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## Reading Rape and Answering with Empathy: A New Approach to Sexual Assault Education for College Students

Brianna Jerman  
*University of South Florida*

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Reading Rape and Answering with Empathy:  
A New Approach to Sexual Assault Education for College Students

by

Brianna Jerman

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
with a concentration in Literature  
Department of English  
College of Arts & Sciences  
University of South Florida

Major Professor: Diane Price Herndl, Ph.D  
John Lennon, Ph.D  
Susan Mooney, Ph.D  
Michelle Hughes Miller, Ph.D

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## **DEDICATION**

This dissertation is dedicated to my greatest friend and life partner, Mike Jerman, who was a responsible and empathetic witness to my story long before I knew what that meant and years before this dissertation took root, and who has continued to be an advocate, confidant, and inspiration over the past fourteen years. And to Adeline and Molly, may you learn to channel pain and heartbreak into hope and healing for others. And to our First Tiny Love, who forever impressed on me the importance of empathy, love, and self-care.

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I owe a debt of gratitude to many other professors and faculty members in the English department. The classes I took as a student helped prepare me for this endeavor, and I must make

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I am especially thankful to my only family member by choice, my husband Michael Jerman, for his encouragement, support, and immense patience. We have known each other for fourteen years and have been married for ten, and there has not been a day during this time that I haven't been a student. The weight of earning a PhD while raising a family was shared by Mike. He ceaselessly provided for our family while I focused on completing this project; listened to my complaints and anxieties in equal proportion to my joys and ruminations; and endured the fallout of my scattered mind when the house was a mess, the kids weren't bathed, and the car was out of

gas. He also voluntarily read and provided feedback on each chapter of this project. He remains my greatest cheerleader.

Finally, I am especially indebted to survivors of sexual assault who have bravely spoken about their experiences as victims. I had many reasons to abandon this project: it is emotionally difficult and exhausting to engage with stories of trauma, both real and fictional; there are fears I'm asking readers too much; my knowledge of trauma theory has made me aware of the possibility of triggering or retraumatizing the very people I'm hoping to help; people have said that my choice to write about rape makes them uncomfortable; and I wonder how it will be received by a more general audience. But each time I've nearly resolved to end this project, something—the publication of a story about a prominent director sexually assaulting actors or of a convicted rapist sentenced only to probation—proves the work set out in this dissertation is necessary. I want to thank the many friends and acquaintances who shared their experiences of sexual trauma with me personally. An unexpected and unintentional byproduct of writing about this topic is that it presents as an invitation for people to tell me their stories. For each of these people, I am so thankful and feel so honored that I could be a witness. This charge was almost always heavy but these stories provided constant motivation to look to a better future and try to be a part of its foundation. I thus owe this finished project to the men and women whose stories encouraged me to keep writing.

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## **ABSTRACT**

The issue of sexual assault on college campuses is addressed in part by a mandate that all college students complete some form of sexual assault education. While current education programs have proven successful in teaching bystander education and dispelling rape myths, they have not proven to increase reporting rates while also decreasing the number of sexual assaults. This dissertation makes a pedagogical argument for a new approach to sexual assault and prevention education at the college level that would use literary rape narratives to dispel sexual assault myths, teach trauma theory principles, and address intersectional aspects of rape culture with the ultimate goal of instilling and inciting empathy for rape victims. Repeat offenders make up more than 90% of rapes and assaults. This is possible because only a small number of assaults are reported and thus many offenders are never apprehended. The main reason victims do not report is due to fear of further victimization and stigmatization. The course proposed in this dissertation seeks to combat underreporting by creating a community that believes and supports victims. Through purposeful and guided interaction with literature as exemplified in this dissertation, students will identify and combat existing implicit bias against victims, become trauma informed witnesses, and learn how to respond to victims of sexual assault with empathy and care. Informed by dozens of studies on the effectiveness of using literature to teach affective empathy, this dissertation includes literary analysis of four novels that include rape in order to illustrate how such a class would work.

## INTRODUCTION

*It is very tempting to take the side of the perpetrator. All the perpetrator asks is that the bystander do nothing. He appeals to the universal desire to see, hear, and speak no evil. The victim, on the contrary, asks the bystander to share the burden of pain. The victim demands action, engagement, and remembering....Without a supportive environment, the bystander usually succumbs to the temptation to look the other way —Judith Herman, pp. 7-8*

The problem of sexual assault on university campuses is not a new revelation, and many can cite the statistic that one in four women will be a victim of sexual assault during their time in college.<sup>1</sup> Legislative and social efforts to address the issue have made strides in raising awareness and ensuring victims' rights, but each time new policy is implemented, an additional challenge is revealed. When the prevalence of sexual assault instances on college campuses was made public in the 1980s, the government responded by enacting The Jeanne Clery Disclosure of Campus Security Policy and Campus Crime Statistics Act which required school to report all crimes occurring on college campuses, including instances of sexual violence. However, a 2018 analysis by The American Association of University Women (AAUW) revealed incidences of sexual assault were largely unreported on crime reports due to “individual student fears of reporting to school authorities or law enforcement; procedural gaps in how institutions record or respond to incidents; a reluctance on the part of institutions to be associated with these problems;

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<sup>1</sup> The statistic regarding the likelihood of being a victim of sexual assault has been reported in various ranges between 1 in 5 women and 1 in 3 women. The Center for Disease Control's most recent statistics report states “More than 1 in 3 women and nearly 1 in 4 men have experienced sexual violence involving physical contact at some point in their lives” and “Nearly 1 in 5 women and 1 in 38 men have experienced completed or attempted rape in their lifetimes” (Smith).

or a combination of these factors” (AAUW). Following this report, a bipartisan bill was proposed called the Accountability of Leaders in Education to Report Title IX Investigations Act (Alert Act) which would require university Presidents and at least one other board member to acknowledge all Title IX investigations.<sup>2</sup>

The issue of sexual assault on college campuses is clearly complicated and any solution would not be unilateral but rather multifareously address both practical concerns like reporting standards and restorative justice practices and larger social and systematic issues like hegemonic masculinity and patriarchal violence. Many aspects of this problem are beyond the purview of this dissertation as such a task is not possible to undertake in one document nor by any one person. Thus the purpose of this dissertation is not to propose a panacea to sexual assault but instead to propose a potential approach to addressing one aspect of this multifaceted problem: the impact of community response to victims’ willingness to report and to seek help and healing.

While fewer than five percent of sexual assaults are officially reported, Colgate University says that two-thirds of survivors confide in a friend, and Rebecca Campbell et al.’s study on sexual assault victims found that in most cases friends were the first people victims told. How peers respond when a victim discloses their experience is extremely important. A plethora of studies confirm that a victim’s decision to report is greatly affected by their fear of or confidence in how their community will respond,<sup>3</sup> and Campbell’s study found that victims’ who

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<sup>2</sup> As of the time of this dissertation, the ALERT Act has been passed in neither the House nor the Senate. The bill can be read here: <https://www.congress.gov/bill/115th-congress/house-bill/5157>

<sup>3</sup> See Cohn, Amy M., et al. “Correlates of Reasons for Not Reporting Rape to Police: Results from a National Telephone Household Probability Sample of Women With Forcible of Drug-or-Alcohol Facilitated/Incapacitated Rape.” *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, Vol 28, No. 3, 2013, pp. 455-473.; DeCou, Christopher, et al. “Assault-Related Shame Mediates the Association Between Negative Social Reactions to Disclosure of Sexual Assault and Psychological Distress.” *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy*, Vol. 9, No. 2, 2017, pp. 166-172.; Duran, Mercedes, et al. “Social Perception of Rape Victims in Dating and Married Relationships: The Role of Perpetrator’s Benevolent Sexism.” *Sex Roles*, Vol. 62, No. 7, April 2010, pp. 505-519.; Orchowski, Lindsay, et al. “Social Reactions to Disclosure of Sexual Victimization and Adjustment Among Survivors of Sexual Assault.” *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, Vol 28, No. 10, 2013, pp. 2005-2023.; and Sable, Marjorie, et al. “Barriers to

were met with responses that conveyed victim blaming attitudes were less likely to go on to report or seek help from professionals like victim advocacy organizations. Many victim blaming beliefs can be addressed through purposefully dispelling rape myths, a core objective of most sexual assault prevention and response courses, but other victim blaming attitudes are neither intentional nor conscious; they are instead a consequence of implicit bias. Even those who know factual information regarding sexual assault may still reflect and reinforce victim blaming tendencies without meaning to, and these beliefs may inhibit one from responding with empathy to sexual assault victims.

A call for empathy underpins this dissertation. Acknowledging the importance of meeting sexual assault victims with care and recognizing that peers are usually the first point of contact for victims, I argue that sexual assault prevention and assault courses, now required at all public universities, should aim not only to dispel rape myths, but to address implicit bias towards sexual assault victims, inform students of trauma theory principles, and bring awareness to students' potential role in creating a community that responds to victims with empathy and care. The main objective of this course is to empower students and help them become empathetic listeners. To achieve these goals, this dissertation makes a pedagogical argument for using literary accounts of sexual assault and rape in a college level sexual assault prevention and response course in order to build a more empathetic and trauma-informed community wherein victims feel safe to come forward.

A focus on sexual assault response curriculum is timely. The rape culture embedded in university communities has been known for a while, but the topic has recently reached a wider audience. Following the accusations against several male Hollywood figures for acts of sexual

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Reporting Sexual Assault for Women and Men: Perspectives of College Students.” *Journal of American College Health*, Vol. 55, No. 3, Nov/Dec 2006, pp. 157-162.

assault and coercion, the #metoo movement illuminated the expansiveness of this issue while empowering women—much like the consciousness raising groups of the 1970s did<sup>4</sup>—to resist the expectations of silence and shame inherent to our rape culture. We are experiencing a political movement to recognize and respond to victims’ stories of sexual trauma. This is an opportunity for progress. In *Trauma and Recovery*, trauma theorist Judith Herman explains that such timeliness is necessary for change:

The study of trauma in sexual and domestic life becomes legitimate only in a context that challenges the subordination of women and children. Advances in the field occur only when they are supported by a political movement powerful enough to legitimate an alliance between investigators and patients and to counteract the ordinary social processes of silencing and denial. (9)

I believe we are in this kind of powerful political movement now, and those of us in the literary field, who know the power of the written word, can be a part of it.

The crux of the dissertation is exactly that: a belief in 1) the ability of literature to go beyond the intellectual and mental realms and to reach the emotional and 2) in the value and usefulness of literature beyond the aesthetic enjoyment it provides. Chapter one begins by fleshing out this argument. Synthesizing multidisciplinary theory and practical research from the fields of psychology, neuroscience, literary studies, and criminology, I argue for a new sexual assault prevention and response curriculum that prioritizes trauma informed care awareness and empathy training. Current Sexual Assault Prevention and Response (SAPR) programs provide rape myth education and bystander intervention training, which are both necessary, but what is missing from the present programs is an emphasis on empathy for victims. Thus, this dissertation creates a curriculum that incites victim empathy through both education and emotional

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<sup>4</sup> See Nicole Hemmer. “#MeToo’s Roots in the Feminist Awakening of the 1960s.” *Vox*, 29 Nov 2017.

engagement. Students will learn the important aspects of trauma theory and discuss rape myths; then they will be asked to apply this newfound knowledge to fictional characters who are victims of sexual assault and rape. Chapter one includes a detailed look at empathy studies and at research regarding the effectiveness of using literature to teach readers applicable empathy. The four chapters following then provide a pedagogical approach to teaching such a course in terms of readings, progress, and discussion opportunities. Each chapter represents a new module of the course aimed at specific objectives.

The literary works included in this dissertation have been carefully and purposefully chosen. Rape is a global occurrence and has been used by authors to symbolize, reflect, and communicate the unspeakable nature of atrocities and injustices worldwide.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, for this course I have selected works by authors from various countries which speak to diverse and intersectional issues: *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, by British author John Fowles, critiques Victorian attitudes towards women's sexuality and Freudian psychology which persist today; *The Wars*, by Canadian author Timothy Findley, comments on the political aspects of World War I while depicting a male victim of rape; *The Bluest Eye*, by African American author Toni Morrison, speaks to the traumatizing effects of racism and sexual violence; and *The Rape of Sita*, by African author Lindsey Collen, captures the struggles of the women and people of Mauritius to fight various forms of gender, political, and social oppression.

These books are connected not only by their inclusion of accounts of rape but also by their unique narrative approaches. First, these books are similar in that the accounts of rape are all told from a third-person perspective, which I argue creates a distance in which readers can be

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<sup>5</sup> Lynn Higgins and Brenda Silver's 1991 foundational feminist text criticizes the use of rape as metaphor and the omission of physical violence in literary texts as an erasure of the victim's voice and a censorship of rape's brutality. They argue that rape has been represented in such a way as to appear natural, inevitable, even acceptable in our culture. Looking at world literature over several centuries, Higgins and Silver investigate how race, gender, cultural conditions, and literary movements differently affect the representations of rape in literature.



allowed to critically analyze the events of sexual assault while still connecting with the victim. Second, these works employ experimental narrative techniques—vacillating between different narrative voices; blending narrative storytelling with narratives that reflect oral traditions, mythical stories, news reporting, or investigative journalism; and shifting in time frame or periods. The narrative techniques employed by these novels reflect the core difficulty of witnessing a trauma for both the victim and the listener as the experience of trauma cannot be accurately captured in language. Victims often struggle to tell their stories in ways that are satisfying to them and that listeners can understand, and oftentimes rape narratives employ literary techniques that require listeners to interpret meaning. Students will be guided to apply their newfound knowledge of trauma theory and rape culture to a thoughtful analysis of these works.

Transitioning from the theoretical arguments of chapter one, the next chapter, “Historicizing Victim Blaming Tendencies and Challenging Implicit Bias: Rape Myths in John Fowles’ *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*,” lays out the first module of the course. The objective of this module is to challenge students’ implicit bias towards victims of sexual assault by drawing attention to the historical beginning of some victim blaming attitudes rooted in fallacies and sexism. In John Fowles’ novel, *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*, the protagonist, Sarah, is socially outcast due to her rumored sexual affair with a French Lieutenant, Varguennes. Fowles’ narrator intentionally creates an air of mystery around Sarah, never disclosing the truth behind her relationship with Varguennes but instead focusing on the community’s response to the rumors they believe to be true. This narrative device and structure aligns readers with the fictional community, manipulating readers into making their own judgments of Sarah based on incomplete information. I argue that this narrative approach provides an organic means of

challenging implicit bias against victims of sexual assault. Students will be asked to reflect on their knee jerk thoughts about Sarah throughout the narrative and whether these judgments are informed by textual evidence or cultural attitudes they've unknowing adapted.

After acknowledging the existence of implicit bias, students will be guided through an examination of such bias and its historic roots. Fowles' novel is inspired by and also includes the non-fiction trial of Emile de la Ronciere, who was tried for sexual assault in the 1800s. The trial garnered popular attention because of the high profile parties involved but also because it set off a shift in how Victorian culture thought of women. La Ronciere was initially found guilty but years later was exonerated when the alleged victim, Marie de Morrell was accused of mental health issues and of fabricating the assault. Fowles' novel and the extended trial de la Ronciere illuminate how the inception of psychology, arguably sexist in nature, founded current victim blaming attitudes that are harmful and fallacious. Once students have reflected on their own implicit views on victims, the next module will further challenge any damaging views regarding gender and sexual assault victimization.

Chapter three, "Erasing Victim Stereotypes: Male Rape Victims in Timothy Findley's *The Wars*," debunks the assumption that sexual assault is only a women's issue and provokes students to consider the role of hegemonic masculinity in how male victims experience and recover from sexual assault. First, this module illuminates how gender-specific definitions of rape that exclude forced to penetrate language are damaging to male victims who have higher rates of suicide following assault than women. Second, Findley's novel is used to prompt a discussion about normative masculinity and how expectations of men exclude them from voicing their stories of sexual assault. The main character, Robert Ross, does not fit into a description of hegemonically masculine norms until he joins the military. As a soldier, he is indoctrinated into a

form of marshall masculinity that prioritizes bravery, heroism, heterosexuality, and violence. After several failures, he learns to perform masculinity in a way that is acceptable and laudable to his follow comrades. Then he is raped by those brothers in arms.

The impact of this trauma is detrimental, and readers observe Robert, who is without recourse to heal and recover, spiral and self-destruct. Through a guided reading of Findley's novel, students will learn about several important aspects of trauma theory and reflect on their own beliefs on masculinity and male sexual violence victims. Informed by research on empathy and compassion, this module seeks to portray men as potential victims of sexual assault in order to leverage an empathetic response to victims of all genders.

The next module of the course, described in chapter four, "The Impact of Trauma and the Power of Community: Lessons on Responsive Witnessing in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*," continues to teach trauma theory principles while simultaneously drawing students' attention to the damaging consequences of a community that fails to respond with empathy and care to sexual assault victims. In critiquing both overt and systematic racism, Morrison's novel includes three instances of sexual assault wherein two of the victims are further traumatized by the community's detrimental response. Cholly, who is forced to penetrate a girl by threat of violence, passes his trauma on to others including his daughter, Pecola, who he rapes. Cholly's experience is never shared with others and he never works through his trauma, but instead displaces his fear, anger, and self-loathing onto black women. Pecola, on the other hand, suffers a complete mental breakdown after her mother, who blames her for her own incestuous rape, and the community both fail to help. Through a guided reading of this novel, students will learn about the concept of witnessing and Kelly Oliver's theory of response-ability and come to see the importance of community response.

In chapter five, “Working Through Trauma: Memory and Witnessing in Lindsey Collen’s *The Rape of Sita*,” students will learn more about the physical, emotional, and mental responses to trauma both during the event and after and see a community response to trauma that stands in stark contrast to that in Morrison’s novel. *The Rape of Sita* recounts the title character’s search through her memory for a forgotten event, one which she realizes later is her rape by an acquaintance. The narrative provides readers no outside information as they follow Sita’s “dive” into her memory. This narrative structure positions readers as passengers who experience the same emotions of confusion, frustration, and anxiety as Sita. When Sita finally remembers the rape, the narrator describes Sita’s reactions and thoughts in vivid detail, providing readers a realistic portrayal of a trauma experience. This aspect of the novel helps students to better understand trauma and why victims of sexual assault do not respond during or after the event in a single uniform way. The novel does not end with Sita’s recovered memory, but instead follows her as she struggles with how to process the trauma, whether she should report it, and to whom she can turn for help. Ultimately, Sita confides in her friend, Devina, whose response is empathetic and trauma informed. In turn, Sita goes on to help other victims, and the narrator imagines a future in which this cyclical healing grows and rape no longer exists.

Prompted by the ending of Collen’s novel, the final module of the course, explained in the concluding chapter, focuses on restorative justice and then asks students to synthesize and apply what they’ve learned about sexual assault, rape myths, victim blaming tendencies, trauma experiences, trauma informed care, and witnessing. First, I connect the many ways in which the course texts speak to each other, mainly in relation to characters’ needs to heal. Students will learn the basic tenets of restorative justice, namely that survivors need to be empowered to decide the necessary steps for successful recovery. Sexual assault allies and advocates may be

inclined to suggest the victim make a report and some may even go as far as to report it themselves (Campbell et al). Reports made against victims' wishes, even when the person reporting has the best intentions, only causes further damage. Students will be led to act as an empathetic and responsive witness in a way that honors survivors' wishes.

In the final course assignment, students will define an empathetic and responsive witness and write a response script to an imagined friend's disclosure that they have been sexually assaulted. I argue that this exercise achieves two goals: 1) it helps guide students from a place of cognitive empathy to applied empathy, wherein they can take the lessons learned from the course novels and apply them to the real world; and 2) prompting students to think through such a conversation helps eliminate unintentional victim blaming language and prepare them for a situation they may have not previously considered.

There are undoubtedly logical reservations about implementing a sexual assault prevention and assault course such as this, and while chapter one fleshes out the theories and practical studies that inform my pedagogy, I seek now to address three challenges to such an approach that have been considered in all stages of writing: 1) the concern that reading narratives of rape and discussing the sensitive subject of sexual assault in a classroom setting has the potential to traumatize or retraumatize students; 2) the difficulty of planning a curriculum such as this for a broad target audience that includes groups of various age, background, gender, race, location, resources, experience, and knowledge and different educational settings; 3) the reality of implementing this course in the future.

First and perhaps the most important concern is if and how such a difficult topic as rape and sexual assault should be addressed in common core education curriculum. While Title IX requires schools to incorporate SAPR education for all students, I understand that a proposal to

use literary accounts of rape in a full semester long course is unprecedented. It is not uncommon for these courses to use vignettes, role playing exercises, or case studies in which students are exposed to potentially traumatizing content. However, the power of literature to evoke empathy is a double edged sword: its capacity to arouse emotional responses in readers—the very reason I argue I want to use this approach—also renders it potentially more dangerous as a cause of trauma.

Keeping this in mind, I've heavily weighed what teaching this course would look like in practice—among other things, where and how conversations would take place; what space would be allotted for students' self care through trigger warnings and class policies; and how to create a safe space that takes into consideration the power dynamic implicit to the teacher-student relationship. I've read about the pros and cons of trigger warnings and consulted victim advocates and practicing trauma therapists. In terms of trigger warnings, my take away has been this: Trigger warnings can be beneficial and may even be necessary; but when wrongly implemented, trigger warnings can allow students to evade tough conversations that are valuable, meaningful, and necessary. By allowing students not to participate, we help maintain stigmas around victims that reinforce the cultural call for silence. Stories of sexual assault may be uncomfortable for listeners—and they should be because the violation of a person in this way is horrific—but the reality is that these stories, these lived experiences, are not uncommon. The #metoo movement has helped this issue in many ways by exposing how frequently sexual assaults take place and how normal, everyday women and men share this trauma. Exposing students to realistic representations of sexual trauma in a controlled and safe space can help normalize these stories as well and lessen the stigma around victims.

Moreso, however, trigger warning present the opportunity for students to feel empowered and exercise self care. In the article, “Trigger Warnings, Covenants of Presence, and More: Cultivating Safe Space for Theological Discussions about Sexual Trauma,” Stephanie Crompton writes,

Conceived this way, trigger warnings occur as a process that makes students aware in advance of what they will see and hear, sets expectations for dialogue, and encourages self-care. Doing so empowers students to discern within and among themselves whether or not, and how they want to be present for the conversation. They feel empowered to choose.

The trigger warnings implemented in this course are informed by this perspective.

Creating a safe space and building trust between the classroom facilitator and students are necessary prerequisites for the kind of conversations this course hopes to provoke. In addition to her discussion on trigger warnings, Crompton’s article provides an outline for discussing sexual assault in the classroom. First she warns that students who have experienced sexual abuse may be anxious in situations “organized around power disparity” (Crompton 138). She thus emphasizes creating a classroom dynamic in which the teacher is not an authority but a moderator, guide, or facilitator. This can be established through written documents like the syllabus and classroom policies and procedures. Crompton also argues for teacher self-disclosure. In her article, “Power and Caution: The Ethics of Self Disclosure,” Anette Ejsing makes the same argument, defining self disclosure as any personal information that may be relevant to the classroom subject. She says that self-disclosure provides an “effective pedagogical bridge between students and their learning material” (Ejsing 238) and Crompton

adds that this bridge helps establish trust and eliminate some of the anxiety students may feel in a class of this kind.

Second, Crumpton presents a “Trauma Sensitive Pedagogical Strategy” (Crumpton 144). Her strategy includes clearly identifying triggering material; continuously reminding students of the trigger warning and inviting them to practice self care; presenting the learning goals and objectives tied to the triggering material beforehand; remaining attentive to students’ body language and other means of non-verbal communication; planning grounding exercises that break up discussion and help keep students present in the classroom; listening as students speak and responding with wonder rather than judgement; and being intentional about self-disclosure. This strategy heavily informs this dissertation and the course materials included in the appendix. Armed with extensive knowledge about trauma informed pedagogy and care, I believe a SAPR course as proposed here can be executed in a way that meets course objectives while empowering students and minimizing further trauma.

In thinking about the target audience of this course and the course’s foundational goal to teach empathy for victims, I have kept in mind that college is not a universal experience. Having taught at a large research university (University of South Florida) with a diverse student population in terms of age, race, class, and experience; a small private university (University of Tampa) where most students are between 18 and 23 and come from middle-to-upper class families; and a state college (St. Petersburg College) in an urban neighborhood where less than 30% of students are in the 18-23 age bracket and most students receive a form of income-based financial aid, I am aware of the vast differences in campus culture and classroom dynamics in local schools, let alone across the nation. While chapter one addresses the universality of empathy and its teachability, I have considered where this course would be best implemented.



The practical implementation of this course has thus been an underlying thought. Looking at the data regarding which schools are most affected by sexual assault crimes, there are some unifying characteristics. First, Keriann Sperenza's research, published in "Campus Rape Phenomenon," found that the prevalence of Greek Life and school athletic teams, namely football, basketball, and baseball, increased incidences of rape and assault. Greek life membership also increased risk of sexual assault (Tyler, et al; Mohler-Kuo et al; Copenhaver & Grauerholz; Kalof). Universities with student populations between 18 and 21 also had higher incidences of rape, and scholars have noticed what they call a "red zone" for when and what year students are more likely to be assaulted. The red zone refers to the time period between August and November when most assaults occur to victims in their freshman and sophomore years (Flack, et al.; Kimble, et al.; Cranny). In fact, 84% of rapes and assaults occur during victims' first four semesters at school (Gross et al). Finally, more rapes occur at universities where the student population mostly lives on campus or within a mile of the school in off-campus housing and apartments (Fisher, et al; Mohler-Kuo et al). The proposed course would first be implemented at universities that fit these risk factors.

I do not imagine this course acting as a full replacement to existing SAPR programs but rather as an alternative. As universities move to require longer or repeated SAPR education, this course may serve as an option for students who want to simultaneously earn college credits. SAPR courses are mostly outside requirements that do not fulfill any core education credits. However, because this course is founded upon reading literature, literary analysis, and writing, it could realistically fulfill a course requirement in the arts, English, or cultural studies. Students would opt to take the class in lieu of completing an outside SAPR program.

This dissertation serves not as an end but as a starting point as I recognize the amount of work that still has to be done. First, I would seek to consult clinical psychologists, victim advocates, trauma response specialists, and other relevant experts to review this proposed curriculum and help design a research method for evaluating the course's effectiveness. Second, following any changes I would hope to pilot the course at a school that fits the profile above with volunteer participants who agree to take part in the study. The results from this would determine the next step whether they show that I have been too optimistic about this course's potential; indicate changes must be made before retesting; or confirm its effectiveness.

What follows in this dissertation, what readers should prepare themselves for, is a plea to readers and students to look, unimpeded, at victims of rape and sexual assault; to resist the temptation to look away; to see and hear their stories; and to help build a supportive environment.

## **CHAPTER 1:**

### **INSTILLING VICTIM EMPATHY THROUGH RAPE NARRATIVES**

Between 1982 and 1987 *Ms.* magazine published various groundbreaking studies regarding sexual assault on college campuses that shaped popular understanding of rape culture as we know it today. The project, led by research psychologist Mary Koss, surveyed 6,159 female students from 32 college campuses. The findings revealed an epidemic as 54% of participants reported having been victims of some form of sexual assault during their time enrolled as a student, with 27.5% identifying they had been victims of acts that met the legal definition of rape or attempted rape. Further, this study dispelled the myth that rape crimes were largely committed by strangers and brought attention to what we now term date rape or acquaintance rape. Over the past thirty years, universities, advocacy groups, and political entities have sought to address this issue through policy changes, interventions, and education; yet multiple studies from 2000-2018 have found that sexual assaults on college campuses still occur at an alarming rate. These studies all confirm that 23-25% of college women have been victims of sexual assault and that women have between a 10-16% chance of being a victim of rape or attempted rape during their time as students.<sup>6</sup> They also show that perpetrators tend to commit assaults repeatedly on more than one victim (Foubert et al).

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<sup>6</sup> See Fisher, Cullen, Turner. *The Sexual Victimization of College Women*. U.S. Department of Justice, 2000.; Kilpatrick, Dean G. et al. "Drug-facilitated, Incapacitated, and Forcible Rape: A National Study." U.S. Department of Justice, 2007.; Cantor, David, et al. "Report on the AAU Campus Climate Survey on Sexual Assault and Sexual Misconduct." Association of American Universities, 2015.; Fedina, Lis, et al. "How Prevalent Is Campus Sexual Assault in the United States?" *National Institute of Justice*, No. 277, 2016.

Eradicating rape is an unrealistic goal that would require—among other things—addressing a dense history of patriarchal violence towards women; eliminating existing beliefs and stereotypes about gender, sexuality, and desire; and understanding the thought processes and impulses of sexual offenders.<sup>7</sup> Even decreasing the number of sexual assaults on college campuses has proven difficult despite valiant efforts. This chapter, “Instilling Victim Empathy Through Rape Narratives,” begins with a brief look at how universities are addressing rape culture on college campuses and presents current research on the effectiveness of existing sexual assault and prevention (SAPR) programs. It then proposes a new approach to these courses that uses literary accounts of rape to increase both awareness and empathy in readers in order to encourage a social and cultural change in how our community thinks about rape, its perpetrators, and its victims.

While there is a lack of consensus about what works and how SAPR education should be constructed and delivered, what is noticeable is that these programs do not address a substantial reason victims fail to report their assault in the first place: that is, the belief that they will not be met with empathy from their peers and authorities but instead will face doubt, blame, and further harassment and indifference, as the untested rape kits around the country have attested (Thornhill

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<sup>7</sup> Much research has been conducted on the thought processes and impulses of sexual offenders. See Posadas, Jeremy D. “Teaching the Cause of Rape Culture: Toxic Masculinity.” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, vol. 33, no. 1, Spr 2017, pp. 177–179; Bryden, David P., and Erica Madore. “Patriarchy, Sexual Freedom, and Gender Equality as Causes of Rape.” *Ohio State Journal of Criminal Law*, no. 2, 2015, pp. 299-346; Lalumiere, Martin L. *The Causes of Rape: Understanding Individual Differences in Male Propensity for Sexual Aggression*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2005; Wegner, R et al. “Sexual Assault Perpetrators’ Justifications for the Actions: Relationships to Rape Supportive Attitudes, Incident Characteristics, and Future Perpetration.” *Violence Against Women*, Vol. 21, 2015, pp. 1018-1037; Woerner, J. et al. “Predicting Men’s Immediate Reactions to a Simulated Date’s Sexual Rejection: The Effects of Hostile Masculinity, Impersonal Sex, and Hostile Perceptions of the Woman.” *Psychology of Violence*, Vol. 8, 2018, pp. 349-357; Woerner, J et al. “The Effects of Alcohol Intoxication and Sexual Interest on Men’s Sexual Persistence and Hostility in a Dating Simulation.” *Aggressive Behavior*, Vol. 44, 2018, pp. 537-547; Pegram, S.E. et al. “Men Who Sexually Assault Drinking Women: Similarities and Differences With Men Who Sexually Assault Sober Women and Nonperpetrators.” *Violence Against Women*, Vol. 24, 2018, pp. 1327-1348.

& Palmer).<sup>8</sup> Rebecca Campbell and her colleagues' report, "Adolescent Sexual Assault Victims' Experiences with SANE-SARTs and the Criminal Justice System," found that sexual assault victims were likely to tell a peer before anyone else and that their peer's response to their admission directly affected whether or not they chose to report. If the victim was met with a response that reinforced rape myths or victim blaming attitudes, they did not report. In contrast, victims who felt supported by their peer's response were more likely to file an official complaint (Campbell). Underpinning my dissertation's call for empathy for rape victims is the mission of identifying and stopping repeat rapists. If victims do not feel safe to come forward, perpetrators are free to continue hurting others.

Thus, this chapter argues that instilling empathy and dispelling rape myths should be a central goal of SAPR education and posits that literary narratives offer one the best means of teaching empathy or an empathetic response. Recently, experts in psychology, sociology, and neuroscience have investigated empathy, most relevantly seeking to understand if empathy is an innate characteristic or a learned practice.<sup>9</sup> Overwhelmingly, studies support the idea that empathy can be taught. Even more striking is the evidence that literature is a powerful means of inciting empathy.<sup>10</sup> Researchers have found that reading fiction elicits compassion and critical thinking, and others have found that this practiced empathetic response can then be transferred

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<sup>8</sup> The *Daily Atlantic* reported on July 15, 2019 that as many as 200,000 rape kits were sitting untested in police storage (See Haggerty, Barbara Bradley. "An Epidemic of Disbelief." *The Dailey Atlantic*, July 15, 2019). Additionally, the organization, End the Backlog, spreads awareness about this injustice, explains the practical and emotional effects of these untested kits on victims' journey to justice, and secures funding so police have resources to test rape kits.

<sup>9</sup> See Batson, C. Daniel. "These Things Called Empathy: Eight Related but Distinct Phenomena." *The Social Neuroscience of Empathy*. The MIT Press, 2009.; Brener, Milton E. *Evolution and Empathy: The Genetic Factor in the Rise of Humanism*. McFarland & Co., 2008.; Dohrenwend, Anne M. "Defining Empathy to Better Teach, Measure, and Understand Its Impact." *Academic Medicine*, No. 12, 2018, p. 1754.; and Deane-Drummond, Celia E. "Empathy and the Evolution of Compassion: From Deep History to Infused Virtue." *Zygon*, Vol. 52, No. 1, Mar. 2017, pp. 258–278.

<sup>10</sup> See Bal, P. Matthijs, and Martijn Veltkamp. "How Does Fiction Reading Influence Empathy? An Experimental Investigation on the Role of Emotional Transportation." *PLoS ONE*, Vol. 8, No. 1, Jan. 2013, pp. 1–12.; Zuckerbrod, Nancy. "The Power of Stories: Develop Social-Emotional Skills and Empathy Using Fiction, Nonfiction, and Poetry." *Scholastic Teacher*, no. 3, 2019, p. 45.

outside of reading fiction.<sup>11</sup> Hence, I argue that because literature provides a means for equipping students with the tools and forethought necessary to practicing empathy, engaging students in literature about sexual assault can counter students' implicit biases against victims and help them understand and empathize with real world victims of sexual assault.

### **Current Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Strategies**

In the mid-2000s, rape culture on college campuses once again became a focus of political and social action thanks to popular media coverage of high profile cases like that of Beckett Brenner and the Dear Colleague letter to the Obama Administration from the Office for Civil Rights (OCR).<sup>12</sup> On January 22, 2014, President Barack Obama responded by urging all colleges to better their efforts to prevent and respond to sexual assaults on campuses and by assembling the White House Task Force to Protect Students From Sexual Assault.<sup>13</sup> He also signed the 2013 Campus Sexual Violence Elimination Act.<sup>14</sup> According to this Act, in order to remain compliant with current interpretations of Title IX, colleges and universities are mandated to include sexual assault education in their required curriculum for all students. In 2014, the ItsOnUs national campaign began as part of this mandate and encourages students, faculty, and organizations to engage in SAPR education efforts.

As a campaign, ItsOnUs spreads awareness about bystander intervention and seeks to encourage universities and individuals to take part in ending sexual violence, but it offers little in the way of tangible tools for SAPR education. Instead, the Center for Disease Control, in

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<sup>11</sup> See Berninger, Anja. "Empathy—Real-Life and Fiction-Based." *Journal of Literary Theory*, No. 2, 2018, p. 224.; and Stansfield, John and Louise Bunce. "The Relationship Between Empathy and Reading Fiction: Separate Roles for Cognitive and Affective Components." *Journal of European Psychology Students*, No. 3, 2014, p. 9.

<sup>12</sup> The Dear Colleague letter detailed the epidemic of college campus sexual assault and reinterpreted Title IX to provide rights and recourse to sexual assault victims. The letter can be read in full at [https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/default/files/dear\\_colleague\\_sexual\\_violence.pdf](https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/default/files/dear_colleague_sexual_violence.pdf)

<sup>13</sup> Information on the White House Task Force to Protect Students From Sexual Assault can be found at <https://www.justice.gov/ovw/protecting-students-sexual-assault>.

<sup>14</sup> The Campus Sexual Violence Elimination Act amended the Jean Clery Act. Both can be read here: <https://www.congress.gov/bill/112th-congress/house-bill/2016>

collaboration with other organizations and experts on sexual violence, published their official guidelines in the 2016 publication *Sexual Violence on Campus: Strategies for Prevention*. The publication includes a set of suggested objectives and examples. Along with recommending that SAPR courses define rape, discuss rape myths, encourage bystander intervention, and inform students about on and off campus resources for victims, the CDC encourages programs to use a trauma-informed approach; address gender-based violence; counter traditional gender norms; be intersectional in order to disrupt various systems of oppression like sexism, racism, and homophobia; and be inclusive of people of all identities and groups (10-11). However, beyond these suggestions, the mandate does not include specific requirements concerning the mode, length, or frequency of education. The CDC only states, “it is best to not limit prevention to one type of activity – a one hour online class or a one-time theater performance is not sufficient. Stand-alone activities are ineffective and not supported by evidence” (7). Colleges are permitted to meet the set of objectives by whatever means they see fit.

Thus, university courses implement varying approaches to sexual assault education, including peer-to-peer education, dramatic performances, educational videos or documentaries, mock trials, online learning tools, and case studies of both real and fictional accounts of rape. Most of the lauded programs incorporate bystander intervention training, a foundational aspect of the ItsOnUs campaign, and challenge men to play a larger role in encouraging appropriate behavior; however, programs vary dramatically. For example, Indiana University Bloomington’s Culture of Care initiative includes a 120-minute program in which student audiences participate in various dramatic scenarios. The University of Pennsylvania’s program is also interactive and uses a peer-to-peer model to provide bystander training to students during a 90-minute session. The University of Massachusetts Amherst’s U Matter at UMass campaign has created student-

led videos about being an active bystander.<sup>15</sup> Along with in-person education, several campuses, including the University of South Florida, have begun implementing online training courses for students and staff.

Over the past five years, a plethora of research has sought to investigate and evaluate approaches such as these but research is still rather inconclusive. The non-profit organization, Culture of Respect, has evaluated and compared 36 SAPR programs according to the level of evidence supporting the program's approach and whether the program includes bystander intervention training, emphasizes empathy, dispels rape myths, and addresses the relationship between alcohol use and rape rates. The programs are categorized by approach such as online, performance-based, or mixed methods. While Culture of Respect hopes to offer universities a helpful guide to finding a suitable education program, the organization acknowledges that conclusive research regarding the effectiveness of prevention programs is still wanting (Baynard et al).

