Moral Disgust as an Emotional Response to Reading Literature:
The Role of Moral Disgust in the Reading Experience of Immoral Literature

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1. Introduction

Disgust is a powerful emotion that we all have encountered in different shades. We are disgusted by physically repulsive objects such as bodily waste, insects or disease. Similarly, we are also disgusted by situations where moral transgressions appear, for example when we hear about a child molester on the news who gave swimming lessons to mentally disabled children and was able to sexually abuse over forty of his pupils. The ‘gut’ feeling we have in both cases is very similar, suggesting that something like ‘moral disgust’ exists. Disgust seems to be one of those emotions that are active in the moral domain. Literary studies have often busied themselves with the role morality (with its associated emotions) plays in literature. Literature and morality are regarded as intimately connected by important works within literary studies in the 20th century up until now. Theorists that have contributed to this discussion include Wayne C. Booth, Martha Nussbaum and James Phelan. However, the perspective of this kind of research has often been text-oriented. This means that this work analyzes texts, while not a lot of attention is paid to the process of reading itself. In my view the reading process is one of the most important factors when it comes to the connection between morality and literature: the reader makes the judgment whether the elements the text harbors (such as characters and their actions, situations, plot lines) are moral or immoral, since morality is not inherently part of the text. Thus, I am proposing research that looks at the specifics of the reading experience. As the opening lines indicate, my point of entry into the reading experience is the emotion of (moral) disgust. A type of reading that foregrounds this emotion, is the reading that the reader herself experiences as ‘immoral’. My central question would then be:

What role does the emotion of disgust play in the experience of reading works of literature that are regarded as immoral by readers?

1.1 Some preliminary remarks

Disgust has been an under researched topic in the past. William Ian Miller ¹ gives a provoking reason for this lack of attention to such an overtly present emotion: “Disgust has elicited little attention in any of the disciplines that claim an interest in the emotions: psychology, philosophy, anthropology. It is not hard to guess the likely reason. The problem is its lack of decorum” (5). An interest in disgust seems to tell something about the person who expresses that interest: metonymically, one who is

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¹ William Ian Miller’s work The Anatomy of Disgust (1997) was one of the first to delve deeper into the topic of disgust. Before this, only the Austrian phenomenologist Aurel Kolnai had devoted a complete work to disgust, which was a truly early instance of interest in disgust, written in 1929. After Miller’s publication, on the other hand, more works have appeared dealing with disgust (for a good overview up to 2011, see Korsmeyer 9).
interested in disgust must be disgusting herself. Also, when discussing disgust, there is no way to stay outside of the disgusting domain, you will have to give examples, which will lead to actual disgust, both in the writer and in the reader. Why the topic has come under some relative interest in the last decade, can be explained, according to Miller, by two developments: “(1) the general loosening of norms surrounding once taboo topics of bodily functions and sexuality, what we might more tendentiously call the coarsening or pornographization of public discourse; (2) the resurgence across a multitude of disciplines of interest in the emotions” (7).

As already hinted at above, I define immorality in literature as an immorality that is based on what specific readers deem to be immoral. I do not want to make a categorization of moral and immoral works, because I think every reader will judge for herself. Everyone has his or her own values and ideas about morality and makes judgments accordingly. However, while I do allow for the fact that different readers find different works of literature to be immoral, I also think that the same types of reactions are at play in these at first seemingly completely divergent instances. The underlying structure of the functioning of disgust and the moral judgment will stay the same, even in completely different persons. A methodology and philosophical tradition that makes research in this experiential domain possible, is phenomenology.

Without giving a complete overview of the history and ideas of phenomenology, I will mention some important points that will make it clearer why this is the main methodological focus for the questions I am asking. The German philosopher Edmund Husserl can be seen as the founding father of phenomenological enquiry. He was not the first to coin the term, but he certainly was the first to build up a complete framework and methodology around this notion. While only some of his followers were completely faithful to his scientific and rigorous approach, Husserl’s theory spawned a huge following in the course of the 20th century and includes eminent thinkers like Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Hannah Arendt and Jacques Derrida. The main distinctive feature of phenomenology is its focus on conscious, lived human experience. And while at first, this field seems to overlap with the field of psychology, phenomenology had its own interest. It “sought a distinctively philosophical route to the study of the mind that avoids both the methods of introspectionist psychology and the methods of naturalistic psychology keyed to publicly observable physical phenomena” (Smith and Thomasson 4–5). While phenomenology has often been accused of simple introspectionism, from Husserl on, the tradition rejected introspectionist views. Husserl developed the method of what he called ‘reduction’, where the phenomenologist brackets her everyday attitude with its preconceptions and prejudices, in order to study this stripped and naked experience as a phenomenon.

There are many more names than I could mention here. For an outstanding overview of historical phenomenology and its practitioners, see Moran.
Phenomenology also relies on the idea that we have to achieve knowledge of our inner states and experience of the world “not in a special observation of our mental states, but in awareness at least apparently directed *outwards*, towards the world” (Thomasson 119–120). Thus, we can learn about our experience by turning outwards and studying how the phenomena of the world appear to us, instead of turning inwards.

Strictly speaking, phenomenology is a philosophical tradition, not a method or methodology. This is why the different thinkers often employ different methods to answer their questions, also in the field of phenomenological aesthetics. An observable emergence of interest in phenomenology from the literary field occurred during the ‘70s, most notably in the work of Wolfgang Iser and Georges Poulet (see for example Iser 1978 and Poulet 1969). This approach to literature and reading became unfashionable quite quickly and phenomenology disappeared from the field of literary studies. In the last decade, film studies have taken up an interest in phenomenology again. It has won ground as a supplement to the popular cognitive studies that focus on physical and unconscious processes, while employing rigorous methods and tools. The studies of visual arts have turned their attention to a phenomenological approach as well, which was only a natural transition because of the appearance of interest in these arts in historical phenomenology, through the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Merleau-Ponty, who was interested in the processes of human perception (*The Phenomenology of Perception* being his most important work), turned to the visual arts as his greatest example in his essay *Eye and Mind*. In this essay he gives art the status of the true phenomenology of perception, because it shows more insight than even philosophy into the workings of perception (Merleau-Ponty). Film and the visual arts were thus studied in accordance with a phenomenological approach in the preceding decennium, while literary studies stayed behind. A good example of this is the edited volume *Art and Phenomenology* that appeared in 2011 and which focuses only on the two afore mentioned arts, leaving out not only literature, but music and theatre as well. I would like to argue for a revival of phenomenological research in literary studies, because phenomenology can offer a fresh point of view on the reading experience.

As Iser has pointed out, phenomenological research can provide a framework for other types of research, most notably empirical research on actual readers’ responses. He states that “one needs certain presuppositions if one is to investigate what happens in the reader while he reads. If one had no heuristic assumptions, it would be difficult to learn anything from an actual reader’s response, and

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3 As Dermot Moran explains, the writings within the field of phenomenology are very diverse. Husserl’s original method was not adopted in a scrupulous manner by his followers. All of Husserl’s students adopted his theory in different ways and the result is that “phenomenology as a historical movement is exemplified by a range of extraordinarily diverse thinkers” (Moran xiv).


5 An early representative of this approach to film was Vivian Sobchak (See for example Sobchak 1992).
so our prime requirement is a frame of reference to which we can relate our findings” (Iser, Holland, and Booth 61–62). I will side with Iser on this point, in the sense that I do not discard empirical research that has been done within psychology or cognitive studies. On the contrary, I think that this kind of research is essential for a better understanding of how we read. At the same time, I think that more than only empirical data is needed, a basic framework is required. In my view, phenomenology can take up this task of building up the foundations for other types of enquiry into the reading process. This of course does not mean that phenomenology will lay a seamless groundwork for cognitive research, as both are focused on different elements of art reception: phenomenology on the conscious experience, and cognitive studies on the physical and unconscious reactions and processes. Phenomenology can however, offer new ways of thinking about art reception, new frames of mind that can be then researched and scrutinized in empirically based studies.

The methodological framework of phenomenology, however, is not completely pure in the case of this thesis, but supported with ideas and evidence ranging from different fields and disciplines. Husserl’s ground-laying work will not be featured in this thesis, neither in citations nor in spirit. Rather, it is a bricolage of the available and to my idea useful theories and ideas, for trying to approach this highly complex phenomenon of reading immoral literature. Smith and Thomasson argue for a combination or cooperation between the phenomenological tradition and that of the philosophy of mind. They argue that phenomenological research has much in common with the philosophy of mind and that the two can be recruited for the same type of research. I expand on this idea that phenomenology can be compatible with other theories and is able to support those and be supported by them.

When it comes to the question of the literary works that I have chosen for this study, the choice has been primarily personal. These are the works that have drawn my attention for the way they deal with issues of morality. One is Vladimir Nabokov’s Lolita and the other Bret Easton Ellis’ American Psycho. Both are, however, completely different in nature. One uniting feature, on the other hand, is their being narrated by the main character. For a lot of theorists, especially in the narratological domain, homodiegetic narration (specifically in these two cases) brings in the problem of the unreliability of the narrator. While I will not dedicate a detailed discussion to the topic of unreliability, I will mention where it played a role in my reading experience. To return to the personal aspect of my choice for the

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6 Which, in fact, only points to fact that disgust can be elicited by a wide variety of books, ranging from popular horror to classic literary fiction.

7 Unreliability is a much debated subject in narratology. The discussion is loaded with many different categorizations and definitions. Giving an overview of the state of the discussion would take too much time and lead me away from my own subject. Thus, when I will use the term unreliability in my account, I will use it informally and when needed will supply complementary information.
two novels at hand; both shocked, attracted and repulsed me in many different ways and I had the feeling that for both of the books many emotions were triggered during my reading, one of which being disgust. I will not try to claim that my choice says anything about the true nature of the two books and I will refrain from claiming that all readers would regard these novels or aspects of them as immoral. From past experiences, I can even ascertain that a lot of people would not agree with me on one or both of the cases. This, however, does not weaken my argument, since I aim at a description of the general workings of reading immoral literature; not at a description of the working of every reading of these two specific novels. That said, I have to emphasize that the two case studies in no way represent a strict analysis or interpretation of these two works (this is also why the issue of unreliability becomes less important). They merely serve as an example of how certain mechanisms are at work within our reading and judging of literature that we find to be immoral. They also offer a possibility for the ideas expressed in the second chapter, which are mainly abstract in nature, to be illustrated in a more practical and concrete way.

I also will try and not fall prey to the highly normative ideas of ethicism, a view that asserts that “works of art are to be judged by moral criteria in such a way that (what is taken to be) a moral defect will ipso facto count as an aesthetic defect” (Bermúdez and Gardner 4). No claim of mine regarding the immorality of a piece of literature will lead to a dismissal of it in aesthetic terms. On the other hand, I also do not want to profess the opposite claim, thoroughly defended by Matthew Kieran and which he has coined as ‘cognitive immoralist’. Kieran’s claim supports the view that “the moral character of a work is relevant to its value as art to the extent it undermines or promotes the intelligibility and reward of the imaginative experience proffered by the work” and this is consistent with his holding that “in certain cases the morally reprehensible character of a work may constitute an aesthetic virtue rather than a vice” (Kieran 56–57). In this thesis I’m trying to refrain from normative claims about aesthetic virtues and vices, simply because it is beside the point of my argument. My case studies have been chosen for their added value to the subject of immoral reading experiences and not for their artistic values (even though I can attest that I value both for their artistic merits). However, it is important to map out that both ethicism and its opponent theory have accompanied literary theories that concerned themselves with ethical issues.

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8 “It is immoralist because it holds that a work may be valuable as art in virtue of, rather than despite, its immoral character. It is cognitivist because the account of how and why this is so relies on the assumption that the value of art, at least in part, is a function of the ways in which a work may deepen our understanding and appreciation” (Kieran 58).
My second chapter will set out the main theoretical framework of the thesis. I will explain what I mean when I use the word disgust, I will argue for its place in the moral domain and finally mention the way disgust has been handled in the domain of aesthetics. Chapter 2 will thus lay out some underlying notions that will be helpful for understanding the reading process of immoral literature and what place disgust can take in it. In chapters 3 and 4, I will then turn my attention to the reading of two specific literary works, mainly focusing on my own experience when reading them; but I will also support my claims and arguments with other readings, both from professional readers and those who read for pleasure, whose frank and for that reason very important opinions have reached me through the internet and through literary blogs specifically. I will end with a concluding chapter where I will try to unite the theoretical part of the thesis with the particular findings of the two case studies, in order to make some general claims about the notion of immoral reading.

2. Disgust

The main hypothesis of my thesis concerns the idea that disgust plays a role in making moral judgments or moral decision-making, both in real-life and when encountering works of fiction. A more basic, underlying assumption of this claim is that morality is connected to emotions in general. This idea has been explored by both the empirical sciences and philosophy. Damasio, for example, has conducted neuroscientific research to examine the brain areas that are activated when one deals with moral issues. The results of the research indicated that the areas that light up during (moral) decision-making are the same areas that are associated with emotions (Damasio). While this can indeed indicate that morality may be grounded in emotions, I still think that this kind of evidence is too ‘rough’. As Bermúdez states with regard to research done on embodiment, “[e]xplanations of the physiological underpinnings of bodily awareness can only at best form part of an understanding of the distinctiveness of the experience of embodiment” (296). From my point of view, this idea can be expanded to the whole field of cognitive studies. This kind of cognitive research simplifies the processes that are at play in their subjects, in order to capture data, that is easily quantifiable and analyzable and that can be used to make generalizations about the phenomena at hand. In my view, this type of research can be used to support other claims about the interrelation between morality and emotions, but it has to be complemented by a more philosophical framework if one wants to do justice to the complexity of the process and experience of morality. In the following paragraph I propose the work of the American philosopher Jesse Prinz to provide this kind of framework. Even though Prinz’ work is grounded in the tradition of analytic philosophy, it proposes convincing ideas which are from my viewpoint experientially recognizable. Unfortunately, phenomenology has not yet
paid much attention to the emotional side of morality, for which reason the following account will only focus on Prinz’ work.

2.1 Morality and emotions
In his book *The Emotional Construction of Morals* (2007), Jesse Prinz develops an account of morality that he calls ‘constructive sentimentalism’. This means that his theory relies on the idea that human morality is based on so-called ‘sentiments’, and that these sentiments create (hence the term constructive) moral values. Prinz describes sentiments as ‘emotional dispositions’, but these sentiments can manifest themselves as “different emotions on different occasions” (84–85). The sentiments can best be associated or compared with *moral rules* and the emotional manifestation of the respective sentiment a *moral judgment* (Prinz 96). These sentiments are thus a part of our long-term memory, they are part of the repertoire that we carry along with us and that has been constructed out of innate qualities, (cultural) learning and personal experience. The emotions on the other hand occur through an activation of these sentiments in a context-sensitive way, dependent on the circumstances at a certain place and time.

Prinz’ theory can be subsumed under the larger heading of ‘strong emotionism’, a view that holds the following statements to be true:

“(S1) **Metaphysical Thesis:** An action has the property of being morally right (wrong) just in case it causes feelings of approbation (disapprobation) in normal observers under certain conditions.

(S2) **Epistemic Thesis:** The disposition to feel the emotions mentioned in S1 is a possession condition on the normal concept RIGHT (WRONG)” (Prinz 20–21).

What this means practically is that when in real life we encounter moral dilemmas, we decide what to do or how to judge by weighing one emotion against another. Every moral rule or norm and its transgression has a different emotional strength, so the stronger emotion decides (Prinz 25). When, for example, telling a child a lie about the whereabouts of her dead hamster, the negative emotion of lying has less weight than the negative emotion of exposing the child to the (at that age) possibly harmful information about what happens to us when we die. In such a situation we would rather tell the lie and say to the child that the hamster has gone on vacation, than hurt the child by saying that the hamster has died and will never return.

Another important implication of this theory is that one’s moral values do not rest on rational grounds. As we have seen, Prinz claims that our moral rules are not rationally argued, but that they
are rooted in our sentiments. Prinz supports this claim with empirical research that presented the participants with different morality laden situations, for example of consensual sibling incest. Most of the participants indicated that they regarded this situation as wrong and gave reasons for why they thought this was wrong. When the researchers dismantled these reasons and showed that they were invalid in this case\(^9\), the participants still insisted that the act of incest was morally wrong. This research shows that no arguments can be found at the basis of our norms, only sentiments (Prinz 29). This does not mean, however, that at a later stage rational arguments cannot be connected to our norms. One reason that Prinz gives for this ‘rational’ component of moral values is that according to him, emotions represent concerns, that can be rationally assessed (Prinz 65). So when two people argue about a moral dilemma and what to do in such a case, they can have a debate about the specific circumstances and aspects of the situation. As soon as the discussion reaches what Prinz calls the ‘grounding norms’ (the sentiments) of the debaters, there can no longer be any discussion: “[i]f two people have different grounding norms, they must resort to other means of persuasion”, because the sentiments fall outside of the rational territory (125).

As many other theorists\(^10\), Prinz thinks that our innate emotional repertoire is quite small, we have only several ‘basic’ or ‘core’ emotions. These basic emotions, however, get reused in different ways to create new emotions. The idea, then, is that “we have a universal emotional vocabulary, which is quickly co-opted by experience and tuned to culturally specific eliciting conditions” (Prinz 67). Thus, the core emotions, which we are born with, get reused and transformed into new emotions through personal experiences, our upbringing and the cultural background. Disgust is one of the core emotions, but it can get transformed. This is why a person from western Europe or Northern America will be disgusted by eating living insects, while a person from certain parts of South America or Africa probably will not. Similarly, a person from a working-class background in the Netherlands can find the eating of escargots disgusting, while a person from an affluent French family may find it to be the ultimate delicacy. Thus, according to Prinz, two processes can account for the creation of new emotions: either two basic emotions get combined, to create an ‘emotional blend’; or a basic emotion “can be assigned a new set of eliciting conditions” (Prinz 67).

