexual abuse and physical violence perpetrated by white men, whom Ella refers to as 'the lowest yet' (*B*, p. 301). As a result, she gave birth to a 'hairy white thing' (*B*, p. 305), but she refused to nurse the baby because they had been conceived with 'the lowest yet' (*B*, p. 305). Ella's past has affected her conception of sex and love, developing respectively, a 'disgust' (*B*, p. 301) for the former and a consideration of the latter as a 'serious disability' (*B*, p. 301).

In addition, the reader is informed that Sethe's own mother killed the children that she had after having been raped by the white slaveholders, but she kept Sethe because she had conceived her with a man whom she apparently loved (*B*, p. 74). However, she could not be a mother to Sethe because she had to work 'out in the fields' (*B*, p. 72), thus Sethe was nursed by another woman, Nan, 'whose job it was' (*B*, p. 72) and she never really formed a relationship with her own mother. Nonetheless, Sethe's bond with her mother is defined by a specific episode where Sethe's mother showed her a mark under her breast, so that Sethe could identify her in case her mother's face would have been unrecognisable. Being a child, Sethe could not really understand the significance of a mark on one's body, so she asked her mother to be marked too, receiving a slap in return. Reflecting on this episode, present Sethe states that she did not understand why her mother had slapped her until she got her own mark. Sethe's mother was hanged, but she was not able to spot her mark, so much was her mother disfigured (*B*, pp. 72-73).

Putnam (2011) argues that the aforementioned episode between Sethe's mother and Sethe might be regarded as the moment when Sethe learns that there is a violent side to maternal love (p. 40). The display of her mark might be read as an 'act of recognition' (Putnam 2011, p. 40) between mother and daughter, but more importantly, the adult Sethe might realize that violence can characterize the bond between a mother and a child and that 'maternal violence' (Putnam 2011, p. 40) might signal both ownership of and affection for one's children.

However, Sethe's regret of not being able to be a daughter to her mother is voiced by herself towards the end of her monologue. She confesses that her original plan was to kill herself and all her children, so that she could reach her 'own ma'am' (*B*, p. 240) on 'the other side' (*B*, p. 240). Moreover, Sethe's maternal love is once more highlighted by her refusal to believe that her mother was hanged because she was caught fleeing: 'Running, you think? No. Not that. Because she was my ma'am and nobody's ma'am would run off and leave her daughter, would she?' (*B*, p. 240).

On the whole, these different reports and Sethe's experience attest to the difficulties that slave mothers had to deal with. Although sometimes their role of mother was often forced on them, it was ultimately denied because their children were not theirs. In some other instances, such as Sethe's mother and Ella's, they asserted their will by disallowing their relation to those children conceived from rape. Therefore, Sethe's assertion that ‘unless carefree, motherlove is a killer’ (*B*, p. 155) acquires a certain significance in consideration of the relation existing between motherhood and slavery.

4.2 Maternal love

Another major theme of Sethe’s narration is her maternal love, which Sethe herself defines as ‘tough’ (*B*, p. 236), but Sethe believes that it is this very love that justifies her action: ‘that what she had done was right because it came from true love’ (*B*, p. 296), and even Stamp Paid seems to come to the conclusion that, ‘She [Sethe] ain’t crazy. She love those children. She was trying to out-hurt the hurter’ (*B*, p. 276).

In the interview for the *PBS Newshour*, Morrison claimed that one of the reasons why the story of Margaret Garner drew her attention was that she noticed how motherhood consists of two opposite forces. On the one hand, there is a ‘compulsion to nurture’ (PBS Newshour, 2019) and a ‘ferocity’ (PBS Newshour, 2019) inherent to a mother’s sense of responsibility towards her children that complicates one’s attempt to ‘be a separate, complete individual’ (PBS Newshour, 2019) on the other.

Sethe’s maternal love does not seem to entail a separation between herself and her children, as Sethe affirms: ‘I [she] wouldn’t draw a breath without my [her] children’ (*B*, pp. 240-241). Sethe’s love becomes excessive, to the point of risking her own life. After a brief period of what seemed a newly found familial affection and unity among Beloved, Denver, and Sethe, the love that tied them turns into a morbid and destructive force, which makes them ‘locked in a love that wore [wears] everybody out’ (*B*, p. 286).

Beloved’s unsatiable hunger and refusal to listen to Sethe’s apologies and explanations drive Sethe to physical and mental illness. Sethe subdues to Beloved’s tantrums and whims, to the point of starving herself, so that Beloved could have enough food: ‘She [Sethe] sat in the chair licking her lips like a chastised child while Beloved ate up her life, took it, swelled up with it, grew taller on it. And the older woman yielded it up without a murmur’ (*B*, p. 295). Denver’s perspective allows the reader to comprehend the nature of Sethe and Beloved’s relationship: ‘Sethe was trying to make up for the handsaw; Beloved was making her pay for it’ (*B*, p. 295). Yet, Sethe does not want Beloved to leave until she understands her mother’s motivations for killing her:

> That before Sethe could make her understand what it meant – what it took to drag the teeth of that saw under the little chin; to feel the baby blood pump like oil in her hands; to hold her face so her head would stay on; to squeeze her so she could absorb, still, the death spasms that shot through that adored body, plump and sweet with life. (*B*, p. 295)

The reader is confronted again with a portrayal of Beloved's killing that juxtaposes Sethe's love with the horrid details. This description helps the reader visualize the sequence of actions and perceive them also on a sensorial level by means of certain verbs, such as 'drag', 'pump', 'squeeze' while, at the same time, the emotional component can be found in Sethe's display of affection towards her daughter even after the deed; in fact, Sethe makes sure to support her baby's head and to hold her body close to hers until her last breath.

The subsequent section reinforces Sethe's motives by calling attention to what she was trying to protect her children from: 'That anybody white could take your whole self for anything that came to mind. Not just work, kill, or maim you, but *dirty* you. Dirty you so bad you couldn't like yourself anymore. Dirty you so bad you forgot who you were and couldn't think it up' (*B*, p. 295, emphasis mine). She underlines how slavery and the constant physical and verbal abuse could warp or erase the slaves' self-perception, since they had no rights over their bodies and minds.

4.3 Reclaiming a self that was not theirs

Schoolteacher's consideration of Sethe and her children as property that has been lost appears also later in the novel when Paul D recalls the moments after he and two other slaves had been caught fleeing Sweet Home. After having been tied to a tree because schoolteacher did not want him dead, Paul witnessed the death of another slave of Sweet Farm called Sixo, whose constant singing convinced the white men that he must have gone crazy, which meant that he was useless. Therefore, Sixo was tied to a tree, burnt alive and finally shot (*B*, pp. 266-267).

On their way back to Sweet Home, by overhearing a conversation among schoolteacher and his crew, Paul 'discovers [discovered] his worth, which is to say he learns [learned] his price. The dollar value of his weight, his strength, his heart, his brain, his penis, and his future' (*B*, p. 267). According to schoolteacher, Paul's value amounted to '$900' (*B*, p. 267), whereas Sethe was referred to as 'the breeding one' (*B*, p. 267). In addition, Paul learnt that his worth could, in turn, provide schoolteacher with two young black men thus, each slave was considered a disposable individual who could be traded for someone else at any time. Turning back to the present, Paul reasons that the news of schoolteacher's arrival at 124 did not caught him by surprise because he knew that compared to his, Sethe's value was higher because she was '*property* that reproduced itself without cost' (*B*, p. 269, emphasis mine).

Therefore, if on the one hand, slaves were considered in terms of property, whose value could differ according to one's age, gender, and productivity, on the other hand, becoming a freedman and a freedwoman implied that they could reclaim their selves. Baby Suggs' memories of her life at Sweet Home and as a new freedwoman exemplify this issue. Although Sweet Home could be considered a 'marked improvement' (*B*, p. 165) in comparison to the previous places, it was still characterized by 'sadness' (*B*, p. 165): 'the desolated center where the self that was no self made its home' (*B*, p. 165). Moreover, even though Baby Suggs knew almost nothing about her children, except for Halle, she believed that it was still far more than what 'she knew about herself, having never had the map to discover what she was like' (*B*, p. 165). Discovering and laying claim to their own selves meant that they could choose their own name and own their physical body, their minds, their feelings, and their social selves. Baby Suggs recalls that moments after she had 'stepped foot on free ground' (*B*, p. 166), she first started observing her hands and realized that, 'These hands belong to me [her]. These *my* [her] hands' (*B*, p. 166, original emphasis), and then she seemed to become conscious of 'a knocking in her chest' (*B*, p. 166), wondering whether 'this pounding thing' (*B*, p. 166) had always been there.

Such realization led Baby Suggs to make use of her heart and to become an 'unchurched preacher' (*B*, p. 102) who would preach self-love to her congregation: 'in this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it' (*B*, p. 103). Baby Suggs imparted such lesson also to Denver, telling her that slaves were forbidden to have 'pleasurable feelings on their own' (*B*, p. 247) and that their (female) bodies had to always be at the slaveowners' disposal in order to generate new labour and income. Thus, Baby Suggs encouraged Denver to learn to pay attention to her body and to love it.

As far as Sethe is concerned, her taste of 'unslaved life' (*B*, p. 111) lasted 'twenty-eight days' (*B*, p. 111), which are described as 'Days of healing, ease and real-talk' (*B*, p. 111). During this period, Sethe had the opportunity to make the acquaintance of other black people, which signified that they knew each other's names, they could share their personal experiences and 'their fun and sorrow' (*B*, p. 111). In other words, during these days, Sethe 'had claimed herself' (*B*, p. 111). Hence, the reader is made privy to Sethe's life during the intervening days between her arrival at 124 and Beloved's killing, adding hence another piece of information to Sethe's motivations to act. Having experienced a life both under and out of slavery, Sethe could not allow her children to go back to Sweet Home because 'Whites might dirty *her* all right, but not her best thing, her beautiful, magical best thing – the part of her that was clean' (*B*, p. 296, original emphasis).

Sethe's assertion that her love for her children augmented once they were out of Sweet Home implies that her affection is intertwined with her willingness to reclaim her children. Morrison herself stated that Sethe 'claimed something that she had no right to claim' (PBS Newshour, 2019), that is the 'property' (PBS Newshour, 2019) of her children, which allowed her to exert control on their lives, including putting an end to them. Therefore, Sethe acquires back the ownership of her children and as Putnam (2011) points out, 'via violence, Sethe redirects her racialized powerlessness into maternal possession and dominance' (p. 37). Sethe herself does not seem to question her course of action and, at the beginning of her monologue, she states that she had no time to think because she had to act swiftly in order to put Beloved where she would be 'safe' (*B*, p. 236). Moreover, she deliberately took on the role of murderer because she could not stand the thought of her daughter's death being at the hands of someone else: 'How if I hadn't killed her she would have died and that is something I could not bear to happen to her' (*B*, p. 236).

Sethe's statement acquires even more significance when the reader recalls the narrator comparing black women and men to 'checkers' (*B*, p. 27) who were constantly 'moved around' (*B*, p. 27). The word "checkers" suggests that these people's lives were at the mercy of the slaveholders, who would move them around according to their financial needs. The following sentences, however, reinforce the objectification and dehumanization of the slaves, from which children were not exempted:

> Anybody Baby Suggs knew, let alone, loved who hadn't run off or been hanged, got rented out, loaned out, bought up, brought back, stored up, mortgaged, won, stolen or seized . . . What she [Baby Suggs] called the nastiness of life was the shock she received upon learning that nobody stopped playing checkers just because the pieces included her children. (*B*, pp. 27-28)

The first part summarizes black people's existences where, on the one hand, escaping from slave farms could either go well or result in their death, while, on the other hand, the sequence of verbs emphasizes the association of black people with items that can be exploited and disposed of at any time in order to buy some other, so that the cycle can go on. On the whole, this passage highlights the impossibility for slaves to maintain a familial unity and to build a net of acquaintances, but it also epitomizes what Sethe was trying to protect her children from, not only in view of their future, but also of their present.

In sum, this section aimed to organize Sethe and the other characters' experiences under the main thematic cores of Sethe's narration as a way to offer an overview of the different testimonies that contribute to shed light on Sethe's motivations and what she was trying to protect her children from.

4.4 Final steps

As it was hinted at before, Sethe's action changed the atmosphere at 124 and its inhabitants' social perception. Sethe holds herself responsible for Baby Suggs' declining health after the killing and, more generally, she believes that 'grief at 124 started when she jumped down off the wagon, her newborn tied to her chest in the underwear of a whitegirl looking for Boston' (*B*, p. 105). Ella herself claims that she comprehended 'Sethe's rage' (*B*, p. 301) on that day of late August 1855, but she could not fathom Sethe's response, which is seen as 'prideful, misdirected' (*B*, p. 302) and Sethe herself is deemed 'too complicated' (*B*, p. 303). Sethe's 'potent pride of the mistreated' (*B*, p. 113) becomes her response against the community's disapproval, even though the community's pride does not seem to have dampened either, as it can be seen at the funeral of Baby Suggs and Beloved: 'So Baby Suggs, holy, having devoted her freed life to harmony, was buried amid a regular dance of pride, fear, condemnation and spite' (*B*, p. 202).