As many researchers point out, it is difficult to measure and compare the success of sexual assault prevention courses because effectiveness can be conceptualized in various ways and measured in both qualitative and quantitative methods (Jozkowski 849). Some studies, such as those that have assessed the effectiveness of the most well-known curriculum, *Bringing in the Bystander*, use pre- and post-tests to measure changes in students' knowledge and attitudes regarding rape definitions and rape myths (Ahearns et al.; Amar et al.; Katz & Moore). Others use qualitative analysis such as action research or interviews to measure effectiveness. However, success as measured by quantitative data does not always transfer to similar results in qualitative analyses nor is it easy to compare qualitative and quantitative data. By far, the greatest marker of these courses' success is the relative number of reported incidences and the findings of

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<sup>15</sup> To view the videos, see [www.umass.edu/umatter](http://www.umass.edu/umatter).



anonymous survey responses; yet despite the implementation of education courses and increases in student knowledge, the number of sexual assaults on college campuses has not changed in five decades (Jozkowski 848). What looks like success when measured by qualitative or quantitative measures does not mean that there are fewer incidences of rape on college campuses.

These studies do, however, make clear that approaching sexual assault prevention education as a one-time, one-hour course is not effective enough. Kristen Jozkowski's 2015 study compared the effectiveness of a semester-long course to an hour-long workshop. Students from both education models were asked in follow up interviews months later to determine whether a particular scene in a film included rape or not. Jozkowski's findings confirmed her hypotheses that a semester-long course was more successful in helping students define and identify sexual assault and that students in the semester-long course were less likely to blame the victim and/or excuse the perpetrator's actions. Based on this and similar research findings, some colleges, like Dartmouth, are now employing more intensive programs that require ongoing education during students' four-year time at the institution.

While research supports the need to implement a minimum duration of time for sexual assault courses,<sup>16</sup> it is still unclear what the general-education curriculum should include and what methods should be employed in order to lessen and ultimately eliminate instances of rape. Many current programs aim to educate students about the definitions, myths, and truths about sexual assault and inform them about both on-campus and outside resources for students who want to report a crime or receive confidential counseling.<sup>17</sup> Few schools, however, have

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<sup>16</sup> See Nation, M. et al. "What Works in Prevention: Principles of Effective Prevention Programs." *American Psychologist*, No. 58, 2003, pp. 449-456; and Anderson, Linda A., and Susan C. Whiston. "Sexual Assault Education Programs: A Meta-Analytic Examination of Their Effectiveness." *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, Vol. 29, No. 4, 2005, pp. 374-88.

<sup>17</sup> The Boston University's required online curriculum, "Sexual Misconduct Prevention Training," expressly states that it "teaches students information and skills to safely intervene in situations that may lead to sexual violence, and it discusses students' rights and responsibilities related to sexual misconduct." Duke University's five-hour

implemented the additional CDC recommendations of using a trauma-informed approach; addressing gender-based violence; countering traditional gender norms; using intersectionality to disrupt various systems of oppression like sexism, racism, and homophobia; and including people of all identities and groups in discussion. These goals are indeed necessary and laudable, but in addition to this list, I argue in this dissertation that empathy must be a core component of SAPR education, which Culture of Respect acknowledges but the CDC does not. In fact, I argue that empathy, which is inherent and embedded in many of the CDC's principles such as taking a trauma informed approach, is a distinct and critical objective that university general-education programs must address. My proposed course, Sexual Assault Narratives and The Response-able Community, aims to satisfy the CDC recommendations and develop empathetic readers who can translate that knowledge into their college community and beyond.

### **A Case for Empathy**

A quick review of a few prominent rape cases paints a grim picture of universities and communities' responses to victims. In 2008, Beckett Brennan was raped by three male basketball players at the University of the Pacific. During a university hearing of the crime, members of the judicial board spent more time questioning Brennan's choice of clothing, level of intoxication, interpretation of consent, ability to remember details, and whether or not she was flirting with the perpetrators the night of her rape, than they spent questioning the accused rapists. In 2012, a Florida State University student, Erica Kinsman, reported being raped by an unknown assailant who she later identified as the university's Heisman-winning football quarterback, Jameis Winston. Various reports and a now-redacted deposition by the former FSU Victim Advocate

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"Prevent. Act. Challenge. Teach." curriculum includes the following topics: "Types of gender violence (sexual assault, intimate partner violence, stalking, sexual harassment); Meaning of consent ("Only an enthusiastic yes means yes!"); Healthy, positive sexual communication; Consent and the use of alcohol and drugs; Rape culture; Common scenarios of concern; Supporting victim-survivors after an incident of gender violence; Common perpetrator characteristics; Gender violence "red flags"; and Practical and safe intervention techniques.

Director reveal that FSU at best mishandled the case and at worst colluded to privilege the star athlete despite a positive rape kit match.<sup>18</sup> Kinsman was also subject to public accusations, threats, and victim blaming both online and in person by fellow students and ardent FSU fans.

In 2013, four Vanderbilt football players were caught on surveillance video gang raping a female victim. In response to this evidence, defense attorneys blamed the university's culture of debauchery and employed an argumentum ad populum to justify the perpetrators' actions. The following year, Columbia University student Emma Sulkowicz garnered national attention for carrying a mattress around campus during her senior year as a form of protest against the university's failed response to her rape case. Her rapist was never expelled and instead walked across the same graduation stage. Then, in 2016, a Stanford University student athlete, Brock Turner, who raped an unconscious female victim, was sentenced to only six months jail time despite there being two testifying witnesses. Media coverage juxtaposed details of the heinous crime with Turner's record-setting swim times and statements about his "good character." These are just the more notorious of many rape cases that have taken place on college campuses and that have been treated ambivalently or evenly by the media, showing a tendency to blame victims and exonerate young white men and college athletes.

The few cases presented here illuminate quite clearly a culture that uses alcohol as an excuse for bad behavior, that continuously reinforces rape myths (for example, women who dress provocatively always want to have sex; victims who are intoxicated during their rape bear partial responsibility; it is not rape if the person doesn't fight back), and that consistently renders the victim the defendant both in and out of the courtroom. This culture teaches us to make

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<sup>18</sup> While the deposition by then-Victim Advocacy Director Melissa Ashton was redacted, summaries of her testimony can still be found online, including this one published by the Tallahassee Democrat: <https://www.tallahassee.com/story/news/2015/11/26/fsu-official-details-favorable-treatment-football-players/76411078/>

excuses for the perpetrator and hold victims accountable—even blameworthy—for their rapes. Given that victims will expect that their accounts will be doubted, scrutinized, and further maltreated, it's of no surprise that a vast majority of rapes—an estimated 63-95%—go unreported (Lisek).

Arguably, this maltreatment of survivors can largely be attributed to implicit bias and a resulting lack of empathy for those coming forward as victims of sexual assault; both of which are rooted in rape myths and ignorance of trauma theory. Empathy, the ability and practice of sharing the emotions of another as if one has lived the experience themselves, informs how we treat others. However, this practice requires adequate knowledge of a situation. Simon Baron-Cohen, a psychologist specializing in the field of social neuroscience and focusing on empathy, explains that empathy has two parts: recognition (thought) and response (feeling) (12). The first part, recognition, is a cognitive process and requires one to be of a dual mind; that is, to keep one's own interests in mind along with someone else's interests. To do this, one must have understanding and awareness of another person's situation. Once one has the adequate information to be dual-minded, they can then respond with “appropriate emotion,” but without this informed knowledge, one fails to practice empathy (12). In the case of sexual assault victims, people who are not well-informed about the myths of sexual assault and trauma theory may not believe a person's claims or may not understand why, for example, one victim might report it immediately while another might not tell anyone for weeks or even years.

Reacting to someone's claims that they have been raped with doubt or skepticism has damaging repercussions, and various studies have found that victims' decisions to remain quiet can be attributed to a lack of empathy (Rebecca Campbell, et al). In their work on rape reporting barriers, authors Randy Thornhill and Craig T. Palmer explain that sexual assaults go unreported

most commonly because victims are faced with a culture of victim blaming that deters them from pursuing help or taking legal action. Marjory Sable et al's study, "Barriers to Reporting Sexual Assault for Women and Men: Perspectives of College Students," further confirms that fears of being judged, ostracized, and not believed are the greatest barriers to reporting sexual assault. Victims often report that they encountered hostility from their peers after reporting an assault and were harassed by those who doubted their claims. According to "Report on the AAU Campus Climate Survey on Sexual Assault and Sexual Misconduct" by David Cantor et al, 60.8% of undergraduate students and 56.4% of graduate students believe that victims would face retaliation following a report of sexual assault (11). The study by Cantor et al also reveals that participants are not only skeptical about how victims reporting sexual assault would be treated by the perpetrator and fellow students, but by college officials. Of respondents, 71.9% reportedly doubt that officials would pursue action against the perpetrator (Cantor et al 12). It has also been well documented that many sexual assault victims leave school or transfer to a new university as a result of hostility and alleged improper responses from university officials and police who trivialized their experiences.<sup>19</sup> In essence, victims of sexual assault are largely met with a lack of empathy and support, which not only deters reporting but impacts rates of PTSD, depression, and anxiety amongst victims (DeCou et al).

Teaching empathy as part of a college sexual assault prevention and response course is important to both deterring potential offenders from committing rape and to creating an empathetic community where victims feel safe to come forward and receive needed support for recovery. First, empathy is a common focus in sexual offender rehabilitation programs because, while studies disagree about the definition of empathy, there is overall agreement that there is a

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<sup>19</sup> According to a 2009 study conducted by the Center for Public Integrity entitled "Barriers Curb Reporting on Campus Sexual Assault," students who encountered discouragement from campus authorities transferred or withdrew from their schools within a year of their assault.

correlation between offending and a lack of empathy. A 2003 study found that offenders lack the capacity for specific aspects of empathy such as relationality, sympathy, or compassion. Jolliffe and Farrington (2004) found that offenders had low cognitive empathy, while Barnett and Mann (2013) identify the potential blocks to the empathetic process that occur during sexual encounters. These studies overall support the notion that first time offenders lack empathy for their victims because they do not conceive of their actions as rape or do not understand how their victims may feel (indicating a lack of cognitive empathy). Repeat offenders, on the other hand, either fail to apply cognitive empathy to their victims or intend to inflict harm regardless of their empathetic understanding. While the latter group may not be changed by empathy instruction and practice, such education may help to deter potential offenders. Therefore, mandatory sexual assault prevention courses should seek to integrate victim empathy awareness as a core aspect of American general-education curriculum.

Second, a therapeutic focus on empathy for the victim is also important to encouraging rape survivors to report so that potential repeat offenders can be prevented from harming others. According to rape psychologist David Lisak, rape rates remain unchanged because 9 out of 10 rapes are committed by repeat offenders who are never charged as criminals (Lisak & Miller). The Department of Justice reports that only 31% of rapes are reported and only 7% of offenders are ever convicted. Research in the field of rape culture shows that several factors contribute to this. For example, Lisak explains that victims are met with high scrutiny as people grossly overestimate the number of false accusations (Lisak, et al). In reality, only 2% of all reports are false (Lisak). Arguably, a lack of empathy for victims from peers and people of authority is the reason serial rapists are able to continue committing crimes: if victims do not feel safe coming forward, they do not report; if they do not report, then their rapists remain free to hurt others.

Third, people are more likely to care about an issue and respond with empathy if they identify themselves as being potentially affected by it. While a high percentage of students surveyed by Cantor et al said that sexual assault and misconduct on college campus was a major issue, a much lower percentage believed that they themselves would become a victim. It is easy to dismiss other people's plights when people do not see how they may be affected in the future. Expanding students' knowledge of rape culture is one way to increase victim empathy.

Bystander intervention training and rape myth education, the most popular aspects of sexual assault prevention education, have been successful in increasing students' knowledge of rape and their "readiness and willingness to act" or intervene when they see signs of a possible assault situation (Jouriles et al). However, a more in-depth understanding of rape culture and victims' experiences is necessary for increasing empathy. The course proposed in this dissertation thus takes a new approach to sexual assault prevention and response education in that its primary goal is to instill a sense of empathy amongst student learners. The desired outcome is to create a more compassionate community where students understand definitions of rape and apply empathetic understanding when responding to those who come forward as victims; and where victims can feel safe to speak about their victimization and will receive valuable support amongst their peers.

### **If and How Empathy Can Be Taught**

Historically there has been disagreement amongst scholars regarding how exactly to define empathy and to distinguish between similar states. Broadly, there is a consensus that empathy is the ability to understand another person's experiences, but division occurs regarding the nuances of where empathy comes from, how it is experienced, and what processes are included. First, some view empathy as an inherent trait while others see it as a learned skill.

Largely there are three camps of thought: 1) empathy is an emotional state that occurs automatically and unconsciously; 2) empathy is a conscious and purposeful mental task of taking on the perspective of another; and 3) true empathy is an amalgamation of affective trait and cognitive practice that ultimately leads to compassion. This compassion, or empathetic concern, is an outward indication of the inner workings of empathy and an important motivator for helping others and fighting for social justice ([empathylab.co.uk](http://empathylab.co.uk)). I adopt this third model of empathy as an amalgamation.

The idea that compassion is the corollary of empathy is tied to the second issue: is empathy simply an internal phenomenon of thought or feeling or does it include a further step of response? C. Daniel Batson argues that the foundational issue with defining empathy is the disagreement about whether it is largely defined by knowledge or action. For some, empathy is about knowing what another person is thinking or feeling, sometimes called mentalizing. For others, it is about responding to another person's needs with care and sensitivity (3). While some see these as two distinct phenomena, others like Simon Baron-Cohen argue that empathy is a process wherein people must first have knowledge before they can have an emotional response. Christine Hooker et al, who researched the relationship between mentalizing and empathy, define mentalizing as the ability to predict another person's actions by understanding that person's state of thought. Theorists have found it difficult to separate the process of empathy from mentalizing. Hooker et al found a clear correlation between the two. Not only did participants' process of predicting an outsider's response to a situation involve imagining and understanding their emotional experiences, but when asked to empathize, participants' process included thinking about the outsider's thought process.



For the purpose of this dissertation, I adopt a definition of empathy as the ability to imagine another person's thought process and emotional state and how these impact one another and their (re)actions. Additionally, this adopted definition goes beyond feeling and moves into practice and application. Empathy allows one to transcend the limitations of lived experience and imaginatively understand the emotions of another person from their reference point. However, this transcendence of mind is of little importance if it does not influence our emotional responses and inform our actions. This outward expression of mentalizing and empathy may more commonly be called compassion, and it thus makes sense to ask why this dissertation does not focus solely on compassion. These emotional states are closely related but research shows that compassion that arises from empathy, as opposed to from sympathy or pity, is more likely to result in altruistic acts (Burton).<sup>20</sup> Equipping students with the ability to identify another person's thought state or even feel the emotions of another is only the first step to encouraging them to respond to claims of sexual assault victimization with compassion and care. It is my hope that if enough students practice and employ empathetic responses, there will occur a positive shift away from the college campus rape culture.

Researchers have also sought to understand what factors contribute to individual and group capacities for empathy. In their article, "Differences in Empathic Concern and Perspective Taking Across 63 Countries," William Chopik et al summarize their study of empathy in different cultures and its relation to psychological characteristics and prosocial behavior. While the definition of empathy varies slightly by country, a general definition was applicable, and through their survey of 104,365 people in 63 countries, they found that the capacity for and

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<sup>20</sup> Neel Burton's book, *Heaven and Hell: The Psychology of the Emotions*, lays out a diagram in which pity leads to sympathy, which leads to empathy, which ultimately leads to compassion. However, one does not necessarily have to follow this trajectory. For example, pity can lead to compassion without first becoming sympathy and empathy. His studies find, however, that compassion that yields from empathy more often leads to altruistic action.

practice of empathy was strongest in Middle Eastern, Asian, and Central/South American countries. Of the top ten rated countries, only two—the United States and Denmark—were outside these regions. Chopik et al do not seek to explain these differences across cultures as their data was too limited to do so but instead argue that future research should focus on addressing the narrow focus of current research. Most empathy studies, they attest, only include Western, educated, individualistic, rich, and democratic (W.E.I.R.D.) cultures. Thus, what we know about empathy is limited and applicable only to countries that are W.E.I.R.D. While I recognize this shortcoming in existing research, this dissertation proposes a course for integration at U.S. universities and thus empathy studies of W.E.I.R.D. cultures are applicable.

Chopik et al also explained that their findings hinted to, but did not fully explore, differences in empathy recipients. Aleksandra Dopiera et al take up this question in their 2017 study, “Empathy Gap – What Do We Know About Empathizing With Others’ Pain?,” wherein they review hundreds of studies to see if and how these studies address cultural differences. They found that while only 10% of studies look cross culturally at empathy, these studies illuminate a tendency for what is called preferential empathy: empathy for members of one’s own identity group. Thomas Fuch’s study, “Empathy, Group Identity, and the Mechanisms of Exclusion: An Investigation into the Limits of Empathy,” looks further into this question and confirms that more innate empathy, as instilled through cultural aspects like familial, religious, and social systems, is largely preferential. We more easily and instinctively empathize with others like us. However, Fuch opens up the possibility of teaching empathy to extend it to outside identities. While people may not innately empathize with someone unlike themselves, perhaps they can be taught or trained to do so.

The ability and effectiveness of teaching empathy has been a topic of inquiry in various disciplines with studies focusing on when, how, and if it is possible to teach empathy. Many psychologists believe that the capacity for empathy forms during childhood through an infant's mirroring of their caregiver's behaviors (Fonagy and Target). If empathy is not learned as a child, they argue, it is absent in adulthood. While some believe this means that empathy cannot be taught in adulthood, a larger group of neuroscientists, theorists, teachers, psychologists, doctors, and literary scholars disagree with this premise and instead offer studies that illustrate not only that empathy can be taught, but how it can be taught with concerns to both method and methodology.<sup>21</sup>

In the field of neuroscience, researchers have traced the parts of the brain wherein empathy is experienced, and studies have evolved to show that the brain can change in response to empathy exercises. The discovery of mirror neurons and mirror processes in the late 1990s helped neuroscientists to visualize the cognitive processes of empathy. When an observer empathizes with someone else, their brains exhibit neural mirroring; that is, neurons are fired in the same locations and same pathways in both the brain of the observer and the observed. Applying this new technology, a multitude of studies distinguish emotional empathy from the similar processes of compassion and cognitive empathy. Most notably, Marsh explains that emotional empathy triggers the pain center of the brain while cognitive empathy does not. However, there is an ongoing debate as to whether the stimulation of the pain center is necessary

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<sup>21</sup> See Segal, Elizabeth, and M. Alex Wagerman. "Social Empathy as a Framework for Teaching Social Justice." *Journal of Social Work Education*, Vol. 53, No.2, 2017, pp. 201-211.; Bouley, Theresa, and Phoebe Godfrey. "Reading Outside the Boundaries: Children's Literature as Pedagogy for Building Empathy and Understanding of Social Justice in the College Classroom." *The Journal of Effective Teaching*, vol. 8, no. 1, 2008, pp. 33-41.; Moller, Karla J. "Developing Understandings of Social Justice: Critical Thinking in Action in a Literature Discussion Group." *Journal of Children's Literature*, vol. 38, no. 2, pp. 23-36. Additionally, an organization in the U.K. called Empathy Lab works with schools and other organizations to bring literature to students ages 4-11 that purposefully invokes literature to incite empathy and social justice work. Their mission is "to build children's empathy, literacy and social activism through a systematic use of high quality literature. Our strategy builds on new scientific evidence showing the power of reading to build real-life empathy skills."

for the inner experience of empathy to lead to an outward action of compassion and care. Marsh argues that while emotional and cognitive empathy are distinct, they equally promote empathetic concern or compassion. Thus, the means is not important if the end is the same.

Antoine Lutz, Richard Davidson, and their colleagues have been researching brain plasticity in relationship to empathy to see if the brain can develop new neural pathways. They have confirmed that with training, the brain can be rewired to respond with empathy without coaxing. In “Regulation of the Neural Circuitry of Emotion by Compassion Meditation: Effects of Meditative Expertise,” Lutz and Davidson explain how meditation and mindfulness exercises helped participants identify and generate compassion. After just a two week period, this practice led to the development of reflexive responses of empathy and compassion. Helen Weng and her team’s research, as published in their article “Compassion Training Alters Altruism and Neural Responses to Suffering,” produced similar findings when they measured brain activity in response to training over a three week period. Ultimately this field of neuroscience research provides physical, biological proof that empathy is a skill that can be taught and learned.

The evidence of empathy at various levels of study has supported investigation into effective methods for teaching or increasing empathy or empathetic response. Viewing technology as a potential tool, researchers have looked at using video games, online role playing interfaces, online forums or chatrooms, and virtual patients to teach empathy to a variety of audiences. Others have used more traditional approaches to teaching empathy through interviews or vignettes in the medium of film or theatre. While some of these methods have proven successful, as I show in what follows, there is overwhelming evidence that critically engaging with literary texts is an impressively effective way of teaching empathy. This evidence largely informs the pedagogical approaches for the course outlined in this dissertation.

## Using Literature to Increase Empathy

Literature's effectiveness in increasing empathy has been confirmed by countless studies by researchers in various fields; a literature review for this dissertation alone found forty-five peer-reviewed studies and literature reviews on the topic published since 2000 (See Appendix A). Literary empathy studies include multi-disciplinary approaches across academic boundaries, and as such the literature on this topic is wide ranging and includes various study designs.

Editors Meghan Marie Hammond and Sue J. Kim warn in their collection, *Rethinking Empathy Through Literature*, that the connection between empathy and literature shouldn't be

oversimplified, but their work attests that a positive relationship has been broadly confirmed.

The essays in the collection—including one by a pioneer in the field, Susan Keen—seek to address “the complex relations between reading, literature, empathy, morality, and society”

while keeping in mind that “literary genres have conventions, forms, histories, and audiences that variously impact how empathy functions (or does not function)” (Hammond & Kim 11). It is

thus difficult to summarize such a complex field as literary empathy studies, but what I've included here are the most relevant and pertinent aspects to understanding the purpose and motivation of this dissertation.

Literature's value to humanity has been long debated, as far back as ancient Greek culture. Renowned philosopher Martha Nussbaum returns to arguments by Plato and Aristotle in her defense of emotions and their importance to a well-functioning society. She argues that sympathy and empathy are vital to creating laws and political systems that are fair and effective, and she emphasizes the importance of art in maintaining our empathy for others. Her book *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life*, fleshes out this argument specifically

addressing literature's unique capacity for inciting empathy. Her work is anecdotal, offering reflections implementing literature in her courses on law, but this work offers a valuable history and overview of the connection between literature and empathy.

In support of Nussbaum's argument, America's decline in empathy is corollarily connected to declines in readership. Sarah Konrath's study of empathy between 1979 to 2010 found a 40% decrease in empathy over time. The National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) has been tracking reading habits in the US since 1982, and their data shows that reading has dropped significantly in recent years. Where 56.9% of people read at least one work of fiction per year in 1982, less than 43% of people read one or more work of fiction in 2015 (NEA). While research has not explicitly tied declining readership to declining empathy, two studies (Mumper & Gerrig, and Dodell-Feder & Tamir), which each asked participants to self-report their reading habits and rate statements of empathy, found nonreaders scored lower in empathy than their fiction-reading counterparts.

In their research, "The Relationship among Different Types of Arts Engagement, Empathy, and Prosocial Behavior," Xiaonan Kou et al examined existing data on various forms of artistic engagement and empathy to assess the degree to which particular forms of art were tied to empathy. In terms of peer-reviewed publications alone, literature consumption was most studied and a comparative review of these studies found the research on literature consumption and empathy to be the most conclusive. If, how, and why this connection can be effectively used for the purpose of teaching literature has been the focus of forty-five studies collected for this dissertation.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Appendix A provides a table of citations and summaries of peer-reviewed empirical studies and literature reviews of empirical studies of fiction/literature reading and empathy, mentalization (Theory of Mind), perspective taking, and/or emotional transportation from the fields of neuroscience, psychology, social studies, literature, and education.

In terms of why literature is so effective at inciting empathy, much of the explanation has been theoretical. Reading literature provides unique insight into experiences and thoughts outside of our own without needing to live through an event firsthand. Employing narrative style, imagery, characterization, and other literary elements, authors have the ability to transport readers into new and unknown worlds. The literary world is meant to mirror our own or offer new visions of what could be. Even in science-fiction, the ideas and concepts can only reach as far as we can imagine them from what we already know about our own world. Yet even as close as the literary world mirrors ours, it is still only imagined and hypothetical. The creation of a story world that's not real is foundational to literature's potential to evoke empathy.

Keith Oatley argues that fiction can relay elements of truth as "fiction can fulfill the criteria of truth as coherence...and truth as personal insight" (102). Here, Oatley means that fiction can provide an authentic experience for readers that provokes emotional and mental responses akin to those in the real world. Using war literature as an example, Oatley explains that while a non-fictional account of war may provide facts regarding location, the number of casualties, and names of the fallen, a literary fictional account may use imagery, metaphor, and prose to bring readers into the story and help them feel the emotions of the experience. Oatley argues that emotional truth is sometimes more necessary to understanding than factual truth. He argues "reading purely expository nonnarrative accounts of a war in charts and tables of death tolls does not have the same effect" as the emotional insight gained through reading literature (183). Far more than learning facts, it is feeling the essence of war and its emotional toll that shapes our understanding and ideology.

Oatley's discussion of the relationship between fiction and reality echoes those of other literary critics, namely reader response theorists. Wayne Booth's book chapter on "Emotions,

Beliefs and the Reader's Objectivity” posits a theory of aesthetic distance, in which he argues that an author must be sure not to “under distance” or “over distance” the work from reality and the reader. In over-distanced works, the literary world is too abstract or unbelievable for the reader to connect to it. When works are under-distanced, they are too real and thus cannot be enjoyed as art. Booth argues that art exists when readers are made to feel as though they are a part of a narrative world but do not believe it is reality, and more recently, David Herman has developed the term “story world” to refer to “worlds evoked by narratives” (Herman 105). In response to Herman, Jim Phelan and Peter Rabinowitz tie the relationship between reality and fiction in reader experience to reader positionality; that is, the perspective and experiences of the reader that affect their ability to enter into or interact with the story world. Herman argues that the audience must keep in mind their role as an audience in order to experience a work of fiction as the work of art it is intended to be:

Reading a work of fiction therefore always entails at least a double consciousness: we can treat the work neither purely as what it is, nor purely as what it pretends to be, but must hold these competing (and mutually incompatible) perspectives simultaneously in our consciousness....In other words, to read a text as fiction, an actual reader needs to recognize that it is an invented artifact (and hence that fictional characters are synthetic constructs) and, at the same time, to pretend to be a member of the narrative audience who takes what he or she reads as history and treats the characters as real. (D. Herman, *Basic Elements* 140)

Responding to this theory from a feminist perspective, Robyn Warhol argues that this narrative approach allows for readers to see, experience, and analyze issues within a text and apply this to the material world (D. Herman, *Narrative Theory* 201).



It is precisely these artistic aspects of narrative that make literature such a valuable tool for evoking empathy. Between 1994 and 2014, Maja Djikic, Keith Oatley, and their colleagues published more than a dozen studies confirming the ability of literature to transform one's emotions and stimulate empathetic responses, even amongst emotionally avoidant participants ("Defenseless Against Art"). Empathy theorists Eva Maria Koopman and Frank Hakemulder emphasize the importance of using literary works over narratives in general to teach empathy because of the role that aesthetics play in creating "stillness" and "aesthetic detachment." Koopman and Hakemulder argue that stillness and aesthetic detachment are two connected experiences that allow for self-contemplation, slow thinking, and reflection, all necessary elements of engaging an empathetic imagination:

Stillness, we propose, allows a space in which slow thinking (Kahneman 2011) can take place. Stillness is not reflection itself, but a precondition for reflection. In our model, stillness is an empty space or time that is created as a result of reading processes: the slowing down of readers' perceptions of the fictional world, caused by defamiliarization. Our multi-factor model suggests that while role-taking can take place for all types of narratives, literary and fictional narratives may evoke the type of aesthetic distance (stillness) that leads to a suspension of judgment, adding to a stronger experience of role-taking and narrative empathy. (Koopman and Hakemulder 80)

A 2016 followup study conducted by Koopman found that stories told with greater literary qualities (imagery, foregrounding, semantics, etc.) were more effective at evoking empathy in their college-age participants than less literary versions of the same story ("Effects of 'Literariness'"). This finding is in line with Kidd and Castano's 2013 and 2018 studies. In their original research, Kidd and Castano asked randomly assigned groups to read either a work of

literature, popular fiction, nonfiction, or nothing then assessed their ability to mentalize and empathize. Those who read literary texts far outscored those in other groups. They mirrored the study again in 2018 and found similar results.

Koopman and Hakemulder's theory about aesthetic detachment is akin to Oatley and Mar's theory regarding abstraction and simulation. The latter argue that literature creates both proximity and distance which opens a space for empathy to occur. Oatley and Mar present literature as a simulation of real life that is simultaneously abstract. Stories model real life and yet we know that they are not real. This characteristic of literature requires "readers and others [to] project themselves into represented events" (173). Readers are prompted to imagine characters' emotions as they explore the story world laid out by the author. While Ann Jurecic and Susan Keen recognize the possibility that the empathy we experience for characters is not true empathy in that it is confined to the imaginary world on the pages of a book, Mar and Oatley do not see this as a shortcoming. Instead, they argue that the empathy experienced in reading and the lessons learned from fiction can be easily applied elsewhere: "fictional literature abstracts, summarizes, and compresses complex human relations by selecting only the most relevant elements. This abstracted level of comprehension also enables one to see how these principles apply elsewhere and how they may be generalized. . . . For literary stories, the understanding gleaned from complex social events can be seen to generalize from one instance to many similar instances" (Mar and Oatley, 177). Literature's ability to evoke readers' empathy for fictional rape victims, for example, can be carried over to real world victims.

The applicability of literary empathy to the real world has been a bone of contention amongst scholars. Susan Keen's book *Empathy and the Novel* reviews what she calls "narrative empathy" research. She acknowledges that findings largely confirm that literature lends to the

experience of empathy, but she says that this does not mean that empathy in theory translates into empathy in practice. Specifically, Keen argues that “readerly” empathy is different from social empathy. Elaine Scarry, however, in looking at poetry’s connection to empathy, argues for a definition of narrative empathy that specifies literature’s capacity “to exercise and reinforce our recognition that there *are* other points of view in the world, and to make this recognition a powerful mental habit” as opposed to its ability to make readers feel empathy for a specific character (67).

In order for readers’ experiences of empathy to be harnessed for purposeful use, the experience of reading must be purposefully expanded beyond the private sphere and be followed with a pedagogy of social action. Ann Jurecic (in response to Keen’s criticism) argues that such transition does not always occur in the literature classroom (16). Literary analysis and class discussions are often concerned with what is written on the pages—what readers can glean from figurative language, characterization, prose, symbolism, and other literary devices. Readers may feel empathy for fictional characters quite easily through the author’s ability to create close aesthetic distance, but readers may not naturally or easily carry this empathy over into the real world. Jurecic argues that an engaged and purposeful classroom can aid in translating readerly empathy to real world empathy. The assignments in this course are aimed at helping students make this transition from empathy for characters to real world engagement.

Eric Leake’s work on pedagogies of empathy provides a useful methodology for making this shift possible. He argues that both rhetorical and dispositional approaches are necessary aspects of teaching empathy. Akin to the distinction between cognitive and affective types of empathy, the rhetorical approach seeks to promote “critical awareness” of emotions and the limitations of empathy while a dispositional approach encourages reflexive empathy—that is,

practicing empathy as a habit without force of thought (Leake). Leake begins his course by teaching students to engage in “perspective taking” through role playing activities. These activities reinforce empathy as a purposeful exercise. He then guides them from a space of critical empathy to affective empathy through text engagement. Students again were purposeful in exercising empathy, but over time it become habitual rather than forced. Through pre and post tests and interviews, Leake found that students demonstrated an increase in affective empathy after completing the course.

Arguably the most prominent practical application of empathy curriculum is Rita Charon’s course on narrative medicine, which seeks to instill doctors with empathy for their patients.<sup>23</sup> Over the past decade, the field of narrative medicine has gained national recognition as prestigious medical programs like the one at Columbia University have begun to implement the approach into their training curricula. Narrative medicine is defined by Charon as “medicine practiced with the narrative competence to recognize, absorb, interpret, and be moved by the stories of illness” (vii). Primarily, Charon argues that the founding skills of literary analysis and storytelling can be useful to those in the medical field. After learning the art of close reading of fictional and non-fictional literary texts, doctors can apply these same skills and tools to their interactions with patients. Through telling their own stories as patients, doctors learn to align themselves with the role of the patient. In practicing narrative medicine, medical professionals can become better doctors because they are able to more adeptly “read” their patients’ bodily symptoms and can better understand their verbal accounts of illness. Doctors also learn to empathize with individual patients in a more genuine and individualistic way. Charon argues,

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<sup>23</sup> Versions of Rita Charon’s Narrative Medicine curriculum are now available at nine universities as a major, minor, or master’s program. These universities include the Ohio State Humanities Institute, the Columbia University Medical Center, The Lewis Katz School of Medicine at Temple University, Montefiore Medical Center at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine, the University of California Irvine School of Medicine, Western University, Lenoir-Rhyne University, and Saybrook University.

“these capacities...lead to more humane, more ethical, and perhaps more effective care” (vii). Her course leads to an increase in affective, real world empathy, just as the course proposed in this dissertation hopes to achieve.

Charon’s approach to bridging the divide between patient and doctor is meant to combat the loss of empathy that occurs during the years of medical training. She accomplishes this by purposefully equipping doctors with the tools of empathy. She argues that doctors can be equipped with “compassion’s prerequisites: the ability to perceive the suffering, to bring interpretive rigor to what they perceive, to handle the inevitable oscillations between identification and detachment, to see events of illness from multiple points of view, to envision the ramifications of illness, and *to be moved by it to action*” (8, emphasis added). Narrative medicine achieves this goal by first teaching doctors the art of close reading and interpretation—to read messages written beneath the words, messages that are expressed in signs, symbols, and metaphors—and then teaching them to apply this skill to their patients’ stories of illness. Charon’s book details the approach of her curriculum that includes both writing and reading. Doctors write their own stories as patients and doctors, intentionally expressing and reflecting upon both their experiences of illness and as agents of healing, and thereby learn to analyze their own habits, mistakes, and talents. They also read accounts of illnesses written by others and use the skills of literary analysis to learn more about the patient. Charon also guides readers’ reactions to a place of empathetic reflection by asking response or reflection questions. Her students learn, eventually, to ask these same kinds of questions when they listen to their patients’ stories.

At the very least, Charon’s work and subsequent studies confirming its effectiveness supports the notion that empathy can be taught and that readerly empathy can be transposed to

real-world situations. This is foundational to the argument in this dissertation that literature can be used to evoke compassion for victims of sexual assault. This dissertation relies heavily upon Charon's pedagogical approach to teaching narrative medicine in hopes that a similar course focusing on stories of sexual assault will lead to positive real world outcomes. It is my belief that much of Charon's theory can easily be applied to students in order to bridge the divide between previously unaffected students and survivors of sexual assault and to evoke a more empathetic approach to the issue of sexual trauma. However, one must consider the differences in setting and audience and the sensitive nature of sexual trauma when compared to illness.

### **Using Literature in Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Education**

Exposing students to rape narratives is without a doubt a controversial tactic for instilling empathy for rape victims. Trauma theorists warn about traumatizing secondhand witnesses and retraumatizing firsthand witnesses to trauma, and fictional representations of violence do have the potential to cause harm. In her book, *Intimate Violence: Reading Rape and Torture in Twentieth-Century Fiction* (1994), Laura Tanner argues that words can be sources of trauma. Looking not just at rape but other forms of violence, she acknowledges the resistance of readers to witnessing accounts of violence in texts and how the experience of reading can be traumatic.

Concern about secondary traumatization is prevalent in trauma theory discussions, but it does not mean American college instructors should omit accounts of violence all together or shelter students from the realities of sexual violence. First, Judith Herman emphasizes the importance of social witnessing, wherein victims are heard and supported by those close to them and by the larger community. Specifically, she states:

To hold traumatic reality in consciousness requires a social context that affirms and protects the victim and that joins victim and witness in a common alliance. For the

individual victim, this social context is created by relationships with friends, lovers, and family. For the larger society, the social context is created by political movements that give voice to the dis-empowered. (9)

Clinical psychiatric social worker and psychotherapist Deborah Horvitz looks to Herman's work as the foundation for her argument that encountering tales of trauma allows for healing from trauma. She says that when traumatic experiences, such as rape, are put into words—whether by a victim or an author—it produces a possibility for political and personal change. Fictional and non-fictional accounts of trauma allow for victims' truth to be told and heard. Reading trauma literature connects the individual victim with a victim collective, and thus empowers and heals, while providing those who are not victims emotional truth. This idea connects clearly to the notion of witnessing trauma, a foundational aspect of trauma theory that is discussed more in subsequent chapters.

Second, silencing stories of rape contributes to a culture that looks the other way when bodies are violated and communicates to victims that silence is the only accepted response to this kind of trauma. Lynn Higgins and Brenda Silver equate the omission of physical violence in literary texts including sexual assault with erasure of the victim's voice and censorship of rape's brutality. Rape has sometimes been represented in literature, film, and media in such a way as to appear natural, inevitable, even acceptable in our culture. Authors often use rape as a metaphor or representative of political or social power struggle (including *The Wars* by Timothy Findley, *The Rape of Sita* by Susan Collen, and *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison, all included in this dissertation), yet the violence of rape is not often recorded in details or from a perspective that privileges the victim. Rather, rape is hinted to or written about abstractly. Higgins and Silver explain that when authors use strategies to soften or veil the vile act of rape, they “contribute to

the social and narrative acts of victimization they wish to expose” (6). Honoring rape victims and returning voice to the silenced both in literature and in the real world “requires restoring rape to the literal, to the body; restoring, that is, the violence—the physical, sexual violation” instead of focusing on the metaphor (4).