\(^9\) One of the reasons provided by the participants was, for example, that incest is harmful. However, in the case presented by the researchers, the sex was consensual and contraception was used, so there could be no consequences to the sexual act.

\(^10\) The emotions that are predominantly labeled as basic emotions by some psychologists include disgust, “anger, fear, surprise, joy, and sadness. Basic emotions are pancultural, meaning that they are experienced by members of all societies, and that aspects of their expression are recognized by social groups throughout the world” (Korsmeyer 24). One of the most famous accounts of basic emotions is the one given by psychologist Paul Ekman, who identified the six mentioned above. For an overview of the range of theorists and their ‘basic emotions’ see TenHouten 14.
What Prinz then calls ‘moral emotions’ are derivatives of the basic emotions. These emotions arise “in the context of morally relevant conduct. More specifically, moral emotions promote or detect conduct that violates or conforms to a moral rule” (Prinz 68) This means that when a certain person interprets another person and/or her act as either conforming to or violating a moral rule, the emotions that accompany this situation are moral emotions. These emotions can be divided into two categories, those of blame/disapprobation and praise/approbation. Prinz then goes on to argue that disgust, belonging to the disapprobation class, also has a specific role to play within the domain of moral emotions, but I will turn to this issue in the next paragraph.

2.2 Disgust’s transition into the moral realm

As suggested above, disgust is an emotion that is strongly rooted in our physicality. Strangely enough, it seems to be connected to our moral domain as well. Very often people exclaim that they find certain behavior to be ‘absolutely disgusting’. These kinds of expression, however, are often categorized as having only a metaphorical connection to disgust. Verbal expressions that report disgust in response to moral transgressions can be suspect of being metaphorical, because anger or irritation can be at play instead of disgust. Thus, as Chapman et al. assert, disgust is “a somewhat surprising candidate for a moral emotion, given its hypothesized origins in the very concrete, nonsocial, and straightforwardly adaptive functions of rejecting toxic or contaminated food and avoiding disease” (1222). Because the primal objects of disgust seem to be of this physically self-preservation nature, linking disgust to the domain of moral judgment seems to pose problems. Saying that, for example, punishing an innocent person is disgusting, seems to be completely different from saying that eating rotten or spoilt foods is disgusting. Still, the great range of objects and situations that have elicited an emotion which has been experienced as disgust, has prompted a subdivision\(^\text{11}\), a categorization of the emotion: ‘core’, ‘material’ or ‘physical’ disgust on the one hand and ‘moral’ or ‘sociomoral’ disgust on the other. The former has to do with the visceral reaction to foul or contaminated objects and the latter with transgressions of moral rules and social norms. In my view, there is indeed an important role for disgust to play in human morality and in the following I will argue why.

As hinted at in passing in the preceding sections, ordinary disgust is a visceral emotion that concerns itself with factors of contamination and digestion of harmful products. The emotion has a strong physical component and its associated facial expression is the ‘gape face’, which is “characterized by a nose wrinkle, extrusion of the tongue and expelling motion of the mouth, and

\(^{11}\) Most researchers working on disgust have made this distinction. See, for instance, Kelly, Kolnai, Korsmeyer and Miller.
winkled upper brow. The gape face mimics the facial movements that precede and accompany actual retching” (Kelly 16). As is quite obvious, disgust is triggered by different senses. Many theorists, however, disagree about the central sense that activates disgust. Darwin, for example, was one of the first to delve into the workings of disgust and located disgust in one’s sense of taste. Aurel Kolnai, on the other hand, located disgust primarily in smell. William Ian Miller, in his seminal socio-historical account of disgust The Anatomy of Disgust, gives a more inclusive account of disgust: “Disgust undoubtedly involves taste, but also involves – not just by extension but at its core – smell, touch, even at times sight and hearing” (2). I as well support the idea that disgust is not primarily dependent on only one sense, but can be triggered by the different but equally important senses of taste, smell, touch, sight and hearing. Our own personal experiences attest to this. We can be disgusted by something which feels slimy, or by something that smells rotten, or by something that looks unclean.

Although disgust is one of the most visceral and vehemently experienced emotions that seem to be purely reactive, it has both innate and cultural aspects. As Daniel Kelly describes, the emotion has, in this sense, an ambiguous nature:

“One interesting fact about disgust is that it is a piece of human psychology that does not sit easily on either side of the traditional nature-nurture divide. On the one hand, the capacity to be disgusted, together with a small set of things that appear to be universally and innately disgusting, is a part of the species’ typical psychological endowment. (...) On the other hand, the variation evident in what different people find disgusting reveals a considerable role for nurture as well” (Kelly 11).

As the categorization of disgust as a ‘basic emotion’ indicates, disgust is an emotion that is prevalent all over the world. Some triggers of the emotion are universal (primarily the ones that seem overtly contaminating) and the gape, the facial expression that accompanies the emotion is innately present in humans. On the other hand, both personal experience and culture can supply disgust with an infinitely broad repertoire of triggers. For example, when a certain food has been consumed by an individual, who afterwards experiences signs of food poisoning, that individual will in the future probably refrain from eating that type of food again and will even be disgusted by it12. Another example would be someone visiting a slaughterhouse and afterwards being disgusted by meat and refraining from eating it. A more culturally conditioned example would be the aforementioned

12 This consequence of feeling bad after food consumption takes place, even if the food is not actually the cause for the sickness. If the illness is, for example, caused by a simple stomach flu, the experience of the same symptoms as in cases of food poisoning after food consumption, will still be enough to leave a (semi)permanent imprint on the individual.
consumption of snails or escargots, which in some subcultures is considered to be a delicacy. All of
these examples and many more would show that indeed, disgust reactions are also dependent on
upbringing. This observation leads William Ian Miller to shift the focus of questions about the
universality of the emotion: “The real issue is not whether nurture raises up the young human to learn
what is disgusting; rather it is whether the marking off of some things and behaviors as disgusting is a
(nearly) universal feature of human society” (Miller 15). He thus claims that it is obvious that nurture
plays a large part in the construction of disgust and that a more fruitful way at looking at this issue is
through the idea that it is a universal feature of human society to lay out the boundaries of the
disgusting. It then may come as less of a surprise that disgust is an exclusively human emotion.
Whereas the other emotions that have been grouped under the term ‘basic’ (fear, anger, surprise, joy
and sadness) all have their analogies in the animal world, disgust is absent among other animals.
While animals do have similar feelings, such as distaste, they do not show any true equivalent of
disgust (Korsmeyer 34).

‘Moral’ disgust then, is another affirmation of the emotion’s strictly human nature. Moral
disgust, according to Prinz, “not a basic emotion. It is an outgrowth of ordinary disgust” (71). Prinz
argues for the interconnection between the two emotions, because moral disgust has the same bodily
basis and the same logic of contamination. From a more phenomenological point of view, Aurel Kolnai
points to the similarities of the two emotions as well: “Both in the physiological and in the moral
sphere we can experience, with very slight difference of coloring, the same ‘disgust’, or, to put it more
sharply, almost the same quality of disgustingness can be present to us” (Kolnai 29). So in our
experience, the feeling when we are physically disgusted is very similar to the emotion we experience
in cases of what we would call moral disgust. Undoubtedly, there seems to be a strong moral
component to disgust. However, there are still difficulties with clearly defining moral disgust.
Surprisingly, the problems with the description do not arise on the side of disgust, according to Daniel
Kelly. The issues is, rather, how to “precisely demarcate the domain of morality, so there is not yet any
way to separate out instances of genuinely moral disgust from others” (128). But as Kelly himself
points out, this trouble arises only in the borderline cases. From experience, we know very well which
situations are of a moral nature and when in these instances disgust is felt, it is quite safe to state that
in these cases, moral disgust is at play.

The idea that moral disgust is strongly connected to its physical counterpart, is supported by
moral disgust being a prevalent in situations where physical disgust is at play as well. In a case of a
moral transgression that includes a strong physical element, it will not be surprising to see disgust in
its moral form as the emotional reaction. Two of the most common moral disgust elicitors, according
to Prinz, are sexual mores and mass murder:
“Sexual mores are obvious candidates for moral disgust because sex is a carnal act that saliently involves the transfer of bodily fluids. Since these things can elicit disgust on their own, it is unsurprising that violations of sexual rules are regarded as disgusting. Moral disgust is also directed at mass murderers, perhaps because they are associated with mutilation and death, which are primitive elicitors of disgust” (Prinz 71).

The case studies chosen for this thesis include both of these elicitors. *Lolita* features pedophilia and (non-graphical) descriptions and allusions to sex with an under aged girl. *American Psycho*’s protagonist is a mass murderer who in graphical terms describes murders that sometimes include sexual acts. It is surprising that while the physical element is so important in cases of moral disgust, William Ian Miller’s account of disgust and morality includes only a very small paragraph about the interconnection, stating very briefly that disgust “tends to focus its moral work on moral issues that involve the body” (Miller 205). The rest of the chapter focuses on such notions as hypocrisy and cruelty. Although these notions are less obvious and thus might be more interesting cases than the more apparent and prevalent cases that involve the body, I also think that in these cases we might be legitimizied to regard the disgust as metaphorical. Hence, I think that it would be more fruitful to focus on the more certain cases that involve the body and study those in great detail, before turning to the more complex and ambiguous elicitors.

Besides these philosophical and theoretical accounts of the functioning of disgust, empirical evidence has been found to support the claim that disgust can indeed function as a moral emotion. The psychological research conducted by Chapman et al. looked at and measured facial expressions of participants that were shown fair and unfair situations. In the cases that the participants judged or felt the situation to be unfair, their facial expressions showed the same muscle movements as when the participants were disgusted by drinking unpleasant solution and viewing physically repulsive images of uncleanliness and possible sources of contamination, such as feces or insects. Thus, the results of the research suggest that “moral transgressions trigger facial motor activity that is also evoked by distasteful and basic disgust stimuli, even though the ‘bad taste’ left by immorality is abstract rather than literal” (Chapman et al. 1224–1225). The conclusion that Chapman et al. draw from all their findings is that moral transgressions evoke several negative emotions, including disgust. It is an emotion that is very strongly felt by the subject and is experienced as the most salient emotion. In addition, disgust is the emotion that is the “strongest predictor of decision-making” (Chapman et al. 1225). Thus, if during an assessment of a moral transgression, one feels disgust at that transgression, it is very plausible that disgust will be the deciding factor for the negative moral judgment. Alongside
with the other more theoretically grounded work that for some time asserted a strong interrelationship between morality and disgust, Chapman et al. give us empirically based evidence to support the more speculative claims.

One of the more enigmatic aspects of disgust (both in its physical and its moral form) is its double sidedness. The primal reaction of someone who encounters something disgusting is to move away, to put distance between herself and the disgusting object. However, there is also something surprisingly alluring about objects of disgust. As Aurel Kolnai states in his phenomenological analysis, “not only is an aversion to its object characteristic of disgust, but also a superimposed attractedness of the subject towards that object” (42). This reaction is often visible in children when they encounter an disgusting object, for example a slug or an animal that has been run over. The first reaction will probably be the elicitation of a sound similar to ‘eew’. Afterwards, however, it can be quite often perceived that children will come closer to the object, smell it, touch it with a stick or the like. Adults have learned to hide their attraction to disgusting things. One is not allowed to look at and touch his or her nasal discharge in public, while many do when they are alone. It is more obvious and certainly more accepted that disgust can to a certain degree be attractive in the field of aesthetics. Carolyn Korsmeyer, in her account of aesthetic disgust lays a great emphasis on this ambiguous nature of disgust: “Aversive it is, but one of the enigmas of disgust lies in the fact that the emotion can also attract; therefore the occasions when it beckons and fascinates are especially intriguing” (Korsmeyer 19–20). Although many have commented on this double sidedness of the emotion, there still is no complete account of its attractive function. Also, whether or not moral disgust has the same push and pull effect, is unclear as well.

At the end of this overview I feel safe to state that moral disgust is indeed more than a metaphorical elicitation and that it relies on the same mechanisms as physical disgust. However, as Miller points out, the discussion has to be shifted from the descriptive aspects to the normative ones: “The argument is not whether disgust operates in the moral domain, but about its proper scope, its proper object, and its reliability in that domain” (Miller 179–180). This issue seems to be of great importance to many theorists. Now that we know, after some consideration, that disgust does play an important role in morality, the question becomes whether it actually should. Should we truly rely on disgust for guidance when making moral judgments? As Daniel Kelly points out, disgust is an immensely strong emotion and as Chapman et al. have suggested, disgust is often the deciding emotion when it comes to moral judgment. “Once in play, the effect of disgust can be particularly pernicious because of the powerful but subliminal – perhaps powerful because subliminal – influence it can have on behaviors and judgments” (Kelly 125). There would be nothing bad about this fact, if not for our distrust towards disgust in the moral domain. We do not only feel disgust when faced with
cruelty and injustice, but we might also feel it when we encounter the deformed or the ugly. In the latter cases, Miller states that the emotion “may clash with other moral sentiments, like guilt and benevolence, that push us in another direction” (Miller 197). However, an even stronger argument is put forward by philosopher Martha Nussbaum, who pleads for a dismissal of disgust as guidance in making moral judgments. According to Nussbaum, disgust has been used in the past for repressive means and provides sustenance for prejudice and exclusion. Homosexuals, for example, have been regarded as disgusting in the past (and in some places even now), which has led to their repression in society. Disgust has nothing to do with actual danger or harm and is not a good advisor for making moral judgment. The incorporation of disgust in laws and the juridical system is thus something to be avoided (Nussbaum). Daniel Kelly, as well, states that disgust “is not wise about or acutely attuned to ethical considerations, and ‘yuck’ deserves no special moral credence” (Kelly 148). In the conclusion of this thesis, I will offer some considerations on the role disgust should play in morality. One part of that argument will be concerned with the role disgust can play within the aesthetics. So let us first look at the work done on disgust in the arts.

2.3 Disgust and aesthetics

The most inclusive account of the functioning of disgust in art is Carolyn Korsmeyer’s book *Savoring Disgust*. Korsmeyer states that although little attention has been paid to the emotion in the past and although disgust is so prevalent in current television and movies, “aesthetic disgust is neither a contemporary stunt nor an emotion exploited to pander to the lowest common denominator in popular art forms” (95). Disgust has always been a part of the aesthetic domain. As such, it can have an aesthetic function, can be more than simply a fortuity. The emotion can be a significant part of the aesthetic experience, even be an important feature of aesthetic judgment when “an artwork prompts disgust as part of its appropriate effect” (Korsmeyer 89). If an artwork is thus supposed to elicit disgust, it can be judged whether or not that specific artwork has achieved this well enough and through which elements. Even though disgust is an unpleasant and possibly even painful emotion, Korsmeyer claims that through its use in the arts, we can gain knowledge by it, which affords us pleasure or enjoyment. Similarly, a second-order reflection on one’s reaction and toleration of the disgusting, can offer enjoyment (Korsmeyer 130). Often, avid horror movie fans, feel thrill and pleasure at the end of a horror movie, knowing that they were able to live through the strong emotions of horror and disgust. This trial of strength is able to afford pleasure at the end, even if the means to achieving that end were rather painful.

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13 This idea resembles Matthew Kieran’s notion of cognitive immoralism, cf. p. 6.
As this intensity of experience suggests, the impact of disgust does not differ when it occurs in art from when it occurs in real life. The physical or visceral component of disgust is so strong, that it elicits a reaction, even in the fictional or aesthetic domain. Disgust, when used in art, maintains its ‘signature physical arousal’, which, according to Korsmeyer, in the past has lead to the disqualification of the emotion in the sphere of aesthetics (Korsmeyer 48). The ontological distance between reality and the artwork cannot create enough phenomenological distance for the emotion to be weakened or negated, as is the case with many different emotions and reactions. When we watch someone being hit by a car in a movie, the impact is very different from when we see such a thing in real life. We simply know that this is not really happening. However, with disgust it is a different case, according to Korsmeyer. When we see something physically disgusting on the big screen, it is just as disgusting as when we would see it in real life. From my point of view, this statement is too strong. While I do think that a viewer of a film will directly respond to the disgust elicitor on the screen, I do think that the disgust will be less intense than in real life. The fictionality of the representation will tone down the emotion to a certain degree, even if the emotion is the same.

Although disgust is mostly portrayed as a very impactful and strong emotion, Korsmeyer distances herself from the view that disgust functions as a simple on-off switch. One is not either strongly disgusted, or not disgusted at all. Instead, disgust – like many other emotions – comes in different shades, blends, degrees, and ranges. The either-or understanding of the emotion “has both led to some exaggerated claims about its significance and blinded us to the subtleties of its artistic usage” (Korsmeyer 10). Art, specifically, is the attestation to the fact that disgust can be felt in different gradations and is a more nuanced emotion that many theorists would like us to believe. This holds for both moral and physical disgust, as the visceral emotion varies from a ‘slight twinge’ to strong nausea and actual vomiting (Korsmeyer 137).

An important point to mention about Korsmeyer’s work, is that she only looks at how material (or physical) disgust functions within the field of aesthetics. She completely disregards the idea of pure moral disgust, because she believes that when language of disgust is applied to morally transgressive situations, it is simply to emphatically indicate disapproval. In these cases, the use of the language of disgust is more metaphorical than literal (Korsmeyer 4). From my point of view this is a strategic limitation and simplification of her field of study. If one leaves out the moral instances of disgust, one is left with a much ‘cleaner’ and more clearly demarcated emotion, which will not only be easier to define but easier to analyze as well. However, I think that similar phenomenological feelings underlie disgust in both the material and the moral sense: the disgust feels and is experienced as very similar. I also think that in most cases, physical and moral disgust are difficult to separate. Of course, there are the clear prototypical cases: being disgusted at feces is clearly physical disgust and being disgusted at
someone’s hypocrisy is clearly moral disgust. However, there is a vast grey area that falls between these two poles. Even the moral transgressions that I will cover in the case studies do not amount to strictly moral disgust.