However, if on the one hand, the reader is made aware of Sethe's pride and her community's moral judgement, on the other hand, the reader gets access also to Denver's perception of her mother by means of her monologue. Denver confesses that, 'I [she] spent all of my [her] outside self loving Ma'am so she wouldn't kill me, loving her even when she braided my [her] head at night' (*B*, p. 245). Denver claims that she has a recurrent dream, wherein her mother 'cut[s] my [her] head off' (*B*, p. 243), but her eyes seem to suggest that 'she didn't want to do it but she had to and it wasn't going to hurt' (*B*, p. 243). The reader might find a connection between Denver's dream and Sethe's act where an act of violence is executed because it is deemed necessary, but it is bereft of any evil intentions. Moreover, Denver's extreme attachment to her mother might be explained not only as a way to fill her loneliness, but also as a shield against Sethe.

Nonetheless, as the situation at 124 gradually deteriorates, Denver realizes that her fear is now misdirected: she is afraid that either Beloved might become Sethe's executioner or that Sethe's health may worsen (*B*, p. 285). Thus, she decides to take matters into her own hands and to step outside 124, searching for a job. Word of what is happening at 124 starts spreading out, leading Ella to organize a rescue mission. In fact, Ella seems to sympathize with Sethe because even though 'Sethe's crime was staggering and her pride outstripped even that' (*B*, p. 302), Ella appears to disapprove of 'past errors taking possession of the present' (*B*, p. 302) because 'daily life took as much as she had' (*B*, p. 302). According to Ella, the future amounts to the 'sunset' (*B*, p.302), whereas the past should not interfere with the present, but if so, then the past needs to be 'stomp [stomped] it out' (*B*, p. 302) because despite living a life as a freedwoman or as a slave, 'every day was [is] a test and a trial' (*B*, p. 302).

The women's intervention and their preventing Sethe from attacking Edward Bodwin seem to lead Beloved away. The news of Beloved's disappearance is not explicitly stated, but the characters infer it from a series of details, such as the return of Here Boy (*B*, p. 310), the quietness of 124, and the absence of the 'sad red light' (*B*, p. 318) that struck Paul the first time he stepped inside the house. The end of the novel sees the return of Paul to 124. Paul is worried about Sethe's condition because it resembles Baby Suggs' 'marrow weariness' (*B*, p. 212) after Beloved's death, where she would hardly leave her room and think of 'the colors of things' (*B*, p. 208). The motif of pieces occurs again with Sethe wondering whether the different parts of her body would stick together: 'And if her bathes her in sections, will the parts hold?' (*B*, p. 321). Sethe mourns

Beloved's disappearance, claiming that, 'She was my [her] best thing' (*B*, p. 321), but this time Paul's response is fraught with hope and is projected onto the future. In fact, unlike his comment to Sethe's act, which recalled schoolteacher's point of view, his final answers disclose a positive note. In contrast with Sethe's tendency to dwell upon her past and her disinterest in the future, Paul now appears to be eager to build a future with her: 'me and you, we got more yesterday than anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow' (*B*, p. 322) and he also reminds her that, 'You your best thing, Sethe. You are' (*B*, p. 322). The exchange concludes with Sethe asking, 'Me? Me?' (*B*, p. 322), a repetition that may indicate that Sethe is inclined to consider this proposition and that the reader too may wish Sethe a brighter tomorrow (Phelan 2013, p. 378).

Morrison's portrayal of the infanticide from different angles does not provide the reader with a clear ethical guidance. Even if the reader may distance themselves from the first perspective, the latter does still expose the most horrific side of Sethe's act, whereas the second point of view may not be as jarring as the first one, but it still adds one more defining element to the picture, namely, the criminal weapon. Finally, the third perspective, which is also the internal one, brings to the foreground Sethe's motivations and purpose, but it avoids dwelling upon those elements that characterize the first two narrations instead. Hence, the reader might refrain from taking a moral stance, although it might be possible that their pre-existent sympathetic relation towards Sethe might induce them to align themselves with Sethe's account.

However, the fact that the three perspectives are positioned towards the end of the first part means that the reader has already become acquainted with the peculiar narrative structure of the novel, whereby events do not unfold linearly, but it is the characters' act of remembering or attempt to suppress their memories that mould the narration. Therefore, the reader might delay their moral evaluation in order to gather the missing pieces that will be needed to make connections and to reconstruct the historical context of the novel by turning to the testimonies of the other characters. Having been introduced to the characters' memories, the reader might be likely to adopt Baby Suggs' position about Sethe's act: 'They came in her yard anyway and she could not approve or condemn Sethe's rough choice' (*B*, p. 212). Lastly, the characters' memories might function also as possible scenarios of what Sethe's children's future might have turned into, which is also in line with Sethe's conception of time, whereby even though a physical place does not exist anymore, its significance and what occurred there do not vanish because 'Nothing ever dies' (*B*, p. 44).

In sum, the reader might come to the conclusion that 'Sethe's choice is somehow beyond the reach of standard ethical judgement – an action at once instinctive and unnatural, motivated by love and destructive to life' (Phelan 2013, p. 379). Thus, the reader might redirect their moral assessment towards a system that was founded upon the uprooting of millions of people, who were then exploited and physically, psychologically, and verbally abused until they were considered useless. Such position does not exclude that the reader might also concur with Morrison's stance that, 'it was the right thing to do, but she had no right to do it' (Moyers, 1990). The reader's awareness of Sethe's motivations and the possible future prospects of her children's lives, had they returned to Sweet Home, may persuade them that Sethe's deed may have been the only option available to her in that moment, but at the same time, the reader may feel ambivalent towards Sethe because she still arrogated herself the power to kill, depriving her children of a chance at life.

Chapter Three

Emerald Fennell's *Promising Young Woman* (2020)

This chapter will be concerned with the analysis of Emerald Fennell's feature directorial debut, *Promising Young Woman* (2020), through the lens of negative empathy and the movie's relation with the rape-revenge genre. Firstly, I will outline the main characteristics and historical development of the rape-revenge genre by concentrating on a series of movies that were released between the 1970s and the 1990s. Such review aims to highlight the genre's filmic and narrative conventions and its main thematic concerns in order to provide a framework for the study of Fennell's movie, since the latter draws on some motifs of the genre, but it also offers some variations. Secondly, I will briefly hint at a more contemporary contextualization of the movie before identifying and describing the main scenes that depict the evolution of the female protagonist's revenge in order to underline the movie's main thematic centres and use of cinematic devices. Finally, I will dwell upon how the movie's imagery and choice of actors might affect the viewers' response to the female protagonist and how the absence of a cathartic ending leads to a conclusion that might go against the movie's own precepts.

1. Rape-revenge

The denomination itself may appear self-explanatory, since these movies are supposed to feature a rape, to which revenge follows. Therefore, a first generic definition of rape-revenge might be that of a film where a 'rape that is central to the narrative is punished by an act of vengeance, either by the victim themselves or by an agent' (Heller-Nicholas 2011, p. 3).

However, this apparently simple description encloses more complex issues that problematize a clear categorization of the rape-revenge. Clover's (1992) comprehension of rape-revenge as a subgenre of horror (p. 5) is refuted by Read (2000), who argues that Clover's 'generically specific model' (p. 11) does not consider the rape-revenge films' historical and cultural specificity. In fact, Read (2000) understands the rape-revenge as a 'narrative structure which, on meeting second-wave feminism in the 1970s, has produced a historically specific but generically diverse cycle of films' (p. 11). On the other hand, Henry's (2014) approach to the rape-revenge aims to regard it as a genre because not only does 'genre studies' (p. 4) serve to highlight and study its tendencies and variations, but it also might help legitimize it as an important genre that is equally worth studying, together with other traditional established genres: ‘Rape-revenge’s versatility, durability, cult popularity, its ideological ambiguity or ambivalence, and its chameleon nature offer interesting issues for the field’ (Henry 2014, p. 4).

Heller-Nicholas (2011) too recognizes that the two words “rape” and “revenge” imply a connection between a physical brutal act and its retaliation, which is imbued with emotional and ethical overtones (p. 4). She goes on to argue that the lack of a general consensus to a definition of rape-revenge is exemplary of a ‘broader general confusion’ (Heller-Nicholas 2011, p. 4) concerning rape, which continues still today. However, Henry (2014) points out that although the rape-revenge is a ‘hybrid genre’ (p. 3) that may seamlessly mix with other genres, it still features a series of defining characteristics. As the name itself reveals, the movies are divided into two main acts, namely, rape and revenge, which both provide a commentary upon ‘rape trauma’ (Henry 2014, p. 55) and rape itself; occasionally, the ‘victim-avenger’ (Henry 2014, p. 55) may replicate the rape on her rapist as part of her revenge. Moreover, the rape-revenge is characterized by ‘its own loose iconography’ (Henry 2014, p. 4), which is concerned with the depiction of the female protagonist as a ‘mud-covered semi-naked rape victim[s]’ (Henry 2014, p. 4), who turns into an avenger who wears red lipstick and ‘fetish costumes’ (Henry 2014, p. 4) and who might carry a gun and become a castrating avenger. The rape-revenge is often populated by a series of archetypal figures, such as the young, white, beautiful victim who transforms into a ‘*femme fatale* avenger’ (Henry 2014, p. 4, original emphasis), rapists, and rednecks. In turn, these characters and their portrayal inform the genre’s main themes, such as the heroine’s evolution from victim to heroine, rape trauma, the ethical implications of revenge, rejecting the law in order to take matters into one’s hands, and inflicting and receiving physical suffering (Henry 2014, p.4, p. 55).

Given its thematic centres and its characters’ portrayal, the rape-revenge may be regarded as a rich arena for discussions about rape and its aftermath, its representation in the cinematic medium, and the treatment of rape according to a cultural and gender perspective. Yet, despite its rich potential, the very tensions surrounding sexual violence that inform the genre become a source of critical disagreement on the ‘very “unrepresentability” of the reality and trauma of rape itself – the inability to capture the magnitude of human suffering that results from sexual violence’ (Heller-Nicholas 2011, p. 8).

Despite this difficulty, several movies have attempted to deal with these delicate issues and their cinematic rendition. The main thematic centres, recurring imagery, and significance of some of the movies that contributed to define the rape-revenge genre between the 1970s and 19990s will be tackled in order to highlight how *Promising Young Woman* interacts with and diverges from its predecessors. Although it is generally agreed that the rape-revenge started in the 1970s in the USA, Heller-Nicholas (2011) points out that not only does the presence of rape in movies date back to Hollywood's silent era with, for instance, D.W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* (1915), but she goes on to outline a series of movies featuring rape-revenge motifs that preceded the implementation of the Production Code in 1934 (pp. 14-17). However, here the focus will be mainly restricted to those movies released between the '70s and the '90s that exerted a strong influence on subsequent representatives of the genre.

1.1 1970s: from exploitation movies to the mainstream

Even though Ingmar Bergman's *The Virgin Spring* (1961) might not be properly defined as a rape-revenge movie, it is still considered an influential film for its religious overtones and, particularly, for Wes Craven's *Last House on the Left* (1972). Adapted from a medieval ballad, Bergman's movie features an act of revenge of a father on behalf of his raped and murdered daughter. In this movie, rape does not occupy a central role, but it functions as the triggering event that leads the father to embark upon a journey of spiritual salvation (Heller-Nicholas 2011, pp. 22-23). Craven's movie presents some similarities, insofar as the parents take upon the role of avengers for their raped and dead daughter, but unlike Bergman's movie, *Last House on the Left* is not concerned with the redemptive conclusion of the victim's father's journey. In fact, Heller-Nicholas (2011) argues that in Craven's movie the act of revenge does not lead to a positive outcome, but it highlights that 'in this world, revenge is futile, and can only be rewarded with chaos and despair' (p. 38) and that violence only leads to further violence, which is perpetrated by the parents, who have now turned into killers themselves.