Third, a required undergraduate course featuring critical literary accounts of rape offers a way to inform students about rape myths, teach trauma theory principles, and incite empathy for rape victims that is unparalleled. Literature has an inherent tie to the real world in that it both reflects and affects the real; yet, while these stories reflect true experiences, they operate on a hypothetical and poetic plane. The works selected for this dissertation imitate real life in their accounts of rape as violence actually perpetrated and suffered by the characters, but the fictional nature of these literary texts allows for aesthetic distance and for a feeling of safety while still allowing readers to feel a sense of relatability to the fictional characters and events. It is precisely because literature is distinct and distant from true life that I have chosen to use fictional representations of rape that include, rather than omit, accounts of violence.

Furthermore, while Charon uses both real and fictional narratives of illness in her curriculum, I maintain a focus on fiction because of the sensitive nature of sexual assault. In her 2012 work, Koopman and her colleagues used fictional rape narratives to assess the importance of aesthetics on reader response. The authors were concerned that representations of sexual violence in literature and media had the potential to be fetishized and thus provoke further violence. Their study, however, found that literary depictions of rape allowed participants aesthetic distance from the event which in turn fostered appropriate emotional and intellectual reactions and a sense of empathetic understanding of the characters and the event. Provided with rape narratives of varying aesthetic and explicit detail, participants responded to open ended



questions which were then coded for seven aspects of reader response: experienced distance, perception of realism and of beauty, emotional versus intellectual reaction, empathy, tension, and arousal. The concerns the researchers had about these fictional accounts of rape causing tension or trauma and arousal in readers were unfounded, while participants responded to the more literary and explicit accounts with more empathy. Additionally, participants were able to balance their emotional and intellectual responses and discuss the texts critically. This research, in congruence with theories and research about narrative medicine, supports the approach of the pedagogy I advocate for in this dissertation.

Reading fictional rape narratives renders a horrific and often isolating experience accessible to readers. Mar and Oatley argue that literature is the perfect venue for exploring trauma:

Projecting ourselves into these difficult circumstances also provides us with an opportunity to grow emotionally. Fictional literature not only allows us to simulate ideas and situations, it can enter our emotional system and prompt it toward the experience of emotions that we might otherwise rarely acknowledge. By engaging in these emotional experiences, we...gain a greater understanding of emotions and of their breadth and quality. (Mar and Oatley, 183)

Ironically, the qualities of literature that make emotions accessible also render fictional stories more believable than real life accounts of rape. Research has found that largely “readers encountering assertions in fiction tend simply to accept them” while they tend to question the details of nonfiction passages (Oatley, 102). While an unreliable narrator is a literary tool employed by some authors, readers usually have no reason to doubt what a narrator is saying. The story is written down and unchanging, and each reader has equal access to the same passage.

This contradicts and challenges our intuitive, culturally-imposed inclination to doubt survivors' claims. In real life we tend to question a victim's authenticity, motives, and memory, and we default to defending the perpetrator as innocent until proven guilty. In the literary rape narratives presented in this dissertation, however, there is only one account of sexual assault by a non-authoritative narrator—and this device is purposefully included to encourage a discussion about our inclination to doubt victims. The other three rape narratives included here are written from a reliable, omniscient, third person perspective. Free from the complications of believability tied to real life sexual assault accounts, student readers of fiction are able to connect and empathize with the victim uninhibited.

Despite the arguments in favor of using rape narratives in sexual assault education, this approach is not without concerns. Exposing students to rape narratives through literary engagement must be done with care and consideration. While I seek to encourage the dialogic context central to narrative medicine, it is important to consider best practices communicated by trauma theorists and victim advocates who warn about exposing students, and perhaps rape survivors, to potentially trauma-inducing material. Thus, it is important to base this pedagogical approach on evidence and sound practice and to continuously reassess how to discuss rape narratives with care.

One aspect of teaching trauma narratives that has been greatly debated is the implementation of trigger warnings. Alerting readers that they are going to encounter violent content in the course and within a certain literary work allows them to prepare for the emotional work ahead. However, critics argue that trigger warnings can potentially allow readers to avoid this content, which in this kind of course, would be counterproductive. Margaret Price's "Access Statement for presentations" provides a useful perspective on the traditional trigger warning:

As I discuss this very difficult subject matter, please do what you need [...] to take care of yourself. You may need to take up a different position, engage in some manual activity—knitters, feel free to take out your work—or you may simply need to leave. This is an accessible presentation, which means I’ll be doing things such as describing visual images and offering copies of the talk. Having a copy is useful not only for those who may have difficulty hearing the talk in the mode I’m using, which is primarily oral; it may also be useful for those who need to receive the information in a different time and place, for reasons ranging from physical barriers to this location to experiencing traumatic flashbacks. (quoted in Kafer, 2)

Price also adds in her printed statement: “Please also feel invited to follow up with me later to discuss ways that you might engage with what I’m saying, but in a safer and lower-stakes setting.” Alison Kafer argues that Price’s trigger warning here is “a matter of *access* rather than *avoidance*” (2). I find this perspective helpful for students being asked to read rape narratives. This approach encourages students to face the subject rather than evade it while also permitting them to use appropriate coping mechanism for self-care.

Yurie Hong’s article, “Teaching Rape Texts in Classical Literature,” provides suggestions for how to introduce and manage discussions about fictional accounts of rape that students will read in classical literary texts. His suggestions include presenting the classroom as a safe space, providing students a set of discussion guidelines, issuing trigger warnings for texts and for certain discussion days, and including information about on-campus support resources on the syllabus (670-671). Hong, however, emphasizes that sexual assault should be discussed in terms of how it develops the plot and what it adds to the work’s meaning. In this way, Hong’s

approach allows for the circumvention of emotions and trauma by focusing on the rape as a literary device.

In contrast to Hong, Sana Amoura-Patterson purposefully assigns her Introduction to Fiction students short stories centered on rape in order to force them to think about the realities of this act of violence. Taking up a similar argument to that made in this dissertation about the power of literature to provoke thoughtful discussion about rape, Amoura-Patterson uses Doris Lessing's short story, "One Off the Short List," and Margaret Atwood's "Rape Fantasies" to problematize students' definitions of rape and bring their attention to victim blaming tendencies. Amoura-Patterson closes her article with an expression of hope that reading and discussing these short stories will empower students to "change the sociological conditions that allow rapes to continue" (83). She hopes to encourage a real world effect through literary engagement, as do I.

Amoura-Patterson may fall short of achieving this goal in that she does not expressly guide her students to move from discussions of fiction to its application to the real world and how students must be active participants to invoke change. This dissertation directly proposes ways to help students bring lessons from the classroom into their real lives. In subsequent chapters I demonstrate how to use literary rape narrative to teach students trauma theory and the importance of witnessing to supporting trauma victims. I blend pedagogical argument with literary criticism in order to illustrate how we can purposefully engage students in conversations about sexual assault through literature in order to increase knowledge and awareness about trauma theory, witnessing, and victim empathy.

**CHAPTER 2:**  
**HISTORICIZING VICTIM BLAMING TENDENCIES AND CHALLENGING**  
**IMPLICIT BIAS: RAPE MYTHS IN JOHN FOWLES' *THE FRENCH LIEUTENANT'S***  
***WOMAN***

On August 11, 2008 an 18-year-old woman, “Marie,” reported that she had been raped at knifepoint by a man who broke into her apartment. She couldn’t describe her attacker as his face was covered by a black scarf, and her memory of the event was spotty. As police officers gathered Marie’s testimony, they noticed inconsistencies in her story<sup>24</sup> and began to question the integrity of her claim. After further investigation and questioning, Marie voluntarily retracted her report. Months later, she stood in a courtroom facing a judge, not as a victim but as a defendant. She pled guilty to making a false police report, was fined \$500, and was sentenced to one year probation and mandatory mental health counseling. Marie’s past as a lifelong foster child and abuse survivor was integral to the police department’s decision to charge her. They saw Marie’s false claims as a cry for attention and claimed they were helping Marie by requiring her to see a therapist. Three years later, however, the arrest of a serial rapist provided evidence that Marie was not lying. The rapist had taken pictures of all of his victims, and they revealed that Marie was his first.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Sexual assault victims, like many people who experience trauma, remember the events in atypical ways compared to how they experience everyday memories. The investigators in Marie’s case were not educated in trauma response and thus misinterpreted Marie’s inability to recollect details of the story as a sign of dishonesty rather than PTSD. Victims’ varied responses to trauma and the unspeakability of trauma is discussed in depth in chapter 5.

<sup>25</sup> For the full story about Marie, see “An Unbelievable Story of Rape” by T. Christian Miller, ProPublica, and Ken Armstrong, The Marshall Project, December 16, 2015.

Marie's story is not an anomaly by any means. There are several documented cases of women charged with lying to police who were later exonerated by indisputable video or photographic evidence.<sup>26</sup> These women were doubly victimized and traumatized: first by their attackers then by a judicial system rooted in a victim blaming culture. While not all people who come forward to report being raped are prosecuted by police, they are all subject to the very real damage caused by the myth that a majority of sexual assault claims are untrue when in reality only 2% are false (Lisek). Victims know that if they report, they will likely be accused of either blatantly lying or of misinterpreting or misremembering the event. Their claims are dismissed as a ploy to get attention, an attempt to assuage their embarrassment about having sex with someone they barely knew, or an act of revenge after being scorned.<sup>27</sup> Such accusations coincide with, or at the very least imply, questions about the victim's mental stability and thus their believability.

Our victim blaming culture has a historical root in the field of psychiatry, which has a history of sexist theories. Since the Egyptians and Greeks first identified a "wandering womb" as the cause of female hysteria in the 4th and 5th centuries BC, women's reproductive systems and sexual practices have been tied to deviancy and mental illness. In the 1800s, women diagnosed with neurasthenia were told that the cause of their illness was thinking and acting outside of their natural roles as wives and mothers. They were subsequently prescribed the Rest Cure. In the late 1800s, vibrators were used on women diagnosed with hysteria, insinuating that the very root of women's mental health lay in their reproductive organs. Sigmund Freud, the father of psychoanalysis whose works permeated the early 1900s, has also been a controversial figure in

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<sup>26</sup> See Ken Armstrong and T. Christian Miller's article, "When Sexual Assault Victims Are Charged With Lying" in the New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/24/opinion/sunday/sexual-assault-victims-lying.html>

<sup>27</sup> See Newman, Sarah. "What Kind of Person Makes False Rape Allegations?" *Quartz*, May 11, 2017.

terms of his theories on women, mental illness, and sexuality. His contributions to the field are still felt today.<sup>28</sup> Thousands of years of connecting biological sex to mental illness has undoubtedly influenced current popular notions of women and their behavior, but of particular interest is how this has influenced—arguably initiated—our victim blaming culture as it exists in modern times.

Analyzing and understanding the historical basis of victim blaming and the myths that perpetuate it are essential first steps in a course that seeks to educate students about sexual assault prevention and response. Students will begin with an introduction to implicit bias theory. The Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity defines and explains implicit bias as “attitudes or stereotypes that affect our understanding, actions, and decisions in an unconscious manner” (Kirwan Institute). These biases, which may be positive or negative, are involuntary and subconscious. They are different from known biases like racism or sexism in that most people are not aware of them and so they do not conceal them out of concern for social/political correctness. Implicit bias theorists stress that even well-educated and well-meaning advocates and allies can have implicit biases. Dr. Bryant Marks, founder of The National Training Institute on Race and Equality, provides implicit bias training to various groups such as police departments, mental health counselors, and advocacy groups. He explains that while implicit biases are subconscious and deeply ingrained, people can learn to identify and combat biases of this nature at the thinking, feeling, and action levels. As Patricia Devine et al have confirmed in their study, “Long-Term Reduction in Implicit Race Bias: A Prejudice Habit-Breaking

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<sup>28</sup> Phyllis Chesler’s landmark book, *On Women and Madness* (1972), argues that the diagnoses and treatments of mental illness, by mainly male professionals of largely female patients, are necessarily patriarchal. She particularly discusses Freud’s contributions to the field and responses to his theories over time. Her book stands as a valuable source to understanding the double standard that still exists when treating women with mental illness.

Intervention,” practicing purposeful and consistent resistance strategies can undo and ultimately eliminate implicit biases.

#### **In Class Activity and Discussion**

**Activity:** Before reading *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*, students will watch Dr. Bryan T. Marks’ video on Implicit Bias and take at least one of the Harvard Implicit Association tests at [implicit.harvard.edu](http://implicit.harvard.edu).

**Follow up class discussion:** What do you know or believe you know about victims of sexual assault, either those who report or those that do not? What do you know or believe you know about perpetrators of sexual assault? What percentage of victims who come forward do you think are telling the truth? How do you know these things about victims and perpetrators? From popular portrayals on television or in movies? From what you’ve heard about high profile rape cases? Or from how peers have responded and spoken about victims who come forward?

**Figure 1.** Implicit bias activity and discussion prompts

It is important for students in sexual assault prevention and response courses to inventory their implicit bias against sexual assault victims and learning how this bias can or does affect their responses to victims and perpetrators. Students will watch Dr. Bryant Marks’ video on Implicit Bias as a foundation to the work they will do in class acknowledging and challenging common preconceived notions about sexual assault victims.<sup>29</sup> To frame and guide such a conversation, students will read John Fowles’ novel, *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* (1969). Fowles’ novel was inspired by the renowned legal trial of Emile de La Ronciere in 1835 France. Lieutenant La Ronciere was found guilty of raping a sixteen-year-old girl, Marie de Morrell. However, after serving a ten year sentence, he was exonerated after a case was made that de Morrell was suffering from a nervous disease and had fabricated the entire story and the evidence due to her mental condition. The historical case makes little more than a cameo

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<sup>29</sup> See the above text box or see Appendix B for a complete list of activities and discussion questions for *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*.



appearance in Fowles' work, but the novel's characters and plot are centered on issues raised by the trial such as society's attitudes towards female sexuality, sexual assault, and sexist notions of mental illness.

In this chapter, I explore the political and social commentary of Fowles' novel and its applicability to 21st century rape culture, while simultaneously illustrating how the novel can be used to encourage readers to critically investigate their own implicit biases towards sexual assault victims. First, students will conduct a guided, in depth analysis of the Trial de La Ronciere, its context within *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, and the historical facts omitted from Fowles' narrative. This legal case marks a pivotal shift in how society viewed women, who were once thought to be too innocent to be deceptive and dishonest. Respondents to the case gathered evidence from psychologists and legal cases to illustrate that women with mental illnesses routinely hurt others and themselves and lied and connived in order to gain attention. The trial and subsequent commentary are used by Fowles to frame a possible interpretation of Sarah, the title character, as a femme fatale, as a woman who is not a victim but a predator of men like Charles, the novel's protagonist. However, further investigation into the trial illustrates the real world consequences of adopting this view of female victims.

Following this in-depth exploration of the historic trial, students will then discuss its impact on their reading of Sarah, whom Fowles intentionally portrays as a mystery. Exploring various possible readings, students will come to view Sarah not as a victim of rape (which readers have no proof to support), but as a victim of the victim blaming culture founded upon views of women as mentally ill or deceitful. Finally, students will analyze the novel's narrative structure—namely its multiple endings—and use of a limited narrator, which lead readers to

judge Sarah themselves. These aspects of the novel present an opportunity for self-reflection and self-criticism of students' own ingrained views of sexual assault victims.

### **The Trial of Emile de La Ronciere and the Initiation of Victim Blaming Culture**

In 1834, Emile de la Ronciere was stationed at the home of his prestigious commanding officer, Baron de Morell, who was married and had a sixteen-year-old daughter named Marie. One evening, La Ronciere was expelled from the home by the Baron after a number of poison-pen letters were found signed with the initials "E de la R." Days after this expulsion, Marie woke her governess in the middle of the night to tell her that La Ronciere had broken into her room through the window, locked the door, threatened her, hit her breasts, bitten her, and then cut her upper thigh. He was reported to authorities and arrested.

During the trial, the defense did its best to illuminate the inconsistencies in Marie de Morell's account. First, Marie's bedroom was on the topmost floor of the de Morell home, accessible only "by an exceptionally tall ladder, which it would have taken at least two other men to hold steady enough for La Ronciere to climb" (Fowles 231-232). The property was heavily guarded the night of the incident; yet none of the sentries reported anything out of the ordinary, and no marks from a ladder were found below the window. Second, a glazier testified that the glass from Marie's bedroom was scattered outside, inconsistent with the report that the glass had been broken by La Ronciere from the exterior. Third, the other occupants of the house, including Marie's governess in the next room, reportedly heard nothing of a struggle that night. These details, as historians point out, would lead any logical person in modern times to question the integrity of Marie's claims or perhaps even conclude La Ronciere's innocence; yet he was found guilty and sentenced to ten years in prison.

Fowles ends the account of the trial with his narrator lamenting the legal outcome and attributing the verdict to Victorian society's belief in "the myth of the pure-minded virgin" and the era's "psychological ignorance" (233). The narrator then introduces a nonfiction landmark text on women's psychology that directly speaks to these two factors. A German physician by the name of Karl Matthaei wrote an analytical appeal of La Ronciere's guilty verdict, presenting his case that the poison pen letters were written by Marie de Morell herself and falsely attributed to La Ronciere. In his appeal, Matthaei argues that the letters followed a monthly pattern and thus attributes Marie's deceit to her menstrual cycle. This accusation links female biology to instances of psychological breaks during which women are driven to seduction. To reinforce this belief, Matthaei positioned Marie's story alongside several anecdotes of female mental illness and male victimization. Matthaei tells about a young woman who committed arson in order to force her family to move closer to the city; a jealous woman who viciously sent letters to break up a marriage; and multiple cases of women who harmed themselves and lied about physical illnesses in order to receive male sympathy and admiration. These stories, shocking and unbelievable to those in the nineteenth century, were meant to prove that women were not only capable of deceit and dishonesty but even predisposed to it because of their biology.

By including both the trial of La Ronciere and Matthaei's book into his novel, Fowles calls attention to a cultural shift regarding not only women's morality but their believability. The trial of La Ronciere was a spectacular scandal in the 19th century not simply because the Morell family was well-known, but because the case was so perplexing, and it has maintained its allure over the centuries for this same reason. A number of historians and legal experts have written extensively about the case, providing further insight and argument into the evidence, verdict, and

acquittal.<sup>30</sup> These non-fiction investigations informed Fowler's inclusion of the trial in his fictional novel, *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, and together these texts help to illuminate an important moment in the intersecting histories of women, mental illness, and rape culture.

First, the trial stands as an example of how women were regarded in Victorian times. A synthesis of the 20th century commentary on the trial of Emile de La Ronciere has already been undertaken by Anne Shields. In her article, "Hysteria, Sexual Assault, and the Military: The Trial of Emile de la Ronciere and *The French Lieutenant's Woman*," Shields points out that there is largely agreement amongst scholars that Marie de Morell's story was believed because of her gender, class, and father's position, not because the evidence presented supported her claim. In fact, the prosecution brought forth very little evidence in her favor, and she herself did not testify as the nature of the crime was deemed too risqué and an insult to Marie's modesty. Largely, La Ronciere's conviction and the jury's conclusion that Marie was telling the truth were primarily informed by the belief that women, especially those born to a distinguished, upper class family, were by their very nature delicate, honest, and incapable of deceit.

Second, the trial's aftermath illustrates how this default belief in women's innocence was altered by the emergence of psychology. This is most evident in the impact of Matthaie's book. Following La Ronciere's release from prison thirteen years after the trial, the case was reopened and La Ronciere was found not guilty as a direct result of Matthaie's book. The defense argued that Marie de Morell's unrequited feelings for La Ronciere drove her to falsify the poison pen letters, make fraudulent claims against him, and feign the evidence of his assault. They also pointed to evidence that she had suffered multiple nervous breakdowns, at least one of which

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<sup>30</sup> See White, James. "The Verdict of a French Jury: A Parisian Trial in 1834 of Emile de la Ronciere." *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, 1842.; Irving, H.B. *Last Studies in Criminology*, London, Collins, 1921.; Williamson, W. H. *Annals of Crime: Some Extraordinary Women*. London, Routledge, 1930.; and Happenstall, Rayner. *French Crime in the Romantic Age*. London, Hamilton, 1970.

occurred before the alleged attack (Fowles 232). She was branded a liar and reports that she had been diagnosed with a nervous disorder were made public. La Ronciere become the image of the wrongly accused male victim and the trial became a cautionary tale about women's capacity for malice.

Fowles does not include this turn of events in the body of his text, but instead details La Ronciere's acquittal in an endnote three full pages after the narrator finishes his summary of the trial. This structure has both contextual and thematic motivations. First, although Fowles' narrator is from the 20th century and thus privy to history beyond the novel's time, he is at this moment recounting Charles' experience of reading Matthaei's work as a stand alone text, ignorant of the book's impact on La Ronciere's fate. The footnote interjection is thus a note for readers and not a part of the fictional world of the novel. Beyond this, and most importantly, Fowles' novel baits readers into formulating their own opinions about the trial and Marie de Morrell's character. Fowles writes *The French Lieutenant's Woman* with an eye towards existentialism, and many critics have written about the novel's theme of freedom.<sup>31</sup> The narrator claims that the characters are not at the mercy of himself or the author, but rather autonomous actors. Fowles awards this same freedom to his readers, never explicitly telling them what to think or what is the truth, a point that is discussed in detail further on in this chapter. Informed by the translated excerpts from Matthaei, the narrator simply asks readers: "After such examples, which it would be easy to extend, who would say it is impossible for a girl, in order to attain a

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<sup>31</sup> See Ji, Qiming and Ming Li. "Freedom in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*." *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 11, Nov. 2013, pp. 2052-2060.; Lynch, Richard. "Freedoms in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*." *Twentieth Century Literature*, Vol. 48, No. 1, Spring 2002, pp. 50-76.; Marais, Mike. "I am Infinitely Strange to Myself": Existentialism, the Bildungsroman, and John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman*." *Journal of Narrative Theory*, Vol. 44, No. 2, Summer 2014, pp. 244-266.; Marais, Mike. "I am Infinitely Strange to Myself": Existentialism, the Bildungsroman, and John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman*." *Journal of Narrative Theory*, Vol. 44, No. 2, Summer 2014, pp. 244-266.; and Strout, Irina I. Siminova. "The Novel Is Only a Game; Or, Narrative Techniques in John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman*." *Victorian*, Vol. 3, No. 2, 2015, pp. 1-13.

desired end, to inflict pain upon herself?” (236). This question invites readers to conclude on their own that Marie de Morrell was lying before the narrator confirms this judgment by informing readers of La Ronciere’s acquittal.

### In Class Discussion

What is your initial perception of Sarah? What information from the novel informs your thoughts of her? What is the community’s perception of Sarah? What information informs the public’s opinion of her?

**Figure 2.** Class discussion prompts about Sarah in *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*

This narrative approach and structure provide opportunities throughout the novel for students to practice guided self-reflection of their implicit bias towards victims. In this first instance, students will be asked to evaluate their current and active preconceptions about women who claim to be victims of sexual assault in light of the historical trial. The implications of La Ronciere’s exoneration and the resulting beliefs about women’s deceitful nature can be felt centuries later. This legal case, Matthaey’s work, and the budding field of psychology during the 19th century revealed that women were not the innocent, pure, and delicate beings they were once believed to be, and this founded a shift in society’s view of women which permeates current rape culture. The issue with the historical shift resulting from La Ronciere’s trial is not that the public learned that women are capable of lying and scheming—all people regardless of gender should be equally viewed with appropriate skepticism and belief. The issue is instead that the tropes of the deceitful vixen or the mentally wounded woman have become the default characterizations for victims claiming to have been sexually assaulted. Women coming forward as victims are often accused of misinterpreting men’s advances, failing to send a clear message

of dissent, secretly enjoying rape, imagining the whole event, or blatantly lying about it.<sup>32</sup> It seems we cannot escape the impacts of this centuries old case. Armed with knowledge of implicit bias theory, students will be guided to reflect on their own reactions to Matthaei's work and their judgments of both Marie de Morrell and La Ronciere. They will be asked to identify the stereotypes about victims that persist today and to what degree they have come to believe them.

### In Class Activity and Discussion

**Activity:** Assign students in small groups a recent case of sexual assault known to the public. Have students use their social media skills to find tweets and comments on Facebook posts or articles. How do commenters respond to victims? Is there evidence of the victim blaming characterizations (slut/whore, liar, mentally ill, confused, regretful)? How do commenters respond to the perpetrator? Come together as a class and write some common found language on the board.

**Discussion:** From your reading of Fowles' novel, how would you characterize Victorian beliefs about women? How do these beliefs compare to popular perceptions about women today as you observed during the activity?

**Figure 3.** Class room activity and discussion prompts for evaluating victim blaming attitudes in present day culture and in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*

The classroom conversation will also help students identify such judgements as problematic. Matthaei's discussion of evolution and biology in connection to divergent female sexuality and mental health helps readers to trace the thought process by which our culture has come to dismiss women's claims of sexual assault and victimization as false or imagined. The victim is portrayed as either a vixen and a scorned woman looking to avenge her wounded pride and reputation; or as a fragile woman who is suffering from mental illness whose recollection of events cannot be trusted. Both these readings of sexual assault victims render their stories false and serve to support a reading of the accused as not only innocent but as a victim himself.

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<sup>32</sup> Stubbs-Richardson et al. looked at social media posts on Twitter to identify existing stereotypes common in victim-blaming cultures. The most prevalent stereotype is that of the whore. See also Ullman, Sarah E. *Talking About Sexual Assault: Society's Response to Survivors*. American Psychological Association, 2010.

Students will be asked to consider how these fallacies may impact both victims who choose to come forward and those who do not.

Students will unlikely be aware that the story of Marie de Morell and La Ronciere takes another unexpected turn. Years after La Ronciere returned to a distinguished position in the military and regained his reputation, it was revealed that Marie de Morell was telling at least a partial truth: La Ronciere had indeed entered her room and assaulted her. Fellow soldiers revealed that La Ronciere had bragged that Marie was infatuated with him and made a bet that he could get a lock of Marie de Morell's pubic hair (Floriot). He didn't need to use a ladder to enter her room as he had convinced Marie's governess, whom he was secretly courting at the time, to let him in. The governess corroborated this story, only lying during the trial to avoid incriminating herself.

Fowles' novel does not include these final details of the ordeal, and thus the novel itself reflects our current culture's predilection to believe the accused and doubt the accuser. Fowles practically excludes La Ronciere's confession from the narrative, leaving readers to believe that Marie de Morell was nothing more than a conniving or mentally ill woman. It is only in a brief footnote that Fowles provides additional information about the trial and La Ronciere's exoneration: "Only quite recently has it become known that he at least partly deserved the hysterical Mlle de Morell's revenge on him. For the both obscene and absurd ultimate truth of the events . . . . I must send you to Rene Floriot, *Les Erreurs Judiciaires*, Paris, 1968" (Fowles 236). In this footnote, Fowles maintains that Marie is mentally unstable by calling her "hysterical" and neither directly states nor insinuates that La Ronciere was guilty of any wrongdoing. He additionally maintains the position that Morell's claim was an act of "revenge." Instead of providing readers the facts of the case, Fowles directs readers to a book in which La Ronciere's



confession is detailed only in French.<sup>33</sup> Readers who do not embark on this goose chase for truth are thus left believing that La Ronceire's exoneration was the end of the story and that Marie de Morell was nothing more than a jilted lover scheming for revenge or acting as a victim due to her mental illness.

Students, however, will be guided on this quest for the truth. Following the earlier discussion about Matthaëi's work and La Ronciere's subsequent exoneration, students will then be provided excerpts from Rayner Heppenstall's 1979 translation of Floriot's book. These excerpts detail which aspects of the story were true, and in doing so Floriot addresses the doubts surrounding Marie de Morrell's account and confirms that she had not fabricated the assault. Students will be asked to reflect upon how this new information affects their judgment of the case and whether Marie de Morell was treated fairly.

#### **In Class Activity and Discussion**

1. **Activity:** After reading the account of the trial of Emile de la Ronciere included in the novel, prompt students to discuss their thoughts on Marie de Morell and de la Ronciere in regards to what they know or think happened, the characters' respective blameworthiness and guilt, and the effects of this story on how readers characterize la Ronciere and de Morrell. Ask, what are you inclined to believe about la Ronciere and Marie de Morrell?
2. Hand out the pages from Floriot's work that are cited in Fowles' endnote. Help students construct a timeline of the event and what actually happened.
3. **Discussion:** Does this information about the night of Marie de Morrell's assault influence or change your perception of Marie de Morrell and/or la Ronciere? Why/how?

**Figure 4.** Class room activity and discussion prompts about the trial of Emile de la Ronciere

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<sup>33</sup> Fowles' novel was published in 1969, only a year after *Les Erruers Judiciaires* was published. An English translation of Floriot's work by translator Rayner Heppenstall was not published until 1972. As far as Fowles was aware, readers would have to read French to know the late-discovered facts of the case.

Following this in-depth examination of the Trial de la Ronciere, students will be asked to consider Fowles' motivation for omitting La Ronciere's confession, shifting the focus of classroom discussion from the historic case towards the novel's fictional plot and characters. Fowles integrates Matthaei's work into his novel to frame a negative reading of Sarah, the female protagonist. She is pushed to the outskirts of society due to her affair with a French lieutenant who abandoned her shortly after their tryst. Sarah is adopted by a strict Christian, Mrs. Poultney, who hopes to gain favor with God by helping Sarah make up for her sinful past. Sarah, however, disobeys Mrs. Poultney's strict rules and is dismissed from her home. Sarah subsequently disappears. The male protagonist, Charles, consults Dr. Grogen out of concern for Sarah's wellbeing, and in response, Dr. Grogen gives Charles a copy of Matthaei's book. Dr. Grogen states that Sarah's concerning behavior is at best a symptom of mental illness—he diagnoses her with melancholia and calls her “deranged” (225), “compromised” and “mentally diseased” (227)—and at worst a form of deceit. He portrays Sarah (and all sexually deviant women) as either manipulative and conniving or mentally unstable, and he says that prostitutes prey on men that he calls “victims” (225). Dr. Grogen gives Matthaei's book to Charles in order to support the notion that these deceptive traits are distinctly female, embedded in biology and evolution. Such women cannot be helped.

### **In Class Discussion**

What purpose does it serve within the novel to only include the version of the story wherein la Ronciere is exonerated? Why does Fowles include the Trial de la Ronciere in his text? What effect(s) does it have that he provides readers information about the trial only snippets at a time? Why doesn't he include Floriot's revelation about the event? Did Fowles fairly portray this historic case? Why might he choose to withhold the full story?

**Figure 5.** Discussion prompts about the trial of Emile de la Ronciere in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*

Maintaining a version of the La Ronciere case wherein Marie de Morell is the villain serves Fowles' plot and his portrayal of Sarah. Fowles plays with the definitions of insanity and mental illness by proclaiming one minute that Sarah is not hysterical then the next providing a definition into which she fits. As Shields argues, "Fowles works by misdirection, on the surface claiming that Sarah is not an hysteric while subtly undermining this claim in portrayal of her character and her actions" (88). Time and again, Sarah's actions are painted as peculiar and strange and her claims as unreliable. She lies and self-sabotages. Yet the narrator tells readers that she "was far less mad than she seemed... or at least not mad in the way that was generally supposed" (65) and that her face showed no signs of "hysteria" nor "madness" (10). As Shields further argues, readers are not certain whether Fowles' narrator, as a character with knowledge of more recent psychology, is using clinical terms or popular terms.<sup>34</sup> Though she argues that Sarah hardly fits into a medical diagnosis of mental illness, the protagonist does fit into a popular definition that intertwines gender and mental illness: "Fowles saw Sarah as quintessentially female and ... his concept of the female incorporates numerous characteristics which over the years have been associated with supposedly hysterical women" (Shields 86). Popular definitions of mental illness are used in connection to sexual assault, and Fowles' depiction of both Marie de Morell and Sarah illustrate this. Reflecting on the omitted details of the case, students will be asked whether the connection between female biology and mental illness is fair, right, or scientifically supported, and they will be lead to think about how this myth has permeated our cultural views of women.

While it is infuriating that Fowles all but eliminates La Ronciere's confession and ties both Marie de Morell and Sarah to mental illness, this provides another opportunity for students

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<sup>34</sup> Fowles was extremely interested in psychology and psychoanalysis and Freud's theories of the unconscious mind. For more, see Mandal, Mahitqsh. "'Eyes a Man Could Drown In': Phallic Myth and Femininity in John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman*."

to examine prevalent preconceived notions about women, mental illness, and claims of sexual assault. The court's initial willingness to believe Marie de Morell is indicative of an outdated belief in women's innocence and virtue. Fowles' novel captures the historic moment in which this dominating view of women changed, and thus it offers a chance for a valuable classroom discussion. The impact of this case can be observed by juxtaposing the treatment of Marie from the 21st century with that of Marie de Morell in the 19th century. While 21st century Marie was assumed to be lying about her rape, the judge and jury in the La Ronciere case believed Marie de Morell and found the lieutenant guilty despite the laundry list of missing pieces of information and illogical claims. Where Marie de Morell was met with acceptance and concern, modern-day Marie was further victimized by police and our judicial system and her trauma compounded. It is clear that our current preconceived notions about victims and their claims of rape stand in stark contrast to those in 1835 France. Simply, we now instinctively doubt victims instead of believing them. Shifting the analysis to Sarah, students will next come to see how damaging such inclinations can be to victims' emotional well-being and sense of self.

#### **In Class Discussion**

How does Fowles' novel capture a shift in society's view of women who report a sexual assault? What is Fowles' purpose for including Matthaëi's work on deceptive and mentally ill women? How is this nonfiction text meant to influence the reader's experience of the story world?

**Figure 6.** Discussion prompts about Matthaëi's influence in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*

#### **Sarah as a Casualty of a Victim-Blaming Culture**

In congruence with directly accusing victims of lying or being unreliable, our culture's long-embedded views on victims cause irreparable damage to their sense of self and their social

relationships.<sup>35</sup> Students see this effect in Sarah and the fictional community's response to her from the novel's beginning and through its various endings. When readers first encounter Sarah, she is introduced and defined by her scandalous and mysterious relationship with a French Lieutenant that has rendered her a spectacle. The first half of the novel present Sarah as an enigma and as the subject of popular curiosity. This is largely because the truth of her past is kept secret from the fictional characters and readers alike. Brooke Lenz, who writes extensively about Fowles' use of voyeurism as a trope, explains that it is precisely because Sarah upholds the mystery surrounding her that "members of her community [are inspired] into especially relentless and constant acts of surveillance and interpretation" (104). Despite their ignorance, however, the people of Lyme make various assumptions regarding Sarah's actions and blameworthiness. As a result of these judgments, she is rendered an outcast and internalizes the assumptions cast upon her.

Whether Sarah is a victim of sexual trauma is never explicitly stated, nor is there evidence to support such a reading; however, she can be read as an example of the consequences of trauma on one's identity because of the community's response to her. Traumatic experiences commonly cause victims to undergo identity changes. Kaitlyn Boyle's extensive and recent studies on sexual assault victims illustrate that this kind of trauma, in particular, causes psychological stress that leads to identity disruption. The identity salience experienced by victims is largely a response to their trauma, but it is greatly exacerbated by social reactions to

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<sup>35</sup> See Grubb, Amy, and Emily Turner. "Attribution of Blame in Rape Cases: A Review of the Impact of Rape Myth Acceptance, Gender Role Conformity and Substance Use on Victim Blaming." *Aggression and Violent Behavior* 17.5 (2012): 443-452.

the victim.<sup>36</sup> Sexual assault victims report being ostracized by social circles or feeling like their identity is now tied to their experience of trauma (Boyle).

Although Sarah is not raped, the people of Lyme think of and treat her only in relation to one experience in her past. To those around her, she has no individual identity and is instead defined through her relationship with the French Lieutenant. This is evident in how Sarah is named or called throughout the novel. Her agency is usurped by the gazing public who do not call her by her name, but instead call her “the French Lieutenant's woman,” “tragedy,” and “whore.” All three of these names prioritize her sexual relationship rather than her personhood. The first assigned moniker strips Sarah of her identity as her own person and instead defines her as a possession belonging to a man.<sup>37</sup> The second defines her only as a jilted lover. And the third not only makes an assumption about her sexual relationship with the French Lieutenant but renders her a blameworthy deviant deserving of social ousting.

Though there are some who don't call Sarah by these names, even the relatively more sympathetic characters in the novel, like Dr. Grogen, view Sarah as enjoying her victimhood. Informed by Freud's writings on melancholia, Dr. Grogen posits that Sarah is akin to one of Freud's patients, and while he paints mental illness as a disease, he still speaks condescendingly of Sarah. After she disappears from Ms. Poultney's house, Charles fears that she may jump from the cliffs in despair, and he asks Dr. Grogen once again for his opinion on how to help Sarah. Trying to solve the mystery and gain insight into her character, Dr. Grogen jumps into the mind of Sarah and gives voice to her thoughts:

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<sup>36</sup> See Ullman, S. & M. Relyea. “Unsupported or Turned Against: Understanding How Two Types of Negative Social Reactions to Sexual Assault Relate to Post-Assault Outcomes.” *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, Vol. 39, No. 1, 2015, pp. 37-52.

<sup>37</sup> For an in-depth analysis of readers' perspectives of Sarah, see Michael, Migani Cornier. ““Who is Sarah?": A Critique of *The French Lieutenant's Woman's* Feminism.” *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, Vol. 28, No. 4, 1987, pp. 225-236.