Besides Korsmeyer’s work that covers different art forms, film studies has shown great interest in the emotional occurrence of disgust in film reception. Mainly dealing with physical disgust as well, Julian Hanich approaches the emotion with a phenomenological toolbox. According to Hanich, the experience of disgust at the movies is marked by four different elements. First of all, the disgusting object is experienced as coming obtrusively near, forcing itself upon us. The closeness of the disgusting object results in an experienced spatial constriction of the spectator’s lived body. Thirdly, because we feel closed in and constricted, we try to get the object out of the way, feeling repulsion and revulsion toward it. Lastly, the intertwining of the filmic world with that of the viewer is experienced as precarious, which leads to an interplay of looking at and looking away from the screen (Hanich, “Dis/liking Disgust” 295–299). The main functions of cinematic disgust then are both pleasure and provocation. The former can be established when the disgust scenes are “both sufficiently short and thematically harmless enough not to overwhelm the viewer completely but rather ‘tickle’ him or her pleasurably” (Hanich, “Dis/liking Disgust” 305). Disgust is applied in a provocative manner in films that often are seen as ‘scandals of art’. Hanich gives the example of Pasolini’s Salò. In these cases, the fictionality of the films helps to maintain enough distance for viewing the film.

A film theorist that has done extensive research on the role of affect in film viewing from a cognitive point of view, and who also has paid some attention to disgust is Carl Plantinga. While Korsmeyer’s and Hanich’s approaches specifically paid attention to physical disgust, Plantinga shifts the focus to the side of morality and ideology. He argues that through the elicitation of disgust, films can establish a connection between one’s bodily reactions and a specific ideology professed by the film. According to Plantinga “disgust is squarely implicated in issues of morality and ideology” (Plantinga 81). He then goes on to point out that (socio)moral disgust is largely socially constructed. Physical disgust, however, is not completely innate as well and is dependent on learning as well. What we then find morally disgusting, also feeds back into and influences what we find physically disgusting (Plantinga 84).

Similarly to Korsmeyer, Plantinga argues that disgust experienced at the movies or when experiencing another art form is not very different from when experienced in real life. He makes an illuminating distinction between what he calls sympathetic and direct emotions when it comes to encountering art. Sympathetic emotions are experienced in response to the fictional characters portrayed in the artwork. These emotions differ from their counterparts in real life, because the viewer keeps in mind that what he sees is actually a fictional situation. Direct emotions on the other
hand are experienced by the viewer as a direct response to what she sees and are largely independent from the plight of the fictional characters. The viewer thus responds directly to her own concerns and this is the reason that direct emotions as elicited by artworks do not differ from their real life counterparts. Disgust, then, is a direct emotion (Plantinga 86). Still, there is one difference, which is that “in the realm of art, at least, disgusting things may also attract the viewer, creating a push and pull between curiosity and fascination on the one hand, and aversion and repulsion on the other” (Plantinga 87). Plantinga thus places the attractive aspect of disgust mainly in the field of aesthetics. As I argued above, I, in contrast to Plantinga, do think that there is a quantitative difference between direct emotions, such as disgust, in reaction to art or real life. I do think, that to some extent, the direct emotions also get weakened by the viewer’s (or reader’s) awareness of fictionality. I disagree with Plantinga as well on the point of disgust’s attractiveness. I do not think that disgusting objects can attract only in art. As I argued before, disgusting things can be attractive and interesting in real life as well (cf. p. 14).

To return to his opening statements about disgust and ideology, Plantinga claims that when disgust is elicited in a viewer by a film, it is often done to manipulate “the spectator’s stance toward characters and narrative events, playing a central role in a film’s poetic and rhetorical system” (Plantinga 87). So, for example, the ‘bad guy’ in a film is often given a disgusting appearance to underline, emphasize and enhance the negative feelings of the viewer toward that character. This technique is very similar to its counterpart in real life to which theorists like Martha Nussbaum so strongly object. As mentioned above, certain social groups are consciously ascribed characteristics that evoke disgust (such as filthy, slimy etc.) in order to oppress and exclude that group from society. In this sense cinematic disgust can be used not very differently from real life disgust. Thus, while I disagree with him on several points, Plantinga’s emphasis on the connection between disgust and morality is still productive and yields some interesting insights into the workings of disgust in the arts.

3. Disgusted by Immoral Fiction: The Case Studies

In the following chapter, I will turn towards an actual exploration of the reading experience of immoral literature. I have chosen two case studies for this purpose. One is Vladimir Nabokov’s Lolita, the other Bret Easton Ellis’ American Psycho. As mentioned in the introduction, the two novels deal with completely different topics: respectively pedophilia and serial murder. However, the two have enough

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14 For a good overview of the rhetorical devices used to elicit disgust in film, see Hanich (“Toward a Poetics”).
in common. They are narrated by their protagonist, who in both cases would be morally suspect or objectionable for most readers. Because of this morally condemnable first person narration unreliability can also play a role in the reading experience. I have chosen these two novels, because they treat morally salient topics in such a way that the reader has to take up the perspective of the moral transgressor. Seeing everything through the eyes of the perpetrator, makes the reader’s moral judgment more complex and ambiguous, providing a rich subject for enquiry. Both case studies will have a similar structuring. First, I will give some introductory information about the novel and its plot. Secondly, I will describe and reflect on my own reading experience of the novel. Here, I will detail my general reaction to the novel and more specifically my moral and emotional response. Thirdly, I will consider reading commentaries of other readers, taking into account what they thought and felt at the moment of reading. Lastly, I will compare and contrast my own experiential commentaries with those of others.

3.1 Lolita
For several years, one of my close relatives refused to watch any of the Woody Allen films, no matter how many people actually recommended her the films. When I finally came around to asking her why it was that she systematically avoided these films, she confessed that she was disgusted by the person of Woody Allen because she had read that he started a relationship with his adopted daughter. The result of this personal dislike for the director was that she was unwilling to watch any of his movies. This relative will not pick up Lolita as well. She is one of those people who bases her choosing of books to read and films to view on what she has heard about the specific work and about its author. While this might seem extreme, it is not surprising at all that one’s foreknowledge about a book can influence the decision about whether one reads it or not; and such foreknowledge is almost always available. You almost never read a book you have heard, read or know nothing about. Most of the time, there is a reason you pick up a book; it is recommended by someone you know, you were intrigued after reading a book review, it is required reading for a class, the cover caught your eye while you were browsing in a book store etc. All of these reasons often provide some knowledge about what you can expect when you actually pick up the book. Some books, almost everyone has heard about, whether they read avidly, only occasionally or not at all. Lolita is such a book. The character Lolita has become a true phenomenon, the name applied in cultural artifacts, advertisements, news and cultural psychology (the Lolita complex). Almost everyone who picks up the book at least vaguely knows that

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15 Elizabeth Patnoe claims that in most of the cases where Nabokov’s creation has been used, she has been misrepresented as a seductive adolescent girl, instead of an abused and molested girl (Patnoe). In my view, Stanley Kubrick’s adaptation of the novel from 1962 has played a role in this image of Lolita. Kubrick portrays Humbert and Lolita in a playful, humorous and light way, without really showing anything of the actual abuse
it is about a middle aged man who falls in love with a girl. It is important to note that this knowledge can sufficiently influence the reading experience, putting the reader into a specific stance towards the characters in the book and the situations it portrays.

When it comes to (moral) disgust, the influence of paratextual elements and other information that is acquired before actually reading the book is relatively small. As Plantinga describes, disgust is a direct emotion, one that we have towards an object or a situation we ourselves perceive and which is independent of the emotions that the characters feel. This also means that often, we can do little to prevent the emotion, we cannot help being disgusted. Thus, even if a reader has received information about a book that is said to be ‘an adorable love story’, he or she can still become disgusted while reading the book and encountering some content which sparks that emotion. In this case the actual reaction is independent of the foreknowledge. However, in the instances that one has heard about a book being ‘revolting’, ‘disgusting’, ‘subversive’, it is possible that the reader will approach the book with a negative attitude. This can lead to a higher sensitivity on the reader’s part, making her easily stirred to feel disgust, more so than when she would not have heard any of the aforementioned value judgments.

An important point when it comes to assessing the moral side of a work of fiction is the focus on the ‘mimetic’ level of the work. James Phelan has developed a model for literary character that relies on the idea that a fictional character consists of three components: “the mimetic (character as person), the thematic (character as idea), and the synthetic (character as artificial construct)” (Phelan, Narrative as Rhetoric 29). These three components can best be seen as interpretative frames, through which readers view a particular work. How these elements are interrelated and in what amount they are available, thus differs from narrative to narrative and from reading to reading (depending on the attitudes, presuppositions and history of the reader). I think this model can be extrapolated to the level of the fictional work as a whole, which then can be framed in a mimetic, thematic and synthetic fashion. When dealing with issues of morality, the mimetic level is the most prominent. When asking whether a work is moral, the question often goes to the content, to the plot and not so much to the artificial construction of the work. Still, there are some exceptions to this rule. Some works become morally salient because of their construction. One can think of Martin Amis’ Times Arrow in which the narration moves backwards in time, undoing the events of the holocaust, bringing back ‘survivors’ from the ashes and the gas chambers. However, as said, most readers will encounter moral questions in most fictional works through the living and breathing fictional world the work creates. To judge a

that takes plays. An important note, however, is that Kubrick had to deal with censorship issues and could not portray any actual sexual abuse of a minor.
character’s actions in a moral sense, we have to engross ourselves as readers in the work and treat the character to certain degree as a real human being.

As mentioned above, I trust that most are familiar with the contents of Lolita. Before setting out to examine the reading experience of such book, I will, however, briefly summarize the plot. The novel is narrated by Humbert Humbert, who is a European middle aged dilettante academic, writing books on French poetry for English readers. Humbert Humbert also loves young girls, roughly between the ages of nine to fourteen. According to him, these girls he is so interested in are not regular children, rather they are ‘nymphets’, little demon girls. When Humbert, after an unsuccessful marriage, moves to America to receive a small inheritance, he decides to rent a room in the house of a widow, Charlotte Haze, whom he finds to be a complete bore. Her twelve year old daughter Dolores, on the other hand, Humbert finds rather interesting. Humbert falls in love, becomes obsessed by this girl whom he calls Lolita. To be with her, he marries her mother and when she dies in a freak accident, Humbert takes his chance with the girl. He embarks with her on a long road trip, during which he finally establishes sexual contact with Lolita. In the couple of years that they spend together, Humbert takes up the roles of being a father, a lover, a master. He lets Lolita do her ‘chores’ with him in exchange for money and threatens her with orphanages, so she will not tell anyone about what is going on between Dolly and her ‘father’. When after a couple of years Lolita is whisked away by another man, Humbert spends his time in pursuit of this person. In the end it is Lolita herself, who contacts him. She is married, pregnant and in need of money. She tells Humbert that the lover who took her away from Humbert was the playwright Clare Quilty, whom the reader has encountered several times before. After Lolita refuses to go with Humbert, he seeks out Quilty and murders him.

While this is a chronological recounting of the portrayed events in Lolita, it does not capture the experiential nuances of the reading experience of the novel. One of the most important elements of the novel that capture the attention of most readers and influence the reading experience is the style of the novel. Humbert narrates with an eloquent voice, using words originating from different languages (English, Russian, French, German), rare and difficult words and neologisms, all occurring quite frequently. Besides his word choice, Humbert’s tone is quite remarkable as well. His tone is often humorous and apologetic. While trying to make a case for himself, make the reader pity him, he lightens up his narration through humorous descriptions and remarks. However, the humor of the novel as a whole, includes more than just Humbert’s narration. There is also a sense mockery in the novel, as if the implied author (or the real author Nabokov) is ridiculing this character. This has to do with the attention that is paid to detail, the apparent constructedness of the novel and the large amount of references to literature, art, popular culture etc. Humbert’s characteristics are
exaggerated, resulting almost in a caricature. The level of the implied author and the narrator thus show a discrepancy and a friction, which often results in humorous passages. Thus, *Lolita’s* style, in all its exuberance is an important element in most readings of the novel. In the following, I will regard my own reading experience, dealing with the book in more detail and incorporating my own reactions to the book. After this personal account I will follow up with a survey of how others have read the book and what role morality and disgust played in their reading experiences.

When one first starts reading the novel, one encounters a fictional foreword, written by a certain John Ray, Jr. He claims to have received the manuscript of Humbert Humbert for editing. He informs us that Humbert has died of coronary thrombosis, while being in legal captivity, shortly before his trial was to start. We learn that he has committed a crime and that what we are about to read is going to contain scenes that can be called ‘aphrodisiac’. John Ray goes on to assert that Humbert is ‘horrible’, ‘abject’ and “a shining example of moral leprosy”; but even so, he lets his violin sing magically to make us “entranced with the book while abhorring its author!” (Nabokov 7). Lastly, this John Ray, Jr., Ph.D. states that besides the literary and scientific (as a psychological case study) merit, there is a very important ethical aspect to the manuscript, there is a lesson to learn from it. What this fictional foreword accomplished in my reading was a heightened curiosity for this narrator. Even though I had some vague knowledge about Humbert’s crime, I wanted to know what it was that he had done exactly and what he would do to ‘entrance’ me. By inviting my curiosity, the foreword accomplished that I wanted to metaphorically close the distance between myself and the text, I wanted to enter the story world and learn what had happened. Another important aspect of the foreword is that it framed my reading experience as one that was focused on morality. Whether or not the novel would turn out to be ethically laden, my mind was already focused on the moral layer of the work. So the main functionality of the foreword was to set up different frames for the reading of the novel.

In the first paragraph of Humbert’s narration there are already several elements that confirm the expectations that were set up in the foreword. Humbert’s violin starts singing from the first line: “Lolita, light of my life, fire of my loins” (Nabokov 11). The reader gets eased into the rich vocabulary, the alliterations, metaphors and other tropes. And Humbert himself even asserts: “You can always count on a murderer for a fancy prose style” (idem). Thus, we learn that Humbert is a murderer, that Lolita is both his love and his sexual obsession and that he knows his way with words. We also learn that this information is supplied to us by Humbert himself and that this fancy prose style is capable of covering up something. The first excuse for Lolita is made as well: “there might have been no Lolita at all had I not loved, one summer, a certain initial girl-child” (idem). So in the short first chapter, I was able to discern several aspects about the plot, about the narrator and my own framing of the text.
was on the edge of my seat when it came to Humbert’s persona and attitude, he seemed almost too sophisticated. My focus on the moral dimension of the text was also kept high by Humbert’s admission of being a murderer.

In the following chapters Humbert goes on to relate the story of Annabel Leigh, this child-love of his. He met her on the Riviera when they were both preadolescents. Humbert tells us that their attempt to ‘love making’ was interrupted and only a couple of months later the young girl died of typhoid. It was already clear to me, however, that even when Humbert is speaking about love, the actual meaning is of a sexual nature. Sexuality is an obsession for him and he describes sex as ‘possessing’ his darling (Nabokov 15) and kissing as ‘feeding on her mouth’ (Nabokov 17). The act, in his mind, is a matter of consuming the other without consideration of that other. He puts his hand between Annabel’s legs and her face expresses both pleasure and pain. Because of the coitus interruptus, Humbert claims that an ache has stayed with him and “that little girl with her seaside limbs and ardent tongue haunted me ever since – until at last, twenty-four years later, I broke her spell by incarnating her in another” (idem). To some degree, I was even taken in by this explanation and I was still hovering on the line of indecision about Humbert’s character. I was not yet sympathetic or empathetic to him, but I felt that I could become both. Humbert seemed too obsessed by sex, but charming in his eloquence (even regardless of his admission of murder).

Some of the positive feelings that I had for Humbert disappeared on the moment that he started to describe the objects of his fascination: “Between the age limits of nine and fourteen there occur maidens who, to certain bewitched travelers, twice or many times older than they, reveal their true nature which is not human, but nymphic (that is, demoniac); and these chosen creatures I propose to designate as ‘nymphets’” (Nabokov 18). He also states that the girls themselves, are unaware and unconscious of their ‘powers’. The utterly low ages that Humbert is describing and his designation of the children as demoniac simply shocked me. While before Humbert’s language could persuade me to look at the world through his eyes, to take me along, this passage made me take a more distanced look. Because I could not appreciate what it was that I was seeing through the eyes of Humbert, I felt it would be better to regard him more outwardly and not let him carry me away with his humor and eloquence. I thus felt the need to break the empathetic bond I had started to create. It forced me to split my appreciation of the mimetic and the synthetic levels. Before this admission of Humbert, I could focus on the beauty of the synthetic qualities of the text and still go along with the content. After, however, I needed to be more heedful and attentive at the mimetic level, knowing that

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16 It is important to note the difference between sympathy and empathy. When one feels sympathy, one feels for someone, caring about what happens to that person. Empathy means feeling with someone, imagining what that other feels or thinks. One thus can distinguish between emotional and cognitive empathy.

17 There have been several studies that have taken a look at the role of empathy in a reading experience. See for a good example: Keen 2007.
it was not pretty. A friction or imbalance set in, where I appreciated the one, but was unable to take in
the mimetic level without a high amount of suspicion.

These ambivalent feelings were thus already established when reading the novel, even before
actually meeting the real object of Humbert’s obsession, namely Lolita. After the aforementioned
passage, Humbert even goes on to describe different instances of him coming into contact with small
girls. He also describes his attempts to find prostitutes and a wife, that in some sense were able to
remind him of their childlike qualities. He tries to lure in the reader again by saying that the rooms
which he visited were ‘abject’, his cravings ‘criminal’, and he himself a ‘pervert’. The fact that he
admits this, however, did not seem to redeem his actions for me. When Lolita then finally enters the
scene, it is her physical appearance so similar to Annabel’s that is highlighted by Humbert: her hair,
breasts, hips. Their description is accompanied with sentences that made me laugh out loud: “With
awe and delight (the king crying for joy, the trumpets blaring, the nurse drunk) I saw again her lovely
in-drawn abdomen” (Nabokov 41). The mixing of humor with Humbert’s repulsive remarks creates an
uncanny feeling. While reading passages like this I felt uncomfortable for laughing, experiencing a
push and pull effect at the same time (feeling both attraction and repulsion). This feeling was
reinforced through the following scenes where Humbert is around Charlotte, Lolita’s mother. Calling
her, for example, the ‘phocine mamma’ seemed both hilarious and sad. These sentences provoked
laughter, but in a guilty form, because I actually felt sorry for Charlotte.