Another important and divisive movie is Meir Zarchi's *I Spit on Your Grave* (1977), which Lehman (1993) ascribes to a sub-genre of the rape-revenge, wherein an attractive woman goes after the men who raped her in order to murder them one by one, often taking pleasure in the man's distress at the realization of her identity and what she plans to do (p. 103). The movie became object of critical debates and controversy surrounding its extreme and unflinching graphic portrayal of rape. Movie critic Roger Ebert claimed that after the movie's end, he 'walked out of the theatre quickly, feeling unclean, ashamed and depressed' (Ebert, 1980) and that he was appalled by the reactions of certain male moviegoers who appeared to enjoy the scenes of rape, whereas some others (female) cheered on the female protagonist's journey of revenge (Ebert, 1980). He concluded his review by defining the movie as 'an expression of the most diseased and perverted darker human natures' (Ebert, 1980), whose only plausible reason for it to be seen is if one wishes to 'be entertained by the sight of sadism and suffering' (Ebert, 1980).

As Ebert (1980) stated in his review, the plot is very simple: a woman, Jennifer, moves to the countryside in order to finish a writing project. She encounters a group of four local men, who will reveal to be her rapists. She is raped three times and, after a period of attempted physical and mental recovery, her decision to take revenge is preceded by Jennifer's visit to a church to plead for forgiveness for what she will do. She goes on a killing spree where she kills each one of her rapists by resorting to a series of methods that are as grisly as inventive: hanging, castration in a bathtub, death by axe, and mutilation by means of a boat propeller; and, with the last killing, the movie ends.

Clover (1992) states that the movie's 'perverse simplicity' (p. 119) may be considered one of its most distressing characteristics. The men are not depicted in any peculiar or cartoonish way nor are the rapes justified by the men's problematic upbringing; Jennifer's revenge is not prompted by psychological motives, but it is deemed a befitting retribution for what she has suffered, hence the law does not interfere nor do ethical and moral concerns appear to be a matter of importance (Clover 1992, p. 119). Furthermore, Clover (1992) traces the source of the movie's shocking effect to its familiarity: 'we recognize that the emotion it engages are regularly engaged by the big screen but almost never bluntly acknowledged for what they are' (p. 120).

Heller-Nicholas (2011) points out that the lack of 'filmic poetry – of allusion, of metaphor, of any kind of formal fanciness' (p. 36) does not grant an emotional distance for the viewer who might feel disoriented and taken aback by the rape scene. However, it is also the unabashed cruelty of the scene that may lead the viewer to experience a sensation of entrapment and powerlessness, which does not fade away even if the viewer may abandon the theatre or turn off the movie: '*I Spit on Your Grave* moves the onus of trying to comprehend the brutal incomprehensibility of rape firmly onto the spectator' (Heller-Nicholas 2011, p. 37). In addition, Lehman (1993) raises a similar point by drawing attention to how the protractedness of the rape scenes and the absence of eroticized shots of the woman's body augment not only the audience's discomfort at watching the scene, but they also allow the audience to find the violence of Jennifer's revenge warranted and male viewers in particular are less likely to enjoy the rape, identifying instead with the vindictive woman (p. 104).

On the other hand, Henry (2014) seems to diverge from Clover's (1992) argument because she argues that the movie is not completely bereft of any moral or ethical concerns, but it sheds light on the rapists' inability to hold themselves accountable when confronted by Jennifer (p. 47). By blaming each other or by ascribing guilt to Jennifer herself, they disavow their individual responsibility, fuelling thus Jennifer's desire for revenge. Therefore, Henry (2014) believes that Jennifer's unsparing attitude towards each one of them is evidence of the movie's laudable decision to position the onus of moral accountability on the rapists rather than on the victim (p. 47).

Furthermore, Henry (2014) identifies another interesting element that positions the movie within the rape-revenge genre, namely Jennifer's 'lack of subjectivity' (p. 47). Although the movie does present the viewer with Jennifer's point of view, it refrains from endowing her with full subjectivity. This is especially noticeable during her transformation into a 'mythical feminist avenger' (Henry 2014, p. 48), which may hinder the spectatorial identification. The transformation of Jennifer from victim into avenger is characterized by a mythical aura that can be seen when she is presented wearing a white dress or when she is steering the boat towards the men while brandishing the axe, recalling thus the imagery of vindictive female characters of Greek mythology, such as Amazons, Sirens, and Furies (Henry 2014, p. 48). Moreover, her carrying out her revenge is compounded with an almost impassibility on Jennifer's part that highlights the formal nature of her vindictive acts (Henry 2014, p. 48).

However, this alteration in the spectatorial identification with the protagonist may be indicative of how the rape-revenge deals with rape. Henry (2014) argues that in the first act, the viewer is likely to share an empathic response with the victim, whereas in the second act such response might be curtailed by the protagonist's change. In turn, such disconnection allows the viewer to not only take delight in the revenge section, but, if done properly, it may also create an opportunity for the spectator to ponder upon the ethical and political undertones of the protagonist's reaction to the rape (Henry 2014, p. 49).

Generally speaking, in the movies of the rape-revenge that were released in the late seventies and eighties, women would take matters into their own hands, either to avenge one's rape or that of a sister (literal or metaphorical) that was killed or left deeply traumatized after the sexual assault (Clover 1992, p. 138). Moreover, these movies featured a series of commonalities that were not a novelty in the genre, but they were still influenced by the evolution of social stances of that period: rape legitimized an all-out retaliation and the rape-and-revenge narrative provided enough drama for a feature film where the woman's survival and her transformation into her own avenger were even more positively appraised (Clover 1992, pp. 138-139). Finally, the characters' world and the real world was, and still is, marked by a "rape culture" where '*all* males – husbands, boyfriends, lawyers, politicians – are directly or indirectly complicit and that men are thus not just individually but corporately liable' (Clover 1992, p. 139, original emphasis), an aspect that these subsequent movies will strongly highlight.

In particular, the following movie is regarded by Clover (1992) as the movie that paved the way for the rape-revenge's entrance in the mainstream: Lamont Johnson's *Lipstick* (1976) (p. 138). The establishing shot immediately foregrounds a crucial element that will affect the framing of the protagonist's rape: Chris McCormick's lips occupy the frame and, as the camera tracks back, the moviegoer sees Chris laying on a bed as part of her photoshoot for the promotion of a lipstick. In fact, not only will Chris's supermodel career hold a considerable heft in the discussion of her rape in the courtroom, but her character may be considered a stand-in for a general consideration of the overt sexualization of women's bodies. Lehman's (1993) comment upon the rape-revenge narratives' tendency to depict men as 'sexually repulsive' (p. 109) is not consistent with the rapist of *Lipstick*, namely, Gordon Stuart, a music teacher and aspiring composer who is presented as a good-looking and nice man. Moreover, Heller-Nicholas (2011) argues that an equal representation of the lives of both the rapist and the victim before the assault and the avoidance of a stereotypical portrayal of the rapist ensure that Gordon's moral position following the rape relies exclusively upon his brutality against Chris (p. 27).

In this movie, the woman's revenge does not immediately assume a violent connotation, but it first passes through the courtroom. It may be important to add that revenge is not solely motivated by rape but, as Clover (1992) suggests, revenge also hinges upon 'the power dynamic between men and women that makes rape happen in the first place' (p. 144). Such dynamics may be seen in the courtroom where the issue of sexual consent and Chris's career and image become the cornerstones of the defence's winning arguments. This movie exposes the law's failure to convict the rapist and its propensity to quickly dismiss the victim's account of the rape. Chris's lawyer herself compares the courtroom to another abuse where the defendant's lawyer is going to 'terrify you [her], degrade you [her], control you [her], humiliate you [her]' (Johnson, 1976), thus foreshadowing the circumstances that will lead to the rapist's acquittal. In the courtroom, the fact that Kathy, Chris's little sister, did not call the police after stumbling upon Chris and Gordon is regarded as strong evidence that what occurred was not rape, but consensual raw intercourse.

However, Chris's rape is positioned within two main frameworks: Chris's career and Gordon's assertion of power. As it was stated earlier, the first instance is foregrounded from the very beginning and it returns also during the first encounter between Gordon and Chris at a photoshoot on a beach where Gordon sees Chris half-naked; both instances are brought out in court to reinforce the defence's plea for Gordon's innocence. In particular, Chris's photos are believed to encourage a view of the woman as a 'sexual commodity to be consumed' (Heller-Nicholas 2011, p. 29), promoting thus the idea that, because of her public image, she was "asking for it". Gordon himself employs this argument also during the rape where he obliges Chris to wear the red lipstick that she was advertising at the very beginning of the movie. Heller-Nicholas (2011) sees this act as Gordon's endeavour to 'make the rape as much about her (and her sexuality) as possible' (p. 29), but also as a way to sexualize the rape, even though the assault was prompted by Gordon's anger and his feeling of having been turned down by Chris. In fact, Gordon's hopes that Chris's fame and net of high-end acquaintances may have given him the opportunity to launch his career are thwarted when Chris shows disinterest in his music. Therefore, the rape may be seen as Gordon's willingness to impose his power: 'men rape when rape is the only way they have left of asserting their domination over women' (Clover 1992, p. 145).

Chris turns to violence after Gordon sexually assaulted her little sister, Kathy. The shooting scene occurs at a parking lot near the building where Chris is doing a photoshoot. Chris, who is wearing a long red dress and the red lipstick, starts shooting repeatedly at Gordon until there are no bullets left. The closing shot sees Chris again in a court room and a voice-over informs the viewer and Chris herself that she is acquitted of Gordon's murder.

1.2 1980s: variations on the theme

Abel Ferrara's *Ms. 45* (1981) emphasizes the issue of transformation of the victim into avenger and how a deeply entrenched rape culture may lead a woman to resort to violence in order to protect not only herself, but women as a whole. This latter aspect is stated from the start with a sequence where Thana, the movie's mute heroine, and her female co-workers are being catcalled, while walking down the streets of New York. Moreover, the perception of women's bodies as flesh ready to be consumed is smartly hinted at through a dolly shot on the meat while Thana is doing grocery shopping. Thana is sexually assaulted twice in a short amount of time: she is first raped in a dark alley and once she gets home, she is raped again by a burglar who had broken into her house. Lehman (1993) observes that, in movies such as *Ms. 45*, the narrative development may seem improbable, insofar as all the male characters are negatively depicted as sexually abhorrent and the high-frequency occurrence of rapes may appear exaggerated (pp. 108-109).

The apparent redundancy and display of stereotypical figures are not completely unmotivated and they may affect the viewer's perception. However, this exaggeration may aptly convey the idea that 'men use their superior strength to victimize women, and women for that reason live in constant threat' (Clover 1992, p. 144). Thana's violent reaction against her rapist occurs during the second rape when she hits him with a steam iron, which may be seen as an allusion to Thana's job as a seamstress and a possible anticipation of the death of her patronizing employer at her hands. Subsequently, she saws and chops up the rapist's body, whose pieces are then enveloped in trash bags and put in her fridge. Then, Thana proceeds to disperse those trash bags across the city's corners and trash bins, and it is during one of those ventures that Thana kills a street harasser with her .45. Despite her distress and physical discomfort at her act, her next killing signals a change in Thana's attitude. She pretends to indulge the advances of a sleazy fashion photographer who claims that, 'When I [he] see [sees] beauty, I [he] gotta go after it' (Ferrara, 1981). Once they arrive at his studio, Thana shoots him, her firm face and posture do not reveal fear, but she appears fierce and determinate.

The next scene exemplifies the exterior side of Thana's transformation: Thana is shown carefully applying a red lipstick, wearing make-up and a black dress, and putting her .45 in her bag. This marks the beginning of Thana's metamorphosis into a 'kind of ultimate feminist vigilante gunning down men who traffic in women' (Clover 1992, p.

141). She goes on a killing rampage, which is defined by the newscast as ‘the largest mass killing in New York City in eight years’ (Ferrara, 1981). It should be noted that Thana seamlessly moves from one killing to another without being intercepted by the law enforcement, nor does Thana ever consider going to the police after the first rape. This may be due also to the fast pacing of the movie and it may be interpreted as a deliberate choice in order to focus exclusively on Thana’s vindictive enterprise. Finally, the ending of the movie presents Thana dressed as a nun for what will be her last killing spree at her office Halloween party where, after having killed her condescending employer, she goes on to kill other men, until she is stabbed by one of her female co-workers.

Thana’s muteness may assume different meanings both within and outside of the movie. Heller-Nicholas (2011) argues that, as a victim, her silence may be regarded as ‘her literal inability to speak up for herself’ (p. 43), whereas as a vindictive femme fatale, Thana’s silence may be seen as a weapon, which further enhances the impact of her physical presence (Heller-Nicholas 2011, p. 43). On the other hand, Thana’s muteness may be deemed a materialization of the ‘taboo unspeakability of rape’ (Heller-Nicholas 2011, p. 43) as well as the failure to verbalize the extent of female oppression.