I am a young woman...I think the world has done badly by me. I am not in full command of my emotions. I do foolish things, such as throwing myself at the head of the first handsome rascal who is put in my path. What is worse, I have fallen in love with with being a victim of fate. I put out a very professional line in the way of looking melancholy. I have tragic eyes. I weep without explanation. (Fowles 223)

Here Dr. Grogen asserts that Sarah is motivated by self-pity and driven to despair by her own actions. He contends that she suffers from melancholia by choice, reinforcing his earlier claim that she is “addicted to [it] as one becomes addicted to opium” (157). Far from an empathetic response to mental illness, Dr. Grogen’s roleplaying monologue is condescending and accusatory. He goes on to depict Sarah as preying on Charles:

And now . . . enter a young god. Intelligent. Good-looking.... I see he is interested in me. The sadder I seem, the more interested he appears to be.... He treats me like a lady. Nay, more than that. . . . Now I am very poor. I can use none of the wiles the more fortunate of my sex employ to lure mankind into their power... I have but one weapon. The pity I inspire in this kindhearted man. Now pity is a thing that takes a devil of a lot of feeding. I have fed this Good Samaritan my past and he has devoured it. So what can I do? I must make him pity my present. One day, when I am walking where I have been forbidden to walk, I seize my chance. I show myself to someone I know will report my crime to the one person who will not condone it. I get myself dismissed from my position. I disappear, under the strong presumption that it is in order to throw myself off the nearest cliff-top. And then, in extremis and de profundis or rather de altis, I cry to my savior for help. (224)

Dr. Grogen paints Sarah as a conniving and deceitful woman and likens her to prostitutes who prey on men the same way. Kathleen Renk takes on a similar reading of Grogen's character monologue, arguing that he "shifts the blame...to Sarah herself, claiming that [she] has deliberately 'tragic eyes'" (580). The accusation that Sarah is seeking attention and pity and that she is enjoying her situation is an allegation often made of sexual assault victims who report.<sup>38</sup>

The Lyme community's response to Sarah does more than just relegate her to the periphery of society; it actually causes Sarah to lose her sense of self. She buys into the names assigned to her, and they shape what she thinks of herself and the actions she takes. Sarah calls herself "the scarlet woman of Lyme" (122) and she tells Charles, "I am nothing. I am hardly human any more. I am the French Lieutenant's Whore" (Fowles 176). Whether Sarah actually had sex with Varguennes is questionable as the latter two endings illuminate, but she tells Charles that she did have intercourse with the French Lieutenant.

Sarah's confession reveals much about how she has internalized the victim blaming culture beginning with her relationship with Varguennes. First, she summarizes how he influenced her self-perception and actions. Each time Sarah would block his advances, Varguennes would call her "cruel" (170). Sarah tells Charles he may have made this accusation in jest but that "a day came when I thought myself cruel as well" (170). As a result of this pressure Sarah gives into Varguennes. While it doesn't equal rape, this detail evokes sexual coercion and consent. Current campaigns for affirmative consent standards argue that consent should be defined as the verbal statement of a person's uninfluenced desire to engage in sexual practices. This means that sexual encounters should be free of both physical force and verbal threats or pressure. Making the case to include coercion in a definition of sexual assault,

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<sup>38</sup> See Jayalakshmi, G et al. "Perception About Women and Attitude Towards a Rape Victim — A Cross Sectional Study." *Medica Innovatica*, Vol. 5, No. 2, 2016, pp. 22-27.



researchers Brandie Pugh and Patricia Becker specifically state: “If there is a concerted effort to protect women’s autonomy, then instances in which they consent to sex that is unwanted as a result of [Verbal Sexual Coercion] should be considered as not freely given consent and perpetrators should be held accountable” (88). Though the definitions of rape and consent are complicated and nuanced, this passage in Fowles’s novel allows readers to engage in a thoughtful discussion about the topic in congruence with their analysis of Sarah’s consent.

Second, Varguennes’s mind games lead Sarah to further blame herself. Two types of self-blame are common amongst sexual assault victims: behavioral self-blame, wherein victims blame their own actions; and characterological self-blame, wherein victims blame their own character traits.<sup>39</sup> For example, behavioral self-blaming is evident when a victim says, “I should not have gone into his bedroom” or “I shouldn’t have had so much to drink.” Characterological self-blame can be recognized when victims say “I always pick the wrong guys” or “I am a bad judge of character.” Sarah exhibits both these aspects of self-blame. Although she details the ways in which Varguennes painted himself as a gentleman with genuine feelings for her, Sarah tells Charles that “The blame is not all his” (169). Sarah says that Varguennes made her believe he was infatuated with her but says, “But all he said was false. I don’t know who he really was. . . . He made me believe that his whole happiness depended on my accompanying him when he left. . . . I foolishly believed him” (169-171). Sarah blames herself for being a fool and then follows this with an excuse that her lack of French may have led to a misunderstanding: “Perhaps I heard what he did not mean.” (169). In these statements, Sarah blames her own actions rather than holding Varguennes accountable for his.

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<sup>39</sup> See Janoff-Bulman, R. “Characterological Versus Behavioral Self-Blame: Inquiries Into Depression and Rape.” *Journal of Perspective in Social Psychology*. Vol. 37, No. 10, 1979 Oct, pp. 1798-809.

Once she realizes Varguennes’s true intentions, Sarah still chooses to remain with him in Lyme. This further leads to her blaming herself and accepting the names she is called. She tells Charles that “a respectable woman would have left at once. . . . My innocence was false the moment I chose to stay” (174-5). Like sexual assault victims who are verbally attacked for why they attended a party, what they were wearing, and the signals they sent to their accuser, Sarah’s belief in her own culpability is clear with this confession. Even though it is possible that Sarah never did have sex with Varguennes, she accepts the guilty charges placed onto her by the gazing public because she should not have fallen for his lies nor followed him to Lyme.

#### **In Class Discussion**

Can you point to details or quotes from inside the novel that influence or support your reading of Sarah? If not, what outside factors might be influencing your judgement and perception?

**Figure 7.** Discussion prompt reflecting on implicit bias and readings of Sarah

Sarah has been treated for so long as a social pariah and deviant that she adopts this view of herself. When Charles tells her that Mrs. Tranter has offered to help her leave the caustic town of Lyme, Sarah is astounded that someone would be so kind. She responds emotionally, “To be spoken to again as if...as if I am not who I am...” (123). Instead of saying “as if I am not who I am *thought to be*” Sarah’s words of “who I am” indicate that she has indeed internalized the rumors spoken about her. Even though she is neither a victim—and perhaps not the sexual deviant people believe she is—the community’s response to her has caused identity disruption. Sarah cannot treat herself with kindness and care, let alone accept such kindness from others.

This initial portrayal of Sarah illuminates a possible reading of her as a sympathetic character. She may be viewed as an undeserving casualty of a victim blaming culture, and an

analysis of her character and the community's response to her allows students to see the damaging effects of assumptions that both intentionally and unintentionally blame victims. However, such an interpretation of Sarah is complicated by the various endings of the novel. Students will thus be asked to conduct various analyses of Sarah's character at multiple points in the narrative.

### **The Interpretive Impact of Fowles' Three Endings<sup>40</sup>**

The earlier analysis of the Trial de la Ronciere illuminates how our victim blaming culture has come to assign victims popular, gender-based definitions of mental illness when it benefits the accused perpetrator or to charge victims with lying, conniving, and deceiving in order to destroy their credibility. While the class discussion asks students to reflect on their own existing biases, an investigation of Sarah and Fowles' three endings offers the opportunity for further reflection on both cultural and personal attitudes towards sexual assault victims. The inclusion of the La Ronciere case and Matthaie's response to the verdict are meant to inform both Charles' and readers' perceptions of Sarah, and in conjunction, Fowles' book as a whole illustrates the damaging effects of a victim-blaming culture. The three endings present various possible interpretations of Sarah that each reflect different cultural responses to victims as a result of psychology and the popularized case of la Ronciere.

After students discuss the historic impact of the trial of Emile de la Ronciere and the effects of a victim-blaming culture on Sarah, the class discussion will then turn to the novel's multiple endings and their implications for readers' perceptions of Sarah. While the first ending is the most open and maintains a sympathetic reading of Sarah, readers may view the second and

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<sup>40</sup> The number of endings has been a debate amongst scholars, many of whom dismiss the first possible ending in chapter 44. The narrator says that the events recounted in this chapter are "not what happened" but what Charles was "imagining might happen" (342). Some critics thus dismiss this ending as implausible and argue that there are two endings. Other critics, however, believe that this first ending should be considered. For a thorough literary review of such arguments, see Scruggs, Charles. "The Two Endings of *The French Lieutenant's Woman*." *Modern Fiction Studies*, vol. 31 no. 1, 1985, pp. 95-113.

third endings as a reinforcement of Matthaei's book and his claim that women are prone to mental illness, and are devious and conniving. Readers can read Sarah as a traumatized character who has come to internalize the identity projected upon her by society; or, they may come to see Sarah as a *femme fatale* who lies and deceives in order to harness Charles' affections.

### *The First Ending*

In this first ending, Fowles concludes in a traditionally Victorian way that serves to preserve Sarah's presumed innocence. In this conclusion, readers are allotted the greatest imaginative and interpretative freedom and may form a more sympathetic reading of Sarah as a result. While the second and third endings complicate such interpretations of Sarah, in this first ending, readers are left without a clear resolution. After Sarah has gone missing, Charles finds her sleeping in a barn. Looking at her "curled up like a small girl," Charles feels a desire to protect and comfort her (249). Startled by the likeness of these feelings to those of the men in Matthaei's book, Charles blames his emotional response on Sarah and claims it is "proof of the doctor's accusation" (249). Upon her waking, Sarah's face further "compound[s] all the clinical horrors bred in Charles's mind by the worthy doctors Matthaei and Grogen" (250). In both these instances in which Charles' suspicions are awakened, Sarah has done nothing malicious or deceitful, directly or indirectly. Rather, it is Charles' own lustful and emotional responses that convince him of her guilt. While Charles does not see this, the narrator comments that "the tiger was in him, not in her" (249). Students' attention will be drawn to the fact that the narrator allows us insight into Charles' character but not into Sarah's and thus we cannot mistaken his reactions as proof of her guilt.

### In Class Discussion

How does reading Matthaei's book complicate Charles' feelings for Sarah and his interpretation of her intentions? Are his interpretations based upon Sarah's actions or his own internal reactions?

**Figure 8.** Discussions prompts about Charles' implicit bias towards Sarah and women

Armed with suspicion about Sarah's intentions, Charles scrutinizes her words and actions for further evidence that Dr. Grogen is right, but he is left uncertain. Sarah confesses that she wanted Mrs. Poultney to catch her because she knew she would consequently be dismissed. Even though this admission shows that Sarah was not entirely forthright with Charles, he notes that her confession separates her from the examples in Matthaei's book who "waited to be caught before confession" (252). He is still reluctant to see her as a mad or devious woman. Charles finds himself "hypnotized" by Sarah's eyes, but again, she does nothing to prompt his advances when he embraces and kisses her. Throughout this exchange, Charles fails in his quest to illuminate Sarah's intentions as malicious and instead succeeds in highlighting his own feelings for her.

Following their kiss, Sarah agrees to go to Exeter with financial help from Charles and Mrs. Tranter, and this is the last readers hear of Sarah in this first ending. Sarah's story abruptly ends while Charles' storyline continues. This may be in Sarah's favor, however, as this ending provides no concrete evidence to support a reading of her as ill-intentioned or unstable as Dr. Grogen suggests. Charles, himself, is conflicted by Dr. Grogen's assessment of Sarah, but his brief moments of suspicion are not informed by her actions or proof of her intentions but by his own internal responses to her. His subsequent tryst with a prostitute is motivated by his feelings for Sarah, but she does not directly appear again in this conclusion. In this first ending recounted by Fowles' narrator, Charles returns to Ernestina after visiting the brothel and makes amends for

his secretive behavior while helping Sarah. Having accepted Charles' apology, Ernestina and Charles marry and the narrator tells readers that, though they fall out of love, they grow old together. He also recounts the fates of characters like Dr. Grogen and Mrs. Poulteney, but admits, "what happened to Sarah, I do not know—whatever it was, she never bothered Charles again" (340). Despite a letter from Dr. Grogen warning Charles that Sarah may continue to pursue him and "thrust her woes upon [him]," Sarah does not contact Charles further nor is she ever heard of again in Lyme (327). The trial de la Ronciere and Matthaiei's response were presented to Charles in order to frame Sarah as a femme fatale, but her disappearance from Charles' life flies in the face of such a comparison. This first ending thus directly contradicts a reading of Sarah as mentally ill or deceitful, and readers may see her as a sympathetic victim who sought only to escape the oppressing community of Lyme.

### *The Second Ending*

In chapter 45, Fowles' narrator explains that the previous ending is imagined by Charles and not what actually happens. Instead of returning to Ernestina, Charles visits Sarah in Exeter. While there, he is invited up to her room because she cannot descend the stairs due to a hurt ankle. The characters have a brief sexual encounter and afterwards it is revealed by the blood on the sheets that Sarah was a virgin and thus lied about her relationship with Varguennes. Sarah's deception is controversial for readers who had previously read her as a harmless victim, but still, she can be interpreted in many ways because the narrator is consistently ignorant of her thoughts, emotions, and motivations. Readers thus still have freedom to interpret Sarah in response to the various contextual clues provided in the novel.

From a sympathetic perspective, readers can assert that Sarah is still a victim of the community's judgment and that her feelings for Charles grew authentically. Charles is the first

person to treat Sarah with empathy and to see her as more than just the French Lieutenant's woman. Upon first meeting Sarah, Charles doesn't see her as "mad" as Ernestina calls her. Instead he is drawn to her mysterious sorrow. At first she is like a puzzle needing to be solved, but Charles' perception of Sarah changes through a practice of empathy:

Moments like modulations come in human relationships: when what has been until then an objective situation, one perhaps described by the mind to itself in semi-literary terms, one it is sufficient merely to classify under some general heading (man with alcoholic problems, woman with unfortunate past, and so on) becomes subjective; becomes unique; becomes, *by empathy*, instantaneously shared rather than observed. Such a metamorphosis took place in Charles's mind as he stared at the bowed head of the sinner before him. (141, emphasis my own)

Here Fowles differentiates Charles from the rest of the novel's characters. Charles does not think of Sarah simply as a "woman with [an] unfortunate past" nor as mentally ill or deceitful, but as a person neither tied to nor determined by a single moment.

This empathy helps Sarah to see herself in the same way and to heal in part from the damage done by the community's response to her. In a reading of Sarah as a victim who finds hope and healing in connecting with Charles, one could argue that Sarah has sex with Charles not because she is performing the role of whore assigned to her but because she has rediscovered her sense of self in a small way and genuinely cares for him. She tells Charles, "You have given me the consolation of believing that in another world, another age, another life, I might have been your wife. You have given me the strength to go on living" (358). Because of Charles' empathetic response, Sarah is able to imagine herself outside of the past that has condemned her in Lyme.

In this reading, Sarah's love for Charles is real, and although she has lied, her reasons for doing so are not malicious but instead a symptom of her disrupted identity as a victim of the community's judgment. Her actions are beyond even her own comprehension. She tells Charles, "I am infinitely strange to myself...Do not ask me to explain what I have done. I cannot explain it. It is not to be explained" (356-358). Whether Sarah is simply accepting of her title of "whore," traumatized by it, or actively invites it is a point of uncertainty, but her lies about Varguennes may be read—perhaps mercifully—as her internalization of this public facade. She has embraced the identity projected upon her by the public to the extent that she lies to Charles that she willingly had sex with Varguennes.

Alternatively, in this ending Sarah may also be read as a wicked woman who, akin to those in Matthaei's book, set out to deliberately deceive Charles. This is certainly Charles' first thoughts when he discovers that he has "forced a virgin":

She had lied. All her conduct, all her motives in Lyme Regis had been based on a lie. But for what purpose? Why? Why? Why?

Blackmail!

To put him totally in her power!

And all those loathsome succubi of the male mind, their fat fears of a great feminine conspiracy to suck the virility from their veins, to prey upon their idealism, melt them into wax and mould them to their evil fancies... these, and a surging back to credibility of the hideous evidence adduced in the La Ronciere appeal, filled Charles' mind with apocalyptic horror...She was mad, evil, enlacing him in the strangest of nets. (357)

In Charles' mind, Grogan's diagnosis has been confirmed by the blood on the sheets. Sarah is indeed no more than a conniving, wicked woman.



Brooke Lenz offers insight that supports such a reading of Sarah. In her chapter, “Fantasy and Feminism in *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*,” Lenz argues that Sarah is only masquerading as “innocent, humble, meek and mild” in order to seduce Charles. In providing her detailed confession of her sexual relationship with Varguennes, Sarah purposefully “[prompts] Charles to engage in a voyeuristic fantasy” in which he pictures Sarah erotically (Lenz 112). Fowles tells readers: “He saw the scene she had not detailed: her giving herself. He was at one and the same time Varguennes enjoying her and the man who sprang forward and struck him down” (Fowles 176). In this reading, Lenz asserts that Sarah knowingly “portrays herself as an object of erotic fantasy” (Lenz 112). Her motivation for doing so is to reclaim a position of power and autonomy, the consequence of which is that Charles is made the victim. Lenz explains:

Charles succumbs to Sarah’s seductions, enabling Sarah to appropriate in his life the role Varguennes played in hers. Implicating Charles in her situation, luring him out of Lyme to her hotel in Exeter, deceiving him into an intimate meeting with her in her fire lit bedroom, seducing him into an act of brief but world-shattering intercourse, and finally abandoning him, Sarah uses Charles to transcend her role as the French Lieutenant’s Whore. (122)

Lenz’s interpretation of Sarah’s motivations may be akin to those adopted by students. While I assert that such a reading is too harsh and fails to see Charles as a willing and eager participant in his relationship with Sarah, students may be inclined to see Sarah as conniving. Such a perspective allows for a classroom discussion about how our readings may be informed by implicit bias regarding women and sex.

### **In Class Discussion**

Discussions around female sexuality are changing, but our culture is still fraught with stereotypes and assumptions about women's sexual behavior. What are some of these beliefs or assumptions? How might these ideas or our implicit bias inform our reading of Sarah in the second ending?

**Figure 9.** Discussion prompts regarding women's sexuality

The second ending provides yet another challenge to readers' perspectives of Sarah. Charles leaves the hotel angry and upset at Sarah's seemed betrayal but cannot free himself of thinking of her. The narrator follows Charles over a two year period as he addresses his separation from Ernestina and searches for Sarah. Finally, Charles finds Sarah living under a new name with a renowned and contemporary artist. When Charles arrives, however, he realizes she is not the same damsel-in-distress type he had thought her to be. Sarah admits that she knew Charles was looking for her and had taken measures, like changing her name, to avoid him finding her. Though she states that a conversation between them is not a good idea, Charles baits her into rejecting a marriage proposal and defending her past actions.

Instead of asserting that she is not worthy of marriage as she had in the past, Sarah has discovered that she does not want to be married.

I do not wish to marry. I do not wish to marry because... first, because of my past, which habituated me to loneliness. I always thought that I hated it. I now live in a world where loneliness is most easy to avoid. And I have found that I treasure it. I do not want to share my life. I wish to be what I am, not what a husband, however kind, however indulgent, must expect me to be in marriage. (453)

Sarah goes on to explain that she has found her own happiness and is afraid to give it up. She does not want to be confined by Victorian wifehood, even if her husband is a person she loves.

Sarah's newfound happiness has made her see the errors of her past, but she distinctly says that ending their relationship wasn't a mistake. In this exchange, Sarah admits that "A madness was in me at that time" and that their relationship was built on a falsehood (451). One may read this as an admission of guilt and proof that Sarah's motivations for seducing Charles were malicious. However, an alternative reading, one that affords more compassion for Sarah, is also possible. Brooke Lenz argues that Sarah pursues Varguennes because she is discontent with her role as a governess and desperately seeking to have her own life and family. Sarah tells Charles:

You cannot [understand], Mr. Smithson. Because you are not a woman. Because you are not a woman who was born to be a farmer's wife but educated to be something... better....And you were not a governess, Mr. Smithson, a young woman without children paid to look after children. (170)

Lenz connects this passage with others about Sarah's felt isolation in order to support her claim that Sarah follows Varguennes to Lyme out of desperation. Because Sarah is constantly "[taunted] with a state of domestic contentment she can never possess [and] tormented by her sense of injustice that such pleasure will apparently never be hers," she views Varguennes as her only opportunity for the life she wants (Lenz 118). Sarah's anger at being jilted is less so about love lost and more so because she has once again felt this longed-for future torn away.

While Lenz's analysis here is only about Sarah's tryst with Varguennes, it can be extended to explain her relationship with Charles as discussed earlier. His empathy and compassion towards Sarah helps her to see that she is not condemned to a life of solitude. Readers find out in this ending that Sarah's desire for a family has been met, though

unconventionally for the time. She has a child of her own and feels at home in the Rossetti residence as nothing more than the artist's model.

Charles, however, cannot fathom a woman wanting to remain unmarried and continues his accusations. He charges, ““You told me you loved me. You gave me the greatest proof a woman can that...that what possessed us was no ordinary degree of mutual sympathy and attraction....What you are saying is that you never loved me”” (450). Sarah protests that she did love him only to met by further allegations that she is in love with the artist Rossetti, with whom she lives. Sarah replies. ““Mr. Smithson, I am *not* his mistress. If you knew him, if you knew the tragedy of his private life...you could not for a moment be so...’ But she fell silent. He had gone too far.” (450). Like the villagers in Lyme whom he chided, Charles is himself guilty of projecting his own feelings and beliefs onto others and allowing unconfirmed suspicions to inform his thoughts. Sarah insinuates that Charles' accusations are no more than the product of his imagination which is influenced by his beliefs about female sexuality and social roles. Charles assumes that if Sarah is void of emotion for him, she must have a new suitor, an emotional replacement. He cannot fathom that Sarah, or any woman, might be happy without a romantic other. What she pleads for in this passage is that Charles be open minded and practice compassion and empathy when faced with uncertainty rather than be presumptuous. Here, students will be asked to reflect upon Charles' interrogation and what motivates his actions.

#### **In Class Discussion**

Why does Charles assume that Sarah must have a romantic interest or partner? How are his assumptions influenced by larger Victorian attitudes towards women?

**Figure 10.** Discussion prompts about Charles' and Victorian era attitudes towards women

Just before Charles leaves in anger, Sarah says she cannot let him leave without knowing the truth of her love for him, and she asks that he talk to someone before he leaves. She says, “There is a lady in this house who knows me, who understands me better than anyone else in the world...She will explain my real nature far better than I can myself. She will explain that my conduct towards you is far less blameworthy than you suppose” (Fowles 457). Charles reluctantly agrees, and as he awaits the lady’s arrival he once again lets his imagination run. D.W. Landrum’s article, “Sarah and Sappho: Lesbian Reference in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*,” explains that despite the narrator stopping short of using the word lesbian, Charles suspects with disgust that he is about to meet Sarah’s lesbian lover. Once again, Charles’ thoughts about Sarah are informed by cultural beliefs of women and sexuality.

Who Charles meets, however, is not a grown woman, but a child of less than two years of age. Realizing that the child is his, Charles suddenly understands Sarah’s actions. Born out of wedlock, the child would be a source of public shame for him, especially had he maintained his relationship with Ernestina. And before Sarah could tell him about the child, she wanted Charles to know and accept her objection to marriage. Recounting Sarah’s tears and Charles’ embrace of her and his daughter, Fowles’ narrator implies that the character’s reunion is the start of a happy ending, one in which Charles’ forgiveness and acceptance of Sarah signal to readers that she may be the sympathetic, traumatized character first portrayed.

### *The Third Ending*

The third and final ending begins as the narrator turns back time to just before Charles meets his daughter. Before Sarah can ask Charles to stay and meet the lady who knows her best, he makes up his mind that Sarah is akin to the women in Matthaei’s book—a conniving, manipulative, wicked woman. After Sarah protests that their meeting should have never

happened and that she does not wish unhappiness upon him, Charles retorts, “I think you lie. I think you reveled in the thought of my misery...You have not only planted the dagger in my breast, you have delighted in twisting it” (456-457). In this ending, Sarah does not persist in her self-explanation. Instead, she is struck by silence and reaches for Charles’ arm “as if she were trying to tell him something she could not say in words” (467). Unable to figure out Sarah’s meaning, Charles leaves believing that Sarah has calculated her constant acts of manipulation: “From the first she had manipulated him. She would do so to the end” (468). As he leaves he walks by a woman and a child, whom readers know from the previous ending is his daughter. The narrator, however, feigns ignorance postulating that the child may belong to the women.

The narrator’s seemed unawareness of the previous ending serves to further a class discussion about Sarah’s character and how readers perceive her. If readers, too, were unaware that Sarah has mothered Charles’s child, perhaps they too would maintain a reading of Sarah as conniving and deceitful. Charles’s revelation that Sarah was manipulative from the start may be easily adopted by readers who ignore or skip past the second ending. Linda Hutcheon is one such critic who regards the extended ending as truth. She argues, “There is no doubt that Sarah ‘lies’ in order to bring Charles to the realization of the ‘truth’” (90). However, Fowles’ implementation of an inconsistent or unreliable narrator precludes readers from knowing the narrative truth.

### **Reading Sarah Through Fowles’ Selectively Omniscient Narrator**

As a postmodern novel, Fowles’ *The French Lieutenant's Woman* has been lauded for its experimental style and its ironic commentary on Victorian notions of sexuality from a 20th century perspective. It is precisely these aspects of Fowles’ novel that make it an ideal text for a course on sexual assault prevention and response. By encouraging a metacognitive reading experience, students will be guided to self-reflect on how their thought processes are influenced

by and help to reinforce a victim blaming culture. Fowles' narrative style creates a realm of uncertainty and unreliability when it comes to Sarah and her experiences. As a result, readers are led to respond to Sarah and her story with the same attitudes they have towards real life accounts of rape.

A number of scholars who have written about the narrative style of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* acknowledge the novel's narrator is a character himself and discuss the unequal treatment of Sarah and Charles.<sup>41</sup> While the title of the novel indicates that the book is about Sarah, the narrator privileges Charles's story and as Bonnie Zare argues, positions Sarah as nothing more than "a catalyst for male development" (185). Throughout the novel, the narrator is omniscient when it comes to Charles. He is privy to Charles' thoughts and knows his past such as details from growing up without parents. The narrator also tells us Charles's emotional reactions: "Charles felt immediately as if he had trespassed" (10) and "he was unhappy; alien and unhappy" (293). Readers are allowed to know Charles authentically and directly.

This same insight into one's past, feelings, and thoughts isn't granted to Sarah. Instead there is, as Magali Cornier Michael argues, "a triple layering of voices which includes Charles', the male narrator', and Fowles' voices" (225). As a result of this layering, Sarah is a character that readers cannot claim to know. Alice Ferrebe argues that Fowles's narrative "denies all cognitive and psychological access to Sarah, in part by its refusal of the possibility of the reader looking directly at her" (Ferrebe 216). What we know of Sarah derives from observation, hearsay amongst the novel's characters, or things she says directly to Charles. There is a lot of

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<sup>41</sup> Several scholars have written about Fowles' problematic characterization of Sarah, particularly as an object. See Forward, Stephanie. "Angels or Demons? Stephanie Forward Compares the Presentation of Women in John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman* and Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*." *The English Review*, Vol. 21, No. 3, 2011, pp. 2-4.; Lenz, Brooke. "A Crises of Authority: Fantasy and Feminism in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*." *John Fowles: Visionary and Voyeur*. Rodopi, 2008, pp. 101-131.; Michael, Migani Cornier. "'Who is Sarah?': A Critique of *The French Lieutenant's Woman's* Feminism." *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, Vol. 28, No. 4, 1987, pp. 225-236.; Zare, Bonnie. "Reclaiming Masculinist Texts for Feminist Readers: Sarah Woodruff's *The French Lieutenant's Woman*." *Modern Language Studies*, Vol. 27, No. 3-4, Winter 1997, pp. 175-195.

speculation and rumor regarding Sarah's relationship with the French Lieutenant, and even what she tells Charles may be untrue.

Faced with this lack of reliable insight, readers are rendered an onlooker, not unlike the other characters in *Lyme*. Naomi Rokotnitz explains that "since Charles's knowledge of Sarah is very limited, his conception of her is, to a large extent, of his own invention" (Rokotnitz 336). Readers are drawn into this same process of creation, and this aspect of the reading experience allows for metacognition. At the beginning of the novel, readers may consider the possibility that Sarah was raped or they may immediately believe that she is "mad" as Ernestina claims or a "whore" as others call her. As the novel proceeds, readers' innate responses to Sarah may change and develop, especially as the narrator presents each of the three endings. Students will be asked to reflect upon their views of Sarah throughout the novel and to think about at what point in their reading their assumptions were formed, as such a discussion aids the self-reflexive process.

Because the novel purposefully evades telling readers what is true about Sarah, readers are left to make their own judgments about Sarah. Thus, the novel provides an opening to discuss our knee-jerk assumptions and judgements of people. Students will be asked whether their judgements of Sarah are informed by what they have been told by the narrator or what they know to be true from the novel, or whether their reading of Sarah is influenced by forces outside of the text.

In posing these questions, students are asked to negotiate human qualities like dishonesty and mental health issues as they are portrayed in the novel with current research that dispels such accusations. Overall, guided questions will lead readers to critically think about the intersection of gender, mental illness, and cultural perceptions of victims. Readers of Fowles' work, when



guided with thoughtful questions and discussion, can thus be prompted to consider how they can respond to victims with empathy and openmindedness.

**CHAPTER 3:**  
**ERASING VICTIM STEREOTYPES: MALE RAPE VICTIMS IN TIMOTHY**  
**FINDLEY'S *THE WARS***

Largely fueled by second-wave feminism, the anti-rape movement of the 1970s and '80s focused on the patriarchal power struggle mirrored in rape crimes. Susan Schechter, a prominent voice for domestic violence advocacy at the time, wrote, "Rape violently reflects the sexism in a society where power is unequally distributed between women and men, black and white, poor and rich...In rape, the woman is not a sexual being but a vulnerable piece of public property; the man does not violate society's norms so much as take them to a logical conclusion" (35). The fight against rape was thus an extension of the fight against sexism. Staging public protests, distributing informational pamphlets, and pushing for legislation, women of the anti-rape movement ran a campaign to abolish rape-myths and shift blame from women to their rapists. This initial focus on rape and women paved the way for current work on the issue, and a lot of good came from these efforts: In 1978 the National Coalition Against Sexual Assault was formed;<sup>42</sup> The Campus Sexual Assault Victims' Bill of Rights was signed in 1992;<sup>43</sup> in that same year the Violence Against Women Act was introduced;<sup>44</sup> over the past 15 years the Department

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<sup>42</sup> The National Coalition Against Sexual Assault has since disbanded and other organizations like the Washington Coalition of Sexual Assault Programs were incorporated in its place.

<sup>43</sup> The Campus Sexual Assault Victims Bill of Rights was sponsored by Senator Joseph Biden. See <https://www.congress.gov/bill/102nd-congress/senate-bill/1289/text>

<sup>44</sup> The Violence Against Women Act has been reauthorized several times. H.R.1585 - Violence Against Women Reauthorization Act of 2019 has passed in the House but Senator Mitch McConnell has delayed bringing it to a vote in the Senate. As of this dissertation it has not been signed. The full bill can be read here: <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-bill/1585/text>

of Justice has passed various measures to combat sexual assault in the military;<sup>45</sup> and the White House Council on Women and Girls published a call to action in 2014 that prioritized sexual assault prevention and response efforts.<sup>46</sup> These legislative achievements have been accompanied by an increase in demonstrations like “Walk a Mile in Her Shoes” and movements like “#metoo” wherein the public discourse has largely focused on female victims.

As a result of these women-centered efforts, however, rape and sexual assault has been rendered a women’s issue in the eyes of the public, leaving behind male victims. The cultural perception that victims of sexual assault are only women creates a dichotomy which designates men only and always as perpetrators and leads to silence amongst male survivors. While chapter two focused on female victimization, this chapter, “Erasing Victim Stereotypes: Male Rape Victims in Timothy Findley’s *The Wars*,” shifts to a more inclusive look at victimhood and seeks to dispel common and damaging misconceptions about male sexual assault victims and men’s likelihood to be victims. I begin first with an analysis of the current data on sexual assault to illustrate that male victimization has been underestimated and publicly under discussed. I argue that uncovering this data is imperative to helping men in the course position themselves as potential victims in order to increase their propensity for empathy for sexual assault survivors.

Once students have a real world understanding of rape as not a women-only experience, Timothy Findley’s novel, *The Wars* (1977), can be used to open a dialog about male victimization, masculinity, power, and trauma that will further aid an empathetic response. In this postmodernist work, Findley tells the story of Robert Ross, a World War I soldier who is raped by his fellow brothers in arms. Findley’s detailed account of the event and his narrative

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<sup>45</sup> For an in-depth timeline of Congressional actions addressing military sexual assault see Congressional Research Services. “Military Sexual Assault: Chronology of Activity in the 113th-114th Congresses and Related Resources.” 2019.

<sup>46</sup> The Trump Administration has since disbanded the White House Council on Women and Girls but information can be found within the White House archives here: <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/administration/eop/cwg>

style lend to discussions about how trauma is experienced and processed and how notions of masculinity and power are integral to male victims' experiences. By purposely disrupting the popular notions of the female victim/male perpetrator dichotomy, opening up an unrestricted dialogue about the expectations of hegemonic masculinity that perpetuate damaging stereotypes, and informing students about important aspects of trauma theory, students of all genders may become more empathetic towards victims of sexual assault.

### **Data Depictions and Popular Misrepresentations of Male Sexual Assault Victims**

Shortly after Sam Thompson moved to Manchester, U.K. he went out to a bar with his girlfriend and friends. After losing his phone and becoming separated from his group, Sam was invited back to a hotel room by a group of men he had met. There the group joked and drank some more until the numbers dwindled to just Sam and two others. It was then that an unsuspecting Sam was raped repeatedly by the two strangers. Sam is one of ten survivors—and notably the only male—to recount his story of rape in the award-winning U.K. documentary *Raped: My Story*.<sup>47</sup> As the only male victim amongst women, Sam recounts that his experience was and has been shaped by the gender stereotypes that inform rape culture. First, Sam explains that on the night of his rape he never once felt a sense of danger or alarm. Unlike women who are taught to watch their drinks while at bars and clubs, never to walk alone, and to be wary of returning to a private residence with a group of men,<sup>48</sup> the need for awareness and alert is never instilled in men. Second, Sam recounts how his sense of self and his masculinity were damaged not only by being a victim of rape but by the lack of resources and understanding for male victims. As Sam points out, our cultural focus on female victims has real consequences on male

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<sup>47</sup> *Raped: My Story* can be viewed here: <http://www.lambentproductions.co.uk/content/raped-my-story>

<sup>48</sup> In her book, *Asking For It: The Alarming Rise of Rape Culture and What We Can Do About It*, Kate Harding humorously debunks myths of rape avoidance that women are taught. See Harding, Kate. *Asking For It: The Alarming Rise of Rape Culture and What We Can Do About It*. Da Capo Lifelong Books, 2015.

survivors: “We're only really taught about women being raped. This not only put me in danger in the first place, but also meant, in the first few months, that I had to relate my feelings to how women feel.”

Sam’s experience is not as uncommon as it may seem. An extensive study conducted by David Lisak in 1994 found that men were more likely to be victims of sexual assault than popularly believed and were more likely than women survivors to suffer from PTSD, depression, and suicidal thoughts (“The Psychological Impact”). Yet there is an overwhelming focus on female victims. This poor visibility can be attributed to several factors. First, our legal definition of rape has long excluded the possibility of male victimization and still discounts alternative forms of male rape. Since 1920, the Federal Bureau of Investigation defined rape as “the carnal knowledge of a female, forcibly and against her will” (FBI). It was not until 2012 that the FBI agreed to discontinue the use of the term “forcible rape” and introduced a more inclusive definition of rape: “The penetration, no matter how slight, of the vagina or anus with any body part or object, or oral penetration by a sex organ of another person, without the consent of the victim.”<sup>49</sup>

While changing this definition of rape is a positive step, this definition is problematic when it comes to men who are forced to penetrate. Simply, it does not allow for men to report they have been “raped” by a woman because in this definition, the act of rape is contingent upon the act of victim penetration. Instead victims who have been forced to penetrate must report

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<sup>49</sup> In April 2018, the Trump Administration changed the definitions of sexual assault and domestic violence. These changes return to definitions used in the 1960s and 1970s. To read commentary and interviews with women, gender, and sexual violence scholars, see Oppenheim, Maya. “Trump Administration ‘Rolling Back Women’s Rights by 50 Years’ by Changing Definitions of Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault.” *The Independent*, Jan. 29, 2019.

“sexual assault,” which many argue has a less severe connotation and negative consequences on trauma response.<sup>50</sup>

In their extensive study on male victimization, Lara Stemple and Ilhan Meyer argue that the current definition of rape reflects the male-perpetrator and female-victim paradigm and is informed by myths about male victimization. These myths include that men are not often victims of rape, that they are always wanting and willing to engage in sex, and that male rape is less physically and mentally harmful than female rape. Contradicting the idea that male victimization is rare and comparatively improbable, psychologist Christina Reitz-Krueger and her colleagues found that while women are more likely to be victims of sexual assault in general, rape rates amongst men and women are similar (318). Stemple and Meyer also dispel the idea that men welcome all sex with similar findings. This myth is exacerbated by our culture which champions men (and boys) for having heterosexual sex. Even in cases of statutory rape, young boys are celebrated, and female perpetrators are far less likely to be charged and convicted than male perpetrators whose victims are female (Cocca). The assumption is that men are always willing participants. This belief about men’s sexual desires renders men who do not want to have sex unmasculine and abnormal. Stemple and Meyer argue that this contributes to men’s unlikelihood to report, and it brings up an important aspect of rape culture that is often undiscussed: masculinity and expectations of male sexuality.

Other rape myths revolve around these ideas of hegemonic masculinity as well as biological assumptions. Those who reinforce male rape myths also point to the bodily response of an erection to argue that men are willing participants. However, men can have erections unwillingly and an erection can be a response to stress, fear, or simply physical touch, even if it

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<sup>50</sup> See Weare, Siobhan. “Forced-to-Penetrate Cases: Lived Experiences of Men.” *Baseline Research Findings*, Lancaster University, June 2017.

is unwanted.<sup>51</sup> Finally, the idea that male rape is less harmful is rooted in the fallacy that rape is tied to physical force and in turn that force is relative to the degree of traumatization. Stemple and Meyer point out that while feminists have campaigned to separate force from rape definitions, the idea that men experience less physical force than female victims is a still-prevalent and damaging myth. We must consider these myths and problematic definitions when we analyze rape statistics and discuss masculinity.