Humbert’s desire for Lolita culminates in a scene where she is sitting on his lap on the couch,
while Charlotte is not at home. Humbert credits himself for being able to do what he wants “without
impinging on a child’s chastity” (Nabokov 57). This is also his goal with Lolita, but even so, I felt that it
was abuse. Especially when it came to Humbert describing his physical sensations, I wanted to pull
away from the scene. My disgust was firmly established when Humbert’s metaphors turned dark,
calling his penis “the hidden tumor of an unspeakable passion” (Nabokov 61). He goes on calling it his
“gagged, bursting beast” and “tense, tortured, surreptitiously laboring lap” (Nabokov 62). And then
the episode ends when he “crushed out against her left buttock the last throb of the longest ecstasy
man or monster had ever known” (Nabokov 63). So even though Lolita does not seem to have noticed
anything\(^\text{18}\), the scene left a bad taste in the mouth. Humbert’s descriptions of his erection are made
painfully visible, almost tactile because of the metaphors. The visual imagery of the tumor and the
beast that was induced by the words, operated on my feeling of physical disgust, slowly enhancing the
moral disgust I felt for him. The physical disgust also had an actual physical impact, letting me turn my
face away from the page. And while I was directly impacted by this physical disgust, the moral disgust I

\(^{18}\) It would have made a moral difference if Lolita had actually been aware of what was happening. In that case
the sexual abuse would have been experienced by her, possibly causing harm. In this instance, her not realizing
what was happening could not have let to psychological (or physical) damage.
started to feel was also experienced in my body, but more in a subdued though lingering way. The experience was even more chilling, because through the whole scene Humbert again deploys his comic skills. Humor and disgust thus commingle and the disgust was made weaker because of it.

When the opportunity arises, Humbert takes it and marries Charlotte. His reasons for doing it, however, are not noble at all. He thinks about how he can have his way with Lolita: “I imagined (under conditions of new and perfect visibility) all the casual caresses her mother’s husband would be able to lavish on his Lolita. I would hold her against me three times a day, every day. All my troubles would be expelled, I would be a healthy man” (Nabokov 72). Humbert’s high morals of not trespassing on the girl’s chastity are soon out of the window as well. He plans on giving both the mother and the daughter sleeping pills, in order to have his way with Lolita while she is sleeping. As these ideas grow more absurd, it gets easier and easier to push away the feelings of disgust. The crueler Humbert became, the funnier I thought it was. It was the exaggeration that bordered on absurdity that led to my less serious view on Humbert. He thinks of all of the possibilities to have his way: “although I felt no special urge to supply the Humbert line with a replica of Harold’s [Charlotte’s former husband] production (...) it occurred to me that a prolonged confinement, with a nice Caeserean operation and other complications in a safe maternity ward (...), would give me a chance to be alone with my Lolita for weeks” (Nabokov 82). Because of these exaggerations in Humbert’s character, his constructedness and, thus, the synthetic level of the novel came to the foreground. I was able to disregard the content more easily. Thus, when Humbert started contemplating the option of even killing Charlotte I was not surprised.

Even with all these extreme measures Humbert is toying with, he keeps pleading for a certain degree of innocence on his side. Not only does he keep insisting on his inability to do anything about his disposition, he also claims that his actions are not that bad at all. He comes forward with the proof that other artists and poets (such as Edgar Allan Poe) were ‘nympholepts’ as well and that in other societies it was totally permissible to marry young girls. And the biggest proof is that he is not harming the girl: “[T]he majority of sex offenders that hanker for some throbbing, sweet-moaning, physical but not necessary coital, relation with a girl-child, are innocuous, inadequate, passive, timid strangers who merely ask the community to allow them to pursue their practically harmless, so-called aberrant behavior, their little hot wet private acts of sexual deviation without the police and society cracking down upon them. We are not sex fiends! We do not rape as good soldiers do” (Nabokov 89–90). In this way, Humbert keeps contradicting himself by on the one hand defending himself with such arguments, but on the other calling himself a pervert, a monster, a spider lurking in his web. It was difficult for me not to have a corresponding ambiguous attitude towards Humbert, in some sense sympathetic, in another absolutely abhorring him.
When Lolita is at summer camp Charlotte dies. She runs in front of a car, right after discovering Humbert’s true nature through a diary that he kept. As he himself asserts the “widower, a man of exceptional self-control, neither wept nor raved” (Nabokov 100). Completely untouched, Humbert thinks of the ways to exploit this situation as much as possible. He decides on taking Lolita away from camp and go with her on a road trip. Still unaware of her mother’s death, Lolita jokes with Humbert about him not kissing her. Humbert reflects that “it was but an innocent game on her part, a bit of backfisch foolery in imitation of some simulacrum of fake romance” (Nabokov 115). And instead of refraining from taking advantage of that, he only worries about not being able to contain himself and even that hope is not noble. He just doesn’t want her opinion of him to be changed: “I was dreadfully afraid I might go too far and cause her to start back in revulsion and terror” (idem). He wants to be able to use her later. With Charlotte out of the way, some of the comic relief was also gone for me as reader. Because Lolita, for me, was much more of a victim than Charlotte it went too far to actually find this amusing as well. I was again distanced and estranged from Humbert’s thoughts, feelings and observations. I did not want to empathetically engage with him.

Humbert takes Lolita to a hotel, where they get one room to share. Just before their first sexual contact occurs, Humbert implores us to certainly not skip any pages, but instead imagine him: “I shall not exist if you do not imagine me; try to discern the doe in me, trembling in the forest of my own iniquity; let’s even smile a little. After all, there is no harm in smiling” (Nabokov 131). The first part of this quote functions as an admission of the synthetic nature of his character, as a form of metafictional play. Without the reader Humbert would not exist. My ethical engagement was weakened by this metafictional element in the text. When the synthetic level is brought to the forefront, the mimetic level crumbled away. It showed me that because Humbert is a construct, I could not regard him as a real person. My everyday moral frames could not fit his fictionality. But the second part of this passage directly pulled me back to the mimetic level. Again, Humbert tries to convince that he is only a victim of his own obsession, he is only a ‘doe’ when he comes eye in eye with his wickedness, only a prey. I again, started considering him as having actual feelings and thoughts. But this invitation to smile made me recognize and focus on my own inability to resist the humor and laughter in the novel. The statement that in smiling there is no harm felt false, in the sense that smiling and laughing were weakening my faculty of moral judgment. Because I found the events described in a humorous manner, I was less able to focus on their actual content and I suspended my judgments because of it. In this manner, I was constantly shifting between the mimetic and the synthetic frames, not knowing how to regard Humbert.

Reality hit home for me when the actual sex occurs. As Humbert himself presents it: “Frigid gentlewomen of the jury! I had thought that months, perhaps years, would elapse before I dared to
reveal myself to Dolores Haze; but by six she was wide awake, and by six fifteen we were technically lovers. I am going to tell you something very strange: it was she who seduced me” (Nabokov 134). The nerve to say that it was actually she who instigated the sexual contact, made me even more suspicious of Humbert19. He even goes as far as to say that there was not ‘a trace of modesty’ left in the girl, who was depraved by modern society (Nabokov 135). And to top it off, Humbert makes an unbelievable statement: “I am not concerned with so-called ‘sex’ at all” (Nabokov 136). In the preceding, all of his focus was on sex. He almost did not speak about Lolita’s personality and when he did, it was often in a belittling way, calling her cheap and vulgar. This shameless contradiction of word and deed made me pull away completely from Humbert’s point of view. The moral disgust I felt for Humbert completely broke the empathetic bond with Humbert.

My suspicion and distanced attitude towards Humbert turned into fully fledged disgust in the following scene where Lolita and Humbert are driving in the car. Humbert has told Lolita that they are going to visit her mother, who has to undergo surgery, in a hospital. While they are in the car, Lolita starts complaining about a pain in her stomach and expresses the wish to call her mother in the hospital. She calls him a ‘brute’, a ‘revolting creature’ and says that she should call the police to tell them that he raped her. Even Humbert himself is not sure whether or not she is joking, because they, indeed, “had had strenuous intercourse three times that very morning” (Nabokov 142). But he is actually concerned that she will not want or will not be able to have sex with him later that day. He even tries to stop at a lonely grove to do so, but Lolita urges him to drive on. In the end, Humbert tells her that her mother died. He buys her a box of sanitary pads, in case she indeed is bleeding and lots of other presents to console her. It is not that surprising that at night she comes to Humbert, crying. It is heartbreaking to hear him say: “You see, she had absolutely nowhere else to go” (Nabokov 144). I felt strong compassion for the girl, even though I viewed her from Humbert’s perspective and he does nothing to understand her. He never lets her speak and we learn so little about her, because Humbert in the end only writes about himself and not his object of obsession, Lolita, as the title of the novel would suggest.

When the two resume their tour through the country, Humbert starts bribing Lolita with presents and money in exchange for sex. He also threatens her, in case she thinks about telling someone about the exact nature of their relationship. He keeps underlining that Lolita is not perfect. He even finds her to be a “disgustingly conventional little girl”, mad about dancing, clothes, movies

19 In a different phrasing, I could say that I started to feel that Humbert’s account was unreliable to some extent. James Phelan would in this case speak of estranging unreliability, although he focuses more on text rhetorics, than actual reader response. This is why his definition of estranging unreliability includes narratological characteristics: “[I]n estranging unreliability, the authorial audience recognizes that adopting the narrator’s perspective would mean moving far away from the implied author’s, and in that sense, the adoption would be a net loss for the author-audience relationship” (Phelan, “Estranging Unreliability” 224).
and sundaes (Nabokov 150). He thinks that she is a ‘brat’ and difficult to handle. However, he is still
crazy about her young age and her undeveloped body. What surfaces through Humbert’s veil of words
is that Lolita is indeed a ‘conventional’ child. She even asks him: “how long did I think we were going to
live in stuffy cabins, doing filthy things together and never behaving like ordinary people?” (Nabokov
160). It is thoroughly painful to read that it is this want of being normal is what Humbert resents in
Lolita: “There she would be, a typical kid picking her nose while engrossed in the lighter sections of a
newspaper, as indifferent to my ecstasy as if it were something she had sat upon, a shoe, a doll, the
handle of a tennis racket, and was too indolent to remove” (Nabokov 167). And later: “To the
wonderland I had to offer, my fool preferred the corniest movies, the most cloying fudge” (Nabokov
168). Humbert’s narration made me feel even more sympathetic towards Lolita. While I could not
really empathize with her, because of the lack of information about her, I certainly felt for her.
Humbert seemed a terrible character to be with.

Humbert and Lolita stop travelling and settle to live in Beardsley, where Lolita can go to a girls’
school and Humbert has an acquaintance, a professor of French who is as fond of young boys as
Humbert is of young girls. In Beardsley Humbert wants to keep Lolita locked up as much as possible,
only attending to his needs, instead of pursuing normal teenage activities. He pays her a weekly
allowance in exchange for what he calls her ‘basic obligations’ (Nabokov 185). In the end, he takes
some of that money away from a secret hiding place that he finds, out of fear that she will use the
saved up money to run away from him. All of this pressure culminates in a huge row: “She said she
loathed me. She made monstrous faces at me, inflating her cheeks and producing a diabolical plopping
sound. She said I had attempted to violate her several times when I was her mother’s roomer. (...) I
said she was to go upstairs and show me all her hiding places. It was a strident and hateful scene”
(Nabokov 207). This outburst leads them again to take the car and tour the United States.

When travelling together for the second time, Humbert starts suspecting that Lolita is
unfaithful to him. For me, it was difficult to imagine that he takes their ‘relationship’ serious enough to
apply such labels and prescriptions as ‘faithful’ to it. Still, he becomes completely engrossed by this
idea that she is hiding something: “I ripped her shirt off. I unzipped the rest of her. I tore off her
sandals. Wildly, I pursued the shadow of her infidelity; but the scent I travelled upon was so slight as to
be practically undistinguishable from a madman’s fancy” (Nabokov 217). He becomes obsessively
jealous. When they are by the pool of one of the hotels they stay at, another man is looking at her: “I
also knew that the child, my child, knew he was looking, enjoyed the lechery of his look and was
putting on a show of gamble and glee, the vile and beloved slut” (Nabokov 239). It is also during the
same time that Humbert starts to suspect that they are being followed, by whom he does not know.
My idea of Humbert as a mentally coherent and relatively stable character began to disappear. Again,
this hinted at his constructedness, at the synthetic level. At the same time, however, it enforced my feelings of unreliability towards Humbert. Thus, paradoxically, both the mimetic and the synthetic framework were addressed at the same time.

Eventually, Lolita does indeed manage to run away with another man. Humbert devotes several years to try and track her and her lover down. From the moment that Lolita was out of the picture, I was able to discard some of my distanced attitude towards Humbert. The danger of his perverted actions and remarks working in on my senses and judgments had subsided. Coming closer did not longer seem harmful to myself. And thus, I was not only able to mostly focus on the synthetic level of the novel, but the mimetic level as well. My sympathy also grew, now Humbert was actually unable to do Lolita any harm. Because the object of my disgust (Humbert sexually abusing Lolita) had gone away, I was able to come closer to him, starting to believe in him as a character.

In the end, it is Lolita herself who comes into contact with Humbert, asking him for money. She is seventeen, just married, and expecting a child. When he then finally meets her again, her physical appearance is once more what attracts his attention: “[T]here she was with her ruined looks and her adult, rope-veined narrow hands and her gooseflesh white arms, and her shallow ears, and her unkempt armpits, there she was (my Lolita!), hopelessly worn at seventeen, with that baby” (Nabokov 279). He does not consider that she has never been his Lolita, or that it was him as well who contributed to Lolita being ‘worn’ at such a young age. When Lolita refuses to go away with him, he at least questions her about who it was that took her with him several years before. She tells him that it was Clare Quilty, a middle aged playwright, just such a nympholept as Humbert himself is. After giving Lolita the money she asked for, he sets out to murder Quilty, his own doppelganger.

At the end of the novel, Humbert’s attitude seems to have changed dramatically. He recognizes and admits the harm he has done to her: “nothing could make my Lolita forget the foul lust I had inflicted upon her” (Nabokov 285). And he himself claims that he made the choice to discard all the signs of Lolita’s unhappiness: “I firmly decided to ignore what I could not help perceiving, the fact that I was to her not a boy friend, not a glamour man, not a pal. Not even a person at all, but just two eyes and a foot of engorged brawn” (idem). For Lolita, most other situations would have been better than ‘the parody of incest’ that Humbert offered her. She would have preferred ‘even the most miserable of family lives’ (Nabokov 289). However, all these admissions of guilt and shame are counteracted by his big claim of love. Yes, he was a ‘pentapod monster’, but at least he loved her. Humbert exclaims: “I was despicable and brutal, and turpid, and everything, mais je t’aimais, je t’aimais! And there were times when I knew how you felt, and it was hell to know it, my little one. Lolita girl” (Nabokov 286–287). In the end, however, Humbert was not able to convince me of his good intentions. Even if it was love that he felt, it was the most selfish kind of love one can have. He actively
chose to stay blind to Lolita’s wishes and feelings, only thinking about the fulfillment of his own. Again, his notion of love seems to be confused with those of lust and physical attraction. Lolita’s physical appearance is the only thing that ever interested Humbert. My feelings of disgust were thus not much changed by his proclamation of love.

It seems that Humbert himself realizes how repulsive his story was. He tells us: “This then is my story. I have reread it. It has bits of marrow sticking to it, and blood, and beautiful bright green flies” (Nabokov 310). The metaphors that Humbert uses are clearly disgust related: marrow and blood, which are internal to our body become disgusting at the moment that we find them outside of it. Here again, the physical disgust that is elicited by Humbert’s tropes is conflated with the moral disgust I felt for his acts of pedophilia. The description has both visual information about the marrow being in ‘bits’ and tactile information of being ‘sticky’. Flies gather around objects that we find to be disgusting, such as rotten fruit and feces. Because of their proximity to these objects, we metonymically transport the factor of disgust to the flies themselves. What is even more interesting is that Humbert calls them ‘beautiful’, which actually points at the possible attraction disgust objects can exert. Above (cf. p. 13) I have discussed that disgust is seen as having a ‘push and pull’ effect, where we find the object both repulsive and alluring. And that is exactly how my reading experience of Lolita can be described, as a constant shifting between taking distance and coming closer. The language and humor of the novel are attractive, they pull you in, while Humbert’s actions and persona push you away.

In the following I will look at the reading experiences of some other real-life readers. I have chosen to look at both official publications in (academic) journals, newspapers etc.; and at more casual reviews on internet blogs. The readers on blogs seem to be a bit more prejudiced and judgmental, because often they openly incorporate their real-life experiences and views into their reviewing. However, I believe that this also happens in professional publications, with the single difference that the personal feelings, thoughts and judgments are only covertly present. In those cases you would have to tease out the underlying layer of judgment. While blogs bring a more personal and frank account of the reading experience, professional publications often approach the text with more knowledge and the analysis tends to go more in depth. Because both bring something relevant to the table, I have chosen to treat both blogs and scholarly readings as of equal importance and without much differentiation. I, however, do want to point out that both bring different aspects to the fore. As implied above, the informal responses can be seen as closer to the immediate experience of reading, while the scholarly comments appear to foreground reflection on the experience itself. While in the above I described my own reading of Lolita in a chronological manner, I will just group together the responses that seemed
typical and recurring within the other readings. There were several patterns of response to be detected and these will be the focus in the following section.