Thana’s use of violence and transformation are indicative of two distinct, yet interrelated, phenomena in the rape-revenge. Clover (1992) points out that ‘female self-sufficiency’ (p. 143) is a defining feature of the rape-revenge and that a ‘masculinization’ (p. 143) of the female protagonist corresponds to a ‘normalization’ (p. 144) of the rapist, to the extent that a depiction of the ‘rapist-as-psychopathic-creep’ (p. 144) tends to be eschewed in favour of the ‘rapist-as-standard-guy’ (p. 144). However, such process of “masculinization” is usually juxtaposed with a process of eroticization of the heroine, as Thana’s change attests.

On the one hand, female attractiveness and an eroticization of the female avenger may be seen as an element of interest for male viewers, who might take pleasure in watching the heroine butcher a male body. In fact, Lehman (1993) suggests that the spectacularization of male punishment and the fact that in some movies, the act of killing is situated within an erotic context where the avenging woman deceives the man into thinking that they are about to have sex, are appealing elements to male moviegoers (p. 107). Given Lehman’s (1993) claim that these movies are ‘made by and frequently marketed for men’ (p. 107), he advances the hypothesis that these motifs stem from a ‘male masochistic fantasy so extreme that even brutal death can be part of the scenario’

(p. 113). On the other hand, Read (2000) points out that the female heroine's eroticization may be interpreted twofold: first, it may be enacted to counterbalance the fact that rape scenes are short and are not eroticized; second, eroticization problematizes the transition from what is considered a feminine space (rape) to a masculine space (revenge) (p. 40, p. 50). Therefore, Read (2000) believes that such transition may be better read as a shift from 'private to public femininities' (p. 50), which entails also a movement from a desexualized private dimension to a heavily sexualized public environment. Thus, the female avenger's eroticization provides the heroine with a sexuality that becomes her 'capital' (Read 2000, p. 51), or weapon, in the public space.

Unlike their predecessors, in the rape-revenge movies of the mid-1980s rape tended to be 'moved virtually offscreen' (Clover 1992, p. 140), meaning that the depiction of rape was either completely absent or, if included, its representation was kept brief and was not detailed. However, it should be pointed out that there were still some exceptions, such as *The Accused* (1988), which will be analysed later. If in Ferrara's movie the law did not seem to exist, in Robert M. Young's *Extremities* (1986) the law enforcement fails to provide adequate aid and safety to the protagonist, forcing her to resort to extreme means to protect herself.

The movie's beginning aligns the viewer with both the soon-to-be victim, Marjorie, and her assailant, Joe, insofar as the camera cuts back and forth between the two characters up until they arrive at a parking lot. However, the preceding moments to the attack and the rapist's choice of a victim are portrayed through a point-of-view shot where the camera follows Joe's gaze as he stealthily moves across the parking lot. Marjorie manages to escape before the rape occurs and she goes directly to the police where she is told that her charges would be reduced to a "her word against his word", meaning that he would walk out. Since Joe took her wallet and thus knows her address, Marjorie asks for protection, but it is denied to her. Therefore, the first minutes of the movie have already foregrounded its main thematic concerns, namely how the law regards the differentiation between rape and attempted rape, sexual consent,[6] and its lack of proper assistance, leaving thus the woman to live a life under the constant threat that she may be assaulted again. As a result, Marjorie considers the idea of buying a gun, but she is discouraged by her roommates, Terry and Patricia.

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[6] Once at the police station, Marjorie objects to a verb ('complied') used by a female officer to summarize Marjorie's report of the events. Marjorie points out that the officer omitted the part where she was being held at knifepoint, which left her no other choice but to follow his orders; she says, 'I don't like your wording' (Young, 1976).

Marjorie's worries prove to be real when Joe enters her house under the excuse of looking for someone. Up until this moment, neither Marjorie nor the spectator know Joe's face, since it has always been covered either with a helmet or a ski mask or the camera was positioned behind his back. Hence, the viewer and Marjorie share the same knowledge, augmenting thus the suspense leading to the revelation of the rapist's identity. The fact that the depiction of the attack features an equal amount of point-of-view shots and close-up shots of both Marjorie and Joe may produce contrasting effects on moviegoers: on the one hand, it may enhance the viewer's experience of the assault because it does not prioritize neither the rapist nor the victim's perspective, but on the other it may cause bodily discomfort.

Moreover, Heller-Nicholas (2011) suggests that not only does the movie revolve around rape and its related issues, but it also encompasses other important themes, namely female abuse and domestic violence (p. 31). At a certain moment, Joe commands Marjorie to prepare him something to eat: his posture – sprawled on a chair in the kitchen while sipping beer – and his comment, 'I come home and you got nothing to fucking eat?' (Young, 1986) may recall an instance of domestic violence. However, during the assault, Marjorie often tries to either flee or wriggle away from Joe's grip, until she manages to knock him out and to tie his feet and his hands up, so that he cannot move. Marjorie now seems determinate to go to the police, but she seems to reconsider her decision when Joe faces Marjorie with the hard truth: 'Go ahead! Get the fucking cops! You can't prove a thing! It's my word against yours. They *gotta* let me go. They lock me up, I get out, I get you' (Young 1986, emphasis mine).

Joe's argument sets Marjorie's revenge in motion: she builds a makeshift prison in the fireplace where she confines Joe and then, she starts digging a grave in her garden. However, the arrival of her two roommates complicates the execution of her plan. Both Terry and Patricia attempt to dissuade Marjorie from carrying out her retaliation, claiming that calling the police would be the right thing to do, but Marjorie rejects their advice because she knows that it is impossible to prove an 'attempted rape' (Young, 1986), hence he could easily be released and all of them would be in danger. She presents Terry with an either/or choice, 'Choose. Him or us' (Young, 1986).

In the movie the binary opposition that sees the victim opposed to the rapist is juxtaposed with an ethical conflict among the three women. Heller-Nicholas (2011) points out that the movie does not solely focus on an “us vs. them” situation, but it draws attention also to the ‘splintering of the three women (the “sisterhood”)’ (p. 31) caused by an ethical clash that highlights the variety of the courses of action that a woman is willing to take. The articulation of this ethical discussion is mostly shot from a low-angle camera that identifies Joe’s position behind the bars of an old bed frame in the fireplace, as he listens to the women and awaits his sentence. Patricia strongly disagrees with Marjorie’s treatment of Joe because he is after all a ‘human being just like you and me’ (Young, 1986), but Marjorie refuses to be associated with him, denying his humanity: ‘Like who? Don’t include me with that animal’ (Young, 1986).

As the women quarrel over Joe’s faith, occasional close-up shots of Joe’s countenance reveal his hubris and almost pleasure at seeing Patricia confronting Marjorie, to the point of physically blocking her from hitting him with a hammer. Terry’s revelation that she herself is a rape-survivor does seem to soften Marjorie’s position, but she is not willing to let him go unless he gives a full confession in front of them. He does not take her seriously and provides a fake account of the events where he reframes the assault as a consensual sexual encounter and he tries to recast himself as the victim of Marjorie’s violent outburst. Marjorie is furious and humiliated, but she manages to find Joe’s knife, the one he used on her during the first assault. The next sequence may be seen as an interesting subversion of roles, insofar as Marjorie sort of replicates the assault on Joe by repeating what he said to her and by holding him at knifepoint. The camera does not alternate only between Marjorie and Joe’s countenances, but it cuts also to Patricia and Terry’s terrified faces. Joe’s arrogance is immediately supplanted by horror and bewilderment at Marjorie’s simulation of the assault, but it is not until she points the knife at his genitals that he caves in and he first reveals that he was going to kill Marjorie and her roommates, then he confesses to Marjorie’s assault and three more. The movie concludes with Joe curled up next to Marjorie as she waits for the police.

If Marjorie’s re-enactment of the assault, which however does never become sexual, may be seen as a role reversal where Marjorie is in a position of power and Joe experiences what his victims must have felt like, the movie’s conclusion appears to restore Joe’s authority. Heller-Nicholas (2011) points out that the movie’s resolution reinstates

Joe's power because it is his decision to confess that enables Marjorie's freedom and reconciliation with her friends (p. 32).

If in *Extremities* (1986) Marjorie's revenge is hindered by the intervention of her roommates and Joe still has the final word, *Positive I.D.* (Andy Anderson, 1986) shifts the focus from the rape, which is never shown, and its revenge to the victim's coping with rape trauma. The movie offers an interesting deviation from the common two-part structure of the rape-revenge and, in so doing, it attempts to shed light on the victim's physical and mental recovery. The issue of transformation may be said to be part of the movie's thematic concerns, insofar as the woman changes her appearance when she decides to adopt a new identity.[7] Nonetheless, such makeover is not prompted by her desire for revenge, but it is, first and foremost, conducive to her psychological and physical healing process. Therefore, although the revenge still occurs, its execution is not the focal point nor is it depicted as a protracted spectacularization of violence.

In the movie Julie's rape does not take up place neither in its physical enactment, nor in its verbal articulation. The first minutes establish Julie as a woman who is dealing with some traumatic event that happened a year before. She often takes showers where she aggressively scrubs her skin, while crying, moaning, and muffling her screams. She often lies in bed and she is under the care of a doctor, perhaps a therapist or a psychiatrist. The adoption of a new identity seems to help Julie cope with her trauma, but there has not been any hint at a possible connection between this new identity and her revenge yet. The disclosure of the nature of Julie's traumatic episode coincides with Julie's listening to the newscast where she learns that her rapist's sentence has been reduced to 'seven months on charges of simple assault before being eligible for parole' (Anderson, 1986). The newscast describes the rape as 'brutal' (Anderson, 1986) and her trial as a mediatic case that garnered a lot of attention, to the point of causing a 'public outcry' (Anderson, 1986). The absence of the rape's visual representation and the omission of the scenes concerned with the courtroom and the legal process may affect the viewer's alignment with the protagonist, since Julie is not visually defined by her rape, directing thus the spectator's attention mainly towards her physical and psychological rehabilitation.

The moviegoer may be taken aback by Julie's revenge, which takes place towards the end of the movie. In fact, upon a first view, there do not seem to be any clear allusions to Julie's desire for revenge, although she does buy a gun and there are some temporal cues that signal that the day of Julie's rapist's release is coming close, but the adoption of a new identity appears to be independent of any revenge plan. Heller-Nicholas (2011) regards the film as a 'retrospective rape-revenge film' (p. 67) that redirects the ethical concerns to Julie's endeavour to take back control on her life by means of a 'post-rape identity' (p. 67). In fact, the movie's conclusion, which sees Julie under a new disguise at a telephone booth of a gas station with luggage, may indicate that Julie has decided that she cannot go back to her old existence.

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[7] The transformation of the film's protagonist, Julie, is not limited to an external change (clothes, make-up, hairstyle), but it is carried out in order for Julie to build a whole new separate life, including legal documents that prove her existence, a new apartment and a car under her new name, Roberta "Bobbie" King.

If in the aforementioned movies the law was either absent or its legal deficiencies led the victims to resort to other (more violent) measures, Jonathan Kaplan's *The Accused* (1988) turns the courtroom into the place where revenge may be obtained.[8] Although this movie is mainly regarded as a legal drama rather than a rape-revenge, its depiction of rape and of its legal process still constitute a starting point for a general reflection on these issues. The movie follows a woman, Sarah Tobias, who after having been gang raped at a pub, attempts to seek justice with the help of a lawyer, Kathryn Murphy. Even if in the movie revenge does not equate with bloodshed nor is the victim its executioner, the violence is embedded in the woman's treatment in court and in the visual representation of the rape scene.

The validity of and importance given to one's narrative and the implications inherent to the act of looking are relevant to both the movie and the audience. Up until the final courtroom scene, Sarah is not given the opportunity to tell her story and even in that occasion, her story is not endowed with both legal and cinematic authority. After the rapists are charged with 'reckless endangerment' (Kaplan, 1988), Sarah's lawyer wants to prosecute the other men who were cheering and chanting during the rape for criminal solicitation; should she win, the rape would go on record and the rapists would face a five-year jail sentence. Kathryn's argument is based upon a differentiation between spectators and those who engaged in 'clapping, cheering, pushing, goading, getting the rape going and keeping it going' (Kaplan, 1988).

Young (2010) posits that the 'connections between vision and sexual violence' (p. 51) lie at the heart of the movie. Such connection plays out in the moments before the rape with Sarah's 'returned look' (Young 2010, p. 52) to her future rapists and the reciprocal exchange of flirtatious gestures with the men, but also during the rape. In particular, as the rape is taking place, the act of watching may be said to assume different meanings. Firstly, there are the men in the bar, whose spectatorship becomes liable to the charge of criminal solicitation; secondly, there is Kenneth Joyce, the friend of one of the rapists, who called 911 to report the rape and whose testimony in court allows Kathryn to win the case. Thus, the movie makes a distinction between Kenneth's role as a witness 'with forensic potential' (Young 2010, p. 53) and the rape's spectators who are instead punishable.