Second, rape statistics are often represented in ways that ignore or trivialize male victimization and that largely typecast men as perpetrators. In 2014, a review of federal sexual assault data by Stemple and Meyer revealed that the number of male rape victims has been greatly underestimated and underreported. The authors point out that data from prisons has been discounted from federal reports, skewing the overall statistics on rape. They also found that changing the definition of rape to account for forced-to-penetrate assault increased the number of instances amongst male victims. Upon reassessment, Stemple and Meyer found that men and women had similar rates of nonconsensual sex (defined as rape rather than assault) over a period of 12 months: 1.270 million women and 1.267 million men (19). In the military, the gender breakdown of victims is more equally proportional as well. The most recent reports released by the DoD state that out of 26,000 military sexual assaults, 53% of those were male victims. While it is true that men do have a lower statistical chance of being sexually assaulted than women in the general public, data shows that men are far from immune to sexual assault victimization.

Despite the many men who are victims, the media and our culture largely focus on women. Before the 1980s, much of the research on male victims of sexual assault was related to childhood sexual abuse and experiences of rape during incarceration. Since then, only a handful

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<sup>51</sup> See Weare, Siobhan “From Coercion to Physical Force: Aggressive Strategies Used by Women Against Men in ‘Forced-to-Penetrate’ Cases in the UK.” *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, Vol. 47, No. 8, Nov 2018, pp. 2191-2205.

of studies have focused specifically on male victims in the general public.<sup>52</sup> This erasure is also visible in how data is represented. The most recent National Crime Victimization Survey only provides visual data to represent trends amongst female victims while data about male victims is not given the same rhetorical attention.<sup>53</sup> Discussions of male sexual trauma (MST) at the political level, too, have been presented rather biasedly in favor of female victims as female survivors are often invited to speak to members of congress while men are not. The award-winning documentary, *The Invisible War*, and the associated campaign materials further illuminate the cultural silencing of male victims. In the nearly two-hour film about rape in the military, less than five minutes is dedicated to men even though in this group male victims make up a larger number of sexual assault reports. The two victims, Navy veteran Brian Lewis and Air Force veteran Michael Matthews, have publicly acknowledged their frustration and sense of abandonment after being part of the film (Breslaw). According to Matthews, the documentary campaign has only invited the women from the film to formal screenings and publicity talks, and the two men's pictures were left off the list of victims featured in the film. The media further contributes to the invisibility of male victims by emphasizing female victimhood in headlines and news stories.

Third, men are far less likely to report rape than women. The relative silence about male victimhood has dangerous repercussions. Both the U.S. Department of Justice and the DoD admit that their margin of error is rather large when it comes to reporting the number of male sexual traumas because of how many men do not come forward.<sup>54</sup> While the rates of unreported sexual assault incidents are high for both male and female victims, it is estimated that 90-98% of

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<sup>52</sup> Siobhan Weare's studies, previously noted above, make up much of this research and her articles provide a brief timeline and review of male-centered studies on adult sexual assault and rape outside of prison and the military.

<sup>53</sup> The 2017 National Crime Victimization Survey results can be read here:

<https://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/cv17.pdf>

<sup>54</sup> See Department of Defense. *Annual Report on Sexual Assault in the Military Fiscal Year 2018*. 2018.; and Morgan, Rachel E. and Grace Kena. "Criminal Victimization, 2016: Revised." U.S. Department of Justice, 2016.



men do not report or seek help for this crime (Lisak). This high rate of non-reporting has severe consequences for male survivors. Contrary to the idea that men's experiences of rape are less harmful and traumatizing, Paul Isley and David Gehrenbeck-Shim's study found that 46.3% of male sexual trauma victims had experienced "suicidal ideation," and 76% of these men attempted suicide at some point (162). These rates consider men who were victims at any point in their lifetime, and the authors note that men who experience sexual assault as adults have much higher suicide rates than men who experienced this kind of abuse as a child. Isley and Gehrenbeck-Shim state that this is because adult male victims do not report their experiences and are therefore not receiving the professional help they need to recover. Psychologists and trauma recovery specialists emphasize the importance of telling one's story of trauma in order to recover—an aspect of trauma theory that will be discussed in more detail later (Herman 181). Because male victims are largely silent and silenced, their prognosis is grim.

This is the point where conversation must begin. When men refuse to come forward as victims and when the media fail to give these victims accurate representation, men maintain a false sense of invulnerability. They buy into the idea that rape is a women's issue then feel like they are alone in their experience as victims. This module of the course begins by presenting this factual information as a way of establishing this situation as both real and frightening for both genders. Once this playing field is leveled, we can open up a dialog about felt expectations of masculinity and accepting male victimization.

### **Positioning Men as Potential Victims of Sexual Assault**

The delineating lines of compassion, empathy, and emotional contagion are not always clear, as some believe that these phenomena cannot be separated; yet a defining characteristic of empathy that sets it apart from simple compassion or the overwhelming experience of emotional

contagion is the process of mentally inserting oneself into the world of another.<sup>55</sup> As explained in the first chapter, this aspect of empathy allows one to understand other people's experiences, identify the emotional and mental responses to these experiences, and think critically and compassionately about them. This arguably means that identifying with another person is a prerequisite to the experience of empathy. For example, research has shown that people who see homeless individuals as not different than themselves are more likely to respond empathetically and compassionately, to support social programs, and to donate or volunteer themselves.<sup>56</sup>

Rita Charon makes a similar argument for teaching narrative skills to medical professionals. Charon argues that in order to treat patients properly and effectively, doctors must not only understand the position of the patient but acknowledge that they have been and will at one time be patients themselves. Bridging this gap between patient and doctor helps the physician self-reflexively consider how they feel when they are ill, how they describe their own symptoms, and how they want to be treated by doctors. Charon argues this is a vital aspect of patient empathy.

Similarly, in order for men to be more empathetic to victims of rape, they too must understand the position of the victim and recognize that, despite popular portrayals of rape, they are realistically potential victims. Data portraying this reality is a helpful way to start, but it is imperative to move men from a place of factual awareness to emotional cognizance that will

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<sup>55</sup> See Batson, C. Daniel. "These Things Called Empathy: Eight Related but Distinct Phenomena." *The Social Neuroscience of Empathy*. The MIT Press, 2009.; Brener, Milton E. *Evolution and Empathy: The Genetic Factor in the Rise of Humanism*. McFarland & Co., 2008.; Dohrenwend, Anne M. "Defining Empathy to Better Teach, Measure, and Understand Its Impact." *Academic Medicine*, No. 12, 2018, p. 1754.; and Deane-Drummond, Celia E. "Empathy and the Evolution of Compassion: From Deep History to Infused Virtue." *Zygon*, Vol. 52, No. 1, Mar. 2017, pp. 258–278.

<sup>56</sup> See Einolf, Christopher J. "Empathic Concern and Prosocial Behaviors: A Test of Experimental Results Using Survey Data." *Social Science Research*, Vol. 37, No. 4, 2008, pp. 1267-1279.; Feldman Hall, Oriel et al. "Empathic Concern Drives Costly Altruism." *NeuroImage*, Vol. 105, 2015, pp. 347-356.; and Verhaert, Griet A. and Dirk Van den Poel. "Empathy as Added Value in Predicting Donation Behavior." *Journal of Business Research*, Vol. 64, No. 12, 2011, pp. 1288-1295.

prime them for empathetic engagement. Psychologists Malgorzata Gambin and Carla Sharp have found a connection between anxiety and empathy. While anxiety is a multifaceted emotional experience, an overarching theme of anxiety is the fear or worry about something unpleasant happening, even if it is unlikely. Whereas people without anxiety do not dwell on the possibility of falling victim to a natural disaster, for example, people with anxiety have a higher likelihood of seeing themselves as potential victims of a tornado or earthquake. Anxiety can have life-affecting consequences and shouldn't be encouraged, but the link between this thought process and empathy is interesting. Gambin and Sharp found that people with anxiety have greater rates of both affective and cognitive empathy, arguably because of their propensity to view themselves in unknown and perhaps unlikely situations.

My goal is not to incite anxiety or worry, but to encourage acceptance of one's vulnerability for the purpose of encouraging empathy. By recognizing their vulnerability, I argue that men will be more able to "recognize, absorb, interpret, and be moved by the stories" of sexual assault victims (Charon). A challenge to this, however, is the demands our culturally-embedded notions of masculinity place on men as discussed above. Vulnerability is antithetical to the popular definition of masculinity which includes being emotionally and physically strong and even invincible. Gender has become more fluid and expansive, but strength and power are tenets of many men's identities, and rape is a direct disruption of these identity markers. The trauma men experience is in large part a result of this violation to this sense of masculine identity. In order to prompt a discussion about this relationship between masculinity, power, and trauma, the course looks to the narrative of male rape included in Timothy Findley's novel, *The Wars*.

## **Discussing Masculinity, Power, and Trauma in Timothy Findley's *The Wars***

Thus far, readers have been informed through fact and theory about the real world threats of sexual violence to all genders. Engaging next with a fictional narrative of male rape students will be challenged to move from this space of factual and theoretical awareness to empathetic engagement. The novel *The Wars* recounts the story of Robert Ross, a World War I soldier who time and again escapes death and saves his fellow troops. In return, he is gang raped by his brothers in arms. While the novel employs various narrative structures, Robert's rape is told in detail through a present-tense, third-person narrator, which is contrary to the limited-perspective narrator in Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. Findley's narrative technique provides both advantages and challenges. In direct opposition to the doubt and questioning implicit to reading Fowles' novel, students have no reason to doubt the reliability and truthfulness of the narrator in *The Wars*. Without this complicating layer, readers are prompted to align themselves with the main character and victim of rape, Robert Ross. Yet this proximity also poses the possibility of traumatizing readers or triggering victims enrolled in the course. Thus, teaching this novel must be approached with systematic and careful consideration. Students are asked to read the novel in three parts with three objectives in mind: 1) to trace the formation of Robert's masculine identity in the first four sections of the book; 2) to view Robert's rape in section five as a trauma related to a loss of this masculine identity; and 3) to interpret Robert's response to this trauma and the remainder of the novel through trauma theory.

### *Robert Ross's Masculine Identity*

Mirroring the cultural silence surrounding male rape, literary narratives recounting this experience are few. Findley, himself, had to justify including the rape in the novel to his publishers who implored him to remove the scene (Hastings 85). The publishers did not

explicitly give a reason for their request except that it was not necessary to the point of the novel. In Findley's mind, however, the rape was needed because it served to symbolize that "Robert Ross and his generation of young men were raped, in effect, by the people who made the war" (85). As Findley attests here, rape is often used as a metaphor in literature. However, this symbolism within the novel does not negate nor erase a reading of the event as very real and traumatizing. Indeed, Robert's rape goes beyond figurative implication; it provides insight into the sexual traumas of real men and the ways in which these traumas are connected to masculinity and power, especially in how Robert both establishes and loses his masculine identity.

Several literary scholars discuss gender in Findley's novel and argue that Robert's character at different times aligns himself with and then subverts or fails traditional notions of masculinity. Lorraine York argues that Findley's works are feminist in that they directly challenge patriarchy. Her analyses of *The Wars* focus largely on the "war" between genders and gender orientation; most notably, she argues that Robert is conscripted into heterosexuality through the military and combat. Her analysis of machismo, heterosexuality, and aggression in *The Wars* is valuable to the focus of this course and one we will return to often. Heather Sanderson, echoing York, says that the title refers to "the warring discourses constructing Robert, first as a nurturer, aligned with nature and the feminine in relation to other men, then as a destroyer, a soldier who kills, and finally in his futile attempts to rescue himself and other animals from the war, as both" (82). Christopher Gitting's article, "'What are soldiers for?' Re-Making Masculinities in G.A. Henty and Timothy Findley's *The Wars*," specifically looks at how the novel exposes a paradox of martial masculinity—that one must establish autonomy while also doing what they are told without question. These and other analyses illuminate the novel's

troubling of hegemonic masculinity, norms, and expectations. All of these works provide valuable and relevant insights for students.

To prompt a discussion about masculinity and encourage character analysis, students will begin by tracing Roberts’s character development, specifically the evolution of his masculine identity. Such a feat is easily undertaken as the novel centers on the researcher-narrator’s attempt to reconstruct the story and identity of Robert. Asking students to identify the different narrators and their respective purpose helps draw attention to the complimenting narratives of the research-narrator—who constructs the narrative through historical artifacts and interviews—and the omniscient narrator—who fills in the gaps of knowledge the research-narrator cannot access. Readers’ awareness of this dynamic is extremely important later on as well, when the discussion turns to Robert’s experience of trauma and the difficulties of capturing these kinds of experiences in words.

**In Class Activity and Discussion**

1. In small groups, ask students to think of a fictional character or a real person that they think of as masculine. What characteristics do they possess that make them masculine? As a class, write a definition of masculinity and list traits students identify as masculine. On the other side of the board, do the same for femininity/feminine traits. Draw students’ attention to terms that may have negative connotations and to directly opposing traits.
2. Assign student groups to conduct a close reading of certain pages, chapters, or scenes (ex. the scene in which Robert Ross and Teddy Bulge fight), then ask students to place Robert Ross on the spectrum of masculine and feminine created earlier (above).

**Figure 11.** Activity and discussion prompts for defining hegemonic masculinity

An essential prerequisite for readers conducting a character analysis of Robert is a discussion of gender definitions and expectations. Students will be asked to define masculinity and femininity and place Robert’s character somewhere on this spectrum at different moments in

the novel.<sup>57</sup> As Sanderson points out, Robert's personality as a nurturer, exemplified initially by his role as his sister's caretaker and his affection for her, is essentially feminine. His compassion extends to animals and he cannot stand to see harm befall them. Following Rowena's death, Robert's mother says that her pet rabbits must be killed, and he begs her to let him care for them instead. In a cruel attempt to push Robert to suppress his grief and to "prepare him for the violent world of men," Mrs. Ross tells Robert that *he* has to be the one to kill the rabbits (Gittings 186). But Robert, fraught with emotions, is unable to do so. His emotion-driven refusal to invoke violence against animals is juxtaposed with the mechanical, apathetic ease by which the "Neanderthal" Teddy Bulge completes the task (Findley 20). Students will be guided to identify hegemonically masculine attributes by comparing Robert and Teddy's characters and their actions. Teddy stands as one example of machismo tied to physical strength and aggression. He is described as "large," "wide," and "very strong," and he mindlessly kills the animals because "it was what he was told to do" (19-20). In comparison, Robert is sensitive, compassionate, and doesn't do as he is told. The ensuing physical fight with Teddy, in which Robert is severely injured, further emphasizes the stark contrast between the two men.

Robert's fisticuffs with Teddy is the first time readers see him take part in a competition of masculine strength, but in this instance, he is not trying to prove his masculinity. He only attacks Teddy because of his emotional need to save Rowena's rabbits. He isn't concerned with meeting societal demands or performing his gender. This is emphasized by his unwillingness to physically confront a man who has feelings for his girlfriend, Heather Lawson:

She told him that someone else was in love with her. Robert was not disturbed by this at all. What had someone else's being in love with her had to do with him? But Heather

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<sup>57</sup> See the text boxes within the chapter for in class activities and discussion prompts. A combined list of these activities and prompts for *The Wars* can also be found in Appendix C.

Lawson wanted him to be disturbed. ‘All right,’ Robert said, ‘who is it? Maybe then I’ll be disturbed.’ (He smiled.) ‘It’s Tom Bryant,’ Heather said, ‘and I think you ought to fight him.’ Robert didn’t understand. *Bryant?* Who was he? Did Heather Lawson love him? ‘No,’ she had said, ‘of course not.’ ‘Then why should I fight him?’ Robert had asked. ‘Because he *loves* me,’ she said. She spoke as if Robert were stupid. It all made perfect sense to Heather, but Robert thought it was idiotic and said so. (12-13)

Here Robert questions the logic and purpose of masculine tropes of jealousy, competition, viewing women as property, and defending one’s honor with physical fighting. Students will be asked to compare Robert’s response to Heather’s attempt to incite him to violence to his violent reaction to Bulge. Such a prompt challenges readers to observe the inconsistencies in emotion-driven violence that is at different times both acceptable and taboo in a culture that values hegemonic masculinity.

#### **In Class Discussion**

1. Why does Heather ask Robert to fight Tom Bryant? What are her expectations of Robert and masculinity?
2. Why does Robert fight Bulge? Is this violent reaction akin to the reaction Heather wanted from Robert? If yes, why or how? If no, why or how not?

**Figure 12.** Discussion prompts about Robert’s emotional response to loss, violence, and masculine performance

Additionally, Robert isn’t intrigued by the pomp and circumstance of war like the rest of society. As the researcher-narrator looks at pictures of a military parade from 1915, he notes that Robert is in attendance but not participating like the others: “[Robert] watches with a dubious expression; half admiring—half reluctant to admire. He’s old enough to go to war. He hasn’t gone. He doubts the validity in all this martialling of men ” (6). Once again, Findley illustrates



that Robert doesn't subscribe to traditional notions of masculinity and is skeptical of this social construct.

This initial introduction to Robert positions him as an outsider to the masculine realm and helps students to identify the ways in which Robert fails to perform hegemonic or martial masculinity in the beginning of the novel. With this in mind, students can easily trace Robert's development after he enters the military. Findley uses the historic conflict of war to cultivate and establish Robert's masculinity. This vehicle is clearly purposeful, as Findley states that "The war was a deadly serious and heaven sent chance to become a man" (60). Robert intentionally enlists for this purpose; specifically he wants to learn martial masculinity: "What he wanted was a model. Someone who could teach him, by example, how to kill. Robert had never aimed a gun at anything. It was a foreign state of mind. So what he wanted was someone else who had acquired this state of mind: who killed as an exercise of will" (24). Robert exhibits a sense of self-awareness that hegemonic masculinity is not innate for him—that physical dominance, aggressiveness, strict emotional control, and strong willpower are not natural born traits he possesses—and that he will have to overcome his more feminine inclinations to adopt this "state of mind."

Students will also be invited to observe how the military and combat are settings wherein men are forced to take on a masculine identity. R.W. Connell provides a history of masculinity that illuminates the role violence has historically played in forming ideas about manhood. She argues that a long history of war, colonization, and imperialism perpetuated the inclusion of violence in hegemonic notions of masculinity. Masculinity scholar Michel Kimmel makes a tangential argument that "Violence is often the single most evident marker of manhood" (189). Explicitly discussing Findley's novel, Justine Gieni further explains the implicit relationship

between masculinity and war, stating “The experience of war and systemic configurations of masculinity can be seen as mutually constructing one another: war thrives, in part, by exploiting fears of effeminacy that are entrenched in masculine gender identity; hegemonic masculinity defends its boundaries through the proving ground of military violence” (159).

#### **In Class Discussion**

1. Why does Robert join the military?
2. What does Findley say about the military and masculinity? How does the military reinforce hegemonic masculinity? What does Robert learn about being a man from his time as a soldier?

**Figure 13.** Discussion prompts on military masculinity

Students will be prompted to discuss the markers of hegemonic masculinity visible in the novel and in military settings in general. In a combat setting, masculinity is instilled through socialization and training; tested by dangerous and risky situations; and demonstrated through responses of bravery and heroism. Masculinity is instilled in men who witness others’ performances and who meet the demands of war by doing the same. Soldiers must then have opportunities to face danger in order to exhibit their masculinity. This relationship, the need to establish and display masculinity by facing physical risk and prevailing over threat, is seen in the character Levitt’s response of disappointment upon hearing that their new station doesn’t place them in immediate danger: “You weren’t in the war unless the enemy could shoot you....you weren’t a real soldier unless you were in jeopardy” (Findley 84). Robert succeeds in “becoming a man” through such acts of risk and resilience and quickly establishes himself as a leader during the war. He saves several men’s lives, faces his own death numerous times, lives through the deaths of his friends, and leads some of the more risky missions. Because of his actions, he

moves up in the ranks and becomes greatly respected by the men both above and below him in rank. Students can point to these various performances as support that Robert has satisfied the requirements of hegemonic masculinity and achieved his goal of “becoming a man.”

Sex is also central to masculinity and Robert’s developing sense of masculine identity. This is made clear by the novel’s, and Robert’s, focus on the penis and emphasis on participating in heterosexual acts. First, As York’s chapter on gender in *The Wars* points out, Robert’s participation in heterosexual acts is a necessary aspect of reinforcing patriarchy and heteronormative masculinity. In Robert’s early days in the military, the men ask him to come along to a brothel. The expectation that he is both sexually active and heterosexual is felt by Robert, who doesn’t want to go:

Robert had to be coerced into going against his better judgement. But the ‘coercion’ was simple. He was shamed into going. If you didn’t go you were peculiar. The barracks and the boarding school leave little room for the individual when it comes to sex. Either you ‘do’ or you ‘don’t’ and if you ‘don’t’ you face a kind of censure most men would rather avoid. (Findley 34)

Robert fails this test of masculinity, prematurely ejaculating before he and the prostitute, Ella, have even made it upstairs to the bedroom. He is ashamed by this, and this shame is compounded by Ella’s explanation that if they don’t have sex than she doesn’t get paid. Later on in the novel, however, readers witness Robert perform heterosexual acts successfully. Lady Juliet d’Orsey shares her diary with the researcher-narrator, and her final entry details Robert’s sexual relationship with Juliet’s sister, Barbara. The 11-year-old Juliet had walked in to Robert’s room to find him and Barbara having sex, but to her young, unknowing eyes, what she witnessed confused her. She explains:

This was a picture that didn't make sense. Two people *hurting* one another. That's what I thought. I knew in a cool, clear way that the back of my mind that this was 'making love'— but the shape of it confused me. The shape and the violence. Barbara was lying on the bed, so her head hung down and I thought the Robert must be trying to kill her. ... Robert's neck was full of blood and his veins stood out. He hated her. (178)

This scene is described similarly to a scene in which Robert sees Captain Taffler having sex in the brothel. Taffler has many female partners, so like Juliet, Robert is shocked and confused when he sees Taffler having violent sex with a man. It is unsurprising though to learn that Robert has integrated this violence into his own sexual relationships. Captain Taffler is Robert's masculine icon. Robert bases his own actions and mannerisms on those he observes in Taffler, including his strength, bravery, and ability to shoot.

#### **In Class Discussion**

As the novel continues, how does Robert's character change or evolve? What does he learn about masculinity from being in the military? How does he perform masculinity? Would you now place his character somewhere else on the masculine-feminine spectrum than you had earlier?

**Figure 14.** Discussion prompts on Robert's evolving masculinity

In fact, Robert's masculinity becomes tied to guns, and students are asked to look specifically at the symbolism of this object. Guns are clearly necessary for combat and offer men a way to protect and defend themselves and others and kill when necessary. The power (having the ability to take someone's life so easily) and violence associated with guns are central to toxic forms of masculinity. Findley furthers this connection between guns and masculinity through the use of metaphor. Robert becomes attached to his pistol and it often becomes interchangeable

with his penis, a prevalent symbol of masculinity. Hastings' dissertation and subsequent publications on *The Wars* makes the case that Robert is indoctrinated into phallic masculinity, wherein men's worth as a member of a patriarchal culture is tied to their phallic identity and performances. Hastings argues that Robert's rebellion against the military can be read as a criticism of this kind of toxic masculinity, but what we see in the first four parts of the novel is Robert's initiation and participation in phallic-centered patriarchy. Robert's gun provides him power and authority and renders him strong and brave. When the men are gassed without their masks, Robert orders them to urinate on a piece of clothing and put it over their faces to neutralize the toxic air. The men are reluctant to listen, but Robert, holding his penis at the same time, uses his gun to wield power and authority over the commanding officer, his superior Colonel Bates: "The men all looked at Bates...He was quite convinced that Robert has lost his reason—but you have to obey a man with a gun—mad or sane" (139). The use of guns and war, then, is an agreed upon means of gaining masculine power.

This is one of the many times that Robert saves his fellow soldiers and lives through a near death experience. While other men in the novel fail to face the obstacles with bravery and emotional control, Robert perseveres and proves himself to his superiors. Contributing to a cycle of masculine formation and performance, Robert finds a sense of security in having his gun with him which helps him to respond with courage and thus be rewarded. As he moves up in rank he acquires a better gun, symbolizing his increased degree of masculinity.

The gun as a metaphor for Robert's masculine identity, however, also serves to show its fragility. Not long before his rape, Robert loses his gun. As he lays seeking comfort, he clutches his penis but finds it to be an ineffective replacement for his Weber and a reminder of how his masculinity is threatened without it: "He made a first around his penis. He thought how small it

was. He drew his knees up....He slept with his fist in its place” (186). Then, when Robert is effectively emasculated because of his rape, he immediately looks for his gun: “he wanted his pistol....Gun. Gun. He wanted his gun” (193-194). The war, the reason for which he has a gun, allows Robert to establish a sense of masculine identity and without the gun, without his manhood, he is lost.

### *Robert's Experience and Response to the Trauma of Rape*

So far, students have traced the development of Robert's masculine identity as it is tied to power, authority, bravery, sex and sexuality, violence, emotional control, and physical perseverance. It is imperative that readers cognitively trace Robert's identity formation from a more effeminate character to one who fits accepted notions of masculinity. First, a weak male character who is then raped may reinforce notions that rape victims are those who fail to meet masculine ideals. Robert's success as an ideal male character instead disrupts assumptions that men are invulnerable. Second, tracing Robert's identity formation allows readers to see the connection between masculine identity, rape, and trauma. Identifying the tenets of masculinity will help students to understand Robert's emotional and physical experience of rape and his resulting lost sense of self in the next two sections of the novel.

Employing Margaret Price's approach to trigger warnings, students will be alerted to the detailed description of rape in the next section. They can choose to read the event alone, in pairs, or a small group before it is discussed as a class. Findley's narrative depicts Robert's rape from a present-tense, omniscient point of view using detailed and direct language. The passage evades figurative language and implements instead a very clear depiction of Robert's physical experience. Findley, however, doesn't go into Robert's mind to provide an account of his emotions during the assault. Instead readers are left to project their own possible feelings to the

situation, an intentional exercise in empathy. In the class discussion, students will be asked to link the physical details described in the passage to Robert’s emotional and mental response.

### **In Class Discussion**

1. Read “Trauma and the Freeze Response” by Dr. Leon Seltzer. What are the possible physical responses to trauma?
2. Remind students of the course’s accessibility statement. Allow students to read Section 5, Chapter 4 (Robert’s rape) individually or in small groups and answer the following questions before coming together as a class to discuss. What is Robert’s physical response to what is happening? Does Findley provide details of his mental and emotional responses (his thoughts and feelings)? What might Robert be thinking or feeling during this traumatic experience? What signs are there that this experience is traumatic for Robert?

**Figure 15.** Discussion prompts on trauma response and a guide to reading Robert’s rape

The passage begins as Robert enters his cell and notices too late that the light has been extinguished. The door is shut behind him and he is blind as not even a sliver of light shines from under the door. Immediately Robert knows “someone [is] in there with him....he [is] not alone” (191). Deprived of sight, Robert’s other senses are heightened. He can sense someone moving but doesn’t know who and no one answers when he asks “who’s there?” (191). The fear, confusion, and alert Robert feels is implied more by his physical experience than by the narrator’s words. The character feels a tug on his towel, the only thing covering him, and tugs back to learn there is more than one person in the room with him. He refrains from putting his hands out, “certain he would touch someone and the thought of this was unbearable” (191). When the towel is yanked away, the narrator equates Robert’s nakedness with vulnerability and defenselessness. Robert covers his genitals to protect them and wants to close his eyes, “[fearing] an attack with weapons” (191).

Robert's initial thought that he is going to be attacked with a weapon preempts his fear of being sexually assaulted. He doesn't cover his scrotum out of fear that he is going to be touched sexually, but out of fear it was "going to be hit" (191). Students can liken Robert's ignorance of potential victimization to the real-life victim, Sam Thomas, discussed earlier. Armed with a fallacious belief in sexual and physical invincibility, it doesn't even cross Robert's mind that the nature of the imminent attack is sexual.

Findley provides further physical cues that indicate Robert's fear, confusion, and alarm: "His throat was constricted and his mouth had gone completely dry. He could barely breathe....Robert's body poured with sweat" (191-192). This tightening of the throat and chest, overproduction of sweat, and lack of saliva are the body's fight and flight response to threat. This kind of physical response to acute stress is often tied to experiences people label as traumatic,<sup>58</sup> and the brain's response to this trauma is also observable in the narrative. Findley tells readers that "The dark was terrible and seemed to invade [Robert's] brain....His mind went stumbling over a beach of words and picked them up like stones and threw them around inside his head but none of them fell from his mouth" (192). This detailed description provides an opportunity to introduce students to aspects of trauma theory: specifically how people process trauma at the time of the event. Robert cannot scream nor speak not because of a physical barrier, but because his mind and body are having a physiological response to the situation. Before Robert has even been touched, the fear and threat have debilitated him.

When Robert is finally able to scream, it is not an immediate response to unwanted physical touch. The narrator describes how the sexual attack isn't overly forceful or aggressive at first. The assailants calmly brush Robert's side, "caress him just above his groin," finger his

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<sup>58</sup> Chapter 5 more explicitly describes this phenomena, but also see Scaer, R.C. *The Body Bears the Burden: Trauma, Dissociation, and Disease*. Routledge, 2014.



pubic hair, lightly grasp his penis, press their bodies against his, and “stroke him very slowly” (192). Though Robert is not inviting, wanting, or consenting to these acts, he still has not found the physical ability to fight back or say no. When he finally does, the men are too many for him to fight off. Robert feels hands and limbs push, pull, and turn him over until “all he could feel was the shape of the man who entered him and the terrible strength of the force with which it was done” (193). The pinnacle moment of this traumatic assault results in a fracturing of Robert’s mind from this physical experience. The narrator tells readers that “Robert lost his breath and fainted. A pale, mean light enveloped him. His brain went silent....After a while—(it might have been an hour or a minute)—he could feel the others retreating...he tried to lift his head to see who they were but his neck wouldn’t function” (193). Robert loses all sense of time and cannot will his body to move as he wants, not because he is physically hurt—he moves, stands up, and dresses not long after they leave—but because his body has a physiological, self-preserving response to threat.

At this point in the course discussion, it is important to provide students information regarding the causes of and response to traumatic stimuli. Theorists like Judith Herman and Juliet Mitchell highlight the similarities between rape and war trauma in that both result from what Gieni calls “a breach of bodily boundaries” (175). Physical wounds from combat open the body and disrupt the border between known/seen and unknown/unseen. The autonomy and control one has over their body is broken and lost by this shock. Robert’s inability to speak or move is indicative of this moment where trauma begins and this is a common feeling and experience shared by trauma survivors. Easily accessible and appropriate readings about the body’s physical response to trauma will be provided to students as a point of reference, such as that by Leon Seltzer referenced above.

Drawing students' attention to the body's physical reaction to trauma not only helps to illuminate the horrifying nature of rape, but also serves to debunk damaging myths surrounding rape and silence as consent. When lack of physical struggle or verbal dissent are viewed as counter to popular definitions of rape, we negate victims' experiences of trauma and create an inhospitable environment for reporting rape crimes. This is especially pertinent to male victims whose physical strength and invulnerability are tied to their masculine identity.

Returning to earlier discussion about heterosexual expectations and masculine identity, it is useful to draw students' attention to how this plays into Robert's trauma. Findley's account of rape provides an interesting case of male sexual trauma that is not necessarily tied to popular notions of homophobia, as well. While Robert's sexuality is debated by several critics, including Terry Goldie, Robert's alleged homosexuality is inconsequential to the resulting loss of masculinity he experiences due to his rape. According to Kimmel's definition, homophobia is not necessarily tied to sexual orientation, but to the loss of masculinity that is tied to this sexuality: "homophobia is the fear that other men will unmask us, emasculate us, reveal to us and the world that we do not measure up, that we are not real men" (147). If we consider the root of homophobia to be the fear of being overpowered by another, it is possible for someone who is homosexual to also be homophobic; homosexual men can fear rape in the same way heterosexual women fear it. Sexual orientation is irrelevant, then, and it doesn't matter if perpetrators are male or female as long as it results in an equal sense of powerlessness. However, the very act of being penetrated instead of being the penetrator is attached to biological roles that perpetuate a further loss of manhood. Robert is not only fondled and violently held down but penetrated by the other men. It is at this crucial point that Robert experiences insurmountable trauma. In this act of rape, being penetrated and thus feminized causes ultimate emasculation.

Male rape victims often express a deep sense of lost identity and community. Robert's response to his rape illustrates this dynamic clearly. Unable to defend himself, and effectively rendered powerless, Robert suffers a complete breakdown in which he can no longer fulfill his duties as a soldier when he had previously been the ideal soldier in the face of threat. Findley paints Robert as masculine by time and again illustrating that he experiences harrowing and violent events without mentally breaking down. Along with the expected dangers of war like bullets and bombs, Robert nearly drowns in quicksand, escapes a fire, and lives through a gas attack. In the face of death he perseveres, saves others, and keeps other men calm. This detail is important to a discussion about trauma and masculinity. Unlike other men in the novel, Robert is not traumatized by the near-death experiences, reinforcing Mejía's claim that traumatization is related to an individual's sense of power(lessness) and (lack of) control. Time and again, Robert proves to not be weak or sensitive but both physically and emotionally strong.

This characterization and his cool, calm response to brushes with death help to emphasize the impact of sexual trauma on men. Despite his strength in the face of other harrowing experiences, Robert cannot overcome the damage caused by his rapists. His mental breakdown, however, does not happen right away. A few days after his assault and in the midst of a major battle, Robert is given orders by Captain Leather to leave the horses and mules he is caring for in the line of fire. It is at this point that the effects of Robert's trauma erupt. The animals sit helplessly in the barn as it is attacked—defenseless as Robert was during his rape—and Robert decides to “break rank” and save them. As he is doing so, though, the barn is hit by bombs and destroyed. The animals die, but Robert is pulled from rubble. He is barely alive and unrecognizably burnt.

Unable to save the animals, Robert is not able to symbolically overcome his own rape and is now completely emasculated. Robert reacts by revolting against the very institution by which he acquired his masculine identity, and by doing so, is further emasculated by societal standards. He kills Captain Leather and kills the rest of the suffering mules and horses, effectively destroying his platoon's means of winning the battle. In a gesture of ultimate separation, Robert "[tears] the lapels from his uniform and [leaves] the animals" (203). To go AWOL, to leave one's position, is considered an act of cowardice and treason. With this act of rebellion, Robert has no chance of rejoining the rest of the men and regaining his masculinity by society's standards; thus, his condition of cultural emasculation is permanent.

#### **In Class Discussion**

1. How does Robert's rape affect his masculine identity? What is the symbolism of the Weber?
2. In the aftermath of Robert's rape, how does he respond? Why does he respond this way?

**Figure 16.** Discussions prompts about Robert's response to his rape

In addition to inhibiting him from fulfilling his masculine duties as a soldier, Robert's mental breakdown is further emasculating because losing mental and emotional control as a response to trauma goes against the demands of marshal and hegemonic masculinity. Sheena M. Eagan Chamberlin provides a history of trauma and men that illuminates how PTSD has come to take on a feminine stigma:

Since its first appearance on the battlefield, PTSD and its predecessors were used by Americans to symbolize the manifestation of societal concerns surrounding unfulfilled gender roles, tightly bound to concepts of heteronormativity. Trauma-

related nervous disorders became the mark of someone who had failed to live up to culturally constructed notions of the ideal male citizen soldier. (358)

Eagan Chamberlin follows the history of PTSD amongst soldiers and the changing attitudes towards mentally-wounded troops. In doing so, she concludes that the root cause of this stigma is that men are supposed to be powerful not only physically but mentally. She finds that, similar to what we observe in *The Wars*, combat was an opportunity to both develop and flaunt one's masculinity: "Soldiers who had been 'wounded in the mind' failed to live up to this highly heteronormative image; an image that venerated war as a truly manly activity that would enable these men to show their strength and bravery to their families and the world" (361). Those who failed at war then, failed to be men.

While Eagan Chamberlin does not mention trauma outside of war, the same basic beliefs hold true for other kinds of trauma. A mental breakdown for any reason, especially if it inhibits masculinity, is viewed as a shameful thing. Such an attitude toward traumatized men is most easily observed in the novel's characters' response to Captain Taffler after he tries to kill himself. Soon after Taffler loses both his arms in battle, he is brought to the d'Orsey house to recover. Julia discovers Taffler trying to open his wounds in an attempt to bleed himself to death. He is saved by the nurses but his lover, Juliet's sister Barbara, abandons him and begins an affair with Robert. Julia recounts, "After that, the affair between my sister and Robert Ross developed very quickly. I was shocked of course. Dismayed. Barbara never went again to Taffler" (173). In his physically wounded state, Taffler was still of interest to Barbara, but once he reveals his mental anguish through his attempted suicide, he is no longer seen as masculine. Justine Gieni makes a similar argument about Taffler. While she focuses on Taffler's physical wounds, she similarly argues that he has been feminized and thus outcast by his condition: "Taffler's open,

bleeding wounds can be interpreted as an image of castration; his mutilated body is feminized in its phallic loss as well as in its bleeding wounds, which link his wounded male body and the abject female menstruating body” (Gieni 169). Students will be asked to reflect on Robert’s reaction of silence and Taffler’s mental breakdown in terms of masculinity and gender performance.

### **Helping Men Heal From Sexual Trauma**

The following chapters delve deeper into the experiences of rape trauma victims and how survivors can heal, but to fully benefit from Findley’s novel and a discussion of male sexual trauma, students should be introduced to this future topic. A vital aspect of helping men heal from sexual trauma is sharing one’s trauma with others and reconciling the experience of trauma with a new definition of masculinity. According to Mejía’s theory, men must be able to reestablish a new sense of masculinity in order to heal. This begins first with redefining masculinity because current ideology about gender roles is the root of this trauma in the first place (29). As students will have seen with Robert, the experience of sexual trauma is inseparable from the resulting loss of masculinity as it is defined in our current state. Additionally, Robert’s response to this trauma further perpetuates the damage of this experience. A major aspect of this consequence is that Robert remains silent about his rape. None of the novel’s characters know of his rape as they are not privy to Robert’s thoughts or the words written by the omniscient narrator. In the fictional world of Findley’s novel, Robert’s rape is a secret he takes with him to his grave.