Conflicting attractiveness and offensiveness

The first structural similarity in the responses to Lolita, was that most readers underlined the opposition of beauty and ugliness in the novel. On the level of the book as a constructed whole, most of the readers acknowledge the skill and beauty that went into the language, the word-play, the stylistic devises. As one of the bloggers mentions: “It is the most beautiful book” (Mind Blowing Books). Some of the readers found that this beauty overpowered the ‘unsettling’ content. Their focus of attention and appreciation shifted towards the synthetic elements: “Its [Lolita’s] charm is not in the story, but in the telling” (Things Mean a Lot). Other readers found the content to be so shocking, that the artistic beauty could no longer be a merit, overshadowed by the ugliness of the story. One reader on a blog claimed that you have to have a certain amount of resistance towards immorality in order to even enjoy all of the artistry: “On so many levels, this book is definitely not for the faint of heart. Only the heartiest of readers will be able to love the beauty of Nabokov’s language and witty wordplay in the midst of Humbert’s lusty lamentations of the charms of all nymphets’ charms [sic]” (Rice). This same attitude prevails when it comes to Humbert’s character. He is both admired for his charm and intelligence, as he is despised for his deed. On one blog he is described as a ‘monstrously sympathetic narrator’ (Shelf Love), on another as ‘charming, humorous, and ultimately a monster’ (Herradura). A third summarizes: “As well as being highly articulate and intelligent, we see that Humbert is also pathetic, weak, warped and arrogant” (A Little Blog, “Lolita”).

One of the most appreciated elements of Humbert’s character and Nabokov’s writing is the humor and wit. This element is almost always juxtaposed by the different readers with an element of disturbance or shock. The laughter is counteracted by a negative emotion. One blogger, for example, again highlights the contrast between the content and the construction of the novel by claiming: “By Chapter 20 I realized that this book is both disturbing and hilarious. Disturbing because of the content, and hilarious in its wordplay and wit” (Rice). Another blogger says that his reading experience was excellent, because of these two reactions that the book elicited in him (Berrett). I think that this type of reader appreciates a reading experience that calls up emotions, independent of whether or not those emotions are positive or negative. The more emotions are stirred, the richer the reading experience. While most readers asserted to the co-existence of mirth and shock, Christopher Hitchens writes in The Atlantic Monthly that during a first reading of Lolita he “chortled, in an outraged sort of way”. During a second reading, however, he found himself “congealed with shock” (Hitchens, “Hurricane Lolita” 132). What had changed for Hitchens was his own personal experience of having
two daughters of Lolita’s age. His personal disposition had changed and so had his response to the novel. Joy and disturbance were no longer able to exist next to each other. Also for another reader on a blog, the experience of reading Lolita was not enjoyable, even though he could understand why it “regularly features in lists of the greatest novels of the 20th century” (A Little Blog, “Lolita”). Greatness of a novel apparently does not have to be connected with its enjoyment.

As stated above, some readers were always aware of the difference between the aesthetically pleasant construction of the work and the ‘ugly’ and ‘disturbing content. Other readers, however, indicated that the beauty of Humbert’s (and of course Nabokov’s) writing lured them into disregarding or even accepting the immorality of the actions and situations described. Kit Whitfield writes on her blog that Humbert croons the reader “into complicity – or at least, into staying with him rather than putting down the book and turning away in disgust” (Whitfield). The beauty of the language being the reason for not putting away the book is a mild form of Humbert’s luring a reader in. Several readers professed that they were so enchanted that they were not able to see what was truly happening on plot level. As one blogger mentions: “I had to constantly force myself to remember that the object of his affections is twelve, and that the narrator - monstrously - is not reliable” (Mind Blowing Books). Another reader dismissed “any feelings of distaste we may have on the subjects of kidnapping, rape, or incest” and was able to forgive Humbert “for the atrocities he commits” (Villano).

Nomi Tamir-Ghez picks up on this general feeling while reading the book: “What enraged or at least disquieted most readers and critics was the fact that they found themselves unwittingly accepting, even sharing, the feelings of Humbert Humbert (...). Instead of passing moral judgement on this man who violated a deep-rooted sexual and social taboo, they caught themselves identifying with him” (Tamir-Ghez 65). Colin McGinn, then, claims than in a sense Lolita is about the ‘power of language’. The novel shows how language can both ‘express and disguise’ reality” (McGinn 35). Humbert charms, enchants and lures in the reader with the magic of his words” (McGinn 33). The reader is thus able to suspend her moral judgment, because she is beguiled by the beauty of the work. A rare reader, however, looks through this aesthetic charm. It is again Christopher Hitchens, who because of his having daughters, notes: “None of this absurdity allows us to forget (...) that immediately following each and every one of the hundreds of subsequent rapes the little girl weeps for quite a long time...” (Hitchens, “Hurricane Lolita” 133). Because in this specific reader’s mind, Humbert’s crime is so wrong and evil, no aesthetic merits can compensate it. However stylistically polished the work is, the reader does not let go of his values, he does not let himself and his moral judgments be deceived.
Interpreting the facts

I think it is exactly this difference in reading attitudes which causes discussion about the events on plot level. Readers do not seem to agree about what it is that actually happens. From my point of view, this conflict arises because Humbert is not a reliable narrator. His words can be interpreted as being true or not. Some readers, who are completely taken in by Humbert claim that Lolita is actually a love story about a relationship between Humbert and Lolita. Others, who are more distrustful of Humbert’s point of view claim that what happens is not love, but rape and abuse. It is clear in these cases how moral judgment creeps into our seemingly neutral descriptions. Probably the most well known proponent of the argument for love is critic Lionel Trilling. In his review of the novel he clearly states: “Lolita is not about sex, but about love. Almost every page sets forth some explicit erotic emotion or some overt erotic action and still is not about sex. It is about love” (Trilling 15). And he goes on to compare the story of Humbert and Lolita to other famous literary love stories: “H.H.’s relation with Lolita defies society as scandalously as did Tristan’s relation with Iseult, or Vronsky’s with Anna. It puts the lovers, as lovers in literature must be put, beyond the pale of society” (Trilling 17). For this view, Lionel Trilling has been heavily critiqued by the proponents of the ‘rape’ interpretation, but Trilling is not the only one reading this novel in this fashion. One blogger for example calls Lolita “a story of tragic obsession; of deep and tender, though misplaced, love” (Literary Corner Cafe).

However, as I already mentioned, a lot of readers refuse to see the situation as one of love. One of the most fierce critics of the love-interpretations is Elizabeth Patnoe, who from a strongly feminist point of view condemns Humbert: “The narration of an event that is countlessly described as ‘love-making’ and seduction, but that can only be interpreted as rape” (Patnoe 85). And she extends her accusation from Humbert to modern society and culture, who have taken up the Lolita-myth of a seductive child and keep misrepresenting her as such: “But, as if it is not enough that Humbert repeatedly violates Lolita and that she dies in the novel, the world repeatedly reincarnates her – and, in the process, it doubles her by co-opting, fragmenting, and violating her: it kills her again and again” (Patnoe 82). And Patnoe is not the only one to point a blaming finger at modern culture. Frank Meyer argues that values in our modern society have been undermined to such a degree, that people can no longer make sound judgments. This is why the critics who speak about love in Lolita are not able to “distinguish love from lust and rape” (Meyer 131).

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20 Patnoe’s account is a highly reflective, critical response to the novel. She approaches the novel as an object with power, the power to have an actual influence on its reader’s lives. And she herself has a strong message in this publication, wanting to actually change something about the way Lolita (and other morally transgressive works) are handled in the classroom. The feminist framework underlies her account and colors it. In this sense it is very different from some of the other accounts referenced here. Especially the blogger commentaries give a more immediate and often less nuanced description of the reading experience.
Reality and fiction

A lot of these discussions turn to the distinction between real life and fiction. Some readers claim the there is a clear difference in how they approach works of art and how they approach similar event in real life. One blogger for example, was shocked by her own response to the novel: “When watching the news, I’m disgusted by stories of kidnap, rape, and incest. As a writer, I am fascinated by this writer’s ability to make a character, who should be despicable, charming and likable” (Villano). Some of the examples that I gave of readers being ‘enchanted’ by Humbert’s telling and being unable to judge him, would fall under the same category. Here, the specific make-up of the novel contributes to this difference in attitude towards moral transgression. The same readers who were not so charmed by Humbert, keep underlining the lack of difference between values in real life and in reading. Colin McGinn, for example, claims that there is a lot to learn from a novel such as Lolita: “The plain fact is that Lolita does teach us many things about morality – as stories of human turpitude generally do. That is, it engages our moral sensibility and invites our moral judgment, and we emerge from reading it with a better understanding of human sin and its consequence” (McGinn 38–39). McGinn thus professes the value of such literature by stating that it can offer us insights that are useful in the real world.

Some other critics take this idea of literature influencing real life to a different level; the level where Lolita causally has a certain impact on real situations. Thomas Kennedy, for example, reflects on the idea that there exist human beings like Humbert in the same world as his children. But then he goes on to say that there are people who will be influenced to act as Humbert by reading the novel: “I hate the thought that there are no doubt people who read Lolita as a prescription for behavior” (Kennedy 130). Patnoe sees another way in which a novel such as Lolita can influence people: by actually inflicting trauma on them through reading it: “While a few critics have expressed charged sympathy for Lolita’s trauma, most neglect to confront the trauma Humbert inflicts on Lolita, and none contend with the trauma the book inflicts on readers” (Patnoe 87). This way of seeing a novel as an ‘actor’ in real life (which actually influences and changes the world) will make the reader become more judgmental, more inclined to react as heavily as one would in reality when encountering such a situation. With this attitude, the reader will also be more inclined to feel such visceral and intense emotions as disgust. Herman Teirlinck was so strongly impacted by the novel, that he looked at the creator, Nabokov, as someone who must be morally flawed as well. He reflects on a story that parents took their daughter from the school where Nabokov was teaching: “I can well imagine parents being indignant at such a book. I can also imagine that they would want to remove their daughters from that school, such a step being no more than a measure of prudence on their part” (Teirlinck 439). I feel that this extreme way of viewing the novel as an actor in the real world, downplays the complexity of the
issue. To what extent literature can have effect on readers is difficult to establish. While it is clear that a reader responds in a certain way to a novel, it is far from apparent that the novel can change that reader’s life.

**Moral Positioning**

Herman Teirlinck is not the only one to reflect on Nabokov’s moral position. A lot of readers are wondering why Nabokov wrote such a book and which position he himself takes in the debate, because the novel seems to give no decisive answer to that question. As Elizabeth Patnoe explains: “The text itself promotes misreading of Lolita because, as Wayne Booth is one of the first to note, Humbert’s skillful rhetoric and Nabokov’s narrative technique make it difficult to locate both Humbert’s unreliability and Nabokov’s moral position [sic]” (Patnoe 83). Nabokov seems to have done as much as possible to eradicate his own point of view, but readers such as Teirlinck are convinced of his bad intentions only because he has chosen to write a book with such a topic. Other readers, however, are much more positive towards Nabokov’s position towards Humbert. Tamir-Ghez argues that although Nabokov invites us to take up Humbert’s perspective, he also invites us to pass moral judgment on him: “Nabokov does intend us to identify with the protagonist to a certain degree, to accept him as a human being, while at the same time strongly to condemn his deeds” (Tamir-Ghez 66). One of the bloggers asks herself the question why it is even bearable to read a book that is written from the perspective of the pedophile. She finds her answer in the position she ascribes to Nabokov: “It is only because I believe that Nabokov does not condone his character Humbert Humbert that I can even bear to review this book” (Dolce Bellezza). Frank Meyer takes this idea of Nabokov’s good intentions even further by claiming that *Lolita* is the embodiment of Nabokov’s disgust for modern society: “He is saying that Lolita’s fate is indeed fearful and horrible; and that the world ravaged by relativism which he describes is just as horrible. He is not excusing outrage; he is painting a specific outrage as the symbol of an outrageous society” (Meyer 132). Humbert metonymically represents the society that he is part of and that society is rotten.

**Disgust**

While all these abovementioned patterns are specific to *Lolita* and address the general issues of the novel, I have found enough evidence that points towards the actual experience of (moral) disgust in these reading responses. I was able to find both overt expressions of feelings of disgust and more covert ones that shone through the language and imagery used by the readers. The most straightforward cases are where the reader calls Humbert and his actions disgusting. Consider for example: “It is understandable why this book gets such a bad rap [sic]. Here we have the story of a
blissful love affair between a young girl and an older man, a man who goes to disgusting lengths to win her affections” (Berrett). Other instances include descriptions of Humbert that would normally be considered as disgusting, such as ‘pervert’ or ‘monster’. However, I do think that these overt instances are fairly unreliable evidence for actually felt disgust. As we have seen in chapter 2, there is the possibility that disgust expressions are only metaphors for what is actually anger or contempt.

This is why I think the more interesting and telling instances are where you can discern covert disgust. One blogger describes again the contrast between the beautiful telling and the ugly told as follows: “[T]he language, the word-play, the finely-tuned emotional resonance, but, like a mouldy orange, it’s written around a rotting core...” (Mind Blowing Books). The metaphor that the reader chose for this discrepancy in the novel is clearly of disgusting nature. One can imagine a prettily colored and seemingly tasty orange, which when sliced reveals rotten flesh. Herman Teirlinck also describes an interesting memory association that he experienced while reading Lolita: “[A] recollection of that indefinable noxious atmosphere which I inhaled as a youth when, at the fair, I entered the so-called prohibited (and for adults only) department of the anatomy hall and experienced nausea at the sight of the pink waxen images so realistically equipped with human hair” (Teirlinck 442). Teirlinck refers several times to nausea, which is (as mentioned in chapter 2) one of the symptoms of physical disgust. The picture that Teirlinck sketches of the pink waxen images with human hair successfully resonated with disgust in my experience as well.

One of the most striking and repeated covert indications for felt disgust is the need of some readers to ‘expel’ Humbert and the novel as a whole from their mind and more specifically the body. These bodily metaphors strongly point in the direction that disgust was felt during the reading experience. One of the bloggers for example states: “Humbert Humbert, you smooth-talking pervert. Unapologetic and peripatetic. Like fine filth, you’ve crept under my nails. I must get you out” (Rice). Humbert is here likened to filth, a common disgust elicitor, that has transgressed the boundaries of the personal body, by intrusion under the nails. The following appropriate action to get rid of the disgust would be the expulsion of the filth from the body, and that is exactly what the reader here indicates what he wants to do. In this case the disgust is strongly connected to Humberts ambiguous nature of being both charming, smooth-talking and a pervert; thus, both attractive and repulsive. Thomas Kennedy also describes a physically uncomfortable feeling, one that is primarily driven by how convincing ally the evil portrait is drawn by Nabokov: “I find myself unable to release the suspicion, the feeling that there is an ugliness, an evil at the heart of this book, that this monstrous character is too well drawn, that this literary game is too much the pastime of a god who stands back paring his nails, that his brilliance has forgotten what it reflects. I am not convinced. I have been made to chew tinfoil for an educational experience and all I want to do is spit it out fast” (Kennedy 126). This reading
experience was painful and the source of that pain and distaste has again to be ejected by the body, spat out. Interestingly, the metaphors used, all refer to situations or objects of physical disgust, to depict a moral attitude. Physical and moral disgust, then, seem to be strongly interconnected. To better express how morally disgusted one is, one makes it apparent through the invocation of instances of physical disgust. I myself could better understand how these readers felt, through the experience of physical disgust in the metaphors used.

As a way to conclude this paragraph, I will shortly compare my reading experience with those of the other readers. One important commonality was the ambivalence that was felt towards the novel. I kept going back and forth between on the one hand morally disapproving of Humbert and on the other hand feeling sympathy for him because of his wit and eloquence. Other readers, as well, pointed out that they both liked and disliked Humbert at the same time. When considering my empathetic relationship to Humbert, I can attest that the cognitive and emotional distance between myself and his character was too big for me to want to empathize with him. The moral disgust that I felt only enlarged the distance and made me more closed off. I felt that I could not trust him. Some other readers, did not seem to have issues with Humbert’s reliability and were able to empathetically relate to him. In those cases, moral disgust was less often expressed or reported. The moral disgust that I felt, I experienced bodily, often in combination with physical disgust, making the experience of the two almost undistinguishable in some cases. Other readers also expressed their moral disgust towards Humbert and the novel as a whole through the use of metaphors that were related to physical disgust. The strongest difference that I experienced between the two was their persistence. While the physical disgust (at Humbert’s descriptions of Lolita, imagery of his own lust etc.) that I felt was strong, but relatively short; the moral disgust set in slowly, but persisted and was enforced by new occurrences of the disgust triggers. I kept shifting between the mimetic frame and the synthetic frame, during my reading, uncertain which to apply. Most readers did not point towards this difficulty, although some of them at least indicated that they noticed a discrepancy between the two levels: the mimetic level was regarded as unpleasant and ugly; and the synthetic level as beautiful and pleasing.

3.2 American Psycho

After looking at the reading process of Lolita, it is time to consider a radically different work. I have chosen Bret Easton Ellis’ novel American Psycho. Even before the novel was actually published it was able to create a big controversy. Ellis had a contract with publishing house Simon & Schuster for the publication of the novel. Shortly before publishing, some passages leaked and S&S received many protests about its graphic contents, specifically from women’s rights groups. At the last moment, S&S
decided to drop the publication, breaking the contract with Ellis. Vintage Books decided to pick up the novel, regardless of its graphic descriptions of violence and sex, and the novel was published in 1991. The case was extensively covered by the media, sparking a discussion about freedom of speech and censorship. Because of this media attention, the novel reaching some form of ‘cult status’ and a film adaptation in 2000, the book is widely known. It has become infamous of its ‘hard to stomach’ content and has reached a lot of ‘will never read’ lists of readers. On the other hand, it has also attracted a lot of attention from readers who are wondering what kind of novel could create such a heated discussion. In the following I will keep the same structure as with my Lolita case study. First, I will delve into my own reading experience and then, I will consider how others have read the novel and try to tease out some patterns from those reading experiences.