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[8] Despite having initially registered low scores at test screenings, *The Accused* (Kaplan, 1988) managed to hit the box-office and earned Jodie Foster, who played the rape victim, an Oscar for Best Actress (Ford, 2016).

Kenneth's pivotal part in Sarah's case is further emphasized when Sarah and Kenneth's testimonies are put in comparison from a cinematic and legal perspective. When Sarah is on the stand, the camera starts tracking in towards her as her narration veers towards the initial moments of her rape, until she is in a close-up shot. However, her testimony is put under question because she had drunk and smoked marijuana, she did not reject the men's advances, and her position (held down forcibly on a pinball machine) did not allow her to have a clear sight of the identities of the men who were cheering. On the other hand, Kenneth's deposition is invested with a double authority, namely a cinematic and a forensic one (Young 2010, p. 56) Kenneth's narration in court becomes the voice-over of the flashbacks of that night, giving thus a visual representation of the rape. However, Kenneth's voice-over does not mean that the viewer sees the rape from Kenneth's perspective, but the five-minute-long rape scene is shot from a variety of angles: the camera alternates from Sarah's point of view, which is conveyed through a shaking camera, to the point of view of the rapists and the chanting crowd, to Kenneth's point of view from a side position.

The fact that the belated visual rendition of rape runs parallel to Kenneth's account may affect the moviegoers' position. On the one hand, by situating the rape scene towards the end of the movie, the viewer might be said to take on the role of the jury, since it is in this moment that they are given access to two key testimonies and to a visual rendering of the sexual assault. On the other hand, the moviegoer may be said to share Kenneth's role as a witness who is able to attest to the rape's violence rather than that of the spectator who may be delighted by what they are seeing (Young 2010, p. 54). Hence, it follows that 'looking at sexual violence in *The Accused* is implied to be the conduit to the achievement of revenge: justice is claimed to arise from the forensic capacities of the spectator's relation to the crime-image' (Young 2010, p. 56).

Nonetheless, the general belief that in a rape-revenge narrative the visual display of rape may be necessary to reinforce the viewer's understanding of the gravity of the assault and its effect on the victim does not take into consideration the meanings behind the act of looking. Young (2010) argues that looking should not be regarded as '*just* looking' (p. 70, original emphasis) or as an act that becomes relevant only in legal terms, but it should be reconsidered within the context of the movie (p. 70). In *The Accused*, the fact that the representation of Sarah's subjectivity, her body, and her experience acquire importance only when they are described by and for others implies that the moviegoer is relegated to a position where 'spectatorship matters only in terms of legal contingency: will the prosecutor succeed in convincing the jury? Will the male bystander give evidence? (Young 2010, p. 70). Lastly, placing the portrayal of rape during the courtroom scene may convey the message that the legitimacy of the visual depiction of rape outweighs that of the woman's account and that both the law and the viewer may ultimately rely upon it to support her statement (Young 2010, p. 70).

In sum, even though *The Accused* sheds light on how watching a rape is equated with being guilty of rape,[9] the final indictment of the cheering onlookers is made possible only after the law's failure to convict the rapists for the crime they actually committed, namely, rape and because of a lawyer's determination to obtain justice for her client and a male testimony that becomes the official narration of Sarah's sexual assault.

1.3 1990s: Ridley Scott's *Thelma & Louise* (1991)

The last movie that will be touched upon is Ridley Scott's *Thelma & Louise* (1991) whose cult status is not usually associated with the rape-revenge genre, but its depiction of the assault and its significance within the movie narrative render it an interesting example. Although Lehman (1993) acknowledges that *Thelma & Louise* may feature elements of rape-revenge stories, he argues that the movie may not be properly ascribed to the genre because it refrains from eroticizing female violence against the male body (p. 106). The movie revolves around two women, Thelma and Louise, who decide to take a two-day trip together to the countryside. However, their getaway needs to be rerouted when, after Thelma has been sexually assaulted outside of a bar, Louise shoots her rapist, Harlan. Therefore, the fact that the revenge occurs immediately after the rape (or attempted rape)[10] does not make it an end in itself, but rather the act functions as a plot device that transforms the two women into fugitives. In addition, if in the rape-revenge stories the act of revenge usually restores the world's balance, in *Thelma & Louise*, this act of violence throws the women's world off its axis (Young 2010, p. 60).

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[9] Kenneth watched the rape and did not attempt to stop it, nor did he call for help, but Kathryn claims that his conduct does not make him liable to criminal solicitation because he did not 'induce or entreat or encourage or persuade another person to commit a rape' (Kaplan, 1988). Therefore, in the movie watching rape alone does not constitute a criminal offence.

As far as the rape's portrayal is concerned, Thelma and her rapist's faces are not shown in close-up shots and neither are there point-of view-shots, but the camera is positioned to the side, so that the viewer is shown parts of their two bodies: Harlan is depicted from the waist up, augmenting thus the perception of danger and his force, while Thelma is also depicted from the waist up, bent over the hood of a car and crying (Young 2010, p. 58). Thus, Young (2010) claims that the spectator is only a '*spectator*' (p. 59), whose visual field encompasses both Thelma and Harlan with Thelma placed as a sexualized object (p. 59). Lastly, it is Harlan's brazenness and male bravado that lead him to his death. As the two women are about to leave, he says that, 'I [he] should've gone ahead and fucked her!' (Scott, 1991), to which follows a 'Suck my cock' (Ridley, 1991), causing Louise to first pull the trigger and then to go closer to his dead body and to whisper 'You watch your mouth, buddy' (Scott, 1991). On the one hand, Louise's shooting Harlan may be interpreted as a belated revenge for a past rape that may have allegedly occurred to her in Texas, even though it is never made clear because she remains vague about it. On the other hand, Heller-Nicholas (2011) suggests that Louise's violent reaction at Harlan's verbal abuse may be read as Louise's willingness to obtain 'liberation from a far broader notion of oppression and abuse than just this one act' (p. 34).

In conclusion, this section aimed to provide an overview of some of the movies that contributed to define a rape-revenge genre as a way to lay the groundwork for the analysis of *Promising Young Woman* (2020). The law's inability to hold rapists accountable and its tendency to put the blame on the victim is a staple of these narratives. As a consequence, these women decide to face down their rapists by recurring to violent means in order to reinstate the equilibrium. However, in these films the women, either by themselves or with the help of a third party, manage to successfully carry out their vindictive missions, reaching thus a cathartic ending. By contrast, in Fennell's movie the protagonist's death at the ends of the rapist does not signal the end because the completion of her revenge is delegated to those very institutions that dismiss and downplay women's request for help and justice, withholding thus a cathartic denouement.

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[10] From a visual standpoint, the movie does not show Thelma being sodomized by Harlan because first, the camera shows both of their upper bodies, then it goes on to show Harlan forcing Thelma to open her legs, as he briskly attempts to force himself on her; the camera stops on his face as Louise's gun enters the frame. However, when Thelma and Louise get in the car to drive away from the crime scene, Thelma says that, 'he was raping me [her]' (Scott, 1991).

2. Emerald Fennell's *Promising Young Woman* (2020)

Before tackling the most crucial scenes of Fennell's movie, I will briefly touch upon two more frameworks that might help contextualize the movie from a more contemporary cultural perspective. Positioning *Promising Young Woman* within the context of the rape-revenge might be helpful to observe how this movie interacts with and departs from the filmic and narrative conventions of the genre. More specifically, the movie might be considered to be part of what Henry (2014) calls a 'revisionist' (p. 5) rape-revenge. The term entails that these films reformulate and revise the genre's codes, also in terms of gender roles and their dealing with the ethical implications of revenge.

Clover's (1992) understanding of spectatorial identification in rape-revenge movies hinges upon a 'cross-gender identification of the most extreme, corporeal sort' (p. 154). Clover (1992) argues that the movies' focalization on the female protagonist by means of narrative and cinematic techniques leads a male viewer to identify with the female protagonist and to imaginatively participate in her revenge, playing also on male masochistic fantasies of seeing women maiming male bodies (pp. 153-154). On the other hand, Henry (2014) claims that the revisionist genre attempts to go beyond a gender differentiation between the protagonist and the moviegoer in order to favour the '*corporeal* nature of spectatorship in the genre and the ethical contemplation of revenge that this positioning gives access to' (p. 12). In particular, Henry (2014) suggests that these movies are likely to give the spectator a 'phenomenological and ethical access' (p. 12) to the protagonist by means of Smith's (1995) concepts of 'alignment' (p. 83) and allegiance (p. 84), whereby the viewer becomes acquainted with the character's actions, knowledge, and their internal state in order to form a moral assessment (Henry 2014, p. 12).

The revisionist movies may be said to put emphasis on the viewer's apprehension of the 'phenomenology of rape' (Henry 2014, p. 14), namely how the victim attempts to adjust their relationship with the world following the rape and how rape may alter their self-perception and their ways of interacting with others. As far as the ethical aspect is concerned, the 'victim-avenger' (Henry 2014, p. 12) becomes the audience's ethical guidance in the movie's rumination on the efficacy of revenge, the spectatorial participation in the vengeful act, and how far the victim is willing to go in order to avenge the rape (Henry 2014, pp. 17-18). Therefore, the analysis of *Promising Young Woman* will focus on how Cassie's physical and psychological recovery process following her friend's rape and suicide and her subsequent journey as an 'avenging angel who comes and offers redemption or punishment' (Variety, 2020) might affect the viewer's response to the character and prime them for an ending that withholds catharsis.

In addition, besides the rape-revenge genre, the movie may be also considered within another context, namely the #MeToo movement. The movement is generally thought to have started in 2017 in concomitance with a streak of allegations of sexual harassment and abuse against former film producer, Harvey Weinstein. It then gained media currency with the viral hashtag "#MeToo" when the actor and survivor of sexual assault, Alyssa Milano, invited victims of sexual assault and abuse to respond to her tweet with the words "Me too". However, despite the increasing popularity that the #MeToo gained following these events, it should be pointed out that this social and cultural movement was founded earlier in 2006 by Tarah Burke who, in light of her own experience with sexual assault, wanted to help other survivors of sexual abuse, especially women of colour in disadvantaged communities (Ebony, 2017). The meaning behind the words "Me Too" was explained by Burke herself as a 'catchphrase to be used from survivor to survivor to let folks know that they were not alone' (Ebony, 2017).

As a result, starting from 2017, a series of movies concerned with sexual abuse and power dynamics have been released.[11] Horton (2022) points out that #MeToo movies generally present certain characteristics, such as focusing the movie narrative on the women and avoiding explicit depictions of the sexual assault in favour of visual or verbal allusions that rely upon the audience's knowledge of the media discourse surrounding these issues.

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[11] Even though there are TV series that deal with issues that are #MeToo-adjacent, such as Michaela Coel's *I May Destroy You* (2020), here the focus is restricted to movies. For instance, some other movies that were released in the same year of *Promising Young Woman* include: Kitty Green's *The Assistant* (2020), Eliza Hittman's *Never Rarely Sometimes Always* (2020), and Romola Garai's *Amulet* (2020) (Willmore, 2020).

2.1 Cassie’s vengeful journey

The establishing shot may be said to set the tone of the movie: sections of male bodies, from below the waist and their faces, are shown in slow motion as they dance in a club, possibly alluding to a subversion of roles, both behind and in front of the camera. Subsequently, a woman, sprawled on a couch seemingly unconscious, draws the attention of a group of men, prompting one to say that, ‘If she’s not careful, someone’s gonna take advantage. Especially the kind of guys in this club’ (Fennell, 2020). The woman in question is Cassandra Thomas (Carey Mulligan), a thirty-year-old medical student dropout who routinely goes to night clubs in order to perform the same act: she pretends to be heavily drunk until a man notices her and, under the false pretence of helping her out, he tries to take advantage of her. However, when Cassie stops her drunken pantomime and soberly confronts the man, the latter suddenly becomes very defensive and apologetic.

Even though the reasons behind Cassie’s performance are not immediately disclosed, these nocturnal encounters will reveal to be Cassie’s way to deal with her trauma and sense of guilt following the rape and suicide of her best friend, Nina. During these nights-out the men repeatedly compliment Cassie for her beauty, then they proceed to offer her (or force her to take) alcohol and, occasionally, drugs in order to destabilize her even further and to start getting physical. However, as soon as Cassie discards her drunk pretence, these men recoil in sheer bewilderment, striving to justify their actions and to convince Cassie that they are actually the “nice guys”. In the movie, the “nice guy” label seems to be associated with several male characters: they call themselves the ”nice guy”; they are described as such; or their image and attitude may recall the idea of niceness, but in the end they all turn out to be complicit in abusive and violent behaviours against women. Nonetheless, the film does not only expose male’s adherence to rape culture, but it shows that women too are not exempted.