In working through trauma of all kinds, Herman stresses the importance of “truth-telling.” She explains that telling others about the traumatic experience is part of the healing process that is inherent to the traumatized patient overcoming the “shame and humiliation” of

their experience and regaining a sense of “dignity and virtue” (181). If a traumatized person does not speak out in order to share the burden of their experience, then they cannot heal.<sup>59</sup> Holding on to hegemonic notions of masculinity, however, makes telling the truth problematic for men because to talk about sexual trauma is to inform other men of one’s powerlessness; it is to admit that victims are not men by society’s standards. Kimmel, like Eagan Chamberlin, explains that part of forming masculinity comes from proving one’s manliness to other men: “Masculinity is a *homosocial* enactment. We test ourselves, perform heroic feats, take enormous risks, all because we want other men to grant us our manhood” (Kimmel 214). Therefore, when men tell others about their traumas, they are admitting their emasculation, and in doing so, risk further loss. While veterans speak more openly now than ever about PTSD, men rarely speak out about sexual trauma. Because of the shame and humiliation surrounding this specific kind of trauma, men are less likely to tell others about their victimization.

Because Robert does not report or share his trauma, his response to his rape results in permanent mental instability. In addition to his mental breakdown, Robert’s response results in physical burns to his body and he is tried “in absentia” for his crimes because “there was virtually no hope that he would ever walk or see or be capable of judgment again” (216). It may be that it is victims’ traumas that inhibit them from speaking and not the unwillingness to speak, but at least for Robert, there is a sense that he wants to share his grief with another man but cannot because of gender expectations. Shortly after his rape, he sees his friend Poole and wants to seek comfort in him: “Robert wished with all his heart that men could embrace. But he knew now they couldn’t. Mustn’t” (195). Dianne Brydon sees Robert’s silence as a symptom of the culture within the novel, but this fictional culture is based upon and reflective of the culture we live in today. Men are pressured to be silent about their vulnerabilities or risk being viewed as

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

masculine failures. If society and its expectations of men would allow it, Robert may have been able to seek healing through truth telling.

Such is the key to helping men heal from trauma: creating a new definition of masculinity that allows for weakness and eliminates the stringent demand for men to always be physically and emotionally powerful and strong. Mejía attests that gender expectations, which help to perpetuate trauma, must be combated in order to help men heal: “Because male clients have been socialized in ways that suppress their abilities necessary for coping with trauma, therapy must first help the client redefine masculinity so as to free up and strengthen the client’s coping mechanisms” (29). Knowing that there are others who know or share the same pain is important to the healing process. If men can accept that weakness is not always shameful but an acceptable response to certain situations, especially those that are traumatic, then they may be more willing to share their experiences with others and to listen to the stories of others. Students can take part in imagining what a definition of masculinity might look like.

#### **In Class Discussion**

What definition of masculinity would be more inclusive of all men and provide room for men to be vulnerable? How might rethinking masculinity help male victims of sexual trauma? What changes can we make in the real world to help men feel safe to report sexual assault and openly talk about their experiences?

**Figure 17.** Discussion prompt on inclusive masculinity

While Robert is a fictional man, his experience and response to trauma are authentic. Present theory and statistics prove that male victims are not speaking out. These victims are also, as in Findley’s work, dangerously affected by sexual trauma. What we learn from these works of fiction, however, is a lesson that we have not yet seen practiced in reality: that our attitudes



towards gender and our definitions and expectations of men must change in order to help men heal. By deconstructing hegemonic notions of masculinity and allowing for men to act outside of these constraints without judgment or shame, victims like Robert may have a fighting chance to recover their sense of self and agency.

Thus are the goals and focus of this chapter: to inform students about gender-related myths regarding rape, to teach them about relevant trauma theory, and to encourage them to be empathetic to victims of all genders and sexualities. These goals simultaneously satisfy the recommendations of the CDC. A discussion of masculinity and male rape directly disrupts rape myths, addresses gender-based violence, and counters traditional gender norms in order to frame sexual assault as an issue that affects people of all identities and groups. A trauma-informed approach guides how this topic is discussed in class and how students will be introduced directly to trauma theory as they practice literary analysis. Through guided discussion and interaction with the text, students will be led to a place of empathy as they take part in imagining a community that embraces both male and female victims.

**CHAPTER 4:**  
**THE IMPACT OF TRAUMA AND THE POWER OF COMMUNITY: LESSONS ON  
RESPONSIVE WITNESSING IN TONI MORRISON'S *THE BLUEST EYE***

When Dutch seventeen-year-old Noa Pothoven died by suicide in June of 2019, there was international outcry. Media sources had wrongly reported that Pothoven's death was a result of assisted suicide, and activists loudly condemned Netherlands' euthanasia laws for not protecting someone so young and vulnerable. It was true that Pothoven had petitioned for euthanasia services, but her request was denied. She ultimately died through self-starvation and dehydration. However, as *New York Times* writer Anna Bianca Roach points out, the international anger was misplaced not because Pothoven's death was self-inflicted and unassisted, but because she had spent years advocating for better mental healthcare with no response. Between the ages of eleven and fourteen, Pothoven had survived three separate sexual assaults, one of which was a rape by two adult men. She suffered from anxiety, depression, anorexia, and post-traumatic stress disorder as a result of her assaults and was an in-patient at various mental health facilities at least twenty-two separate times.

At sixteen years old Pothoven published an award winning book titled *Winnen of Leren* (*Winning or Learning*) in which she criticized the care she received. Many times Pothoven was sent to facilities ill-equipped to treat her. Some of these facilities were meant for patients with violent behavioral issues or addictions. Psychologist Peer van der Helm, who worked with Pothoven, wrote an article following her death that illuminated how her time at such institutions

exposed her to further trauma. Van der Helm observed that while housed with boys with violent records, Pothoven's PTSD worsened as the threat of possible harm loomed. In her book, Pothoven explains how in other facilities she was placed in solitary confinement like a prisoner to stop her from self-harm but that the isolation further compounded her mental issues. In various forms of expression from speeches to writing, Pothoven criticized the services she received for treating the symptoms of anxiety, depression, and anorexia with medicine and weight gain instead of addressing the cause: her PTSD as a result of her rape and assaults.<sup>60</sup>

As evidenced by her work as a mental health advocate, Pothoven was a self-aware young woman with knowledge about the mental health issues she was facing. However, the community failed to meet her needs with a trauma-informed approach and ultimately her suffering became too much to endure. In 2019 Pothoven once again began starving herself, and doctors recommended placing her in an induced coma in order to feed her through a tube until she was of a healthy weight again. Pothoven had been placed in an induced coma before, but this time her family declined medical intervention and allowed her to die.<sup>61</sup>

Pothoven's story of sexual assault, mental illness, and suicide is one of many. According to the Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network (RAINN) more than 70% of rape victims experience mental and emotional distress that meets various definitions of mental illness while 33% contemplate suicide and 13% attempt it. Pothoven's legacy should not be the attention she brought to euthanasia but rather her illumination of the community's failure to implement trauma informed care. Her story speaks to the importance of responding to rape survivors with trauma informed empathy and care in order to treat the condition of PTSD and not simply the symptoms.

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<sup>60</sup> Along with publishing her book, *Winnen of Leren*, Pothoven also wrote a blog post for her school newspaper. Her post from April 2, 2019 can be found here: <https://www.hsleiden.nl/binaries/content/assets/hsl/lectoraten/residentiele-jeugd/zorg/nieuws/blog-noa-020419.pdf>

<sup>61</sup> See O'Neill, Natalie. "'Love is Letting Go': Netherland Teen Raped as Child Chooses to End Her Life." *The New York Post*, 4 June 2019.

Judith Herman, whose work is foundational to trauma theory and trauma informed care, explains that there are three steps to the healing process for victims, all aimed at re-empowering survivors and restoring their lost sense of autonomy. The first objective is to establish safety. The experiences that render one traumatized are chaotic, dangerous, and anxiety-producing. Traumatized individuals suffer from persistent engagement of a fight-or-flight response and cannot return to a normal baseline. They often relive the experience which reheightens their feelings of vulnerability and insecurity. To break this cycle, victims must regain a sense of safety and reestablish a normal baseline before they can continue to process their trauma.

The second stage is remembrance and mourning. Here victims recollect the event that caused their trauma, and in doing so not only recall factual aspects but more importantly engage directly with the emotional elements of their experience. It is during this stage that witnessing begins. Victims must tell their story to themselves and others either aloud or in writing in order to work through it. In doing so, victims face their trauma head on and mourn what they have lost as a result of this experience. Finally, Herman explains that the third stage requires victims to break out of the isolation inherent to trauma and reconnect with others. She emphasizes that these “others” must be sympathetic witnesses themselves either through having a shared experience or through having empathy for the victim.

Herman’s three stages of trauma recovery heavily inform this chapter and the next module of the course in which students will read Toni Morrison’s novel *The Bluest Eye*. The objective of this module is to elucidate the importance of trauma informed support to victims’ recovery from sexual assault and rape. Morrison’s works have been widely taught in the literature classroom for their focus on history and racism, their innovative and subversive literary techniques, and their illumination of feminist issues that have been historically silenced. Trauma,

rape, and incest are common motifs in Morrison's novels. In *The Bluest Eye*, there are multiple accounts of sexual trauma: Cholly, a black man, is forced at gunpoint to have sex in front of two white men; Frieda, a young black girl, is groped by an older man, Mr. Henry; and Pecola, an eleven-year-old black girl, is raped and impregnated by her father, Cholly.

Through guided engagement with this text, students will learn more about how trauma is defined and experienced, how unaddressed trauma can cause residual and lasting damage, and how a community that fails to bear witness and respond with care can compound the harmful effects of trauma. Such lessons are easily gleaned from Morrison's novel. Cholly passes on his experience of trauma to others, raping his wife and his own daughter; and his victim, Pecola, descends into madness and creates an alternative version of herself and of the truth. The blue-eyed Pecola denies her victimization and believes her now beautiful eyes will make her a loved and cherished member of the community; yet the community itself is an integral part of Pecola's breakdown and her inability to recover. Morrison's depictions of Cholly and Pecola demonstrate the varied responses one can have to trauma and illuminate the lasting and harmful impact of not only unaddressed trauma but of an unempathetic community.

The fictional community within *The Bluest Eye* plays an important role within the novel, and students' analysis of it is integral to meeting the objectives of this module and the course as a whole. Within the first pages of Morrison's novel, readers are informed about the central event of the work: the rape of Pecola Breedlove by her father, Cholly. Many critics are careful to point out that while this event is central to the plot, the novel's main theme is not incest, but the experience of being black in a racist, white world. Readers are directed to focus on the "how" of the rape rather than the event itself, as it is not meant to be a narrative climax but rather symbolic of the horrific effects of racism that cannot be articulated through speech. It is worth noting here

that Morrison's use of rape and incest as metaphor is of concern to victim advocates. Emy Koopman argues that not only does "the comparison between incestuous rape and colonization fall flat," using sexual assault as a metaphor creates a hierarchy in which issues like race are deemed more traumatic and more unspeakable than rape or incest (308). Her concern is for victims of sexual assault and how portrayals of rape in books and film impact rape culture. While I want to honor sexual assault victims and acknowledge Koopman's argument, Morrison's larger commentary on race is beneficial to understanding the damaging impact of trauma on not just an individual but a community. In this dissertation chapter, I focus directly upon Pecola's experience of sexual trauma as opposed to analyzing it as a symptom of—and thus as secondary to—issues of race; however, it is vital that students recognize how the communal trauma of racism has fractured the novel's community and rendered its members incapable of an empathetic response to Pecola. I argue that Pecola's rape can be read authentically as a sexual trauma in a way that respects and honors victims while simultaneously recognizing the equally traumatizing effects of racism on the community and as a catalyst to the novel's acts of violence.

### **The Lasting Impact of Trauma**

The current guidance on trauma informed care by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) provides practitioners a thorough guide to diagnosing and treating trauma patients. Integrating years of research, the manual emphasizes that trauma survivors' experiences, reactions, and effects can be very diverse. First, an experience that is traumatic for one person may not be so for another. People experiencing the same event may have varying degrees of traumatization or not suffer from trauma at all. As discussed in depth in other parts of this dissertation, a person's experience of trauma has much to do with their felt sense of danger and their mind's ability to process the experience alongside

varying degrees of fear.<sup>62</sup> Second, immediate reactions in the aftermath of trauma are not uniform. For example, while one may be readily able to recount their experience, another may be silent or avoidant.<sup>63</sup> SAMHSA emphasizes that practitioners should accept all trauma responses as natural: “Although reactions range in severity, even the most acute responses are natural responses to manage trauma.... Coping styles vary from action oriented to reflective and from emotionally expressive to reticent” (SAMHSA 60). Third, the lasting impact of trauma is varied. Trauma survivors may have emotional responses such as emotional dysregulation or numbing; cognitive responses such as memory issues or flashbacks; physical responses such as heightened cortisol levels or sleep disturbances; behavioral responses such as increased alcohol use or withdrawal; and existential responses such as cynicism or increased reliance on faith (59-74).<sup>64</sup> Summarily, the guidance explains: “The impact of trauma can be subtle, insidious, or outright destructive. How an event affects an individual depends on many factors, including characteristics of the individual, the type and characteristics of the event(s), developmental processes, the meaning of the trauma, and sociocultural factors” (60).

SAMHSA explains that the multifarious and nonuniform experiences, responses, and effects of trauma make it sometimes difficult to identify and diagnose a trauma survivor with PTSD. While certain symptoms are more common than others, a person who experiences trauma may exhibit atypical symptoms and patterns:

Many trauma survivors experience symptoms that, although they do not meet the diagnostic criteria for [PTSD], nonetheless limit their ability to function normally....These symptoms can be transient, only arising in a specific context;

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<sup>62</sup> Chapter 5 provides an in-depth look at the body’s physical and neuropsychosocial responses to trauma.

<sup>63</sup> Chapter 5 details the effects of trauma on memory and the notion that even when memories of trauma are clear, trauma is unspeakable.

<sup>64</sup> SAMHSA’s manual provides a chart that explains the emotional, cognitive, behavioral, physical, and existential symptoms of PTSD. See pp. 59-74.

intermittent, appearing for several weeks or months and then receding; or a part of the individual's regular pattern of functioning.... Like PTSD, the symptoms can be misdiagnosed as depression, anxiety, or another mental illness. (75)

Thus, SAMHSA encourages practitioners to instead look at whether a person's response to trauma affects their ability to participate in necessary activities, regulate their emotions, maintain a healthy self-esteem, sustain social relationships, and enjoy daily life. The most severely affected survivors of PTSD may exhibit more acute symptoms like dissociation that render them social outcasts, or they may present less obvious symptoms like high-functioning alcohol dependency that still allow them to be a part of society.

Armed with an introduction to trauma informed care, students will read *The Bluest Eye* and analyze the various characters' experiences and responses to trauma. Pecola's rape, as mentioned before, is only one of the three sexual assaults that occur in the novel. Students will be asked to conduct a close reading of Cholly, Pecola, and Frieda's sexual assaults, assess whether these characters have experienced a trauma, and examine the community's impact on the characters.<sup>65</sup>

### *Cholly*

In the previous module, students were introduced to some of the tenants of trauma through Robert Ross's rape in Findley's novel, *The Wars*. However, the main objective was to identify how gender and sexuality influence perceptions of vulnerability and empathetic response. In *The Bluest Eye* students again encounter a male sexual trauma that renders the victim, Cholly Breedlove, a masculine failure in the eyes of society, but this time, the trauma experienced is complicated and results in the harm of others. Cholly, Pecola's father and rapist,

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<sup>65</sup> For in class activities and prompts, see the text boxes throughout this chapter. Or, for a full list of the classroom activities and discussion prompts ordered according to the novel's progression, see Appendix D.



is thirteen years old when he has his first sexual experience in the woods with a girl named Darlene. What begins as a consensual act, however, is interrupted by two white men, who force Cholly to continue having sex while they watch by threat of gun violence. This scene is pivotal to Cholly's character development and one to which critics often point as the catalyst for the sexual violence he perpetrates throughout the novel. While this point is discussed in detail further on, students first must recognize Cholly as a victim of rape and a trauma survivor, himself.

Upon seeing the two white men, Darlene screams, prompting Cholly, who "thought he had hurt her," to stop having sex (147). When Cholly realizes two men are watching, he immediately jumps up and dresses himself, but the men tell Cholly to "Get on wid it" (148). Cholly does not immediately follow this directive: "His body remained paralyzed. The flashlight man lifted his gun down from his shoulder, and Cholly heard the clop of metal" (148). It isn't until the men threaten to shoot Cholly that he responds. The threat of violence, though not spoken but rather implied by the man cocking his gun, stokes fear in Cholly. This fear is enough to make Cholly drop to his knees, take down his trousers, and pull up Darlene's dress. Darlene's inaction and her averted eyes make it easy for readers to identify her as a rape victim, but readers should see Cholly as one as well. Cholly does not act with passion or lust, and the violence with which he acts is "borne of total helplessness" (148). He no longer wants to have sex with Darlene, communicated by the fact that he has been rendered impotent and struggles to continue: "He began to simulate what had gone on before. He could do no more than make-believe" (148). Such a close reading of this passage illuminates clearly that Cholly is an equal victim in this trauma and does not perpetrate the rape by his own will.

Cholly is rendered a victim of rape when he is forced to engage in a sexual activity to which he no longer consents, yet critics avoid using this term for him. The current definition of rape does not include forced-to-penetrate language, and such a definition is also complicated by the fact that Cholly remains an actor throughout the ordeal. The men never give any directives to Darlene; in fact, they never directly address her. Instead, she is an object acted upon and Cholly the (albeit unwilling) actor. Cholly thus exists in a state of limbo—not fully a victim and not fully a perpetrator but simultaneously both. While Morrison’s narrative world permits little space for victims to speak and heal in the first place, there is absolutely no place for Cholly to process this trauma as an unidentified victim of rape and as man. As discussed in chapter three, this designation of rape victim is important to personal healing and recovery and to our cultural response to male victims. Like the course’s other male protagonist, Robert Ross, Cholly does not tell anyone about this trauma. But while Robert’s trauma manifests itself in an unhinged attempt to liberate helpless others (the horses he is commanded to kill), Cholly passes on his trauma. He becomes an alcoholic, fails to maintain a job or provide monetarily, and abuses his family. He also has non-consensual sex with his wife who often wakes up with Cholly already inside her. Cholly’s rape and impregnation of his own daughter are simply the central and most horrific traumas he perpetrates in the novel.

There is no research to suggest that trauma survivors become perpetrators of trauma, themselves. This should be made clear to students as they conduct a character analysis of Cholly who does victimize others as a result of his own trauma. Students will be guided to look past a simple assumption of social cause and effect to a more personalized analysis of the character. Cholly transfers his trauma onto others not due to a trend amongst survivors, but because his own sexual trauma occurs at a formative age and is never addressed. The night of Cholly’s rape,

he is only thirteen years old, and it is his first sexual experience of any kind. In fact, he has had very little interaction with girls at all. When his older cousin leads him to a group of girls from Cholly's school, Morrison tells us that "Cholly didn't know how to begin" talking to them (pp. 144). He follows his cousin's lead, and when he asks Darlene to go with the group down to the gully, he is filled with equal "fear" that Darlene will reject him or say yes (145). Then, when Darlene and Cholly begin to playfully wrestle, she takes the lead, reaches under his shirt and then holds his wrist in place when he reaches into her bloomers.

This interaction illustrates that Cholly is sexually immature and still naive and impressionable. He is just learning about sexual encounters for the first time when it is suddenly interrupted. His altercation with the white men is thus more traumatic for Cholly at this young age than it may have been if he were older and more sexually mature. He has no former sexual experience to compare against and thus believes that he has somehow failed to have sex correctly. Koopman explains the implications of Cholly's age and this trauma:

At the moment when Cholly was supposed to 'become a man,' the white men emasculate him once and for all. The result for Cholly is a complete confusion concerning his own desire, which he is no longer in charge of. Since this desire has been appropriated by the white men, Cholly's sexuality will forever be tainted with violence and disgust. (306)

This trauma shapes his future sexual, romantic, and familial relationships. He has learned to link love, hate, and sex with violence, and since this trauma is never addressed, this link remains in place.

### **In Class Activities and Discussion**

Pages 132-161 provide an in-depth look at Cholly Breedlove. What do we know about Cholly's past? Along with recounting his upbringing as an orphan, Morrison tells readers about a foundational experience in Cholly's past: his sexual assault by threat of force by two white men. What is Cholly's response as this trauma is unfolding? Does he rape Darlene? Is he a victim of rape, too? How does he respond to this trauma? What cognitive, behavior, emotional, social, and existential responses (See the SAMHSA chart) can you identify in the narrative?

**Figure 18:** Activity and discussion prompts for assessing Cholly as a victim of sexual trauma

One consequence of Cholly never working through this trauma is his displaced emotional reaction. Instead of focusing his anger and hurt on the actions of the white hunters, Cholly instead blames Darlene: "He cultivated his hatred of Darlene. Never did he once consider directing his hatred toward the hunters....he hated the one who had created the situation, the one who bore witness to his failure" (Morrison, pp. 151). Cholly, consumed with his own emotions, does not recognize that Darlene, too, has been a victim in this scenario and that they share common feelings of humiliation, fear, anger, and confusion. Rather than seeing her as a fellow victim with whom he can commiserate or for whom he should have sympathy, his traumatic experience is transformed into hate not just for Darlene, but all women. This misplaced emotional response persists into adulthood and affects his relationship with all women, including his daughter.

This trauma impacts not only his perceptions of gender and relationships with women but his views on race. In his article, "Racism, Subordination and Collective Trauma in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*," Jyoti Singh offers a reading of Charlie's trauma as explicitly tied to race. He explains, "Cholly's metaphorical rape and humiliation at the hands of the white

policemen when they force him to reenact lovemaking with Darlene, drawing nasty pleasure, make him feel sub-human” (207). Unable to fight back against the white men, whose power derives not just from the weapons they hold but from their race, Cholly seeks to focus his hatred towards black women against whom he can fight. Morrison tells readers that Cholly purposefully provokes Pauline to physically fight with him. Singh argues that this self-hatred and misplaced anger are integral to the cycle of traumatization visible in Morrison’s fictional black community.

Morrison prefaces Cholly’s rape of Pecola with this account of his trauma and details about his childhood. The narrator tells readers that Cholly was abandoned by his mother when he was four days old; lost his guardian and mother figure, Aunt Jimmy, when he was thirteen; was rejected by his father shortly after; and fell in love with Pauline after years of living alone and drinking himself into oblivion to escape the world and himself (160). These details about Cholly are included to explain why and how Cholly comes to victimize his own daughter. Critics, however, are divided about how to read Cholly’s horrific act of violence given Morrison’s narrative content and structure. First, there are various perspectives on how readers should respond to Cholly. The details of his life certainly paint him as a traumatized character, and his life experiences of abandonment, victimization, and loneliness are necessary to tell the story Morrison hopes to tell—that is, not just “how” Pecola’s rape unfolds but “how” racism permits trauma to be transferred from one generation to the next (6). Critics agree that Cholly’s background is vital information. In respect to the individual character, Laurie Vickroy explains in her article, “The Politics of Abuse: The Traumatized Child in Toni Morrison and Marguerite Duras,” that Cholly’s humiliation and his hatred towards women result in his repetition of his own trauma: “In a traumatic context repetition can be an attempt to attack one’s own fears, as in

Cholly's rape of Pecola, but it can also be a sign of being caught in stasis, of not being able to move on and resolve the initial trauma" (Vickroy 99). On a narrative level, Lynn Orilla Scott explains that the novel's accounts of trauma "expose a system of racial othering in which the father is as much a victim as the daughter" (Scott 87). Minsode C. Gwin also argues that Cholly's victimization of his daughter following his own sexual trauma is necessary to exposing the communal trauma caused and systematically enabled by slavery and racism.

However, as Eva Koopman points out Morrison's novel is problematic in that readers are intentionally led to feel sympathetic towards Cholly: "By stressing Cholly's prior humiliation as well as his confused but partly tender feelings for his daughter, *The Bluest Eye* allows readers to sympathize with him, threatening to present the rape as understandable" (Koopman 306).

Koopman is not the only critic to acknowledge that certain readings of Cholly controversially mirror excusal or forgiveness for his rape of Pecola. Critic J. Brooks Bouson provides a literature review of such critical works, stating that while some critic-readers rightfully describe Cholly's actions as inexcusable, horrific, and diabolical, others "partially [deny] what Cholly has done or [attempt] to exonerate Cholly" (42). Minrose Gwin is one such critic. In her chapter titled "'Hereisthehouse': Cultural Spaces of Incest in *The Bluest Eye*," Gwin argues that Cholly's misguided attempt to show love to his daughter paints a picture of rape that is not "purely bad" (321). Tessa Roynon, too, argues that Morrison "complicates the morality of the situation" (42). Some critics even go so far as to condemn Pecola, such as Terry Otten who says that Pecola's "ignorance" and "passivity" render her both pitiable and contemptible (21-24).

These latter critics illuminate the dangers of humanizing a character like Cholly who victimizes others and of reading Morrison's novel as entirely about race. Not only do such readings run the risk of absolving Cholly of responsibility for his crime, they also deemphasize

the horror and violation Pecola experiences. This reading is in part a consequence of the novel's structural organization. Morrison recounts the rape from Cholly's perspective, immediately following the story of his past. The narrator follows his thoughts throughout the interaction rather than focusing on Pecola's experience and suffering. This narrative strategy provides a valuable prompt for students to discuss the possible motivations for Morrison's narrative choices but also their implications. Namely, students will discuss how Morrison's focus on race has informed this choice to highlight Cholly's history and his reasons for committing the violence against his daughter; yet it also unintentionally reinforces the silencing of victims and their stories.

#### **In Class Discussion**

Morrison provides this extensive look at Cholly's past just before she recounts his rape of his daughter Pecola on pages 161-163. Why does Morrison do this? What effect does this have on reading of Cholly as a perpetrator?

**Figure 19:** Discussion prompt regarding Morrison's narrative strategy

While Morrison's techniques do purposefully guide readers to be gentle with Cholly, I argue that readers can choose not to excuse him nor hold Pecola accountable to any degree. However, because Morrison's depiction of Cholly is so controversial and complicated, it can be used in the classroom to incite a conversation about how we respond to perpetrators in real life (See Appendix C). While we are unlikely to have an in depth biography and psychological profile of real life perpetrators, there are many instances where our knowledge of, or our relationship with, a person accused of rape can influence our attitude towards both them and the victim. Studies regarding victim and perpetrator empathy have found that people tend to doubt the victim or excuse an accused rapist if they know the offender personally (Smith & Frieze).

Furthermore, people are more likely to question or even justify a perpetrator's actions if the two parties were under the influence of alcohol, had previously engaged in sexual acts, or were flirting before the rape occurred (Ben-David). What this research and readers' reactions to Cholly show is that the more personal our relationship with a person, the more that we know about them, the more difficult it is to hold them accountable or perhaps even believe they could hurt someone. We must, however, consciously push back against this inclination. Even when people are oppressed, traumatized, and victimized, themselves, they must still be held accountable for their actions; failing to hold sexual assault perpetrators responsible has grave consequences. Students will be challenged to separate their knowledge of Cholly's past and whatever sympathy they have for him from his hurtful actions within the novel, and thus to give necessary attention to Pecola as a victim of his violence.

### *Pecola*

*The Bluest Eye* maintains a cycle of trauma and turmoil through a community which perpetuates victimization. Pecola, perhaps the most vulnerable victim students encounter in their reading, is only eleven years old when Cholly rapes her. Her age and innocence and the fact that her perpetrator is her own father render her an entirely sympathetic victim, and yet Pecola's community does not respond to her with empathy but rather furthers her victimization by banishing her from everyday society. Following the conversation about how Cholly's trauma precipitates his victimization of others, a new discussion will then focus on Pecola's complete mental breakdown as a result of her rape and the community's response to her.



### In Class Discussion

Remind students of the course's accessibility statement. Allow students to read pages 161-163 (Pecola's rape) individually or in small groups and answer the following questions before coming together as a class to discuss: Why does Cholly rape Pecola?

**Figure 20:** Preparing students to discuss Pecola's rape

Morrison's narrative choice to privilege Cholly's experience as the perpetrator instead of highlighting Pecola's experience as the victim renders Pecola a silent object both in the rape and within the novel. However, rather than read this narrative strategy as a negligent portrayal of a rape victim, Roynon argues that even though "Pecola is unable to communicate what she has undergone," Morrison's account of the rape serves as an "explicit articulation...of the pain and terror to which she is subjected" (Roynon 41). Students can piece together the clues of Pecola's experience to see her rape as a traumatizing one. Pecola is standing in the kitchen doing dishes when Cholly sees her and feels a sense of disgust and anger by the misery exuded in her body language. But when she changes positions, so do his feelings from those of antipathy to affection and love. Cholly initiates the rape not through an overtly violent attack but through a strange yet intimate act of "nibbling" her leg where she had been scratching it with her toe. This physical interaction turns violent, however, when Cholly fails to distinguish between appropriate and inappropriate emotions and expressions. The scene illuminates Cholly's unbalanced state, as Morrison tells readers, "The sequence of his emotions was revulsion, guilt, pity, then love" (161). From his feelings of disgust and helplessness of not knowing how to help Pecola, there grows love and lust, and the rape serves as the embodiment of Cholly's convoluted ideas about love, hate, sex, and violence:

He wanted to break her neck—but tenderly.... The creamy toe of her bare foot scratching a velvet leg. It was such a small and simple gesture, but it filled him then with a

wondering softness. Not the usual lust to part legs with his own, but a tenderness, a protectiveness....He wanted to fuck her—tenderly. But the tenderness would not hold.

(161-163)

Because Cholly's actions are not overtly sexual or violent from the beginning, Pecola is unsure how to react as evidenced by "the rigidity of her shocked body" and "the silence of her stunned throat" (162). Even as Cholly rapes her though, she doesn't scream. The only sound she makes is "a hollow suck of air in the back of her throat" (163). Pecola's inability to voice her dissent is a bodily response to the trauma and does not in any way signal consent.<sup>66</sup> Yet, Cholly does not recognize this. After Cholly has finished, he notices "her wet, soapy hands on his wrists, the fingers clenching" but he "could not tell...whether her grip was from a hopeless but stubborn struggle to to be free, or from some other emotion" (163). While readers are not provided a narrative view of the rape from Pecola's perspective that would clarify this question, Morrison does tell us that Pecola faints and is unresponsive (163). Whether from the physical pain or emotional trauma, Pecola's fainting can be read as an indication that this attack has been overwhelming and the imprints on her father's wrists serve as a mark of her ineffective resistance. Students will be asked to examine the textual evidence regarding Pecola's response from a trauma informed perspective

#### **In Class Discussion**

What evidence is there in the narrative that this is a traumatic experience for Pecola? Why might Morrison have chosen to privilege Cholly's perspective in this scene rather than Pecola's? Does Pecola bear any of the blame for the rape she endures?

**Figure 21:** Discussion prompts for Pecola's rape as trauma

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<sup>66</sup> Chapter 5 informs readers of the body's physical response to trauma and explains how a fight-or-flight response may also render a person incapable of speech and movement.

Readers can infer from this textual evidence that the sexual encounter between Cholly and Pecola was not consensual and was indeed traumatizing. However, the rape itself is not the only suffering she endures nor is it the most damaging in and of itself. Pecola awakens in a state of confusion to the “face of her mother looming over her” (163). A mother figure should be one of comfort and love, but Pauline does not respond with care and concern for her daughter. Instead she physically assaults her (189). Pauline’s response to Pecola is troubling and compounds the trauma she has already survived. However, Vickroy explains that readers must recognize that like Cholly, Pauline has suffered humiliation and pain as a result of the racist climate captured in the novel. She has also been the target of Cholly’s assaults, both physical and sexual. Morrison recounts their physical fights and relates that Cholly would have sex with her while she slept. While one might think that such a trauma-filled past would render Pauline a compassionate and empathetic witness, it contrarily prohibits her from empathy. As Vickroy claims, Pauline “inflicts a traumatizing emotional and physical isolation upon her daughter...stem[ing] from the impossibility of any other kind of action” (Vickroy 97). Pauline’s own oppression and her status as a victim without recourse to justice, renders her unable to respond with care as she does not know how to do so. Her response is damaging to Pecola who, as a victim of trauma, needs empathy and compassion especially from her mother. Rather than acting as a bridge to the process of healing and recovery, Pauline exacerbates Pecola’s trauma by physically punishing her for her own victimization.

#### **In Class Discussion**

What is Pauline’s response to her daughter when she finds her on the floor following the rape? How does this affect Pecola’s response to trauma? Find textual evidence to support your argument.

**Figure 22:** Reflecting on Pauline’s response to Pecola

The Breedlove home is void of empathy and compassion for Pecola, and sadly so is the community that also perpetuates Pecola's trauma. Upon hearing about the young character's pregnancy, bystanders within the community make a spectacle out of her trauma rather than respond with care. Claudia and Frieda overhear the adults gossiping:

'Did you hear about that girl?'

'What? Pregnant?'

'Yas. But guess who?'...

'Who? I don't know all these little boys.'

'That's just it. Ain't no little boy. They say it's Cholly.'

'Cholly? Her Daddy?'

'Uh-huh.' ...

'Lord. Have mercy. That dirty nigger....None of them Breedloves seem right anyhow. That boy is off somewhere every minute, and the girl was always foolish.' (189)

Calling Pecola "foolish" and later attesting that "she carry some of the blame" because "she didn't fight him," the adult members of the community reinforce victim blaming tendencies (189). Pecola is held accountable for her own victimization, which she cannot deny because of her pregnancy. To the community, Pecola is "ruined" and they suggest she be removed from school and hidden out of sight, further adding isolation to the already central trauma of rape.

The community's rejection of Pecola and their failure to come to her aid are symptoms of a broken society, one that cyclically reiterates trauma instead of ending it. Trauma theorist Kai Erikson writes about traumatized communities and communities of traumatized people. In the former, a trauma damages the bonds of a community, while in the later trauma creates them. Trauma, then, can be both polarizing and binding. However, the two communities are not

exclusive. They can occur together when trauma simultaneously binds and destructs, when the very trauma that brings people together also damages the fabric of society. Erikson defines collective trauma as “a blow to the basic tissues of social life that damages the bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of communality” (187). When a trauma persists, it may simultaneously unite people through common experience while also fragmenting the aspects of community that bind them.

Such a phenomenon occurs in *The Bluest Eye*. The community has been both traumatized and united by their collective experience of racism, but because they have internalized social views of racial hierarchy, they inadvertently sustain and compound this trauma. Many critics, including Jane Kuenz, Reza Hassan Khan, and Shafiqur Rahman, write about the internalization of race in the novel. Kuenz argues that the fictional community in Morrison’s novel remains a traumatized community because it “has ‘absorbed in full’ dominant standards of value and beauty with little or no inspection of or reflection on the effects to itself or to its individual members” (Kuenz 107). While the community struggles with past external racism perpetrated by white people, they do not see how they continue to reinforce it in the present through their own actions and learned biases. Khan and Rahman too, recognize that the “contradiction of the internalization and the insurrection of racial abuse is one of the crucial characteristics of this community” (Khan & Rahman 25). The trauma of racism unites the community but at the same time pokes holes in and eventually tears its fabric. Despite each individual in the community having experienced this trauma, they do not practice compassion. Instead, the internalization of white racism manifests as hatred for one another and themselves.

Morrison’s community is antithetical to successful trauma recovery. SAMHSA’s guidelines for trauma informed care explain the importance of a supportive community for

helping victims heal. The organization defines a community as “relationships and social networks that provide support, friendship, love, and hope” beyond the provider-client relationship (xviii). When a community practices empathy and a trauma informed response to victims, they are an integral part of the healing process. Alternatively, SAMHSA informs practitioners, “ties to family and community can also have an adverse effect, especially if the family or community downplays the trauma or blames the victim” (133). An unsupportive community may cause, sustain, or compound trauma, as readers see in *The Bluest Eye*.

Scholars point out that Morrison’s novel elucidates patriarchy and racism as systems that aid in reiterative trauma. As Manuela Lopez Ramirez argues, “Not only the Breedloves, but also the community are responsible for Pecola’s ordeal” (80). The community within Morrison’s novel stands as an example of a patriarchal system in which “people accuse [women and young girls] of the sexual abuse they receive, while they fail to condemn the true victimizers” (Ramirez 80). To hold Cholly completely accountable and to acknowledge and respond with care to Pecola would require Pauline and the other characters to confront their own powerlessness and their own victimization.

Instead of facing this impotence and addressing the systems of racism and patriarchy that are the sources of their oppression, the Breedloves and the community render Pecola the scapegoat. Vickroy explains:

the role of scapegoat which is assigned to the abused child Pecola reveals the connection between her devastated life and those of the other individuals in her community. Not physically able to acknowledge their own lack of power, their seeming lack of sympathy with Pecola is really a displacement ‘onto the Other all that is feared in the self’.... To

avoid a sense of their own victimization, the community projects its sense of inferiority onto Pecola. (Vickroy 96)

The novel's characters cannot respond to Pecola's trauma because they are themselves victims of trauma and do not know how to face this. Judith Herman says that this communal response is not unusual:

Without a supportive social environment, the bystander usually succumbs to the temptation to look the other way.... In the absence of strong political movements for human rights, the active process of bearing witness inevitably gives way to the active process of forgetting. Repression, dissociation, and denial are phenomena of social as well as individual consciousness. (Herman 8)

For the traumatized community in *The Bluest Eye*, looking the other way absolves them of guilt and responsibility and spares them from the painful process of witnessing Pecola's trauma. It is a strategy of self-protection and preservation. But the cost of this denial is catastrophic to Pecola. Her mother's response and the community's rejection compound the trauma of her rape to the point it becomes unbearable and she suffers a mental breakdown.

### **In Class Discussion**

1. What is the community's response to Pecola following the news of her rape and impregnation by Cholly? How is the community's response to Pecola different from their response to Frieda? Does the community play a role in Pecola's breakdown? Why is the community unable to respond to Pecola with care and empathy? How does the community's experiences of trauma affect their response to traumatized individuals?
2. Soaphead church writes a letter to God after Pecola asks him for Blue Eyes. What is his role in the community? Is his desire to help Pecola selfless or motivated by self-interest?