Before continuing, however, a short introduction on the plot of the novel is in order. The protagonist and narrator of the novel is Patrick Bateman, a yuppie who lives in New York during the 1980s. Although Bateman has a rich family and enough money, he works on Wall Street. When not working, he spends time with his friends and colleagues in expensive restaurants and clubs. They drink and take drugs. A great part of their lives is focused on physical appearance and clothing. You have to wear the right combinations and the right brands or you do not fit in. One of their favorite pastimes is bullying and harassing homeless people. Nobody seems to listen to each other and they keep mistaking one person for another. This is a consumption culture gone stale, it is only show and no content. Bateman, however, is different from his associates in several ways: he has refined tastes, is well read and above all he is a killer. He kills animals, homeless people. He picks up prostitutes whom he abuses before killing. Nobody seems to see this, care or do anything about it. In this world, Bateman is able to get away with his crimes. Or at least, that is how it seems when one reads the novel without questioning the reliability of Bateman’s voice. Much of the controversy surrounding American Psycho is centered around its epistemological uncertainty. Is everything what Bateman describes really happening, or is it imaginary?

The book opens with Patrick and one of his friends, Timothy Price, in a cab. While they drive through the city they discuss political and social issues. It becomes clear that we have to do with characters that are in possession of money and status. Price, as a proof of New York’s degradation, is counting the homeless people they see on the sidewalk. First only casually remarking about them, he ends up saying: “Twenty-eight, twenty-nine, holy shit, it’s a goddamn cluster of bums” (Ellis 6). While these remarks did not do anything yet for my emotional response to the novel, I was able to use them as

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21 Bloggers apparently have a fondness for making lists and one of those typical lists is of books you will never read. For a good example that includes American Psycho see (A Little Blog, “Books”).
one of the building stones for my construction of Patrick’s (and his friends’) character. It indicated arrogance, superficiality and a lack of compassion. Still, because these were only early indicators that had a provisional nature, they did not elicit an emotional reaction.

Bateman and Price are going to a dinner hosted by Evelyn, Patrick’s girlfriend. It is clear from their interaction, however, that this has more to do with a social contract than with love. They regard each other casually, Patrick notes what she is wearing, but there seems to be no intimacy. Patrick is even suspecting Evelyn of sleeping with Price. When at one point Price calls Bateman a cynic, the following exchange occurs: “Patrick is not a cynic, Timothy. He’s the boy next door, aren’t you honey?” ‘No I’m not,’ I whisper to myself. ‘I’m a fucking evil psychopath’ (Ellis 19). Patrick’s retort is quite surprising, but what at this point was more surprising to me was the reaction of the others. While Bateman had at that point shown nothing as proof of his statement, I wasn’t able to react in any specific sense to his utterance. What struck me, on the other hand, was that both Evelyn and Timothy do not respond in any way to Patrick’s words either. No surprise, no laughter, nothing. They go on with the conversation, as if nothing happened.

As the novel continues we learn more about Patrick’s lifestyle and his personality. The novel has no real ‘plot development’ to speak of, in the sense that it does not tell a story where there is a central conflict that has to be resolved. Instead, we are introduced by Bateman into his life and he recounts his day to day activities. Patrick compulsively describes in high detail what he and his friends are wearing and the brands of the clothes. He writes about all of the steps of personal hygiene he goes through in the morning, about the interior design of his home, his work-out routine and the music he likes. This information comes in an overload of dry description. And although I felt tired by these sections, I felt that it was the appropriate response. This fatigue exactly indicated the level of obsession Bateman (and his friends as well) has for outward appearances and the vacuity of the life he leads. The minutest details are of importance, because if those are not right, you are not part of the group.

One of the group’s signature occupations is the bullying of homeless people. Patrick and his friends have almost made a sport out of it that they practice on a daily basis. One evening, before entering a club one of Bateman’s friends bothers a beggar outside: “Van Patten waves a crisp one-dollar bill in front of the homeless bum’s face, which momentarily lights up, the Van Patten pockets it as we’re whisked into the club, handed a dozen drink tickets and two VIP Basement passes” (Ellis 50).

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22 It can be argued that this compulsive summarizing of brands and garments is a sign of Bateman’s unreliability. I, however, felt that it was a synthetic expression of the themes that the novel addresses. Because the novel is a social critique on the 1980s that (for Ellis) were marked by consumerism and materialism, I felt that these lists or summaries were a way to stylistically express these issues.
This stark contrast of the wealth of the club and the bitter poverty of the homeless man is shrill. The act of pestering the man by giving him the hope of receiving only a single dollar bill is made even worse by the abundance (a dozen!) of drink tickets they receive. I felt angered and slightly disgusted by this attitude towards those who have less than yourself. I found these characters repulsive, because of their lack of compassion and empathy for the disadvantaged. This moral disgust had a physical quality. Several times I recorded that the corners of the mouth were turned down and that I had a toned down version of the ‘gape face’ (cf. p. 12). While in the first pages of the book this pestering of homeless people only helped me to get a rough and provisional idea of who these characters were, it now (because of repetition and thus confirmation) added a clearly negative connotation. I now actively felt disapproval, was emotionally involved.

Bateman himself also practices this cruelty towards homeless people. At one moment he waves to a homeless person, to subsequently give him the finger (Ellis 90). And at another moment he even inflicts physical pain: “On my way to the Chinese cleaners I brush past a crying bum, an old man, forty or fifty, fat and grizzled, and just as I’m opening the door I notice, to top it off, that he’s also blind and I step on his foot, which is actually a stump, causing him to drop his cup, scattering change all over the sidewalk. Did I do this on purpose? What do you think? Or did I do this accidentally?” (Ellis 77).

What is so disturbing about this sequence is the direct address to the reader, drawing the reader into his act, by considering whether or not Patrick did it on purpose. While I was content to keep a distanced viewpoint on Bateman, he drew me in, by directly speaking to me, asking me questions. What even made my animosity stronger was the feeling that Bateman’s words were accompanied by a smirk, loaded with some form of dark humor. As if not only the beggar was laughed at by Patrick, but I myself was laughed at because of the moral judgment I passed on Bateman. This passage also seemed to point at the possibility that Bateman was not a reliable narrator. Framed synthetically, it seemed not as an utterance from Bateman, but from the implied author questioning Bateman and his narration.

Very slowly we are also introduced to Patrick’s more extremely violent side. He often tells people what kind of awful things he wants to do, but in many cases people either do not hear him or do not listen. At one moment, Patrick is in a club, where the female bartender does not want to accept his drink tickets because they are overdue: “I say, staring at her, quite clearly but muffled by ‘Pump Up the Volume’ and the crowd, ‘You are a fucking ugly bitch I want to stab you to death and play around with your blood,’ but I’m smiling. I leave the cunt no tip” (Ellis 57). Bateman’s utter lack of respect towards the woman is repulsive. The fact that she does not seem to hear what he says does

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23 This, as well, can be seen as a sign of Bateman’s unreliability. Just as with the clothing and brand details, I interpreted it as an expression of the thematic level. The people are so numb and self-centered, that they do not hear what other people are saying. There is a complete lack of interest.
not mean that his action is less unpleasant. On a different night, he speaks to another girl in a club: “I tell her I would like to tit-fuck her and then maybe cut her arms off, but the music, George Michael singing ‘Faith,’ is too loud and she can’t hear me” (Ellis 77). I felt both shocked and disgusted that Patrick can say such things to women and that nobody notices or cares. And while Bateman up to this point had not truly hurt anyone, his actions of pestering homeless people and his utterances towards women have had enough impact on me, to regard him from a distance, letting go an attempt at empathy.

Patrick’s fascination for extreme violence also becomes apparent through the films he rents, mostly porn or violent movies. He watches Body Double more than thirty times: “I rent Body Double because I want to watch it again tonight even though I know I won’t have enough time to masturbate over the scene where the woman is getting drilled to death by a power drill since I have a date with Courtney” (Ellis 67). As this excerpt shows, violence and killing are often connected with sexual desire for Patrick. No wonder then, that it is most often the women who come under Bateman’s attention. The first girl that we encounter that Bateman actually considers of hurting is a model called Patricia. But after shortly toying with this idea, Patrick drops it: “I come to the conclusion that Patricia is safe tonight (…). Maybe the glass of Scharffenberger has deadened my impulse or maybe it’s simply that I don’t want to ruin this particular Alexander Julian suit by having the bitch spray her blood all over it” (Ellis 74). If argued differently, Patrick’s abstinence from killing, his resisting the urge, might be a redeeming factor for his character. Under these circumstances, however, it did almost more harm. Not wanting to spoil his clothes with Patricia’s (whom he shamelessly calls a bitch) blood is the only reason for him refraining from murder. It is the most superficial reason he could have given and could not be farther away from a form of moral integrity. The moral disgust that I felt was enforced by the mental imagery that this passages evoked. I visually imagined the spraying of the blood, which led to a bodily experience of physical disgust through wanting to turn away from the scene. This incitement of disgust in my body enhanced to moral disgust that was building up in me on a psychological, emotional level that was not physically felt.

While Patrick still has not related any actual act of violence or killing, he does drop more and more allusions to acts of violence he has committed or wants to commit. One evening he goes out to dinner with Courtney, one of his colleagues’ girlfriend, whom Bateman also has sex with. The ‘catch’ of the dinner, as he calls it, is that they share it with a couple, Anne and Scott, at an expensive restaurant. He learns that Anne and he have something in common: “It seems that Anne Smiley and I share a mutual acquaintance, a waitress from Abetone’s in Aspen who I raped with a can of hairspray last Christmas when I was skiing there over holidays” (Ellis 90). The ease with which such remarks casually slip into Patrick’s narration add a disturbing element to the reading. When I went along with
the satirically described conversations of these empty and shallow characters, I was able to enjoy myself and even laugh at the humorous bits. This shocking bit, however, caught me completely off guard and left me restless. And Bateman goes even further. Anne and Scott suggest something from the menu and Patrick tells us that they can be glad that they didn’t make him order the dish: “I would have broken into Scott and Anne’s studio (…) and with an axe chopped them to pieces, first making Anne watch Scott bleed to death from gaping chest wounds, and then I would have found a way to get to Exeter where I would pour a bottle of acid all over their son’s slanty-eyed zipperhead face” (Ellis 92). Again, the utter disrespect and the racism that is aimed at specifically Anne and Scott’s adopted child is shocking. It is not only what he wants to do with these people, but how he describes them, that is so revolting. These kinds of violent scenes evoked strong visual imagery, an involuntary visualization of the acts described. I even experienced slight nausea at the images that I formed of the violence that Patrick describes. Because of this strong physical aversion, my moral disgust for Bateman was bevestigd and enforced.

This fantasizing and threatening goes on for some chapters, while we follow Bateman in his day to day life. At the video rental where he keeps renting the tape of Body Double he imagines ways to demolish the girl that works behind the counter: “The things I could do to this girl’s body with a hammer, the words I could carve into her with an ice pick” (Ellis 108). And while a lot of Bateman’s hate is directed at people he does not know, some of it is directed at the people that are much closer to him. One evening, when he is having dinner with Evelyn they are discussing the option of marrying and Patrick utters his idea for the wedding: “I’d want to bring a Harrison AK-47 assault rifle to the ceremony,’ I say, bored, in a rush, ‘with a thirty-round magazine so after thoroughly blowing your fat mother’s head off with it I could use it on that fag brother of yours” (Ellis 119). Evelyn, so caught up in her own reasoning does not hear him. At this point, I was not only disgusted by these wicked fantasies of Patrick, but also by Evelyn, who seems to live in her own world. She does not listen and does not consider anyone’s wishes but her own. The central idea of the wedding is to show her class and style and is nothing about her feelings for Patrick. Her character seems so shallow and superficial that I actually got disgusted by her indifference for everything but herself. On a different level, the disgust commingled with a feeling of mirth. I found Evelyn and Patrick’s conversation humorous, because of the constant miscommunication and lack of understanding. It almost took on the form of slapstick, where everything is exaggerated. Paradoxically thus, my emotional reaction to the scene was split into both disgust and a form of joy at the same time. However, these reactions were directed at different elements of the scene. While the disgust was mostly triggered when I framed the scene mimetically, taking Patrick and Evelyn’s words as actual utterances of actual people; the joy took place when I used a synthetic frame, that took into account the satirical composition of the novel.
The first horrifically violent scene is when Patrick, again, encounters a homeless person on the street. He first offers the drunk beggar some money, but then starts lecturing him about getting a job and being less lazy. This confrontation builds up to a violent ending: “Do you know what a fucking loser you are?” He starts nodding helplessly and I pull out a long, thin knife with a serrated edge and, being very careful not to kill him, push maybe half an inch of the blade into his right eye, flickering the handle up, instantly popping the retina” (Ellis 126). The utterly sad condition of the man who cries while speaking to Patrick makes the impact of the violence Patrick inflicts upon him even worse. This excerpt is only a very small section of the actual description how Bateman molests and injures the man. The actual episode goes on for a page and a half and ends in Patrick crippling the dog of the beggar by crushing his paws with his foot. Patrick concludes: “I can’t help but start laughing and I linger at the scene, amused by this tableau” (Ellis 127). The description of Bateman’s violent actions, of how he mutilates the man and his dog evoked vivid imagery in my mind, because the descriptions were so detailed and precise. I experienced strong physical disgust at the blood, the torn out eye, the dog’s broken bones. But what angered and repulsed me most of all, was Bateman abusing the weak. Choosing for a victim a helpless, drunk homeless person and his pet seemed to me a weaker and thus even more awful action, than when he would have chosen someone who would have been able to stand up against him. Patrick exercises his superiority in class, social status, physical appearance and strength in a horrifying manner. The moral disgust that I experienced was of a more permanent nature, while the physical disgust went away when the descriptions of violence ended.

The attitude of arrogance is specifically prevalent at the moments that Bateman is confronted by people, who in his eyes are less successful than he is. A good example would be the doorman of Patrick’s building: “[I]t struck me that I was infinitely better-looking, more successful and richer than this poor bastard would ever be and so with a passing rush of sympathy I smiled and nodded a curt though not impolite good morning without lodging a complaint” (Ellis 133). However, when he is interacting with his peers, some of his confidence fades away. In one instance, Patrick and his colleagues compare business cards while they are out at dinner. Patrick shows his new card, hoping to impress the others, but after his friends one after the other show him their card he feels upset, seeing that theirs are even more stylish than his: “Suddenly the restaurant seems far away, hushed, the noise distant, a meaningless hum, compared to this card, and we all hear Price’s words: ‘Raised lettering, pale nimbus white...’”(Ellis 43). Thus, even though Patrick seemed awfully arrogant, I started to suspect that this was more because of his psychological instability and insecurity. The strong disgust I felt for his actions and utterances became slightly intermingled with pity, making the disgust I felt for him a bit weaker.
Slowly, however, my pity seeped away, when I was again confronted by Patrick’s violent and abusive thoughts. As mentioned above, Patrick has repeated sex with the girlfriend of one of his colleagues, Luis, whom Patrick hates. At one point he even considers of killing him. The questions he then asks himself are not directed at how he could do such a thing, but about whether or not he would be able to keep a straight face after killing him: “If Luis were killed would Courtney be upset? Could I genuinely be of comfort without laughing in her face, my own spite doubling back on me, giving everything away?” (Ellis 151). He hates Luis so intensely that he wants to denigrate him completely before killing him: “I want to see Luis’s face contort and turn purple and I want him to know who it is who is killing him. I want to be the last face, the last thing, that Luis sees before he dies and I want to cry out, ‘I’m fucking Courtney’” (Ellis 152). The amount of hate and anger that Patrick is able to feel is disgusting, but again I was drawn in to pity him. Patrick seems to be so utterly unstable, unable to keep himself under control and so full of negative feelings that I started to feel sympathy for him. His point of view, however, was so diametrically opposed to mine that I was not able to empathize with him. While I was seeing the world constantly through his eyes, I was careful to not come too close to him. I felt that if I would try to empathize with Patrick, feel with him, it would be harmful to myself. The living through of the horrible things that Patrick does, would have been too much. Instead, when I could, I would shift my attention to the synthetic level of the work, to its construction and the satirical elements that I could find in it. It is noteworthy that it was possible for me to see the world through Patrick’s eyes, but at the same time keep a distance. Through his narration, I could look at the world with a similar view to his. However, specifically on an emotional level, I distanced myself from him, not letting myself get emotionally close to him.

I got an even stronger affirmation of my idea about Patrick’s instability when he has a small breakdown. Patrick finds a two week old reminder card about a sale at Armani in his mail box, that probably had been withheld by one of the doormen of his building. He reflects on the situation: “I missed the fucking sale, and dwelling over this loss while wandering down Central Park West somewhere around Seventy-sixth, Seventy-fifth, it strikes me profoundly that the world is more often than not a bad and cruel place” (Ellis 156). The idea that something as trivial as a sale at a clothing store can put Patrick off balance is telling. Also, the idea that it is Bateman who finds the world ‘bad and cruel’ struck me as important. While I ascribed those characteristics to him, their reversal on the world by himself was an indication for me that Patrick was simply unable to understand the world and deal with it in a normal way. His psychological state was so disturbed that it was not able to cope with
the normal situations. This opposition of my view to Patrick’s view thus deepened my understanding of Patrick’s character, made me move closer to him.

The episode where Bateman mutilates and abuses the homeless person and his dog functioned as a flood gate for violence in the novel. After this scene, the violence happens with smaller intervals and gets more and more extreme. Bateman actually kills his following victims. This time, it is a gay man that is walking his sharpei dog. Bateman approaches the man, starting a conversation about the dog. The man willingly speaks to Patrick, attracted by his good looks, thinking that he is a model. During the conversation, Patrick bows down and slices the dog’s belly open. Subsequently, while the dog is dying, he attacks the man. Eventually he tells us: “[T]o make sure the old queer is really dead and not faking it (they sometimes do) I shoot him with a silencer twice in the face and then I leave” (Ellis 159). The violence was again presented in a visceral and graphic manner and my immediate response was that of bodily felt physical disgust. However, this physical aversion was not the most off putting about this scene for me. After some time I became ‘numb’ or habituated to the violence, I was not able to react with a strong emotion. The way, however, he describes his victim was more disturbing from my point of view. He denigrates the man by calling him an ‘old queer’. Bateman again showcases his sexist small minded ideas and in combination with his horrible acts, they were what I reacted to most strongly.