The appearance of Ryan (Bo Burnham) in Cassie’s life may be seen as ambivalent: on the one hand, he may represent a chance for Cassie to find a way out of a cycle of self-destructive behaviour, while, on the other hand, the fact that Ryan is an old acquaintance from medical school forces Cassie to deal with the past. During one of their conversations about their time at medical school, Ryan mentions the name of the man who will reveal to be Nina’s rapist: Alexander Monroe (Chris Lowell). There is not an explicit disclosure of his connection to Nina’s case yet, but when Ryan mentions the name, an eerie music accompanies the camera as it progressively draws closer to Cassie's face until she is in a close-up shot, which betrays her discomfort.

After this moment, Cassie's revenge plan is set in motion. Each act is signalled by the appearance of a pink vertical dash on the screen that recalls Cassie's ritualistic procedure of keeping track of the men who have fallen preys to her night-time activities by writing down their names, each corresponding to a single bar; after four bars, they are crossed out. Lastly, each act also serves to provide the viewer with information about the mysterious circumstances surrounding Cassie's decision to leave medical school and Nina's rape.

The first victim is Madison McPhee (Alison Brie), a former classmate and friend of Nina and Cassie. When being confronted about her ignoring Nina's cry for help, Madison attempts to defend herself by putting the blame on Nina's tendency to often get drunk and her sexuality, which affected her credibility: 'Look, when you get that drunk, things happen. Don't get blackout drunk all the time and then expect people to be on your side when you have sex with someone you don't want to' (Fennell, 2020). Madison's unmovable position triggers Cassie's retaliation for her: after having gotten her drunk, she bribes a man to make Madison believe that they slept together. The next day Cassie ignores Madison's several calls and voicemail messages where Madison desperately asks her to help her remember what happened because she was too drunk, convincing thus Cassie that Madison may have learnt her lesson.

Even though the second victim is Dean Walker (Connie Britton), Cassie's scheme is not directly aimed at her, but it involves someone who is very close to the woman. For this second act, Cassie disguises herself as a makeup artist who has lost her way to go to the place where she is supposed to work for the music video of a boyband. Cassie intercepts the Dean's daughter, who happens to be a fan of the boyband, and she convinces her to get in the car with her. As the confrontation between Cassie and the Dean unfolds, the viewer is provided with further information about Nina's rape and its aftermath, favouring thus a brief and general verbal rendition of the assault, rather than a visual one.

The Dean's forgetfulness about Nina's case gives Cassie the opportunity to remind her that Nina was raped by Alexander Monroe,[12] whom the Dean describes as a 'really nice guy' (Fennell, 2020), in front of his friends who were 'watching, laughing' (Fennell,

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[12] Cassie does not use the verb 'raped', but she says that Al Monroe brought Nina back to his room 'where he had sex with her repeatedly' (Fennell, 2020). Even if the word 'rape' is never used throughout the movie, I employ the word 'rape' to differentiate it from a consensual sexual encounter.

2020), while taking advantage of Nina's blackout. The day after, Nina's body was covered with bruises, which Cassie describes as 'handprints' (Fennell, 2020). Cassie exposes the Dean's dismissal of Nina's case: she believed that it was 'too much of a "he said, she said" situation' (Fennell, 2020) but, more importantly, even ten years later the Dean reframes Nina's rape as a 'bad choice' (Fennell, 2020) and as part of those 'mistakes [that] can be so damaging and really regrettable' (Fennell, 2020). The Dean goes on to say that given the fact that she often receives similar accusations, she cannot 'ruin a young man's life every time we [they] get an accusation like this [that]' (Fennell, 2020) because she has to 'give him the benefit of the doubt' (Fennell, 2020), perpetrating thus a system that protects instead of holding sex offenders accountable, while the victims are left alone in their dealing with the aftermath and with the possibility that it might occur again.

Akin to Madison before, after Cassie realizes that her victim fails to recognize their wrongdoings, she proceeds to enact her revenge. Cassie tells the Dean that she left her daughter at Al Monroe's former room together with other boys and that it is unfortunate that the Dean does not remember the room where Nina was raped. First, the Dean lashes out and demands Cassie to tell her where her daughter is and then she admits that Cassie was right. An expressive-reaction shot reveals Cassie's smug countenance at the sight of the Dean's desperate and angry reaction, meaning thus that the Dean has now learnt what it might feel like when 'it is someone you love' (Fennell, 2020). Lastly, Cassie reveals that her daughter is at a diner and that she could not be capable of leaving her daughter in a room with unknown boys because 'I don't [she doesn't] have as much faith in boys as you do' (Fennell, 2020).

The third victim is Mr. Green (Alfred Molina), namely, the lawyer who was in charge of Al's, and many other boys', cases of sexual assault. Cassie's encounter with the lawyer is important because it further uncovers the fallacies of the legal system and it represents a sort of watershed for Cassie's future plans. The lawyer's repentance and acknowledgement of his malpractice immediately set him apart from the other targets of Cassie's vindictive enterprise. To Cassie's announcement that the lawyer's 'day of reckoning' (Fennel, 2020) has finally arrived, Mr. Green does not seem to be surprised, but he explicitly says that he has been waiting for it. On the other hand, surprise and puzzlement seem to dominate Cassie's reaction to the fact that not only does Mr Green remember Nina's case, but he deliberately asks her to be punished.

The encounter between Cassie and the lawyer may be said to assume a religious and confessional tone where Cassie has the power to either absolve the man of his sins or to chastise him. The lawyer reveals that not only were they given bonuses if they managed to achieve a settlement in court or if the charges were dropped, but there was an individual whose only job was to scour the victims' social media accounts for any information or images that could jeopardize the victim's credibility. While on his knees and holding Cassie's hands, the lawyer confesses that he will never be able to forgive himself and that his guilt is taking a toll on his mental and physical health. Cassie appears to be almost frightened by the man's candid admission of guilt and she ultimately decides to forgive him. The sequence concludes with Cassie's hand on the lawyer's prostrated back, as she gives him permission to finally go to sleep after several sleepless nights.

Cassie's subsequent encounter is not with another complicit in Nina's rape, but it is with Nina's mother. Her act of forgiveness towards the lawyer may have led Cassie to not only reconsider her course of actions, but it may have prompted her to look for that person who could forgive her instead. The conversation between Cassie and Nina's mother sheds light on Cassie's inability to let go of the past. Cassie believes that what she is doing is a way for her to compensate for not having been with Nina that night, but Nina's mother confronts her with the truth: Cassie's behaviour is not good for her nor for Nina and she has to 'let it go' (Fennell, 2020) and move on with her life. Nina's mother's words seem to have made an impact on Cassie, who throws her notebook away and attempts to reconcile with Ryan after he had seen her during one of her nights out.

Nonetheless, despite Cassie's endeavours to take back control on her life, Madison presents Cassie with a video of Nina's rape, reigniting Cassie's desire for revenge. The video is not shown, but Cassie's face is in a close-up shot as she forces herself to watch, chanting and cheering voices are heard, among which figures Ryan's. Cassie then proceeds to confront Ryan and she blackmails him into giving her the address of the place where Al Monroe's bachelor's party will take place. Ryan obliges, but he keeps trying to defend himself and to convince Cassie that he is not a 'bad person' (Fennell, 2020) and that she has to forgive him because 'I [he] didn't do anything' (Fennell, 2020).

In the shot that marks the beginning of the fourth and final act of Cassie's retaliation, she is shown applying red lipstick while looking in the rear-view mirror, possibly recalling the image of *Ms .45*'s Thana's preparation for her nocturnal killing spree. As an instrumental string version of Britney Spear's *Toxic* starts playing, Cassie first throws away her car's plate and she then starts walking in the woods towards the cabin of Al's bachelor party. She pretends to be a stripper, clad in a nurse costume, complete with white stocks, red high heels, and a colourful wig. Cassie has drugged the alcohol that she pours into Al's friends' mouths to make sure that the execution of her revenge can proceed smoothly.[13] She and Al go upstairs to the bedroom and, as Cassie cuffs his hands to the bed frame, Al tells her that there is no need for her to do anything because he is a 'gentleman' (Fennell, 2020), who loves her soon-to-be bride, to which Cassie replies: 'Hey, do I look like someone who would make you do something you don't want to do?' (Fennell, 2020). However, Al realizes that something is amiss when Cassie tells him that her name is Nina Fisher, but she cannot be because Nina Fisher is dead, informing thus the viewer of what happened to Nina after the rape. Cassie wants a confession from Al, but he does not admit to his crime, repeating that 'I [he] didn't do anything' (Fennell, 2020) and that Nina 'was into it' (Fennell, 2020). The viewer comes to know that after the rape, Nina left medical school and Cassie followed her to take care of her, whereas Al managed to finish school with excellent grades.

Al's denial of his crime is a constant motif that characterizes his confrontation with Cassie, even when he is choking her to death. He claims that Nina's rape has had an impact on his life too because 'it's every guy's worst nightmare to getting accused like that' (Fennell, 2020). Al's desperation and fear grow as Cassie tells him that she is going to carve Nina's name on his stomach because if he took Nina's whole persona until she was not Nina anymore, then it was his turn to have 'her name all over you [him]' (Fennell, 2020). Nonetheless, Al manages to uncuff one of his hands and to disarm Cassie. The camera is first upside down and then it alternates between Cassie and Al: he puts a pillow on her face and he manages to hold it down with his knee, as he keeps blaming Cassie for what she is making him do.

The scene, which is almost three minutes long, turns silent except for the muffled screams of Cassie. The camera first tracks back to show both Cassie and Al and it then starts drawing in until Al is in a medium close-up shot as he pants and whimpers, realizing that he has killed Cassie. The slow movement of the camera that begins to track in towards Cassie and Al may contribute to enhance the viewer's tension and possible discomfort at the protractedness of the scene. Both Al and Cassie occupy the frame and their bodies are shown in their entirety. Even though their faces are not visible, such angle may be said to augment the viewer's perception of Al's overpowering position, whereby he forcibly holds Cassie's arm down and uses his body weight to hold the pillow on her face, whereas Cassie struggles to wriggle away from him by moving her legs and arm.

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[13] When she is in the bedroom with Al, Cassie explains that none of his friends can help him because she slipped drugs in the alcohol, a practice that was very common at medical school. Cassie hints at the fact that one of Al's friends, Joe, would often do it back then. However, it is not explicitly stated whether it was done especially to girls.

Al's inability to hold himself accountable is upheld by his friend Joe (Max Greenfield) who, the morning after, persuades him that it was not his fault because it was a 'fucking accident' (Fennell, 2020) and that they will make sure that no one will find out: 'We *just* got to get rid of the body before the others leave' (Fennell 2020, emphasis mine). The movie's conclusion is signalled by the four vertical dashes crossed out as the police sirens can be heard approaching Al's wedding. Cassie had prearranged the final steps of her plan in the event of her disappearance or demise: she had the telephone with the video of Nina's rape sent to Mr Green, so that he would give it to the police. Thus, this time it seems like Al will not to be able to get away with his crimes because he is taken away by the police with the charge of Cassie's murder.

2.2 Subverting viewers' expectations: what they seem to be and what they are not

After having outlined the main instances of Cassie's journey where she devotes herself to 'teaching [teach] people lessons' (Bastién, 2021), I will now discuss how the movie's imagery and casting choices may affect the viewer's response to the characters. Mulligan described the movie as a 'beautifully wrapped piece of candy . . . except when you open it and put it in your mouth, you realize it's full of poison' (Sandberg, 2021). Such description may be said to fit the movie's tendency to play with the spectator's expectations on different levels.

Fennell claimed that the movie may be defined as a 'dark comedy and satire of the revenge thriller', but it also contains sequences that may be ascribed to the genre of romantic comedies (Variety, 2020; Variety, 2021).[14] Such heterogenous ensemble of genres may be seen as evidence of how the rape-revenge story can be weaved into other filmic genres, while, simultaneously, its features can be still recognized. Cassie is a 'proxy avenger' (Henry 2014, p. 45) who takes revenge on behalf of her friend, Nina, whose rape case was promptly dismissed because it was downplayed to a "his word against her word", wherein Nina's credibility was further questioned because of her drunkenness. Thus, as in several other movies of the genre, the blame is ultimately put on the victim who is often seen as the instigator of the crime.