**Figure 23:** Reflecting on the community's response to Pecola

Thus, Pecola's descent into madness is not entirely a response to her rape but also to the community's further victimization of her. Harkening back to Herman's first step of trauma recovery and SAMHSA guidelines, what Pecola needs is a safe space and a community to protect her from her perpetrator. As Michele Hunt explains in her article, "Women as Commodities in Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory* and Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*," "Pecola's madness...allows her to escape from the gossip; it allows her the ability to become invisible" (Hunt 147). In the absence of a safe community in the real world, Pecola creates one in her own mind. In this fantastical space, Pecola can evade the reality of her rape, and she finds comfort in her split image, a schizophrenic voice that tells her she is safe and beautiful. This chapter of Morrison's novel however, illustrates the everpresent conundrum of trauma, the need to both avoid it and confront it, as Pecola's safe space is persistently under threat of the traumatic memory breaking through. Pecola wants to stop thinking and talking about the rape but she cannot. Readers see Pecola's internal struggle play out in the dialog between her two selves. When Pecola asks why Mrs. Breedlove can't see her new friend, the voice answers that she probably misses Cholly because even if they fought she loved him. The voice points out that Pauline and Cholly would have sex a lot, and thus must have loved each other. Pecola responds, "She didn't like it....he made her" (199). This inquisition into the Breedlove's relationship opens up dialog about Pecola's rape, which she denies has happened altogether:

*I guess you're right. And Cholly could make anybody do anything....He made you, didn't he?*

Shut up!...He just tried, see? He didn't do anything. You hear me?...Who told you about that, anyway?

*You did.*



I did not.

*You did. You said he tried to do it to you when you were sleeping on the couch.*

See there! You don't even know what you're talking about. It was when I washing dishes....By myself. In the kitchen.

*Well, I'm glad you didn't let him.*

Yes.

*Did you?*

Did I what?

*Let him?*

...Leave me alone! You better leave me alone. (199-201)

Though the topic is discussed more in the next chapter, this conversation between Pecola and her split self illustrates the paradox of trauma's unspeakable nature and the victim's simultaneous inability to stay silent; it highlights how the impulse to bury trauma is confronted by the ceaseless persistence of it in one's mind.

Through her other voice, Pecola is able to "say" the things she has not been able or permitted to say aloud—that her mother didn't believe her and beat her instead, that she misses her brother Sammy, that she was raped twice, and that she is glad Cholly is gone. The problem is that these confessions exist within Pecola's mind and aren't really her conscious self saying them, but a voice she tries to bury. The words stay within the confines of her mind because the responses of her family and the community have led her to believe that "[t]here's no use talking about it" (201). But Herman and other trauma specialists know there is use and value in speaking trauma, but only when secondary witnesses are receptive.

### In Class Discussion

What do we know about Pecola before her rape? Does she change as a result of this trauma? How? What factors affected her response to trauma?

**Figure 24.** Discussion prompts on Pecola's response to trauma

#### *Frieda*

Morrison's community is not always so damaging in their response to victims, as is observed in the treatment of Frieda MacTeer. The 9-year-old character is one day sexually assaulted by the MacTeer family's elderly tenant, Mr. Henry. He tells Frieda she is beautiful then grabs her arm and touches her small, budding breasts. Frieda's first instinct is to tell her parents with whom she feels safe and secure, and their reaction reinforces her faith in them. After Frieda tells her mother that Mr. Henry touched her, the MacTeers do not question, doubt, blame, or punish Frieda for the incident. Instead, they evict Mr. Henry and the community helps run him out of town. The MacTeer's neighbor brings over a gun and Mr. MacTeer shoots at Mr. Henry as he runs away. Another neighbor suggests Frieda go to the doctor. In no way does the community perpetuate Frieda's already traumatic experience.

Students will be asked to compare the traumas of Pecola and Frieda and the community's different responses to the two victims. In stark contrast to Pecola's posttraumatic experience where she is further victimized, Frieda's father, mother, and neighbors come to her defense when she is assaulted by Mr. Henry. Where Pecola is doubted and punished, Frieda is believed and thought blameless. While upset by the event, Frieda speaks about it aloud and, to the knowledge of the readers, suffers no further turmoil. Pecola, on the other hand, is silenced and spirals into hysteria. As past critics have pointed out, Pecola's descent into madness is a coping mechanism,

a means of escaping her reality and establishing a space of safety. Students will be asked to contemplate how Pecola's fate may have been different had her mother and the community responded to her as they did to Frieda. Perhaps she would have recovered or found a way to cope with the help and support of the community.

### **In Class Discussion**

When Mr. Henry assaults Frieda, how does her family respond? How does the community respond?

**Figure 25.** Reflecting on the community's response to Frieda's assault

### **The Call to Witness**

Pecola's mental breakdown is not just a reaction to her rape; it is the culmination of consistent rejection and lack of a support system. She is rendered a social outcast when her mother fails to show her love after her father is sexually abusive. Unable to deny her victimization because of her pregnancy, the community further rejects Pecola as "ruined" instead of coming to her aid. She is relegated to the periphery of society and made invisible. Ramirez thus argues that "The center of this novel is [Pecola's] ontological 'unbeing'" (Ramirez 79). Such vernacular is reminiscent of Kelly Oliver's theories of trauma and lost subjectivity. Oliver's theory of witnessing involves two basic calls to action. The first belongs to the subject to speak, and the second to witnesses to listen. Oliver explains that in this latter aspect, "recognition" and "response" are integral to listening, or to bearing witness. To recognize a person is to acknowledge their subjectivity, and for trauma victims this recognition involves being seen and having listeners respond to their experiences of pain and horror.

Oliver argues that we have an “ethical obligation to be responsible to others” (Oliver 11). In “working through” trauma, victims bear witness to their unspeakable experiences, and Oliver says this offers not only a means of personal healing but an alternative to “the repetition of trauma and violence” that occurs on both personal and community levels (18). Namely what she asks is that we “see others with loving eyes that invite loving responses” (19). Simply, Oliver is calling for empathy that involves seeing, validating, and believing others.

Morrison’s fictional community as a whole fails to respond with care and to witness with empathy Pecola’s trauma, a failure that is brought to the forefront of the novel by its narrative structure. The young narrator, Claudia, begins and ends the book with a metaphor about marigolds that fail to grow. Having learned of Pecola’s pregnancy and overhearing an adult say it would be a miracle if the baby lived, Claudia and Frieda plant marigold seeds to try and “make a miracle” happen (191). They believe that if they plant and attentively nurture the seeds, the marigolds will bloom as a symbol that “everything is all right” (192). When the flowers fail to bloom, Claudia at first believes it is her fault the baby dies, but at the end of the novel, having gained clarity, Claudia sees that she is not responsible:

And now when I see her searching the garbage—for what? The thing we assassinated? I talk about how I did *not* plant the seeds too deeply, how it was the fault of the earth, the land, our town. I even think now that the land of the entire country was hostile to marigolds that year. This soil is bad for certain kinds of flowers. Certain seeds it will not nurture, certain fruit it will not bear, and when the land kills of its own volition, we acquiesce and say the victim had no right to live. We are wrong of course, but it doesn’t matter. (206)

The symbolism of the marigolds is clear. Expressly stating “the thing *we* killed,” Claudia recognizes the community’s culpability in Pecola’s breakdown. The land and the soil too hostile for the marigolds to grow is symbolic of the community that is inimical towards Pecola. Pecola is destroyed not only by the trauma of rape but by the black community’s transference of their own self-hatred. The community is too broken to bear witness to her trauma.

### **In Class Discussion**

1. Read pages 5-6 as a class. What do we learn from this preface about the narrative to come?
2. Much of the story is told from the perspective of children, namely 9-year-old Claudia. What is the dynamic set up between children and adults?
3. Morrison juxtaposes information about the Breedlove family with stories about other characters within the community like Miss Marie, Maureen Peal, Mr. Henry, China and Maginot Line, and Geraldine and Junior. Assign students in small groups one of these minor characters. What do readers learn from these secondary characters? How do they fit into the community? How do they impact the Breedlove family?
4. Read the final paragraph on page 206. How does this passage reflect (on) the rest of the narrative? What is the symbolism of the marigolds?

**Figure 26.** Discussion prompts on the symbolism of the marigolds and the need for a responsive community

However, Morrison’s novel does not end with this failure as Claudia, the narrator who tells Pecola’s story, acts as a witness. Though she is ill-equipped to respond to Pecola with trauma informed care and powerless within the traumatized community to change its response, Claudia’s testimony to Pecola’s trauma is a first step. Though she says that “it’s too late” to help Pecola, she tells Pecola’s story and that of her traumatized community in hopes of encouraging change in the future.

Moving from theory and literature to real-world application, Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela writes from the perspective of a coordinating member of South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation

Commission (TRC). She recounts how both victims and perpetrators have benefitted from engaged and empathetic witnessing, which she argues has led to understanding and forgiveness. Gobodo-Madikizela argues that members of a community are woven together for survival and that we are thus “endowed with an ethical morality of care” for one another (173). She recognizes that the violence recounted by victims seeking help from the TRC can be attributed to a lack of empathy within the community. Applying Oliver’s theory of reclaimed subjectivity, Gobodo-Madikizela claims that through witnessing, these victims have helped re-establish themselves as subjects in the eyes of listeners, including their perpetrators. Through testimony and secondary witnessing, empathy can be returned to a community where violence has “severely diminished” the capacity for empathy and understanding.

The works of Herman, Oliver, and Gobodo-Madikizela make clear that witnessing the traumas of others requires the listener to move beyond the role of spectator and into a position of empathetic listener. It is through this exercise of empathy that communities can heal and be built anew. Teaching empathy should therefore be a key goal of sexual assault prevention courses in order to promote a safe environment for victims and end future violence. The next chapter and module of the course speaks further to how such changes can be made.

**CHAPTER 5:**  
**WORKING THROUGH TRAUMA: MEMORY AND WITNESSING IN LINDSEY**  
**COLLEN'S *THE RAPE OF SITA***

Christine Blasey Ford became a household name in 2018 when she testified that Supreme Court nominee Brett Kavanaugh had attempted to rape her when they were both high school students in 1982. Ford's accusations were met with both support from those who believed her and criticism from those who did not—sometimes in the form of verbal abuse and threats to her life.<sup>67</sup> For victims of sexual assault, Ford's testimony brought to the surface their own traumatic memories, and the public smearing of Dr. Ford by dissenters brought up additional feelings of anguish, frustration, anger, and even fear.<sup>68</sup> The accusation that Ford was lying as part of a political ploy to stop a Trump-appointed nominee from being confirmed to the Supreme Court and related attacks on her character were damaging and hurtful not only to Ford, but to many survivors. In an attempt to draw attention to rape culture and fallacies, these women spoke out on various social medium forums using the hashtags #metoo, #ibelieveher, and #believesurvivors. When a countermovement erupted using the hashtag #himtoo, survivors had to fight head on the harmful and vastly-believed fallacy that most reports of rape and sexual assault are false. The #himtoo posts detailed parents', wives' and men's fears that sons, husbands, and themselves

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<sup>67</sup> A GoFundMe Account set up to aid Christine Blasey Ford's security and relocation efforts details the threats she has faced following the trial. <https://www.thecut.com/2018/11/christine-blasey-ford-threats-gofundme.html>

<sup>68</sup> See O'Neil, Luke. "'I Can't Cry Any More. I'm Too Angry': Women Respond to Ford's Testimony." *The Guardian*, 27 Sep 2018.

would be victims of wrongful accusations by women looking for attention or out of spite or vengeance.<sup>69</sup>

Research shows that more than 98% of rape accusations are true (Lisak), yet many in the general public were inclined to believe that Dr. Ford was just one of countless women who was lying. For those unfamiliar with trauma response theory, specifically to the trauma of sexual assault, naysayers' doubts seemed logical: Dr. Ford had waited more than thirty-five years before coming forward about the alleged assault. Why, they asked, would someone wait that long? Further, Dr. Ford could not recollect the exact date or location where the assault took place, but her memory of the event itself was extremely detailed. How did her relative lapses and certainty in memory make sense? A Tweet from President Donald Trump emphasized these seeming inconsistencies in a statement reading, "I have no doubt that, if the attack on Dr. Ford was as bad as she says, charges would have been immediately filed with local Law Enforcement Authorities by either her or her loving parents. I ask that she bring those filings forward so that we can learn date, time, and place!" (@realDonaldTrump). These seeming holes in her story were enough to convince people she had fabricated the whole story.

However, to those who are educated about trauma response or who have experienced trauma, Dr. Ford's timing and memory patterns are recognizably consistent with other trauma survivors. It is upon this point that this chapter rests and why it is arguably the foundational moment in both this dissertation and the proposed course. Thus far, students have been introduced to various rape myths and their historical and political roots and have been encouraged to view rape as a crime that does not discriminate by gender. They have also briefly engaged with principles of trauma theory and recovery. In this next module of the course,

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<sup>69</sup> A meme widely spread during the #himtoo countermovement stated: "Mothers of sons should be scared. It is terrifying that at any time, any girl can make up any story about any boy that can neither be proved or disproved, and ruin any boy's life."



students will become even more familiar with trauma theory and the complex aspects of working through trauma from the victim's perspective as they read and discuss Lindsey Collen's novel, *The Rape of Sita*. Collen's 1993 novel tells the story of Sita—an activist participating in political movements, including the Women's Movement, in Mauritius—and her recollection of a repressed memory: a rape she survived eight years prior. Five years following her traumatic rape, Sita's memory is triggered and she realizes something has been buried. She spends three years purposefully diving into her memory in an attempt to recover the lost time. The novel recounts Sita's rape in immense detail, why she did not report the rape right away, the aftermath of remembering this trauma, and how she ultimately finds healing and purpose.

In this chapter, I argue that the narrative style, plot, and imagery of Collen's novel can be used in the classroom to illustrate for students how a victim may experience rape and respond to this trauma while simultaneously reinforcing lessons from previous readings. Through a careful reading of this text, students will come to understand why victims may not remember details from their rape, may not report the crime, and may not speak about their rape for years or ever. Understanding these aspects of trauma theory can help students dismiss popular and damaging rape myths and respond with empathy to real accounts of rape. Students will then be led to examine how the novel's ending speaks to the power of empathetic witnessing and its potential for political change.

### **Memory and Trauma in *The Rape of Sita***

*The Rape of Sita* is told through a third-person narrative perspective in the form of an oral storytelling, commissioned by Sita herself but told by another. Iqbal, the narrator and close friend of Sita, is both a character in the story he is telling and omniscient in many ways as he recounts the events in details only known to Sita. Critic Eileen Williams-Wanquet argues that

this oral storytelling style is not simply a stylistic choice, but a rhetorical one as Collen's novel is directly looking to invoke social change (204). Oral storytelling requires audience participation which is evidenced by Iqbal's back and forth with his listeners and his various meta-fictional addresses to readers. As Williams-Wanquet points out, this format is meant for telling stories that have "a social and cultural function...of transmitting values or of challenging accepted values" (204). Making a similar argument about the rhetorical power of Collen's style, Felicity Hand writes, "It is precisely this 'vivid immediacy' [created by the first-person narrative style] that encourages the reader to become an active participant in Collen's uncovering of injustices and outmoded conventionality" (41). What makes Collen's novel so useful to this dissertation project is that it not only rewrites the issues of rape and colonialism in an effort to educate readers, but effectively elicits empathy through its use of style.

The narrative dynamic of *The Rape of Sita* provides an intriguing and captivating reading experience that is integral to the course goals but that may simultaneously be challenging for students. Professor Beverly Mack, who advocates for using Collen's novel in both literature and women's studies courses, addresses the novel's difficult structure by reading the first sixteen pages with students. These first sixteen pages establish Iqbal's narrative voice, introduce readers to an oral storytelling style, and illuminate the "technique of game playing" used by Iqbal that may lead to reader confusion (Mack 77). Mack argues that "Once students have been ushered through this, they feel sufficiently informed to carry on, knowing they can expect only the unexpected" (77). I borrow this same approach before purposefully leaving students to read the next 126 pages without guidance.

### In Class Discussion

Read pages 1-16 together as a class. Who is the narrator? What is the narrative structure of the novel? What can we expect from this novel in terms of structure and narration?

**Figure 27.** Introducing students to the narrative style of *The Rape of Sita*

Following the sixteen-page introduction to readers, Iqbal shifts his focus to Sita. His narrative captures Sita's confusion, frustration, and questioning over a three-year time span during which she begins to realize that there is a chunk of time missing from her memory. First, Sita snaps at a person who asks about her time in Reunion visiting friends, and she is subsequently confused by her angry response to an innocent question. She is later inexplicably frustrated and intrigued by the words "bury" and "dive" (31-34). Then she cries in panic when she is asked to travel to Paris again but cannot understand why she feels such anxiety about this request. Sita comes to realize that she can't remember the night she spent in Reunion five years earlier and feels that something horrible must have happened there, but neither she nor readers know what. The narrative thus artfully elicits these same emotions in the reader as Iqbal does not inform his listeners that Sita is slowly recollecting that she was raped. Once students have organically experienced this journey through Sita's memory without interference, a class discussion of trauma and memory will help them reread this section with more clarity and empathy.

### In Class Activity and Discussion

1. What are the emotions Sita experiences in the scenes Iqbal recounts? What is she experiencing? What do/did you experience while reading these scenes? Why did Collen choose to keep readers in the dark about Sita's rape until more than half way through the novel?
2. Provide students the handout about PTSD signs and symptoms. In small groups, have students identify the signs and symptoms of PTSD in the first 163 pages of the novel.

**Figure 28.** Activity and Discussion prompts for interpreting signs of PTSD in *The Rape of Sita*

Collen wrote *The Rape of Sita* at the beginning of what psychologists have termed the “memory wars” of the 1990s. During this time, memory was a primary focus of research and debate, particularly when it came to processing traumatic memories like childhood sexual assault. Prior to this period, Sigmund Freud’s theory of repressed memories had been largely accepted. Freud and other psychologists at the time believed that hysteria was the manifestation of profoundly distressing events that had been eradicated from memory.<sup>70</sup> The talking cure and hypnosis were used to coax out these repressed memories so patients could work through them. However, practitioners in the later 20th century began to question the validity of memories recalled through hypnosis or other therapist-lead memory retrieval approaches. They feared that people were too impressionable and that the memories they were recalling were not real, but imagined. At the same time in a related development, trauma theory also erupted as a distinct field of study within psychology. As a result of these two movements, a plethora of studies were conducted that sought to answer the question of whether memory repression was real; how

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<sup>70</sup> For concise but detailed look at Freud’s theories on repressed and false memory, see Mollon, Phil. *Freud and False Memory Syndrome*. Icon Books, 2000.

knowledge of this theory influenced practitioners and patients discovering past memories of childhood sexual assault; and how traumatic events were processed and filed by the brain.<sup>71</sup>

Researchers found that memories may be unconsciously left unprocessed and that traumatic events were not experienced and filed away in the brain in the same way as other events. First, psychologists and neuroscientists explain that during traumatic events, a person's body experiences a fight or flight response as a result of the sympathetic nervous system releasing hormones like adrenaline and cortisol. The parasympathetic nervous system responds to this by stopping the release of these hormones to help rebalance the body. Working cyclically, the sympathetic nervous system increases heart rate, reroutes blood to vital locations, and heightens alert; and the parasympathetic nervous system slows the heart rate, reestablishes normal blood flow pattern, and returns the senses to normal.<sup>72</sup> However, trauma disrupts this cyclical relationship which then affects the brain. Judith Herman explains, "traumatic events produce profound and lasting changes in physiological arousal, emotion, cognition, and memory. Moreover, traumatic events may sever these normally integrated functions from one another" (34).

The fragmentation of physical, emotional, and mental processes begins with the body's physiological response to stress. Emotions and memories are processed in the hippocampus part of the brain which uses a neurotransmitter called glutamate to orchestrate neural signals, or synapsis. When a person encounters stress and has a fight or flight response, more of these glutamate synapses are fired off than when they are not stressed. Scientists have found that mild

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<sup>71</sup> See Barber, Betsy A. *Review of the Literature Regarding the Repression of Memories of Childhood Sexual Abuse*. Aug. 1996.; Golding, Jonathan M., et al. "The Believability of Repressed Memories." *Law and Human Behavior*, Vol. 19, No. 6, Dec. 1995, pp. 569–592.; Goodyear-Smith, F. A., et al. "Memory Recovery and Repression: What Is The Evidence?" *Health Care Analysis*, No. 2, 1997, pp. 99-111.; and Reagan, Robert Timothy. "Scientific Consensus on Memory Repression and Recovery." *Rutgers Law Review*, No. 2, 1998, pp. 275-322.

<sup>72</sup> See Scaer, Robert. "Trauma, Instinct, and the Brain: The Fight Flight Freeze Response." *The Body Bears the Burden: Trauma, Dissociation, and Disease*, Routledge, 2014, pp. 7-18.

stress can actually be a good thing for memory as it increases glutamate.<sup>73</sup> However, when stress goes beyond a certain threshold, the parasympathetic nervous system begins to release an overabundance of glucocorticoids to mediate the stress response in order to help the brain and body return to a neutral state. These glucocorticoids inhibit glutamate synapses and actually lead to a short circuiting of memory.

Scientists have now confirmed that the brain works differently when faced with trauma and thus argue that traumatic memories must be addressed differently than others.<sup>74</sup> Traumatic events and memories may be processed in pieces or incompletely; however, psychologists have noted that there is still no proof that memories can be repressed or hidden in the way Freud suggests, especially since there is no ethical or reliable way to conduct a study of repressed memories wherein the reliability of these memories can be proven or confirmed. Hence, a growing number of psychiatrists suggest the term “delayed memories” may be a more accurate term to describe memories that are unconsciously left unprocessed until a later time.<sup>75</sup>

Collen’s novel illustrates that she was aware of these movements in the field of psychology and that they informed her writing. Just after Sita is raped, Iqbal asks readers,

Did the rape from the time it was happening already start to bury itself from Sita? Do terrible experiences always run this risk? That there is a mistake in the recording process itself? Not just the memory afterwards? Does the rape get stored into limbo files, secret limbo files that are stored detached from the conscious mind from the time of childhood, get stored there from the very moment the rape is taking place? (185)

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<sup>73</sup> See Popoli, Maurizio et al. “The Stressed Synapse: The Impact of Stress and Glucocorticoids on Glutamate Transmission.” *Neuroscience* Vol. 13, No. 1, 30 Nov. 2011 pp. 22-37.

<sup>74</sup> See Ehlers, Anke. “Understanding and Treating Unwanted Trauma Memories in Posttraumatic Stress Disorder.” *Zeitschrift für Psychologie*, Vol. 218, No. 2, 2010, pp. 141-145..

<sup>75</sup> See Flathman, Marcus. “Trauma and Delayed Memory: A Review of the ‘Repressed Memories’ Literature.” *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse*, Vol. 8, No. 2, Nov. 1999, pp. 1-23.

Here Collen directly addresses questions surrounding the neuropsychological aspects of trauma and memory processes, and these notions inform the novel's depiction of trauma. As a result, the novel provides a valuable teaching tool for a course on sexual assault prevention and response. As students read Sita's journey of recognition, they will learn more about PTSD and engage critically and empathetically with the characters and events of the novel.

Iqbal begins his storytelling as an observer, only inferring from outside clues like Sita's facial expressions, words, and actions that she is enduring an emotional struggle. Students benefit from learning to read these clues. After Sita is asked about her visit with Rowan and Noella Targuin five years prior, Iqbal recalls her strange response:

She was cross. Yes, she was cross. She was cross for nothing. I saw it in her face....She snapped a reply. *'How should I know? I was only there a couple hours. Time for a meal in a restaurant.'* Then she stared into the middle distance ahead of her for a long time. As though startled by what she had said, herself. Or as though she thought she had had some kind of mental fault, a short-circuit or something....As though the whole thing were made up in her own head, like *deja vu*...almost as though nothing had happened, or worse still, as though she wasn't there, she sort of went absent. It was as though she switched herself off, as though her mind took off into space, leaving her body like a sloughed skin (17)

Sita's outward response is easily identifiable as a symptom of PTSD. Herman explains that trauma sufferers "[react] irritably to small provocations" (35), and the questions posed to Sita are neither intrusive or out of the ordinary. They alone do not warrant Sita's emotional response.

Beyond this, however, readers must look carefully at Sita's unspoken actions. In this passage, Iqbal purports to be no more informed than readers as to why Sita says what she does or what she is thinking, but his observations are more true than he lets on. Iqbal's repetition of "as

though” indicates metaphor, yet really he is accurately describing Sita’s inner thoughts which are consistent with PTSD. The emphasis on a mental short-circuiting and an out of body experience aligns with trauma survivors’ reports. Many survivors explain that there are times they feel like they dreamed or imagined the traumatic experience and that it doesn’t feel as though it really happened. In her book, *Trauma and Recovery*, Herman argues that an older definition of trauma as that which is beyond the normal range of human experience inaccurately implies that common occurrences like robbery, abuse, sexual assault, and war cannot be traumatic. Instead, she explains, “traumatic events are extraordinary...because they overwhelm the ordinary human adaptations to life” (33). This leads to dissociation or fragmentation. Sita’s dissociation from both herself and her surroundings is accurately captured by Iqbal through the veil of metaphors, and they serve as hints to readers that Sita is reacting to a traumatic memory. Students will be asked to analyze such metaphors and what they communicate about Sita’s condition (See Appendix D).

Not long after this first event, Iqbal once again observes Sita act unusually and in this instance Collen delves deeper into the connection between memory processing and psychological triggers. When Sita is asked to return to Paris for more advocacy work, she doesn’t react with excitement or pleasure as she has in the past to travel assignments. Instead she responds inexplicably emotionally: “She hesitated for a minute....Then quite suddenly, she burst into tears. ‘No, no, no’ and then ‘No, no, no.’ Great big tears of dread. And horror on her face....There was something that got set off. Like a detonator. But like the detonator of a time bomb” (18-19). Using the imagery of a bomb detonating, Collen alludes to common trauma terminology: trigger and triggering. A trigger is a word, an image, a sound, or other stimuli that elicits a memory or flashback which “[transports] the person back to the event of her/his original



trauma” (U. of Alberta). The term trigger is now more mainstream thanks to the implementation of trigger warnings in popular culture to preemptively indicate that people may be upset by or uncomfortable with content they’ll encounter in a book, film, website, photo, or social media post. However, for trauma survivors a trigger is far more intense than simply being upset or uncomfortable. Once again, Herman’s insight is helpful:

Long after the danger is past, traumatized people relive the event as though it were continuously reoccurring in the present....The traumatic moment becomes encoded in an abnormal form of memory, which breaks spontaneously into consciousness, both as flashbacks during waking states and as traumatic nightmares during sleep. Small, seemingly insignificant reminders can also evoke these memories, which often return with all the vividness and emotional force of the original event. (37)

While readers aren’t told for certain what Sita is seeing or experiencing as she reacts to the travel request, Iqbal’s observations indicate that Sita has been mentally transported back to the event of her rape. She repeats the word “no” not as an answer to the question she is asked but as a response to something else (unknown to Iqbal and readers) as she stares out in horror and dread. Her crying and facial expressions indicate that whatever she is experiencing is emotionally intense, unpleasant, and shocking. Readers can infer that she is seeing images of her rape or reliving it through a flashback.

Although intense, Sita’s flashback is brief, and she is once again confused by her reaction: “A few seconds later, Sita was mystified by what she had done. Bursting into tears like that. ‘Good grief,’ she whispered. She looked perplexed. ‘Well I never,’ she said. And it blew over. Like a sea-squall. There one minute and gone the next” (18). Sita’s sudden emotional

shifts can be identified as another common PTSD symptom: emotional dysregulation.<sup>76</sup> This inability to appropriately respond to stimulus and the failure to predict, control, and identify one's emotional response is another indication of fragmentation or dissociation that occurs as a result of trauma. This is one of the many times Sita exhibits this symptom.

Iqbal observes Sita once again react strangely when news comes in that the children of Reunion have revolted against the French colonizers. While all the activists are happy to hear this, Sita is elated and “vindicated” in a way the others are not (20). She laughs and dances and Iqbal notices a strange look on her face that this news is personal for her: “If I hadn’t known she was a Surinam girl like I’m a Surinam boy, I’d have thought maybe she was a *Reyone* herself. What else could explain this ultimate vindication she was celebrating?” (22). This is a prime opportunity to encourage students to exercise informed empathy by asking them to analyze Sita’s reaction and why this news means so much to her (See Appendix D). For Sita, the children’s uprising over the colonizers is symbolic of her own ability to overcome the emotional prison Rowan Tarquin placed her in when he raped her. Many scholars have written about rape in Collen’s novel as a concept metaphor for colonization,<sup>77</sup> but for Sita this dynamic is reversed; colonization is symbolic of her rape. Iqbal equates the historic news to the story of David and Goliath, pointing out that the children are “the most downtrodden [and] unblessed” (20), and yet they are leading an uprising against a figurative giant of colonization backed by military power. Sita sees herself in the children, whom she and others once thought of as helplessly born into a form of slavery with neither the strength nor ability to escape. Their unexpected mutiny inspires

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<sup>76</sup> SAMHSA’s manual provides a chart that explains the emotional, cognitive, behavioral, physical, and existential symptoms of PTSD (See pp. 59-74). This chart will be a helpful tool for students as they analyze Sita’s response to trauma.

<sup>77</sup> Rachel Mattheau Matsha succinctly summarizes the rape metaphor used by Collen when she says, “Collective memories are experienced by individual characters, as is the case with Sita who bears the burden of slavery and colonization through her own rape” (Matsha 481). See also Hand, *The Subversion of Class and Gender Roles in the Novels of Lindsey Collen*, pp. 73; and Frenkel, *A History of Culture; Negation in Indian Ocean Literature*, pp. 321.

a sense of hope in Sita and becomes a catalyst for her to regain her own power, even though this is not yet clear to her, herself.

The children's rebellion prompts Sita to undergo a purposeful exploration of her memory and emotions, and at this point in the novel, Iqbal's narrative position shifts from one of an outside observer to one of an omniscient insider.<sup>78</sup> This shift allows readers to follow Sita's internal struggle as she comes to recognize that something horrible happened to her while in Reunion and subsequently search her memory for clues. As students read this section they will once again identify and record Sita's symptoms of trauma and the process of recollecting a traumatic memory. Before she realizes she is missing a chunk of time in her memory, she only knows something is wrong with her that she doesn't comprehend. Collen employs a metaphor of diving<sup>79</sup> to explain Sita's journey through the past. The water of Sita's memory is described as a "vast dull water-mass that had been clogged with weed so thick it was like diving into a solid rather than a liquid medium" (31). It is difficult to navigate her search and she is sometimes lost, owing in part to the fact that Sita doesn't know what she is seeking. She knows something is in the murky waters and thinks that maybe it is "a body...a corpse...something dead" (30). The idea of a dead body brings up imagery of something buried, and thus the word and its conjugations become triggers:

the word 'buried,' the very word itself, took on the form of some kind of living monster. A creature. She'd never known a word do that. It echoed around her head, haunting her and taunting her. It seemed to inhabit her mind. Walking to and fro restlessly without ceasing. Like a ghost... (80)

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<sup>78</sup> While Sue Thomas argues that Collen integrates a second narrator separate from Iqbal, the two narrative voices and their knowledge overlap to the point that they are indistinguishable. While this point is of interest from a stylistic view, it has little effect on neither the novel's purpose nor the reader's experience from the lens of this dissertation.

<sup>79</sup> Williams-Wanquet writes in "'Anti-novel' as Ethics: Lindsey Collen's *The Rape of Sita*," that the metaphor of diving works for the text as well: "The narrative movement forward is also a recoil back into the text" (205).

The concept of something buried takes on a double meaning for Sita and for readers. Sita, herself, delves into its definition: “‘Burial.’ Two sets of meanings jostled for her attention. The metaphorical. Burial to cover something up, to hide something, to forget something, to put something out of sight and out of mind....And then the literal sense. Burial after a death. Or perhaps even a murder. Digging a hole. Surreptitiously. Dragging the body to it. Burying a corpse” (81). Both of these definitions are relevant to Sita. While at first she fears she may have killed someone like Rowan Tarquin on the night in question, she reveals later that this lifeless being she fears—the figurative body she sees in the water—is her own. It is the body touched and violated by Rowan the night of her rape.

The term also refers to the psychological concept of repression. Sita’s memory has been hidden away from her conscious mind and she has to unearth it, which takes work. Each time Sita makes a purposeful effort to dive into the depths of her subconscious, she brings back up new information. She remembers that she didn’t just stop for dinner in Reunion, but that she stayed overnight. At first Sita doubts this realization, but then a return trip to Reunion five years after the rape confirms her suspicion. Iqbal tells readers that while in Reunion, Sita experiences “a bout of transitory madness. Insanity, psychosis. No less” (34). In other words, Sita has a panic attack or an acute anxiety episode. As she sits on the bus heading to Reunion, a bizarre feeling comes over her. The first of her symptoms are related to vision and her sense of reality: “People started to look unreal to her....The walls began to look like liquid, and people’s faces began to look as though they were inside soup spoons. All distorted and inhuman” (104-108).

Emotionally, Sita is overcome by fear and a “feeling of being in flight. Fight or” (111). Sita actually begins to sprint through the streets as a response to this fear, but where she is going and why she is running is unclear to her. She only knows, “I am running away from someone in

Reunion” (102). She also experiences physical symptoms of nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea that inexplicably come in waves as she gets closer and closer to Reunion.

### **Class Discussion**

What happens to Sita as she sits on the bus in Reunion? What are her physical and psychological symptoms? Why might she be having this reaction?

**Figure 29.** Identifying Sita’s symptoms of anxiety and PTSD

Sita’s episode of acute anxiety allows for a discussion of the ways stress, particularly from trauma, can manifest in physical symptoms. A discussion of these symptoms will reinforce earlier discussions about the body’s response to stress and how traumatic experiences exponentially increase the stress response to the point of chaos. For Sita, however, this episode reveals a major key to discovering her forgotten memory. Throughout the event Sita repeatedly explains she feels violated and even uses the term rape, but she equates this feeling to imprisonment and thinks she is reacting to being in a place still under colonial rule. Stuck on the bus, Sita reflects:

“At the time she felt as though she were being assaulted....It was like a form of torture. A kind of rape. A form of jail. She started to feel she had to run away. Panic rose in her throat. But the bus was taking her where she had to go, so she had to stay on it. A suffocating feeling of being prisoner descended on her. Like being on a slave boat. Handcuffs and shackles. And a gag in my mouth, she thought.” (107)

While this passage is often cited by literary critics reading Sita's rape as a metaphor for colonization,<sup>80</sup> it also serves a reading of Sita's rape as a very real experience and a vital point in her journey to recollection. Later when she leaves Reunion because the sickness and panic is too much, she returns back to the hotel and takes off her underwear to wash them, and Iqbal specifically says that "she felt as though she had been raped" (111). This is one of the major revelations that helps guide Sita to a moment of remembering.

After three years of trying to remember, Sita gives up intentionally diving into her past. She tries instead to focus on the future and on eliminating the many symptoms of PTSD like inexplicable anger, frustration, and sadness; emotional dysregulation; acute anxiety attacks; and unexplained fear. Only then, however, the memory returns, catching Sita off guard. Eight years and nine months after the rape, she suddenly remembers it all.

### **Recognizing Assumptions of Victim Culpability**

Although Sita's rape has happened five to eight years prior to the narrative time, readers must get through nearly two-thirds of the novel before the source of her trauma is revealed. This narrative structure of working back allows readers to view Sita's resulting struggles and the immense impact of this trauma on her mental, emotional, and physical well-being. Readers also experience frustration and curiosity themselves as they, too, want to discover the missing piece Sita is trying to find. Not only does this serve as an opportunity to discuss trauma theory principles with students, it also serves to illustrate that Sita's experience has been one of intense trauma. This is important for a discussion on rape recognition and victim reporting, especially as

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<sup>80</sup> See Hand, *The Subversion of Class and Gender Roles in the Novels of Lindsey Collen*, pp. 73; and Frenkel, *A History of Culture; Negation in Indian Ocean Literature*, pp. 321.

Iqbal intermittently interjects questions about Sita’s culpability in her rape—the same kinds of questions many victims ask themselves that in turn stop them from reporting.<sup>81</sup>

Even before a person is victimized they have internalized the victim blaming discourse prevalent in our culture as discussed in chapter one. As we see with Sita, once she has been raped, she is filled with guilt and shame as she thinks about her role in her own victimization. Iqbal, though his oral storytelling, brings these questions out into the open and presents them to the reader through direct address. In the classroom setting, students will be asked to answer these questions directly.

#### **In Class Discussion**

As Iqbal recounts Sita’s rape, he raises several questions about Sita’s role in her own victimization. As a class, discuss/answer each question. Why does Iqbal ask these questions? How do these questions reflect implicit bias towards victims or our victim blaming culture?

**Figure 30.** Discussion questions about victim blaming attitudes

Iqbal first tells readers that Ton Tipyer, a wise elder of the village and close friend of Dharma, Sita, and Iqbal, warned Sita not to go to the conference and specifically not to go through Reunion at the end of April. Sita does not heed this warning and goes anyway. Iqbal presents this as a first point of possible blame: “*Here is the first dilemma, dear reader. Should she have gone to the Seychelles at all? Can a person know what will happen as a result of this decision....Is there any error on her part?*” (55). Questions about victims’ choices to go to a bar, attend a party, or walk alone at night are common. Just as Sita is warned not to travel alone, women are often told the same—never to walk alone at night or in dangerous areas, not to go to

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<sup>81</sup> See Miller, Audrey, et al. “Self-Blame Among Sexual Assault Victims Prospectively Predicts Revictimization: A Perceived Sociolegal Context Model of Risk.” *Basic and Applied Social Psychology*, 2007.

certain bars or to parties at a specific fraternity house.<sup>82</sup> When students are asked to think about these questions and whether Sita makes an error in ignoring Ton Tipyer's warning, it will illuminate how this concept exists today in a way that reinforces victim blaming tendencies.

Indicating that someone has made an error or mistake is far from assigning culpability or blame; yet this can be indistinguishable to victims and outsiders who have internalized a victim blaming culture. Collen's novel illustrates this slippery slope as Iqbal indirectly prompts readers to draw a line between error and responsibility:

*Here dear reader is the second dilemma. Should Sita have changed her booking? Should she have left the conference a day early just so that she could be back in time for the 1st May public meeting? Is this a case of stubbornness? Is this a case of cussedness? Culpable persistence?...Can we blame her for anything yet?" (56).*

Students will likely agree that Sita could not have known her choices up to this point would lead to rape, but the "yet" that ends this line of questioning implies that blame is certain. She is traveling for work and wants to return home; but neither of those decisions makes her guilty. But Iqbal continues.