While the violence increases, Patrick’s desire for overpowering and dominating grows as well. His fantasies grow darker and darker. While being with a prostitute he has picked up on the street he thinks: “For a long time my mind races, becomes flooded with impurities – her head is within my reach, is mine to crush; at this very moment my urge to strike out, to insult and punish her, rises then subsides” (Ellis 163). He goes on to have sex with this girl and another call girl, finishing with their physical abuse, for which he uses a sharp coat hanger, a butter knife and a burning cigar. He then pays the girls a large sum of money to leave. Another evening, he is in a club where he meets several models and fantasizes about what he wants to do with them: “Daisy stays, sips Caron’s champagne. I imagine her naked, murdered, maggots burrowing, feasting on her stomach, tits blackened by cigarette burns, Libby eating this corpse out” (Ellis 197). At this point, while still feeling some physical disgust, I was also used to it. Its impact was less strong, because I knew what I could expect and because I knew it would not linger but go away quickly. It was again the disrespect that shone through the descriptions that had a great impact on me. It is the ‘tits’ than Bateman wants to burn and force the other girl to eat from the girl’s body. My moral disgust for Bateman grew stronger and was a persistent factor at this point in my reading experience.

In a sense, Patrick fits in the framework of what could be called a ‘mad narrator’. For more information, see for instance Bernaerts.
It is specifically the act of humiliation that attracts Bateman. When he sees a girl that he recognizes in a club he tells us: “I remember she screamed when I tried to push my entire arm, gloved and slathered with Vaseline, toothpaste, anything I could find, up into her vagina. (...) She was so high – ‘oh my god,’ she kept moaning during those hours, blood bubbling out of her nose – she never wept. Maybe that was the problem; maybe that was what saved her” (Ellis 199). Because Patrick was not able to completely belittle and degrade this woman, he did not kill her. Even though he inflicted intense pain on her, she did not weep. Bateman calls this a ‘problem’, simply because he is not able to turn the girl into this slobbering victim that has let her guard down. This woman resisted, did not make him feel a complete master over her and this is why he was not able to do what he wanted with her. He did not get any pleasure out of it. This psychological domination that Patrick wants to achieve added an extra layer on to the layer of physical disgust that I felt at the graphic description of the violence and murders that he commits. And while at moments I would become less sensitive to the physical disgust elicitors (simply by their excess), I could not block out this moral disgust that I felt for Patrick’s desire to crush another person.

As mentioned above, the people that are close to Patrick do not escape his violent fantasies. While he does not actually abuse them, it is clear that Patrick has no warm feelings towards his family. What is more, we almost learn nothing about them. Only in glimpses do we get some information about his family. We know that Patrick’s mother is a patient in a nursing home. What her problem is, however, we never learn. We know that Patrick has a brother, that is living off the family’s money and that his father is not happy with him. At one point, Patrick meets up with his brother Sean, under pressure from his father. He needs to get some information about what Sean is doing with his life and to try and make him visit his mother. Patrick goes out and buys his brother a tie, but when he actually goes out to meet him, does not give it to him: “I happen to like the tie I bought Sean at Paul Smith last week and I’ve decided not to give it to him (though the idea of the asshole, say, hanging himself with it pleases me greatly)” (Ellis 216). We are given no true reason for Bateman’s extreme dislike of his brother and this is why this attitude shocked me even more than if we would have gotten a bit more information about his childhood and his relationship to his family.

Very slowly, however, some information about Patrick’s inner life seeps through the cracks of the at other times sleek, detailed and impersonal narration. For example, he tells us that his mental health has only gotten worse through the years: “My rages at Harvard were less violent than the ones now and it’s useless to hope that my disgust will vanish – there is just no way” (Ellis 232). And a bit later, he mentions that he is emotionally numb, feeling almost nothing: “There wasn’t a clear, identifiable emotion within me, except for greed and, possibly, total disgust” (Ellis 271). It is remarkable that Patrick indeed openly describes that it is disgust that he experience. While I was
disgusted at him, he was clearly disgusted at the world. His deeds, then, can be read as an expression of disgust. He physically reenacts what he feels. Patrick’s descriptions of what he does, who he meets, what he thinks, are empty and shallow, simply because he does not feel anything. He exists in this shallow world of appearances, because he is only an appearance, he does not have any real emotional experience aside from disgust and hate. This is why, after the murder of two escort girls, there is no real feeling as well: “The aftermath. No fear, no confusion. Unable to linger since there are things to be done today: return videotapes, work out at the gym, a new British musical on Broadway I promised Jeanette I’d take her to, a dinner reservation to be made somewhere” (Ellis 294). He occupies himself with trivial tasks, simply because he is no longer able to get excited by his excesses of violence, he has gotten used to it: “I can already tell that it’s going to be a characteristically useless, senseless death, but then I'm used to the horror. It seems distilled, even now it fails to upset or bother me” (Ellis 316).

This is also the reason why in the course of the novel, the violence gets more extreme. Like a drug addict, he needs more and more to feel anything. He ends up killing one of his colleagues, several women and even a child at the zoo25. This new excess, however, is also not able to fulfill his desire of feeling something. Instead: “Though I am satisfied at first by my actions, I’m suddenly jolted with a mournful despair at how useless, how extraordinarily painless, it is to take a child’s life. This thing before me, small and twisted and bloody, has no real history, no worthwhile past, nothing is really lost”, the death of the child is only ‘puny’ (Ellis 288). This experience turns out to be even more empty for him, than the other murders he has committed. The murder is almost too ‘easy’, the child is no competition at all. Patrick wants to feel that his actions have real consequences, that they inflict pain, both physical and mental. One of the most disturbing factors about this scene, for me, was that I actually started considering together with Bateman the ‘worth’ of his killings. As if the murder of the child was worse, because he got nothing out of it. The novel unsuspectingly was able to draw me in, to emotionally connect with him and empathize with him. I suspect this happened because in the course of the novel I was able to pick up enough information about Patrick and had spent a lot of time with him. This made me emotionally attached to him, regardless of my strong negative judgment of his actions. Because I slowly started understanding him and realized that his acts are largely compulsive, that I pitied him and could emotionally empathize with the hate that he felt for the ugly world surrounding him.

Somewhat surprisingly the novel ended without a resolution or a climax. While the violence keeps becoming more and more extreme and the time that elapses between Bateman’s outbursts gets shorter, no big change takes place at the ending of the novel. We only receive some more insight

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25 That is, if you assign credibility to Patrick’s words. Towards the end of the novel, I started to doubt Bateman’s reliability. It just didn’t seem plausible that he could commit all these murders without anyone noticing anything.
into Bateman’s mind when he tells us: “Desire – meaningless. Intellect is not a cure. Justice is dead. Fear, recrimination, innocence, sympathy, guilt, waste, failure, grief, were things emotions, that no one really felt anymore. Reflection is useless, the world is senseless. Evil is its only permanence” (Ellis 360). What Bateman actually ascribes to the world surrounding him, was for me only a form of his characterization. It told me more about his character and his outlook on the world, than about the world itself. Bateman himself, does nothing to change and in the end, the situation is the same as at the beginning. The novel is a loop, when it comes to Patrick and his character. It is as if time stood still. Again, this absence of change seems to hint at that all these killings did not actually occur, but that Bateman only imagined them. There is even a highly incredible chase scene toward the end of the novel, where Bateman gets away from the police. My doubt about the truthfulness of Patrick’s account created a more complex attitude towards Bateman. I realized that, whether or not he actually commits the murders, he is a highly disturbed individual, with desires and feelings opposed to mine. However, Patrick’s psychological instability made me sympathize with him, pity him. Thus, my reaction to him at the end was twofold: I both thought of him as an awful person, but one that is pathetic, because it seems as if he can do nothing about it.

**Graphic detail**

After considering my reactions to the novel, it is time to look at some other readers’ responses. Similarly to the *Lolita* case study, I will consider both blog entries and scholarly publications. Again, I will try to tease out some of the general responses, some thematic recurrences. Where it came to *Lolita*, most of the readers experienced a contradiction between the beauty of the writing and the ugliness that was nested on the level of plot. In the case of *American Psycho* the responses are in general darker. While some reflect on the writing, beauty is actually never mentioned. The most mentioned element about the synthetic level of the novel however, concerns the level of detail. As Ellis himself explains: “With *American Psycho* it was very clear to me when I started writing that this was going to be a character who was so obsessed with appearances that he was going to tell the reader in minute, numbing detail about everything he owns, everything he wears, everything he eats. And that sense of detail spilled over into the murders” (Love). This is why the novel holds an excess of detail in the descriptions of Bateman’s daily routines and in his murders. This is also what drew the attention of most of the readers. One blogger, for instance, writes that the violence in the novel “is portrayed in meticulous and appalling detail with a chilling lack of remorse, in the same tone Bateman uses for describing the designer fashions of his colleagues or what he orders for dinner” (J. A. Baker). And Mark Storey calls the descriptions of torture, murder and sexual acts ‘lingering’ and ‘horribly detailed’ (Storey 58).
The high detail in the scenes that include violence and sex, is framed by most of the readers as ‘graphic’. Some readers claim that because of this graphic nature, they were not able to continue reading the novel: “I started reading American Psycho a few years ago and it was just a little too graphic for my taste” (A Little Blog, “Books”). So much detail makes the violence visually imaginable, as if you are watching a movie, instead of reading a book. I have found no clear evidence of whether these responses also included somatic experiences, such as somatic empathy for the victim’s pain. Therefore this reader could not read on, it was simply too much to take in. Other readers, while eventually reading on, at least have to pause the reading for some time to recover: “The murders are of course horrific, in some cases so graphic I had to pause and take a breath before I could continue” (Savidge). Most reviews of the novel that are to be found on blogs, include some kind of warning for future readers. The bloggers try to prepare others for this extreme reading experience: “I will have to warn you, that if you attempt to read this book, understand it is very graphic” (Suzie). And it is not only the faint of heart that have difficulty with the graphic scenes. Even the readers that claim that they can handle a lot of violence point out that the content of American Psycho is quite extreme: “These scenes are incredibly graphic and I have an iron stomach” (Tina).

This high amount of detail and the graphicness, has by some been regarded as one part of the excessiveness of the book. According to those readers all of the books elements are in excess. James Gardner, for example, argues that the book is a social critique, a satire. However, it is loaded with an excess of violence: “Ellis seems to perceive a gust of bad faith in liberal discourse, and it is the relentless vigor with which he goes after liberals’ hypocrisy, with which he tramples all over their self-serving sensiblerie, that is the most valuable thing in this novel. What cannot be explained away or mitigated by this reading, however, is the extremeness of this violence, to which no nobler purpose can be ascribed than simple sadism” (Gardner 56). Thus, while valuing the novel for its engagement with modern culture, Gardner claims that there is no reason for the amount of and extremeness of the violence portrayed. This is why he ascribes sadism to Ellis. If the violence cannot be explained by an artistic purpose, it must be that Ellis is simply enjoying it. A blogger also underlines the aesthetic failure of the excessiveness: “Over done, over written, and so ugly for the sake of being ugly” (Délaissé). According to this reviewer, everything is too much about this book. The only reason for its ugliness is the desire to be ugly.

Negative Emotions

As these last remarks show, the high amount of detail that is infused into the novel does not necessarily lead to positive emotions or reading experiences. On the contrary, most responses are marked by negativity. One of the most common unpleasant reactions to the book is the feeling of
‘disturbance’. The most obvious reason for the disturbing feeling is the violence and sex portrayed graphically in the novel. Another reason would be the socially and politically unacceptable remarks that Bateman makes. Similarly to my disgust at such statements, one blogger mentions: “There are a lot of racial slurs in the book and a lot of crude remarks in reference to homosexuals and homeless people. It can be disturbing” (Suzie). For some readers, however, this feeling was mixed with more lighthearted and positive feelings. One reader argued: “I am conflicted over this one because it was highly disturbing to read, yet at the same time, I was fascinated by Bateman” (Tina). There was some form of attraction towards the protagonist and the novel. Similarly another blogger stated that while he did not actually enjoy the novel, he did find it “very compelling and in some parts darkly funny” (Savidge). It is again this humor element that is intermixed with more negative feelings. Another reader remarked that it is specifically this mixing of laughter with such a heavy and awful subject that makes the reading experience so disturbing (Siegfried). When awful things are happening, laughter seems misplaced. So when you are made to laugh in such a situation, it seems so inappropriate that you feel disturbed by your own reaction.

Ellis himself has reflected on this process of reading such violent scenes. In an interview he states the following:

“The immense detail, the ridiculous minutiae, it gets to a point where it’s so over the top that – well, you can have either of two reactions. Either you find it so numbing you skip it, which I don’t think is a bad thing to do, or you find it funny. But at the same time, I wanted the violence to work on another level, to be upsetting, too. I don’t care if a lot of people find that mixture of gallows humor and real harsh violence interesting, but that is something that was conscious” (Love).

Ellis realizes how heavy the actual content of the novel is. He understands that there are people who are not able to read those sections. The other possibility besides just avoiding the violence, is lighten it up by looking at the humorous side of it. Ellis purposefully has infused the novel with jokes and satire, to create this mixture of humor and extreme violence. The final result of this combination is an experience that is upsetting and disturbing. Even Ellis himself could not escape this feeling while writing the novel. When Robert Love asks him what he felt when he was writing the murder and torture scenes, Ellis answers: “They were incredibly upsetting to write, the hardest scenes I’ve ever had to write” (Love). Thus, while intending to upset and shock the reader, he did the same to himself when he was imagining and writing these scenes.
Overt disgust reports

In many cases the disturbing feeling that *American Psycho* accomplished in its readers was strongly connected to the feeling of both physical and moral disgust. Most of the readers openly reported that they were disgusted by the novel (on the whole, by Bateman’s character, by certain scenes or elements). As mentioned above, before the novel’s publication, some of its contents leaked. The National Organization for Women, outraged by the excerpts, established a hotline tape. One of the things that you could hear on the tape was a reading of one of those excerpts. Christopher Hitchens described his reaction to the tape: “It furnishes a graphic reading of a passage from *American Psycho*, in which a woman is so foully raped and dismembered that one replaces the receiver feeling almost disordered with disgust” (Hitchens, “Minority Report” 7). After this vehement protest against the novel, S&S dropped the book and broke Ellis’ contract. Adler and McGuigan reported that some of S&S staff “were revolted by the gory dismemberings and vivid sexual perversities sprinkled through its 366 pages” (Adler and McGuigan 85). So when Vintage decided to publish Ellis’ book, the general public got the chance to give a reaction on the novel.

It is almost a general consensus among the readers that some of the book’s scenes are disgusting. As one blogger mentions, disgust is almost a requirement: “You can’t read the book and not have an emotional response, even if it’s just of disgust” (J. A. Baker). Even if the reader valued the book positively, they still mention this effect. One commenter on a blog, for instance, states: “I read this when I was 17/18 and was blown away by it, albeit in a disgusted/gobsmacked kind of way” (A Little Blog, “Books”). Bateman and his actions are called simply disgusting, but also horrible, grisly, reviled (Iannone 52), repellent, and nasty (Dunn). Some readers also indicate that in spite of all these negative descriptions of *American Psycho*’s main character and the novel as a whole, there remained something that was fascinating about the book: “It was horrifying, terrifying, disgusting, and yet I could not look away” (Siegfried). In a lot of cases, however, the overload of disgust resulted in a negative judgment of the novel. John Baker, for instance states that the disgusting elements of the novel go beyond Ellis’ attempt at a satirical representation of the ‘80s (J. F. Baker 7). R. Z. Sheppard as well claims that writing “superficially about superficiality and disgustingly about the disgusting and call it, as Ellis does, a challenge to his readers complacency does violence to his audience and to the fundamental nature of his craft” (Sheppard 100). For depicting such a disgusting and superficial subject, Ellis is no longer taken seriously as a sincere artist.

Ellis himself has reacted to such accusations by claiming that he also understands the moral

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26 Baker enumerates the following: “The extremely graphic nature of the brutality, the apparent reveling in pornographic detail, the sadistic excesses against homeless people, children and animals, as well as women, the strained attempt to record, in heated prose, the most revolting physical horrors imaginable” (J. F. Baker 7).
nature of the acts depicted in the novel and he does not shy away from passing judgment on
Bateman: “It seemed to me that I had to really get the point across -- if not to an audience, at least to
myself while writing this book -- that these murders are painful, that they're terrible, that they're
messy, that they're as ugly as possible” (Love). Instead, he claims that Bateman’s extremely revolting
character and acts were a necessary evil for his artistic goals. Ellis also tried to strongly condemn
Bateman, in order to apply a strict dividing line between himself and the character that he had
created: “The acts described in the book are truly, indisputably vile. The book itself is not. Patrick
Bateman is a monster. I am not” (Love). A lot of readers, indeed, passed judgment on Ellis for making
up such a character that commits such vile acts. There had to be something wrong with him, if these
disgusting thoughts originated in his mind. These readers thus blurred the distinction between work
and author, being disgusted not only by American Psycho, but by Ellis himself. This reminded me of the
remark by Ian William Miller, that when a theorist paid attention to the functioning of emotional
disgust, he metonymically became disgusting to others (cf. p. 3). Readers apparently have the
inclination to metonymically transfer the characteristics of disgust elicitors from the object of interest
to the researcher/writer.

Physical reaction

Besides these overt reports of disgust in reading experiences, a lot of readers gave an account of their
physical responses to the novel that indicated the presence of disgust. One blogger stated that she
refrained from reading the book because she had seen many people “turn worryingly pale when they
talk about this book” (A Little Blog, “Books”). Paleness, of course, indicates nausea that is often a
consequence of the feeling of disgust. And nausea is one of the most reported physical reactions to
American Psycho. A commenter on the same blog stated that she did not read the novel because only
leafing through it was enough to ‘make her sick’. A lot of people that actually read the book gave an
account of ‘nausea’ (Everybookhasitsday) and being ‘sick to the stomach’ (J. A. Baker). Many
reviewers (both on blogs and in magazines), as well, warn that this book can have this physical effect.
Sheppard for instance states: “Many readers will not have the stomach to get past the middle”
(Sheppard 100). And a blogger gave the following advice: “If you have a weak stomach, this book is
definitely not for you” (Tina). This same blogger reported shaking when she had finished the book,
because the mental images of the murders and tortures would not go away.