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[14] The romantic comedy sequences may be seen with Cassie's and Ryan's dates and the first stages of their relationship, especially during the sequence that takes place at the pharmacy where the two of them dance and sing to Paris Hilton's *Stars Are Blind*. On the other hand, according to Fennell, Cassie's encounter with Jerry (Adam Brody) recalls 'the opening scene of a romantic bro comedy' (Bastién, 2021) where the man believes that the woman is genuinely interested in him, but in reality, she has remained silent

However, the movie does not solely focus on rape, but it also draws attention to how Cassie attempts to cope with her guilt, trauma, and anger. Akin to *Positive I.D.* (Andy Anderson, 1986), Cassie too may be said to adopt different identities during her nocturnal encounters and for some of the acts of her revenge, but unlike Anderson's movie, these new identities will not allow Cassie to break her self-destructive pattern. The viewer first sees Cassie in the midst of one of her nights out, leaving them to wonder about Cassie's identity and the destinies of the men that she encounters. In fact, the shot that sees Cassie walking back home the morning after the night with her victim, Jerry (Adam Brody), further titillates the viewer's curiosity and plays with their knowledge of filmic conventions. As the opening credits roll out, the camera scans Cassie's body from her bare feet up to show a trace of what appears to be blood on her shin, white shirt, and arm, only to reveal that those red streaks are stains of ketchup from the hot dog that she is eating.

In addition, the movie augments the contrast between Cassie's nocturnal and daylight activities by means of colours, locations, and use of light. During the day pastel colours seem to dominate the scenes where Cassie is often seen wearing pastel pink, blue, and floral print clothes while working in a coffee shop, whose colours recall Cassie's outfits. Moreover, her signature style may be said to be her rainbow manicure that does not change until the very end when her dead hand is framed in a close-up shot, as Joe and Al watch her body and belongings burn in a bonfire. By contrast, at night she often wears heavy make-up and opts for dark clothes to go to clubs and bars, which are dimly lit with neon-colours, and to the apartments of the men, which are generally suffused with warm lights. Such clash may be said to underscore Cassie's effort to keep her daily and nocturnal

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throughout their encounter, and a possible forgetfulness of the events of the night is quickly brushed aside in order for their love story to unfold (Bastién, 2021).

activities separated, but it may also reflect a crucial concept at the core of the movie, which Fennell described as ‘hiding in plain sight’ (Bastién, 2021).

In an interview, Fennell claimed that she purported to ‘make something that’s quite familiar until it wasn’t [isn’t] anymore’ (Bastién, 2021), extending such familiarity to Cassie herself, the world where she lives, and the casting choices. As far as Cassie is concerned, the director invoked the idea of the ‘feminine uncanny’ (Bastién, 2021), meaning that possessing certain traits that are associated with an idea of femininity does not exclude a proclivity for violence.[15] As stated earlier, the transformation of the heroine into avenger might create a distance between the viewer and the character, whereas Cassie’s portrayal as ‘innocuous and sweet and feminine and tactile and inviting’ (Bastién, 2021) may be said to bridge such distance. In fact, the daily and nocturnal (or vengeful) Cassie coexist, so that one “identity” is not completely displaced for the other.

Finally, on a visual standpoint, Fennell aimed to create a world that moviegoers would find appealing, but also one that would not be easily recognizable. In an interview, Fennell said that even if the movie was shot in Los Angeles, she did not want to include any identifiable sights or features because she wanted to convey the look of a ‘much more generic everyday city’ (The Deadline Podcast, 2021), with which viewers could identify.

In regard to casting, Fennell’s choices may have been done according to two criteria. The first one has to do with the actors’ style of performance in relation to the movie’s genre. Fennell claimed that the movie’s satire on the dark comedy and revenge thriller stems from how she, and other women in her life, address horror, namely, with ‘grim, gallows humour’ (The Deadline Podcast, 2021) that might be seen as part of a ‘ferocious self-defence mechanism’ (The Deadline Podcast, 2021). Therefore, she needed actors whose comedic background, such as Bo Burnham, Sam Richardson, and Christopher Mintz-Plasse, could serve her view ‘without overselling it’ (The Deadline Podcast, 2021).

In turn, their comedic abilities and the audience’s familiarity with the actors’ previous roles of “likeable” characters may reinforce Fennell’s intent to subvert viewers’ expectations. Fennell stated that *Promising Young Woman* revolves around ‘allegiances and who you trust and to whom you’re willing to give the benefit of the doubt’ (Bastién, 2021). Therefore, Smith’s (1995) ‘star charisma’ (p. 193) may be said to hold sway over the viewer's emotional response to the characters that the actors play in the movie. The viewer's moral assessment of the characters might be biased because they may acknowledge that their actions are wrong and they may disapprove of them, but the viewer might be also quick to forget them. Therefore, the viewer's moral evaluation may turn to another aspect, namely the viewer's ethical stance in relation to and understanding of sexual consent and rape culture. Lastly, the casting choices also reflect one of the main themes of the movie, namely, 'what happens when people you like do things that are bad' (The Deadline Podcast, 2021). Thus, it was necessary for Fennell to cast actors that could convey a sense of safety and familiarity and that viewers were '*trained* to forgive' (The Deadline Podcast, 2021, emphasis mine).

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[15] In the interview, Fennell mentioned wearing pink and listening to Britney Spears as two features that may be associated with femininity, possibly referring to the case of Cassie.

Such discrepancy between the viewer's natural inclinations towards the actor and their emotional response to their fictional character may be regarded also as a determinant factor in the moviegoer's reaction to Cassie's character. In an interview, Fennell asserted that the viewer's pre-existing fondness for certain actors may influence the audience's formation of an allegiance with Cassie: 'we're asking the audience to side with the protagonist, who is much more enigmatic and more complicated than these people that we all love, who seem like kind of straightforward guys' (Bastién, 2021). In fact, sometimes Cassie's behaviour may appear excessive, insofar as the spectator might concur with Nina's mother's argument that Cassie's guilt and anger are leading her towards a path of self-destruction and she cannot go back in time in order to 'fix it' (Fennell, 2020).

However, Coplan (2004) asserts that self-other differentiation is an important component in an empathic relation with a fictional character because it allows the subject to simultaneously retain one's own and the character's emotional state even when their desires might diverge (p. 148). Moreover, Smith's (2010) 'partial allegiance' (p. 244) might be applied to Cassie's character because the spectator may sympathize with the fact that Cassie's actions originate from her love, grief, and guilt for Nina, while, at the same time, they might not endorse certain actions because they may go against their own set of moral precepts. As Mulligan herself said about her decision to take on this role: 'You can still understand a character and go with them on their journey even if you don't approve of them or feel totally comfortable' (Variety, 2020).

Nonetheless, Cassie's questionable acts are part of Fennell's decision not to make the movie overly didactic. In an interview for *Variety*, Fennell claimed that she did not deem her movie didactic, but she rather considered it a 'journey' (Variety, 2020) where Cassie encounters different people who turn out to be bad, and these people are actually 'very articulated about it' (Variety, 2020), meaning that they strongly believe that they are in the right and are reluctant to admit to their faults. As it was stated earlier, Cassie wants to make the person at fault confess and acknowledge their mistakes, but in the movie only one character out of six appears to have come to terms with their share of guilt and does not deny their misdeeds.[16] This ratio may be due to the fact that they either might be too proud to apologize or they might not deem their actions wrong. The latter instance may be indicative of how rape culture permeates society and of the absence of a unanimous consensus and understanding of what differentiates rape from sexual consent.

2.3 Cassie's empty revenge

The movie's 'delicious new take on revenge' (Focus Features, 2019) may be said to be premised on Fennell's conviction that 'revenge and vengeance aren't good things' (Bastién, 2021), a precept that guided her reasoning process for the development of the movie's narrative. In fact, Fennell described Cassie's journey as a 'journey where she's offering redemption or punishment' (Bastién, 2021), wherein the former can be achieved only by apologizing and owning up to one's wrongdoings. In an interview, she stated that, in trying to imagine what she would do in a revenge scenario, she knew that she would never buy a gun or have recourse to violence: 'I think that's a reason women don't resort to violence, and it very rarely ends well when they do' (Bastién, 2021). Instead, she wanted to devise a story and a revenge that would favour the 'psychological and existential' (Bastién, 2021) side over violence.

Thus, Fennell's position might be said to be in stark contrast to the portrayal of the female protagonists of *Ms .45* (1981), *Lipstick* (1976), *Positive I.D* (1986), and *Thelma & Louise* (1991) because in these movies the female avengers are able to carry out their revenge and, if they die, their death occurs only after the act. Moreover, they generally resort to violence, especially by means of a gun, since it appears to have become the only way to exact revenge and obtain justice in a system that fails to convict sex offenders and often condemns the woman because she is believed to be the initiator of the crime.

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[16] The six characters include: Madison, Dean Walker, Mr. Green, Ryan, Al, and Joe.

Therefore, these movies may be said to follow the principle of the *lex talionis* or 'law of retribution', meaning that 'when the law is broken, punishment must be carried out no matter what, since the force of law cannot be restored unless punishment takes place' (Young 2010, p. 46). On the other hand, in Fennell's movie not only does punishment feature an inferior degree of violence, but there is also room for forgiveness, should the victim admit to their wrongdoings. Furthermore, the movie might be said to be part of the revisionist genre because not only does it dwell upon the ethics inherent to the act of revenge, but it also attempts to deal with the consequences of revenge. Such issue may be said to be exemplified in the scene following Cassie's encounter with Dean Walker. Cassie stops her car at an intersection and she is shown with her head rested against the steering wheel, but her face is not clearly visible because the camera is situated on the side. However, her posture might suggest that her revenge plan may be taking an emotional and psychological toll on her and that she might be questioning her course of actions.

In this scene the viewer sees Cassie let her anger loose and turn to violence for the first time. The fact that Cassie might be lost in her thoughts may be signalled both on an auditory and visual level: sounds are muffled and so is the voice of the man who is yelling insults at her because she is in the middle of the road, while outside of Cassie's car, the images are blurred. The camera follows Cassie as she gets out of her car and starts smashing the man's pick-up truck with a tire iron. The incident is accompanied by a triumphant musical crescendo that reaches its climax when, after the man has left, the camera starts circling around Cassie until it is in front of her. The type of music may be said to jar with Cassie's facial expression, which reveals bewilderment and shock at what she has just done. While commenting the scene, Mulligan claimed that that was the moment where 'you see the terror of what's come over her, and what's allowed her to do that thing. Because it's mad, and could get her arrested' (Variety, 2020).

The above scene is part of Fennell's intent to make a 'real genre-revenge movie' (Variety, 2020) that could be as realistic and honest as possible, and this is why Fennell believed that a cathartic ending could not be apt for her movie. In an interview, the filmmaker claimed that she did not want a 'cathartic Hollywood ending' (Bastién, 2021) because she deems it an 'empty catharsis' (Bastién, 2021) that does not take into consideration the aftermath of catharsis, even more so with Cassie. During the same interview, the director said that, in order to develop Cassie's character, she did research on the psychological aspect of self-harming and self-loathing, detecting a cycle where one harbours the desire to do a certain action, which might be ultimately executed, leading thus the subject to feel invulnerable and to subsequently recede again to anger and self-loathing (Bastién, 2021). Therefore, she could not envision an ending where Cassie would live because it would have felt 'incredibly depressing and unfulfilling' (Bastién, 2021).

Fennell wanted to avoid an ending that would feel unrealistic mainly for two reasons. Firstly, Fennell said that she could not fathom a scenario where a woman is alone with a man, threatening him, and she manages to get out alive (Variety, 2021). In fact, Fennell added that no violence in the movie does occur until she arms Cassie with a surgical knife, but it ultimately backfires against her and Cassie becomes the object of violence (Variety, 2021). Secondly, Fennell wanted to make the scene of Cassie's death realistic because even though it is 'unrelenting' (Variety, 2021) and horrific, she did not want to shy away from the reality of it. In fact, it is almost three minutes long because this is the real time that it takes to smother someone to death (Variety, 2021). The raw brutality of this scene did not leave the audience unimpressed. Fennell stated that during the first test screening of her movie, this scene caused a divided reaction in the audience, leading to an altercation between two viewers. Nonetheless, she deliberately designed the scene in order to convey the sudden and disruptive sensation that someone's death might produce (Variety, 2021; The Deadline Podcast, 2021).

This scene is not the first time where Cassie finds herself alone with a man, but similar circumstances occur during her nocturnal encounters. However, none of those scenes displays a violent reaction on the man's part when Cassie starts confronting them about their actions. With the first man, Jerry (Adam Brody), the camera cuts before he can reply to Cassie's asking him: 'What are you doing?' (Fennell, 2020). The second man, Neil (Christopher Mintz-Plasse), immediately tries to justify himself, appealing to the pretext of being a "nice guy" and he seems to be scared by Cassie's unexpected sobriety. The third man, Paul (Sam Richardson), at first seems to be annoyed at Cassie's questioning his sexual prowess, but he then appears to be frightened when Cassie makes him believe that besides her, some other more violent women might be targeting men just like him. Lastly, the scene where Cassie smashes the man's pick-up truck at the intersection does not lead the man to respond with violence, but he simply leaves; a scene where it is her who is holding a weapon. On the whole, all these instances might be in line with Fennell's claim that, by going to clubs, Cassie believes that 'she is making a change . . . man by man' (Bastién, 2021). However, they do not seem to reflect Fennell's belief that a woman would be able to come out unscathed from a hostile situation, and even more so when the woman is armed. As a consequence, these scenes may be perceived as improbable, also in relation to the movie's ending and how it situates itself within the rape-revenge genre.