Of the many different physical reactions, there was another one that was very common
besides nausea. This was the need to get away from the book, to put distance between oneself and
the novel. Some accounts indicate that this distance-taking was only temporary. Some readers had to
stop reading and put away the book during the violent scenes, to take it up a bit later. One blogger, for
instance attests to a reading that had a great impact on her: “It’s the first book I read that actually had a real physical and emotional effect on me. I remember having to stop reading a couple times for fear I would throw up” (Bekoe). Other readers reported that they ‘often had to put the book down’ (J. A. Baker) or they ‘had to pause and take a breath’ (Savidge). In these cases it was enough to put a temporary distance between oneself and the book by taking off one’s eyes from the page and extracting oneself from its fictional world. Other readers had a more immoderate desire to get away from the book. One blogger admitted to a wish ‘to lock it up someplace’ (Everybookhasitsday), while another stated that she did not want the book in the house (Délaissé). There was one blogger that had a quite extreme reaction to the book. She reported that some scenes, after she had read them, would not leave her mind. They were so graphic that she could not ‘unsee’ them. Those images stayed with her for weeks on end after finishing the novel (Tina). Her involvement with the novel and with Bateman was so thorough that she could not help imagining things from Bateman’s point of view. She writes: “Weeks ago, I was stuffing a roast with garlic and what I thought about while doing it, was what it would be like to stuff garlic into a dead body. Seriously. How wrong is that?” (Tina). This is a quite extreme account of how, through taking up perspective and empathy, a novel can influence the audience’s outlook on real life. Even when the perspective one is invited to take on is in no way morally compatible with one’s own perspective.

Besides these physical accounts that point in the direction of disgust, the readers employed some metaphorical language that indicated feelings of disgust as well. There are the more simple metaphorical references that are quite conventional such as ‘nasty’ and ‘dirty’. But there are also some accounts of less common disgust imagery. One blogger for instance claimed: “After I washed my hands of American Psycho, I was more than ready to never read anything of Ellis’ again” (Dunn). The washing of the hands is a need to cleanse oneself from the filth of the novel. To avoid contamination one has to clean oneself and this is exactly what this reader wants to do after coming into contact with American Psycho. The use of the contamination metaphor is actually a recurrent response to the novel. Carol Iannone, for example, claims that the novel is “an example of the very disease it purports to diagnose” (Iannone 54). There is the fear of the novel’s contents, spreading like a disease and infecting anyone who reads it. This is such a persisting idea that even Ellis himself, in an interview, has acknowledged that he thinks that some of the novel is ‘sick’ (Love). There is thus a parallel between the physical disgust for contamination and the moral disgust for the book. This parallel often manifests itself in metaphorical language where aspects of physical disgust are

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27 Marco Caracciolo argues that when readers encounter fictional characters that have a dissonant world view from their own, there are two ways of coping with this dissonance. Either through attitude change, which means that readers will adjust their own beliefs and values after taking on the perspective of that character (28); or through imaginative resistance, where the different world views prevent an empathetic connection (30). Rather than a simple opposition, these two possibilities are two sides of one continuum.
transferred to the moral domain. Just as in the reactions to Lolita readers describe their feelings of moral disgust through the use of physical disgust imagery. The disgust triggered by contaminating objects is one such element that gets transferred into the moral domain, claiming that the novel can spread a ‘moral sickness’.

**Morality**

In some instances the question of morality came to the forefront when there was an indication of a disgust response. The novel had to deal with moral judgments even before its actual publication. When the book finally did get published it caused something of a ‘moral panic’ (Storey 58). Roger Rosenblatt, for example, wrote in the New York times that the contents of American Psycho are ‘moronic and sadistic’ and claims that Simon & Schuster only took “responsibility to assert moral judgment” by cancelling the novel’s publication (Rosenblatt). Ellis had to defend himself against the moral judgments that were passed not only on his book but on himself, claiming that it is clear that “there is a moral tone to the book [which] lies in the direction of the author abhorring this kind of behavior” (Adler and McGuigan 85). A lot of readers, however, were not convinced by Ellis’ moral position. Terry Teachout, for instance, writes that Ellis, even though claiming to be a serious writer, does not exhibit “the workings of an adult moral imagination. It is as if he knows nothing of good and evil” (Teachout 46). And Carol Iannone also states that the novel attests to Ellis’ “moral immaturity” (Iannone 54). What I found most surprising is that the bloggers mostly decided to discard the question of Ellis’ moral position and instead only passed judgment on the novel and its protagonist. So while the media chose the more personal approach, the ordinary readers decided to tackle the issues that the novel portrayed.

Interesting to note is that Bateman’s unreliability did not seem to influence the moral responses to the novel. It is even more striking that almost no reading commentary from the blogs actively considers the question of Bateman’s unreliability. The bloggers tended to focus on the graphicness of Bateman’s accounts of the murders, without questioning how accurate or truthful these accounts are. It is as if the experience of the shocking violence had too great an impact on most readers, was too overwhelming to read with a critical attitude. In the academic literature more attention went to the epistemological uncertainty of Bateman’s murders. Storey, for example states: “The scenes in which he is apparently committing “real” violence subsequently take on a different tone: They are so over the top, so filmic, even comic book in the details that we are given (including one murder using a nail-gun and another using a power driller) that it seems like something he has taken from a book or a film” (60). As he argues, it is not only the evidence that we find on the mimetic
level\textsuperscript{28}, but its specifically the way he describes the murders that hints at Bateman’s imaginings: “The evidence of the novel alerts us to Bateman’s unreliability, but the language that describes his atrocious acts sets off alarm bells on a deeper level; life for Bateman, it seems, is one long film” (Storey 61). In this way, both the synthetic and mimetic level work together to establish Bateman’s unreliability\textsuperscript{29}.

To close off this paragraph, I will again shortly compare my response to the novel with the other responses. During my reading experience I was at first overwhelmed by the shocking visual imagery of the violence that Patrick commits. I had a strong physical reaction of mostly nausea to the scenes where Patrick violently assaults and kills people and animals. How extreme this reaction of physical disgust was, after constant recurrence of the violent scenes and my exposure to it, I got used to the disgust, got numb. What the physical disgust, however, did achieve is enforce the moral contempt and disgust that I felt for Bateman. And while the physical disgust was only of a temporary nature, the moral disgust was a lingering emotion that grew during the reading experience. For some other readers the violence and thus the following disgust was too extreme to be habitualized. Some of them were not able to finish the book and the others who did were left with a bad taste in the mouth and an experience that was marked by shock and disturbance. Thus for those readers the physical disgust also played a consistent role during the reading. However, just as in my case, most readers connected the feelings of physical disgust with their moral judgment of Bateman. My attitude towards Bateman started to change when the novel came to a close. While I still thought that Bateman was an awful person, I also considered the idea that Bateman’s account was unreliable and that the murders were only imaginary. My judgment of Bateman’s moral nature became more layered and complex. Other readers almost did not highlight Patrick’s unreliability and thus outwardly condemned him. However, there were several reports of a fascination towards Bateman, even though the readers concluded that they found him morally disgusting and objectionable. This duality in response was for me also present through the infusion of humor in the novel. Again disgust, a strong negative emotion, commingled with joy or mirth, adding to a disturbing experience. Several other readers also attested to this opposition between the novel being both aversive and funny at the same time. In my case, the humor made me put in perspective my highly mimetic response to the novel, considering it more from its synthetic level of construction. Just as with the question of Bateman’s unreliability, I kept shifting between the mimetic and the synthetic levels. Most bloggers’ commentaries implied a more straightforward experience, that focused on the mimetic level of the work. Unsurprisingly, the

\textsuperscript{28} For example the chase scene I mentioned above; or the fact that Patrick has a maid who must clean his apartment after the horrific murders take place, but who never says anything about blood or scattered body parts.

\textsuperscript{29} Another academic account that centers on the epistemic uncertainty in American Psycho is that of Namwali Serpell in his article “Repetition and the Ethics of Suspended Reading in American Psycho” (2009).
academic studies showed a more reflective and critical stance towards the novel, that resulted in more complex and layered reading responses.

4. Conclusion

After looking at both *Lolita* and *American Psycho* it is time for some concluding remarks. In the case studies I have looked at my own response to the novels and at some recurring thematic patterns of responses from other readers. It was clear that in both of the cases, disgust was a prominent and actively felt emotion. As mentioned in chapter 2, physical disgust is mainly regarded as a direct emotion. When the disgust elicitor appears, one directly feels disgust. However, what I found in the case studies is that disgust, and especially moral disgust, is also an emotion that can develop and change over time. Just as Carolyn Korsmeyer asserts, disgust is an emotion that comes in different gradations and our understanding of it should be more nuanced than simply interpreting the emotion as an on or off switch. What I would like to add to that is that specifically the reading experience is a temporal activity. This temporal nature also influences the way one feels moral disgust when one is reading. When some morally suspicious acts occur in the novel, this does not mean that disgust is immediately felt. Instead, one may first feel discomfort, disapproval or even anger. When the morally reprehensible situations start recurring, however, the basis for moral disgust is laid out. Through the repetition of these situations, one gets a confirmation that moral disgust is indeed an appropriate emotion. So, when in the course of the novel these morally objectionable cases keep occurring, the moral disgust can become more intense.

In the cases I considered, physical disgust was also an important factor of the reading experience. Different from moral disgust, however, physical disgust is subject to progressive habituation. While in the first instance, it comes as a strong emotion, it also goes away the moment the disgust elicitor disappears. And the more often physical disgust appears, the less strong it becomes. In contrast, moral disgust is then different because we are increasingly sensitive to it. Both of my case study also attested to a strong interconnection between physical and moral disgust. The occurring physical disgust often only enforced the moral disgust that was felt. In both case studies, the physical disgust was elicited in different ways. In *Lolita*, the physical disgust was mostly triggered not through direct and graphic descriptions, but through metaphorical language that stimulated physically disgusting visual imagery. However, the metaphors invited a great variety of interpretation and thus different gradations of disgust. In *American Psycho* the physical disgust was, by contrast, triggered by detailed, accurate and precise descriptions of the physically repulsive acts and objects. Here there was
less room for interpretation, but the descriptions also resulted in highly detailed visual imagery that could trigger strong physical disgust.

Because disgust is such a strongly felt emotion, it can become too much for the reader to endure in some instances. If the reader is sensitive and these morally disgusting situations and scenes keep presenting themselves, there is a large chance that the reader will stop reading to escape this unpleasant experience. Disgust initially compels to take a distance from the elicitor. In the novels that I have looked at, the main disgust triggers were the protagonists and their actions. When the disgust is still bearable for the reader, she does not have to actually physically distance herself. The distancing, if needed, can come from a shifting of reading frames. While first immersing oneself in the world completely and reading with a strong mimetic frame, one can distance oneself from the disgusting content by shifting the reading frame to the constructed or synthetic level of the work. By regarding how the novel is constructed, what imagery, tropes and words are used, one can effectively take an experiential or phenomenological distance from the described events. In some cases, the disgust is so strong that this distancing is not enough. One has to take an actual psychological distance from the novel by averting the eyes, pausing the reading. In this way, the novel is no longer present in one’s perception and this creates a larger phenomenological distance. In even more extreme cases even this measure may be not enough and then the reader will probably distance herself physically by putting the book away, temporarily or even permanently.

There is, however, enough evidence that disgust can have an attractive component as well. More often than not, we are speaking about the milder forms of the emotion. This push and pull effect is active in both cases of physical and moral disgust. There is a fascinating aspect to the immoral, to the forbidden. Many people are attracted to that which is frowned upon and the infamous status of a novel like *American Psycho* can draw a lot of attention from readers. The fact that the disgust elicitors are fictional representations enforces the attraction. While in real life, most people would not feel attracted to a mass murderer or a pedophile, in fiction these characters invite curiosity. One requisite for the attractive aspect of disgust is that the repulsive aspect does not get too strong. If the disgust is so strong, the reader will be overwhelmed and the fascination will be overshadowed by the unpleasantness. This holds for both physical and moral disgust as, for instance, in the case of *American Psycho* some scenes are so violent that the physical disgust one feels at the mutilations becomes so intense that Bateman’s character can lose all its fascination.

There are also instances where the feelings of disgust get weaker or subside. The most obvious case with regard to morally disgusting characters, would be acts of redemption. For a lot of readers Humbert Humbert’s guilt ridden proclamation of love at the end of *Lolita* was enough for his moral redemption. They judged Humbert differently, because in their eyes, he had changed and
understood what he had done wrong. This redemption weakened their disgust for Humbert. But there are also other ways in which disgust can grow weaker. When the disgust elicitor is absent for some time, feelings of disgust often subside. For example, in the moments that Lolita was not with Humbert, I felt my sympathy for him rising and my disgust lessened. I was able to reduce the distance to Humbert, starting to feel with him, taking a more empathetic stance. When it comes to physical disgust, it can happen that there are so many disgust triggers or that they are so intense that the reader gets numbed by them. This happened, for example, to several readers of *American Psycho*. The violent scenes contain so many details of the disgusting killings and tortures that do not seem to end. This overload and excess numbs the reader and causes them to react less sensitively to what is happening. In these cases, the disgust also becomes less strong.

When it comes to the works of literature that elicit moral disgust, the mimetic level is most important. When one immerses oneself in the fictional world, one is most exposed to feelings of disgust. This, however, does not mean that the synthetic level cannot influence the emotional response to the novel. The case studies have shown, on the contrary, how important the narration can be for the moral assessment of the work. *Lolita* is considered as being *more* disturbing and disgusting, exactly because on the synthetic level the novel is so beautiful and beguiling. This tension between ugly content and beautiful form is what so strongly disturbed most readers. Readers conceded that because the novel was aesthetically so pleasing, they actually *overlooked* the content. Their moral judgment was suspended because their attention went to the masterly crafted language of the novel and disgust was thus not easily triggered. This, however, does not mean that aesthetic pleasure and disgust cannot go hand in hand. As Carolyn Korsmeyer work shows, specifically physical disgust can produce aesthetic pleasure. There were, however, also readers that were so sensitive to the immoral content that the synthetic level no longer had the same importance or impact. One of the most prominent reasons for the sensitivity to immorality is personal experience. Readers who have daughters were far more easily disgusted by the acts of Humbert than were the readers that did not have any children.

As may have become apparent from the above, moral disgust is rarely an emotion that comes alone. While with physical disgust it is possible that the feeling comes unaccompanied by other emotions (such as when one sees, feels or smells rotten meat, for example), moral disgust almost always coexists with other emotions. These can be either positive or negative. The most common is the mixing with negative emotions, such as anger, hate, disapproval. In these cases one situation simply triggers several different emotions and the experience is stable and unambiguous. When positive emotions, however, are mixed with disgust, one gets a more confusing experience. In the cases of both novels, readers indicated that disgust was often triggered alongside with joy or mirth.
from the humor in the novels. In these cases, readers indicated that this experience was disturbing. The reaction of laughter seems misplaced in situations where our moral disgust is triggered as well. Readers feel as if they are not supposed to laugh and this is often experienced as upsetting. There are also cases when these positive emotions are so strong that the disgust response is weakened. By triggering mirth through humor, the novels can suspend or weaken one’s moral judgment and hereby lessening the feeling of disgust.

Finally, disgust seems such a strong emotion that readers often respond to this emotion in fiction similar to how they would respond in real life. If their judgment is not impaired through the use of humor or charm, readers will regard the novel with the same moral framework as they would a similar situation in real life. This is, I think, also the reason why authors of disgust provoking books often have to answer for their own writings. If the author’s moral position is not clearly represented in the novel itself, readers begin asking questions about why this book exists. When the inclusion of immoral acts in the book seems to be meaningless, readers tend to get morally disgusted by the work and its author. For these readers there has to be a purpose or a reason behind the immorality displayed. I also think that the disapproval of authors, who write disgust triggering novels, by the public comes from the idea that disgusting objects work according the principles of contamination. Readers establish a metonymic relationship between disgusting writing and the author. Also the idea that this disgusting and contaminating object has originated in the mind of the author, must make this author morally disgusting as well. This logic of contamination in the moral domain, is bound up with physical disgust which is often triggered by contaminating objects (such as contaminating food or disease).

All these recurring structural elements of moral disgust in the immoral reading experience attest to the complexity of the emotion. Moral disgust can be triggered by all kinds of different elicitors and can come in many different shades and degrees. It is not an emotion that sets in immediately and subsequently will go away, as attested by many readers commenting on the lingering quality of the descriptions in, especially, American Psycho. I agree with Martha Nussbaum that historically, moral disgust has been employed in ways that have promotes racism, sexism and homophobia. I do think, however, that through reading (and possibly other arts) our moral faculties are trained to function in a more nuanced way. In my opinion, moral disgust is an emotion that is included in this training. Through perspective-taking and empathizing readers are able to make more nuanced judgments that do not rest on only one perspective and only one moment in time. Instead, the situations they are presented with are complex and often change over a longer period of time (both diegetic time and the real time readers spend with the book). In this way, reading novels that have taken up immoral subjects can help refine moral sensibility and judgment faculties of readers,
teaching them that moral disgust has to be regarded as one facet of moral decision-making. These concluding remarks might seem too hopeful and positive when it comes to the effect literature can have. As Jèmeljan Hakemulder has tried to show through empirical research, it is difficult to prove that reading literature can have lasting positive effects on the reader. I do think, however, that it is important that literature at least gives us the possibility to come into contact with other people, other ideals, other moralities and other cultures and thus gives us the chance to reflect on a deeper level on how we deal with questions of morality.

5. Bibliography


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