One of the reasons why rape scenes were common in rape-revenge stories might be explained in terms of an equilibrium between the violence of rape and the violence of revenge. Young (2010) asserts that in rape-revenge films the horrific and brutal experience of rape may be said to give the woman permission to enact a revenge that might be just as 'lethal' (p. 45) as her rape: 'the spectator must feel – at least in part – that the woman's lethal revenge is warranted' (p. 45). However, Fennell's movie does not feature neither a visual nor a verbally descriptive depiction of rape, thus the viewer might not be able to assess whether the intensity of Cassie's revenge may be considered adequate or not.

The first two acts of her revenge might be said to replicate the circumstances surrounding Nina's rape because Cassie does want her victims to experience what Nina must have felt like, but they might be regarded as sets-up that are aimed to harm the victim on a psychological level rather than a physical one. In regard to Cassie's final act, she attempts to inflict physical suffering on Al, but her plan goes awry and she ends up getting killed at the hands of her friend's rapist. Nonetheless, the ending does not solely rest on the female avenger's death, but the completion of Cassie's revenge is entrusted to the law enforcement. Such decision might be indicative of Cassie's awareness that she might not have survived the fight with Al, but also of a possible trust in the very institution whose failings have prompted her female predecessors to take matters into their own hands.

The ending sees the return of the lawyer as he has been sent the telephone with the video of Nina's rape so that he can give it to the police. This act might be interpreted as Cassie's willingness to give the lawyer an opportunity to partially right his wrongs by bringing Al to justice. However, the viewer is left to wonder about Al's destiny because the last scene sees him only being taken away by the police, whereas Joe has fled the scene. If one looks at the courtroom scenes of *Lipstick* (1976) or *The Accused* (1988), one might notice a recurrent pattern whereby the woman's appearance, the fact that she might have been under the influence of alcohol or drugs, and an initial flirtatious exchange with the rapist are considered to be extenuating circumstances that move the blame from the rapist to the victim. In Fennell's movie, Nina's drunkenness and sexuality have been often summoned in order to downplay Nina's rape and the lawyer too admitted that the victims' social media accounts would be scrutinized in order to find compromising images that would lead to a settlement or the rapist's acquittal.

In an interview, Fennell stated that Al and his friends' crime was going to be taken more seriously because of Cassie's murder (Variety, 2021). Under this perspective, Cassie's murder may be seen as a sacrifice that she was willing to make in order to make sure that Al would be punished but, as the final scene attests, Al is arrested on a charge of murder, which does not guarantee that he will be also convicted for Nina's rape. Thus, although there is no visual portrayal of the legal development of Cassie's case, the very same movie's attempts to shed light on the law's inability to adequately convict rapists weaken Fennell's decisions for the ending.

It is true that there is visual evidence of Nina's rape but there is no certainty that such video might be deemed admissible or evidence strong enough to find the rapist guilty. For instance, in another movie of the rape-revenge genre called *M.F.A.* (Leite, 2017), a video of a gang-rape rape was used as evidence but it did not lead to the rapists' conviction because their faces were not clearly visible; thus, the case was dismissed because it was defined a "he said, she said situation", which is what the Dean told Cassie. In Leite's movie, even if the death of the heroine's rapist occurs by accident, she then decides to embark upon a vindicative journey where she becomes the proxy avenger of the girl who was gang raped at her university and of her friend who was brutally beaten by her previous boyfriend. At the end of the movie, when she gets arrested for her crimes, her face does not reveal despair, but she appears to be calm and at peace with herself: her actions were dictated by her conviction that if 'an eye for an eye leaves the whole world blind' (Leite, 2017), then her acts might have been the proper method to seek justice in a 'world's [that is] already blind' (Leite, 2017).

Promising Young Woman may be seen as an interesting point of departure for a conversation on the ethical implications of revenge and how it might affect the subject who is carrying it out. In the movie violence does not represent the immediate solution to restore the balance of Cassie's world, but she first goes through a period constellated by 'slow burn, tiny minute decisions, self-harm, hardening, growing it over and opening it again' (Variety, 2021). The movie does leave its heroine the space to deal with the trauma, anger, guilt, and grief for the loss of her friend, but her endeavours to carve her way towards a place of happiness and seeming normality are thwarted. If in rape-revenge stories the female protagonist usually undergoes a transformation from victim to heroine, in Fennel's movie Cassie is stuck in a position of victim.

The movie introduces a new component that differentiates it from other movies of the genre. If forgiveness pales when a violent drive for revenge takes over the 'female victim-hero' (Clover 1992, p. 4), Cassie, on the other hand, believes that forgiveness is possible as long as the victim proves to be aware of their misdeeds. Notwithstanding, almost all of her victims admit to them only when their lives, or those of their loved ones, are on the line. In *Extremities* (1986) the rapist is reluctant to give a confession because he is aware that in front of the law his word is worthier than her victim's. Only when he is held at knifepoint and experiences the fear and danger that his victims might have felt does he confess to his crimes. Cassie is not able to extort a confession from Al because he kills her and, as he is smothering Cassie to death, he is still unable to acknowledge his guilt because, in his view, he was forced by Cassie to kill. As he did ten years earlier, he believes that his life can still proceed as if nothing happened, but Cassie will not let him get away with it anymore.

The movie's conclusion may leave a sour taste in the viewer's mouth, especially if the viewer themselves is acquainted with other movies of the rape-revenge. In fact, a staple of the genre is the law's glaring failure to convict rapists or, if they get convicted, they are not charged with rape or their sentence gets commuted. Instead, Fennell decided to consign the execution of Cassie's revenge to the law enforcement because Cassie's murder might help Nina's rape be taken more seriously, prioritizing thus a realistic ending over a cathartic one. The death of the female avenger is not a novelty in the genre, but it usually happens after her revenge is brought to completion as in *Ms .45* or in *Thelma & Louise* where the two protagonists decide to commit suicide together, rather than facing the legal consequences of their actions.

Machado (2021) affirms that the rape-revenge may be interpreted as a 'self-immolation – submission to the impossibility of wholeness without destruction, addressed and unaddressed sexual violence as annihilating force'. Even if there is not a physical final destruction, the very episode of sexual assault determines a fragmentation of the female avenger's self that might never heal, even after she succeeds in killing her rapist. In these movies the woman either gets killed or is forced to kill because she is aware that her testimony is likely to be questioned or dismissed and that she might get assaulted again by the same man or some other. She knows that she lives under the constant threat that her body might be sexually violated, that her saying ‘no’ is going to be ignored, and that, as much as she tries to fight back, the man is likely to overpower her. Hence, perhaps, one’s judgement may be redirected at those who really hold the power. As Machado (2021) wonders: ‘How many women – one, two fifty, ten thousand, more – will we sacrifice to the ravenous maw of men’s promise?’.

Conclusion

Readers' and viewers' imaginative endeavours allow them to bridge the distance between them and fictional characters. They may be said to temporarily inhabit the characters' world and they may believe that they know them intimately, to the point of sharing an emotional bond that might seem to tie them on a physical and mental level. The degree of such bond may vary and it has different denominations, such as character identification, empathy, or sympathy. However, at the basis of each sort of relation there is a 'self-other differentiation' (Coplan 2004, p. 148), whereby the reader or viewer does not become one with the character, but the subject is able to grasp the character's inner state, while preserving one's own emotional state.

Moreover, these phenomena do not require an identical match between the individual and the character, but possible differences may be said to lead the individual to broaden one's knowledge of others and to see themselves under a different light. Given these dissimilarities, the subject may be prone to positively respond to certain traits, whereas they may feel ambivalent towards some others. This sort of oscillation between these responses is part of the phenomenon of negative empathy, whereby the subject may be simultaneously drawn to and repulsed by the character because the latter may be endowed with a mixture of positive and negative characteristics. Such evaluation is subject to a series of variables that also include the subject's own moral disposition, attitude, social and cultural background.

Furthermore, the writer or filmmaker may resort to a series of devices that enable them to draw the subject's attention to determinate aspects in order to evoke a certain reaction. Nonetheless, the individual's subjectivity still plays an important role because it may diverge from the artist's intentions, even more so when the object of such response is a character that may be deemed morally dubious. In contrast to reality, fiction is perceived as a safe space where the subject can adopt different perspectives because they are free from real-world constraints and they can also revel in certain emotions that they may view as negative because they arise from actions that they would normally condemn from a moral standpoint.

Therefore, the subject's moral inclinations may jar with their emotional response to the character. The subject may decide to hinder such relation or they may choose to continue their journey, also in sight of a possible 'cognitive payoff' (Tullmann 2016, p. 125). The subject's own moral judgement does have a certain heft on their response to the character, but the moral universe of the fictional world is another equal important factor that ought to be taken into consideration.

In Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), Sethe's infanticide is situated within a specific historical context that underlies the novel, namely, slavery. The nonlinear nature of the narrative framework and the multiplicity of voices may contribute to make *Beloved* a challenging reading experience where the reader may be said to be rewarded both on a cognitive and an affective level. The reader is not given a clear ethical guidance by the author, but they are presented with Sethe's infanticide under different perspectives, including Sethe's. The polyphonic quality of the novel is also concerned with the portrayal of slavery because each character's recollection of their experience as a former slave contributes to exemplify what Sethe was trying to protect her children from and why she might have resorted to such extreme measures. Therefore, one possible outcome is that the reader may shift the objective of their moral judgement from the act in itself towards slavery.

In Emerald Fennell's *Promising Young Woman* (2020), the female protagonist, Cassie, is engaged in a vengeful mission against the man who raped her friend, Nina. The movie may be ascribed to the 'revisionist' (Henry 2014, p. 5) rape-revenge genre because it attempts to dwell upon the ethical implications inherent to the act of revenge and its impact on the subject who executes it. The movie invites the spectator to reconsider the efficacy of revenge by shedding light on its opposite, namely, forgiveness and on the downsides of violence. The viewer's relation with Cassie may be influenced not only by a series of factors, such as the use of light, colours, casting choices, Cassie's appearance and her narrative trajectory, but there might be also an incongruity between the subject's moral code and her actions. Lastly, the absence of a cathartic ending in favour of a more "realistic" one with the protagonist's death and the intervention of the law enforcement might lead the spectator to reevaluate their moral stance on Cassie's actions and to reflect upon the possible aftermath of the rapist's arrest.

This thesis aimed to explore how aspects connected to a critical and theoretical approach may affect the subject's fruition of a work of art. The artist may design their work in order to encourage a certain emotional reaction, but the subject's own disposition and subjectivity may produce an outcome that does not correspond to the artist's predictions. In addition, imagination does play a crucial role in the subject's involvement in fictional worlds for both novels and movies. However, in comparison to literary texts, critical discussions about movies arguably revolve more about character identification and moviegoers' emotional engagement because the visual immediacy of the human body and the world in which it moves may better lend itself to the insurgence of empathic responses.

Finally, these case studies purported to go beyond the ethics of the acts in order to draw the attention to the circumstances and reasons that prompted these women to commit them. The motivations behind their deeds may complicate the subject's stance and emotional response because they may understand and sympathize with the characters, but they might disagree with their courses of action. Such opposition may be seen as the starting point of a reflection on, respectively, the historical institution of slavery and a rape culture that is embedded in society and the legal system.

Their morally questionable deeds may be regarded as acts of resistance against oppressive and abusive systems. On the one hand, Sethe wanted to shield her children from a future of physical and psychological oppression and exploitation, whereas Cassie wanted to obtain justice for her friend, whose rape and death had faded into oblivion. Both women pay the consequences for their actions and they both end up being on the brink of death, but their destinies differ: Sethe appears to have a new future ahead of herself, whereas Cassie dies at the hands of her friend's rapist. Cassie's death may finally consign Nina's rapist to justice but, in order to achieve it, another woman had to be killed by the same man who had led her friend to commit suicide. If *Beloved*'s ending rests on a hopeful note, *Promising Young Woman*'s ending puts hope in a legal system that has often proved to fail women and to belittle their accounts of sexual violence, leaving thus the viewer to wonder whether Cassie's revenge and sacrifice may restore the equilibrium or she might not be just another dead woman at the hands of a man.

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