Sita phones the Tarquins, friends of hers living in Reunion, to ask if she can stay the night on her way back to Mauritius. Iqbal asks readers: "*Another dilemma dear reader. Should she have asked herself to stay? This must be seriously considered?" (58).* Again, there seems nothing wrong with asking to stay at a friend's house for a night, especially where one has stayed before without incidence. When Sita arrives in Reunion, however, she learns that Rowan and Noella are separated. Iqbal explains that Sita was good friends with Noella but considered

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<sup>82</sup> In her book, *Asking For It: The Alarming Rise of Rape Culture and What We Can Do About It*, Kate Harding debunks myths of rape avoidance that women are taught. In one instance she points out to sorority girls she interviews that their language about going to fraternity parties and "leaving no girl behind" at the end of the night is war language. See Harding, Kate. *Asking For It: The Alarming Rise of Rape Culture and What We Can Do About It*. Da Capo Lifelong Books, 2015.



Rowan “if not a friend, at least an acquaintance. Longstanding” (134). He emphasizes the importance of this moment:

*This may be the place, the very point where Sita made an error. Should she, on finding out that Rowan Tarquin was separated from his wife, have immediately said, ‘I would rather stay in a hotel, thank you.’...Here may be the culpability. Inasmuch as there could possibly be guilt....Should a woman never accept to go into the same house as a man is in on his own, even a man she knows? Should a woman never accept an invitation for a cup of tea? And what about the lift? When she steps inside and then, before the doors have time to close, a man comes along, either a friend or a stranger, should she, because she is a woman, leap out of the lift? (133)*

Iqbal continues his questioning in this fashion asking about women’s relative freedom to use the stairs, ride a bus, or take a taxi. Felicity Hand argues that *The Rape of Sita* is Collen’s call for “basic freedom of movement” for women (43). The above passage, though not cited by Hand, challenges readers to think about the restrictions placed on women by a patriarchal system that accepts violence against women as an expectation or norm and thus holds them accountable for avoiding their own inevitable victimization. Female students will undoubtedly relate to these series of questions, but it’s less likely they’ve analyzed how this ingrained, subconscious, and constant evaluation of one’s risk of assault shifts blame from perpetrators to victims.

Readers may be inclined to answer, “Sita shouldn’t have stayed the night” or “women shouldn’t stay at the home of a man they don’t know well.” While ensuring one’s safety is a natural inclination of self-preservation, this perspective can unintentionally restate, or at the very least support, victim blaming tendencies. When we critique victims’ choices to travel alone or wear certain clothing, for example, we partially absolve perpetrators of blame and reinforce

victims' sense of guilt and self-blame. Prompted by Iqbal's line of questioning, students can engage in a conversation that will hopefully change their perspective or at the very least make them aware of these underlying messages.

### **Defining Rape and Recognizing Victimhood**

The in-depth analysis of Sita presented earlier clearly illustrates that she has suffered a traumatic event which has affected her emotionally, mentally, and physically. These symptoms develop long after Sita has been raped and there is a five year period during which Sita exhibits zero symptoms. In large part, this is because Sita has buried the memory; yet there is a period of time, immediately following the rape, that Sita does remember and does plan to talk about it to Dharma and report it to police. Ultimately, though, she does not. For those unfamiliar with trauma response, the progression of Sita's struggle may seem strange. The remainder of the novel—which includes a detailed account of Sita's rape, the aftermath, and what she does after she finally remembers eight years later—will help readers understand Sita's and other rape victims' responses to trauma.

First, Sita's rape unfolds in a way that challenges some ideas of rape and consent. Even though Sita asks herself the same questions that Iqbal poses to readers, Sita decides to stay with Rowan. She dismisses her suspicions that doing so is dangerous and even feels foolish and guilty for thinking Rowan might rape or hurt her. Just as Sita lets her guard down, however, Rowan physically attacks her, knocking her across the face and disorienting her before she even realizes he is in the room. At this point in the novel, Iqbal's narrative voice is dulled as the perspective becomes more omniscient. The newly-integrated syntax and style communicate the fear, panic, and helplessness that Sita experiences. Sita's first thought is that Rowan is trying to kill her and her instinct is to survive. As Rowan holds her down by the neck, Sita only barely notices that he

is pulling at her clothes as her eyes dart from the locked, keyless doors to the kitchen knives out of reach. She realizes she has no way out. Even if she had leverage or the freedom of movement to “kick him in the balls,” this momentary incapacitation wouldn’t give Sita time to find the keys to flee, nor does she know where to go. Even if she reaches the knife, she thinks, she can’t be sure she can kill him.

These thoughts slow down for readers, but are not conscious for Sita. Her inability to act is tied less to Rowan’s physical restraint and more to the chemical and physical response of the body to trauma. Returning back to the discussion of the flight or fight response, Psychiatrist James W. Hopper explains:

Simultaneously with the freeze response, the fear circuitry unleashes a surge of ‘stress chemicals’ into the prefrontal cortex, the brain region that allows us to think rationally – to recall the bedroom door is open, or that people are in the dorm room next door, for example, and to make use of that information. But the surge of chemicals rapidly impairs the prefrontal cortex. That’s because, despite our dominant role on the planet now, we evolved as prey, and when a lion or tiger is upon us, stopping to think is fatal.

The narrative voice that tells Sita’s story methodically moves from one possibility of escape to the next, but Sita’s direct thoughts interrupt: “Trapped. A snare. Animal caught in a trap. Fly in web. ‘He going to kill me’” (142). Here Sita’s thoughts are clearly fragmented and the narrative abandon of grammar reflects the urgency and panic she feels. This contrasts yet complements the dominant narrative voice, and both together allow for a conversation with students about how trauma is experienced and processed in the moment.

### In Class Discussion

After Sita is hit over the head by Rowan, the narrative changes from Iqbal's voice to that of an omniscient narrator. What effect does this shift have on readers? How does this new narrative style reflect Sita's experience of trauma?

**Figure 31.** Reflecting on trauma narrative and storytelling style

Sita realizes as Rowan pulls at her skirt that his intent is not to kill her, but to rape her; yet again she is left without recourse. Sita thinks about screaming, but her instinct is still to survive and she thinks that it might cause him to kill her intentionally or otherwise:

[I]f she screams, and no one hears, he gets more enraged and kills her....Would anyone hear her if she screamed really loudly just once? Once, before he tied her up. After screaming once he would gag her, death by strangulation or death by suffocation....'That's how he'll kill me.' That's how they all do it. A sort of accident. They get scared of the screaming and can't stop the noise. So they try to stop the noise. Death by strangulation. Or by smothering. (143-144)

Instead of screaming or fighting, Sita freezes and goes limp: "She played dead. Stopped struggling. She lay still. Seem to give up. Pretend it's all over. Maybe you're dead. She thought, 'Just stop. Stop it.'" (148). This tactic, albeit unintentional, works and Rowan momentarily stops.

Sita is given a reprieve, a chance to think, and consciously contemplates ways to escape. She weighs the possibility of screaming, kicking Rowan in the testicles, or running for the kitchen knife. But none of these are viable options. When Rowan again starts to undress Sita, she channels the women of past matriarchal societies, who "have no fear of rape, and who believe

they cannot be raped” (150). The women of the “matriarchal world of Chagos” would remove their clothes to thwart the threats of rape made by Mauritius police (150). Collen’s point here is that in patriarchal societies, “rape is a weapon,” a means of establishing and exerting power (150), but that women can take away this power when they mimic consent through removing their own clothes. A classroom discussion of rape as power can evolve from this detail in Collen’s novel along with what such an exchange implies. While it is helpful to discuss how violence against women is tied to patriarchy, the idea that undressing oneself undoes the power dynamic ingrained in the act of rape is problematic. Students will need to return to discussions regarding definitions of rape and consent that occurred earlier in the course in order to reiterate that removing one’s clothes is not in itself a sign of consent.

#### **Activity and In Class Discussion**

1. In small groups, assign students to research the literary references of the names Sita and Rowan Tarquin. Why might Collen have chosen these names? Do these allusions maintain their original meaning or does Collen invert or change them?
2. Sita agrees to take her own clothes off for Rowan. Why does she do this? Is this an act of consent? How does this act complicate her understanding of her victimization?

**Figure 32.** Activity and discussion prompts for Collen’s use of literary allusion

Sita’s response to her rape is complicated by this very debate. In a desperate act of survival, Sita tells Rowan that she can take off her own clothes and does so. In her article, “Memory Politics in the Narratives of Lindsey Collen’s *The Rape of Sita*,” Sue Thomas provides an in-depth analysis of this scene that is helpful for students, especially as it explains literary allusions some students may miss. Collen’s novel amalgamates several hypotexts including the Ramayana and Shakespeare’s *The Rape of Lucrece*. Thomas explains that while Lucrece’s

nakedness in front of Tarquin (not coincidentally used by Collen as Rowan's last name<sup>83</sup>) symbolizes her beauty, innocence, and vulnerability, Collen "reinscribes this nakedness as resistance, consistent with a pattern of non-consensuality" (132). As Thomas's article illustrates, a close reading clarifies that Sita does not remove her clothes as an act of consent but rather as an act of defiance.

Rowan is for a brief moment rendered impotent by this act, but he quickly recovers and his intent to rape Sita is once again clear. Iqbal thus interrupts and returns to his line of questioning to challenge readers to directly consider whether her choice to undress can be considered consent, or if it is at best a mistake:

*Here reader is a moral dilemma. The Chagos women had shown her how to take the initiative against rape and murder. She had done as they would have done. And it had worked up till now. But in what circumstances had she done this? Did the circumstances permit? Nothing else was in her favour. She was out of her geography. He was in his. She didn't know the language here. He did. She didn't know anyone. He knew lots of people. She didn't even know who to run to. He would know where she would run. Her shoes were a handicap. He knew this. She had no money. He knew it. He knew all this. The balance of forces were against her in all ways....Should she, under these circumstances,*

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<sup>83</sup> While this chapter focuses on Sita's experience of rape and her response to trauma, Collen's novel includes several other moments of possible analysis that serve the purpose of this course, including that of Rowan's character. Rowan serves as an example of a repeat offender, having raped a girl when he was a young teen and repeating the act on several women, including his own wife, Noelle. Collen portrays Rowan as a man that struggles against competing needs to be a "good person" and to rape women, but there is no implied sympathy for him. His character is tied to the hypotext of the Ramayana and *The Rape of Lucrece* (See Williams-Wanquet. "Lindsey Collen's *The Rape of Sita*: Rewriting as Ethics) and thus a character analysis and an understanding of the literary allusions employed by Collen is helpful to understanding the novel; however, his character does not elicit empathy for perpetrators. Instead he serves to help reinforce earlier facts about rape perpetrators and repeat offenders and would thus be a valuable topic of class discussion. Arguably, had one of the women victimized by Rowan come forward earlier and been embraced by an empathetic and responsive community, Sita or others may not have been victims.

*have torn off her own clothes? Was it, dear reader, a wise decision? What is the safest thing to do? (151-152)*

Again students can identify another moment wherein victims may be rendered blameworthy for their own rape. When victims are asked why they were at a certain location at a specific time of day, whether or not they screamed, what clothes they had on, if they undressed themselves, or if they said no, these questions shift blame from the perpetrator to the victim with damaging consequences.

Sita's rape is no longer physically violent; Rowan no longer holds her down and she no longer fights him. Yet, this is not consent. Sita gives in, not because she wants to have sex with Rowan, but because she wants to survive and sees no way to escape alive if she doesn't follow Rowan's demands. To cope, she convinces herself she will banish the rape from memory: "I'll forget the whole thing as soon as it's over. *I alone alone must sit and pine.*" The minute this thought went through her head she knew she was a raped woman. Already raped, and still to be raped. Which part of this rape? But she must survive" (152). This passage pinpoints the moment Sita recognizes herself as a victim but is still focused on survival. These competing emotions of victim and survivor parallel the competing responses of the sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous systems. Enduring a prolonged fight and flight response, Sita's mind and body are simultaneously thrown into a state of internal chaos.

Sita, however, mistakenly believes she can separate her emotional and spiritual self from the physical violation of her body she endures during the rape: "What is in a body, she thought. It is but a shell....Her body desecrated. Not of itself. Just a shell" (153-154). The Chagos women believed this—that they were not their bodies—and thus they believed that they couldn't be raped. Even if their bodies were violated, they could not be hurt. This perspective disrupts the

power dynamic implicit to rape and its weaponization, and it is why they undressed for their attackers. This theory of disrupting power informs Sita's actions but in praxis, the outcome is not so liberating. Sita cannot make this separation, and we learn that the image of the dead body she finds while "diving" into her memory, is her own: "No, it is me. I am my body" (153). The rape is as much a physical violation as it is emotional, mental, and spiritual. This is the nature of trauma: it is all encompassing.

### In Class Discussion

Sita tells herself on pages 153-154 that her body is just a shell and not really her. Why does she tell herself this? Does she actually believe this?

**Figure 33.** Reflecting on experiences of sexual trauma and abuses of bodily autonomy

As Sita lies awake under the weight of Rowan's sleeping body, she begs for time to reverse and for the night to be undone, but Sita does not forget the event right away. She spends the night reflecting on her choices, how she should have acted, and what she could have done: "I could have caught his balls in a vice-grip, or mule-kicked him, or bitten him. Of course, I could have" (156). Sita's self-criticism is damaging in many ways, just as it is for real-world victims. This critique of what she should have done leads to guilt and a false sense of responsibility for her own victimization. Replaying the scene over and over to find the exact moment when they failed to act renders victims obsessed with the past and unable to live in the present.<sup>84</sup> Iqbal points this out to readers in his final line of questioning:

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<sup>84</sup> As discussed later in this chapter, Judith Herman speaks to the healing power of replaying or recalling trauma in a controlled setting with the help and guidance of a trauma-informed therapist which directly contrasts the potentially damaging act of replaying the trauma without guidance.



*Was she an accomplice in this rape, reader? Or worse still, did she give consent? This is the question. She invited herself to stay. She took off her own clothes. So what is rape? Could she have avoided the rape? What should she have done? But the rape was done now. Done. Never to be undone. (154)*

Despite questions and contemplations, the reality cannot be changed and there's nothing healthy or logical about looking back in this way. This internalized victim-blaming leads only to feelings of guilt and responsibility that further inhibit victims from coming forward.

Such an example can be seen in Sita. The next morning Sita exists in a state of quiet panic as Rowan casually eats breakfast and drives her to the airport. Each passing second Sita contemplates her next move—to kill Rowan, to tell the French police, to tell Dharma. But she talks herself out of each option. She remembers a legal case she was assigned to in which a woman was convicted for killing her rapist with his own knife. She also knows the police will be of no help and specifically cites the poor conviction rates for rapists: “She would never win a case, she thought. Never. She knew how hard it is to win any rape case, but this one harder. She had invited herself here. He would plead consent. How could she prove the contrary? On what evidence could a judge send a man to jail for nine years?” (155-156). She has also already washed Rowan’s “filth” from her body knowing that it’s not going to be taken seriously as evidence.

#### **In Class Discussion**

How does Sita react in the aftermath of the rape? What actions does she contemplate? Why doesn't she report the rape to the Reunion police or kill Rowan?

**Figure 34.** Discussion prompts on trauma victims' reasons for not reporting

For outsiders, people who have never been victims, going to the police or retaliating against an attacker may seem like an easy decision for a rape victim. As Collen's novel details, however, Sita faces complications and roadblocks to taking action. Drawing students' attention to the factors that inhibit people from reporting their rape or fighting back against their rapists opens up a space of understanding and empathy towards real life victims of rape.

### **The Unspeakable Nature of Trauma**

Sita's inaction thus far has been founded upon logic, as she knows that killing Rowan or reporting the rape to police will not do any good nor work in her favor. Sita holds on, however, to one last option of confiding in Dharma. Sita's desire to seek comfort and help from her husband raises another important point regarding trauma theory: the importance of witnessing. Witnessing refers to the idea of speaking about one's trauma as a prerequisite to healing. Notable theorists and psychiatrists like Judith Herman, Cathy Caruth, Dominic LaCapra, and Kelly Oliver agree that when trauma is shared through the act of telling to both oneself and others, the space for healing emerges. These same experts, however, also acknowledge that the need to witness is complicated and sometimes rendered impossible by the "unspeakable" nature of trauma. Primarily, this is the idea that survivors cannot accurately tell others what happened.

Some of the more theoretical approaches to this dilemma of unspeakability link the conflicts of witnessing to semiotics and whether meaning exists through or because of words or whether meaning always existed before words.<sup>85</sup> Psychoanalytic approaches argue that the complex process of experiencing and remembering a traumatic event is further complicated by the limitations of language. Historians such as LaCapra argue that because of the limits of language and memory, accounts of trauma cannot be held to the same standards of historical

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<sup>85</sup> See Goodspeed-Chadwick, and Julie Elaine. "Derrida's Deconstruction of Logocentrism: Implications for Trauma Studies." *Reconstruction: Studies in Contemporary Culture*, Vol. 6, No. 2, 2006.

accuracy, and we must rethink what constitutes a “true” account of an event. In their article, “Trauma Lives In Speech: The Rhythm of Speech Breaks, Words Disappear, a Hole is Torn in Speech,” Eija Harjula and Timo Heiskanen argue that “silent language”—the language of truth and memory—is found in the space between words (198). Others, like Cathy Caruth, argue that it is the unknowable nature of the experience itself—the very reason an event is traumatic—that renders victims unable to capture it through speech. Despite their various lenses, these trauma theory scholars largely agree that, whether it is due to a rupture in memory or consciousness, or the inaccessibility of words, or both, experiences of trauma elude accurate portrayal.

While students do not need to know the details of this extensive theoretical conversation, they can better understand victims’ silence if they understand that words evade the trauma survivor for a number of reasons. Readers observe this with Sita. When she returns to Mauritius she is desperate to tell Dharma what has happened and plans to do so, but when she tries to speak she cannot bring herself to do so: “She just knew that as soon as she met Dharma she would say: ‘Something terrible happened in Reunion,’ ...[then] she saw Dharma. All calm and radiant. She went up to him. She had no voice. She couldn’t say anything. She seemed so far away” (158). Sita’s silence here is not informed by logic or reason as is her decision not to report to the police. She imagines Dharma enveloping her in the safety of his arms and that this would relieve her constant state of fear and alert. Dharma is her best friend, partner, and confidant, and there is no underlying fear of retaliation or re-victimization; yet Sita cannot bring herself to tell him.

After Sita remembers she has been raped she tells her friend Devina, whose response emphasizes the unspeakable nature of trauma and helps Sita, herself, understand and accept her own silence:

‘Impossible to tell us,’ she said. ‘Not at that time. At any other time, you would have. Not then. No. It was impossible....There was no other thing for you to do but to bury it. It was like living hell at the time....Because rape is worse disorder. It is the ravenous personification of disorder, drawing, like gravity, further disorder around it.’ (179-180)

In this passage, Collen refers directly to how the chaos inherent to trauma renders it so bizarre and so different from everyday experiences. This bizarreness, or “disorder,” makes it difficult to comprehend and impossible to speak it aloud. Devina’s reference to time further alludes to the idea that trauma is even harder to process when one is still experiencing the residual anxiety and fear that persists shortly after the experience. Iqbal, narrating this exchange, further explains the cyclical relationship that informs trauma’s unspeakability—namely here that Sita’s outward silence both produces and is generated by her internal silence:

Sita never, ever thought about the rape itself. Never. She remembers, during the assault, during the sequestration and the rape, thinking she would work it all out with Dharma afterwards. She would absorb it later. She would submit to it later. Go through it later....This was how she, on purpose, didn’t think about it even at the time it was happening. She did not think about it at all....At the very time it had happened she had taken it, the whole horrible deed, all unthought-out and raw, on her shoulders, carried it to a hole and buried it. (185)

Sita resolves to work through the trauma of being raped when she speaks it aloud to Dharma and mentally prohibits herself from thinking about it until then. Being unable to put into words what she experienced, however, Sita unconsciously buries the memory. What she meant to put away for later ends up disappearing from her memory:

She didn’t just forget about it.

She lost it.

For eight years and nine months.

Until the corpse she had buried started to sprout in the garden. (185)

This passage, coming later in the novel, reinforces the journey through trauma that readers have been guided through. Students can now look back on the confusion and frustration they felt as they accompanied Sita to this point and reflect on why Collen chose to employ a nonlinear narrative. This narrative structure forces readers to engage in an empathetic experience with a traumatized character, and students can then apply aspects of trauma theory to their understanding of the novel and of Sita. Finally, analyzing Sita's experience of rape and her response to the trauma prompts a discussion about how and when victims come to recognize they have been raped either through recovering the memory of an event they blocked out or by recognizing what took place during the event as rape. This newfound knowledge can be applied to real life victims of rape and help students be more accepting and empathetic.

#### **In Class Discussion**

1. Why doesn't Sita tell Dharma about the rape? What are the consequences of her silence to her ability to process trauma?
2. Sita confides in her friend Devina about her rape. How does Devina respond? What can we learn from her response about how we might respond to real life victims?

**Figure 35.** Discussion prompts on the unspeakable nature of trauma

### **The Importance of Witnessing**

Sita's inability to process her trauma is in large part a consequence of her inability to speak it aloud and to engage in what trauma theorists call witnessing or testimony. The literature on witnessing is expansive and includes both theoretical and practical discussions of its meaning,

implementation, and effects.<sup>86</sup> While Herman first used the term testimony to explain the process of victims speaking their trauma, the conversation has evolved to include the term witnessing. Herman explains that a crucial benefit of testimony is that it helps bring survivors to a space where the traumatic event can be processed by making it “more present and more real” (181). Cathy Caruth makes a similar argument about witnessing, explaining that while trauma overwhelms the mind and makes it impossible for the experience to be “known,” the process of translating the event into words renders it knowable (Cathy Caruth). As Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela explains, making the event knowable through the act of witnessing “helps the victim integrate the trauma into their lives” rather than holding it in a space outside of consciousness (175). Kelly Oliver similarly brings attention to the concept of knowability, stating that there is a double meaning to witnessing: “eyewitness testimony based on first-hand knowledge, on the one hand, and bearing witness to something beyond recognition that can’t be seen, on the other” (Oliver 16). Oliver explains it is precisely because trauma is “beyond recognition” that survivors must give voice to it. Even if words fail to precisely capture the horror and violation of the experience, giving voice to trauma brings it out of the realm of the obscure and into the real.

From a practical perspective, trauma survivors who complete the step of witnessing are able to process their trauma and participate in further stages of recovery<sup>87</sup> (Herman 183).

Herman explains that with the help of a therapist, the act of witnessing allows victims to relive

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<sup>86</sup> See Belau, Linda and Petar Ramadanovic, eds. *Topologies of Trauma: Essays on the Limit of Knowledge and Memory*. New York: Other P, 2002.; Caruth, Cathy. *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. Ed. with introduction by Cathy Caruth. Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins UP, 1995.; Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1996.; Gert Buelens, Sam Durrant, and Robert Eaglestone, eds. *The Future of Trauma Theory: Contemporary literary and cultural criticism*. London and New York: Routledge, 2014. 45-61. Douglass, Ana, and Thomas A. Vogler, eds. *Witness and Memory: The Discourse of Trauma*. New York and London: Routledge, 2003.; Golden, Kristen Brown, and Bettina G. Bergo, eds. *The Trauma Controversy: Philosophical and Interdisciplinary Dialogues*. Albany, NY: State U of New York P, 2009.; McNally, Richard J. *Remembering Trauma*. Cambridge, MA and London: The Belknap P of Harvard UP, 2003.; and Roth, Michael S. *Memory, Trauma, and History: Essays on Living with the Past*. New York: Columbia UP, 2012.

<sup>87</sup> See Chapter 4 of this dissertation where Judith Herman’s stages of recovery are discussed.

the experience in a beneficial way distinct from reliving it as an uncontrolled symptom. Prior to witnessing their story, patients are taught anxiety management and relaxation techniques so that their emotions can be felt and processed but not overwhelmingly so. Learning such skills also helps disrupt the harmful cycle of anxiety and reliving that feeds the persistent fight-or-flight state in which trauma survivors exist. Learning these techniques is an aspect of establishing safety, the first stage of recovery, and it is a necessary prerequisite to effective witnessing.

In addition to making the trauma knowable, witnessing also serves to return a sense of power and autonomy to survivors. Herman argues that equipped with anxiety management and relaxation strategies, patients undergo a process of healing and empowerment through their testimony. Oliver expands on this notion by explaining that the loss of subjectivity is inherent to trauma: “Witnessing works to ameliorate the trauma particular to othered subjectivity. This is because witnessing is the essential dynamic of all subjectivity, its constitutive event and process.... trauma undermines subjectivity and witnessing restores it” (Oliver 7). Oliver argues that our sense of agency is reinforced by others’ recognition of our subjectivity. When a perpetrator enacts a trauma like rape, they ignore this vital aspect of being; the perpetrator fails to recognize the victim as a subject and the victim internalizes this objectification. Writing or speaking trauma returns voice to the victim and allows them to see that the blame for their trauma belongs to the perpetrator. As Oliver puts it, “[t]hrough the process of bearing witness to oppression and subordination, those othered can begin to repair damaged subjectivity by taking up a position as speaking subjects” (Oliver 7). Herman makes a similar observation. When victims speak their story, she says, “the transformed trauma story... is ‘no longer about shame and humiliation’ but rather ‘about dignity and virtue.’ Through their storytelling, [survivors]

regain the world they have lost” (Herman 181). Reclaiming a sense of personal empowerment is thus an important aspect of witnessing.

Rendering the trauma more knowable and empowering the victim are personal benefits of witnessing, which emphasize victim recovery. However, witnessing has the capacity to transcend the private sphere of healing and enter the public space. Namely, witnessing in the public sphere can be a form of advocacy that can encourage social change. For Herman, this is inherent to the act of testifying:

In the telling, the trauma story becomes a testimony.... Testimony has both a private dimension, which is confessional and spiritual, and a public aspect, which is political and judicial. The use of the word *testimony* links both meanings, giving a new and larger dimension to the patient’s individual experience. (181)

While Herman explains that witnessing need not be politically motivated, the act does have the capacity to incite change. This itself can be a motivation for victims to make their witnessing public.

*The Rape of Sita* is one such example; for Sita, the importance of witnessing for personal reasons is tied to its potential political power. Iqbal spends much of the first part of Collen’s novel detailing Sita’s family history of activism. Along with being a reference to the character of the Ramayana, the name Sita also means sister. Sita’s mother chose this name to instill her daughter with the idea of being an equal to others and of helping those in her community. Sita’s father was a political activist as well who imparted his views to Sita from when she was young. Her identity is thus wrapped up in her political and social service to others. This defining characteristic, however, is the very reason she ended up in Reunion with Rowan Tarquin: She



was determined to make it back to Mauritius for The May Day event announcing the movement's independence.

Ironically, while this personal quest for political change is the catalyst for her dilemma, it also saves her. Sita's political focus overpowers her personal process of grief, which is self-destructive. Once Sita remembers her rape, she experiences the same emotions as if it had just happened. Anger, sadness, fear, confusion, and isolation are all documented in this section. Sita, as do many victims, also contemplates murder and suicide.<sup>88</sup> Iqbal narrates Sita's detailed plans including proposed methods, locations, and reasons for killing Rowan and herself. Ultimately, however, Sita realizes that neither option will do any good:

But would it end rape? Would her act...just add more disorder and more rot? Not vengeance things clean. Not change the direction of anything, the state of anything....How would this stop rape? He himself is not rape. Would this act of murder stop men thinking they could rape women? (192).

Sita's activist nature compels her to channel her emotions into something productive rather than to focus on her own grief and anger. Herman's work explains that a "significant minority" of victims find personal healing and power in publicly witnessing and participating in social action:

Most survivors seek the resolution of their traumatic experience within the confines of their personal lives. But a significant minority, as a result of the trauma, feel called upon to engage in a wider world. These survivors recognize a political or religious dimension in their misfortune and discover that they can transform the meaning of their personal tragedy by making it the basis for social action. While there is no way to compensate for

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<sup>88</sup> For a discussion regarding rape victims' fantasies about killing their rapists, see Hesford, Wendy S. "Reading Rape Stories: Material Rhetoric and the Trauma of Representation." *College English*, vol. 62, no. 2, 1999, pp. 192–221.

an atrocity, there is a way to transcend it, by making it a gift to others. The trauma is redeemed only when it becomes the source of a survivor mission. (207)

For some victims, like Sita, public witnessing is necessary for personal healing.

Sita continues her work with victims of sexual assault and domestic abuse, recognizing that this work has become more personal as a result of her own remembered trauma. More pointedly, however, Sita seeks to reach a wider audience through writing about rape. Sita writes an article called “Who Was Raped Before?” the content of which is included in the book in conjunction with Iqbal’s metanarrative commentary. In this essay, Sita contemplates the history of gender relationships and when rape began; analyzes fictional accounts of rape from mythology and literature; and discusses several court cases wherein female victims of rape are mistreated by the judicial system, one of which became very personal to Sita.

Sita’s act of writing and speaking is directly political. In two separate articles, literary scholar Eileen Williams-Wanquet focuses on the transformative nature of Collen’s novel and specifically discusses the political power of writing both in the real and fictional worlds. In the fictional world created by Collen, Williams-Wanquet argues that Sita’s story arc illuminates her, and other victims’ “moral responsibility to act” to combat rape culture. Once Sita remembers her rape, she is faced with various options; amongst them, to kill Rowan, to kill herself, to stay silent, or to speak. According to Williams-Wanquet, “[b]y consciously and actively choosing to counter taboos, not to act as a victim and not to respond to violence with violence, [Sita] breaks free from previous texts and stories about rape and counters patriarchy’s spiralling violence” (“Rewriting as Ethics” 61-62). Sita’s public witnessing is a morally responsible act because it disrupts the very system in which victims are allowed to be traumatized by rewriting the trope of the rape victim.

Williams-Wanquet contends, too, that Collen's novel does the same in the real world. Reading *The Rape of Sita* through the lens of Judith Butler's *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*, Williams-Wanquet argues that Collen's novel exemplifies how the acts of writing or speaking can be a political act. Within the novel, Sita's response to rape diverts from typical rape stories and thus rewrites them; Collen's does this too in her rewriting of the Ramayana, Shakespeare, and other rape stories. Williams-Wanquet says that

The novel is not simply a political manifesto—it works as an act of language, which generates 'another story.' ... [R]epetition with a difference can break free from the binary strictures of established power and from its traditional narrative methods, suggesting the possibility of reconfiguration and resignification. (210)

Collen's novel presents the possibility for change through its break with iteration. Sita is not resigned to a tale of vengeance and violence, but instead tells a tale where a woman is supported in witnessing her rape.

Sue Thomas adds to this view, explaining that Iqbal's narrative commentary "implies that the ideal nation-family needs to give [victims] the space and time to absorb rape and announce it publicly" (133). The social and political message of Collen's novel is partly that victims need a space to witness. This space to witness is initially created by victims empowering other victims. In an important scene students will be asked to analyze, Sita is inspired to speak her trauma publicly through a discussion with a woman named Mowski who seeks Sita's help after being raped and beaten by her husband. Sita welcomes the battered Mowski into her home and after tending to her wounds, the two characters, tired of being victims and watching other women be victims, discuss what to do. In Mauritius, women raped by their husbands are expected to stay silent, but Mowski tells Sita, "I have to speak, Sita. I have words that must be spoken. They want

to come out” (196). Mowski’s bravery inspires Sita to witness outside the pages of her essay, propelling her advocacy:

You, Mowski...have come at a time that helps me. I was in the dark, Mowski, and you have brought light. For I have decided what to do now. Your courage makes my courage....And now Mowski, time has come for your words....Will you stand up and say this, if I stand by you? If our movement stands by you? (196-197)

This scene from the novel is highly symbolic. Not only does Sita call Mowski, “Everywoman” (194), but Mowski is a homonym for “moi aussi,” the French phrase for “me too.” The women find courage and bravery in each other’s common experiences and thus join voices to fight against a system that maintains their victimhood as opposed to seeking vengeance against individuals. Through guided discussion of this scene and others, students will contemplate the importance of the witnessing community in light of both trauma theory and Collen’s novel.

#### **In Class Discussion**

What does it mean to be a witness? Why is witnessing important to both survivors and their communities?

**Figure 36.** Discussion prompts about witnessing and being a responsive witness

Fighting against harmful aspects of patriarchy and toxic masculinity is foundational to witnessing rape trauma. First, in telling the trauma and its hurt, victims help to restore subjectivity to themselves and to other victims who may not wish to publicly witness but are comforted by hearing others. Second, witnessing also directly defies the cultural expectation of silence that further isolates victims for the comfort of others. As Lynn Higgins and Brenda Silver argue in their book, *Rape and Representation*, that victims’ silence absolves bystanders of

responsibility by permitting ignorance. Public witnessing, on the contrary, demands bystanders make a choice either to be culpable in rape culture through maintaining silence or to act by holding perpetrators accountable. Sita asks Iqbal to make such a choice when she challenges him to use his storytelling talent to “write down the truth for other people...write down what has to be remembered” (197). What Iqbal does with this request relayed on the final page of the novel is tell the story captured within the novel as a whole. Thus Iqbal and Collen act as witnesses to victims’ trauma in the fictional world and the real world, respectively. For these efforts to be effective, however, they must witness to a ready and willing audience.

### **An Empathetic Community of Witnesses**

*The Rape of Sita* ends with a vision of hope for a changed future, one in which women have attained true equality and rape has thus been eliminated. In its focus on creating a safe and equal community by dismantling patriarchy, Collen’s novel is as much about Sita’s trauma as it is about the “metamorphosis” of Iqbal from unconscious enabler of patriarchy and toxic masculinity to victim ally and advocate (8). Such a transition is emphasized by Collen to be one associated with gender, as she reiterates the song lyric “Jojo was a man who thought he was a woman” in various forms throughout the novel. Iqbal replaces Jojo’s name with his own, twenty-two times in the text repeating variations of the line to mirror his own relative position to the social and cultural moment within the story. For example, when he relates the story of the Chagos women taking off their clothes to thwart the police officers’ rape attempts, Iqbal reflects on the power of these women in the face of violence and on the shame he feels as a man. The lyrics in his mind change to mirror these thoughts: “Iqbal was a man *who’d rather be* a woman” (209). By the end of the novel, the lyrics transition from “thought he was,” “wished he was” (90), and “who’d rather” be a woman, to “knew he was” (88) and “was” a woman (197). Iqbal

claims to have transcended the confines of gender and that the future he is a part of has achieved unity amongst men and women.

Williams-Wanquet connects the fluidity of Iqbal's gender to Collen's purposeful destabilization of narrative form but also notes that it is "through sensibility and openness to others" that Iqbal envisions the possibility of a free and equal society. While Collen and readers are inclined to focus on the delineating category of gender, what Iqbal practices in his narrative can be more simply identified as empathy. In the first pages of the book, Iqbal says that to tell Sita's story, he must "become the heroine. Like it's a mask, or a character, take it on" (8). In taking on the responsibility of witnessing Sita's story, and in order to do so effectively, he has to imagine himself as victim and survivor. Gender is indeed an obstacle to this task, but through storytelling, Iqbal is able to see himself as a woman in Mauritius living in constant fear of sexual violence and deprived of the same freedom of movement that men enjoy. Sita knows Iqbal has this gift before she asks him to be her voice, as she was the one who taught him to read and write when he was three-years-old and was with him when he listened to Ton Tipyer's stories "night after night" (197). Sita also knows that Iqbal is nicknamed the Umpire for his ability to maintain a neutral position and be fair and judicial through his capacity to envision a dilemma from various perspectives.

Sita's request for Iqbal to listen and pass on her story of rape trauma thus falls on empathetic ears, and it is because Iqbal has been a receptive secondhand witness that Sita's story is effectively received and shared with others. The future Iqbal envisions is dependent upon listeners being equally receptive to victims' in the present. This is imperative not only to victims' personal recovery but to cultural healing. Judith Herman writes,

To hold traumatic reality in consciousness requires a social context that affirms and protects the victim and that joins the victim and witness in a common alliance. For the individual victim, this social context is created by relationships with friends, lovers, and family. For the larger society, the social context is created by political movements that give voice to the disempowered. (Herman 9)

The future envisioned by Iqbal is not unlike the community this dissertation looks to create. The course proposed here seeks to empower students through knowledge to identify and respond to victims of sexual trauma with empathy and care and to break existing cycles of trauma and survivor victimization.

#### **In Class Discussion**

1. What transition has Iqbal gone through as a narrator and character? Can we see him as a lesson in empathy?
2. Why does Sita ask Iqbal to tell her story? What effect does the story have being told by Iqbal instead of Sita?
3. What is Iqbal's vision of the future? Is this attainable? How?

**Figure 37.** Discussion prompts on Iqbal's transformation and his vision of the future

## CONCLUSION

*I didn't think I would be here today. I was scared and nervous. It wasn't until I started watching the impact statements from the other brave survivors that I realized I, too, needed to be here. Larry, you do realize now that we, this group of women you so heartlessly abused over such a long period of time, are now a force, and you are nothing. The tables have turned, Larry. We are here, we have our voices, and we are not going anywhere. — Aly Raisman*

The excerpt above is taken from Olympic gymnast Aly Raisman's 2018 testimony against Dr. Larry Nassar. Over his thirty-year career as a doctor and medical coordinator for USA Gymnastics, Nassar sexually assaulted his patients, many of whom were underage gymnasts. Accusations against the doctor surfaced as early as 1994, but the reports were silenced or dismissed. It wasn't until 2017 that Nassar was finally charged with sexual assault and a class action lawsuit was filed against him. In 2018, Raisman spoke in solidarity with more than 150 other girls and women who had been Nassar's victims. The above excerpt, which began her testimony, speaks to the very real fear victims feel about coming forward. Moreover, however, Raisman's words attest to the strength and courage victims gain from hearing others speak and also to the healing power of witnessing. Raisman and the other women who were once rendered powerless by Nassar's actions found power in each other's voices. Raisman is just one of many survivors who credits her courage to speak to the women who told their story before her.



Raisman’s testimony, in conjunction with those of other victims, also speaks to the concept of restorative justice. At Nassar’s sentencing hearing, Judge Rosemarie Aquilina opened the floor to any victims and their family members to speak for however long they wanted. More than 140 people made statements taking up a full seven days. Judge Aquilina emphasized that she wanted this sentencing hearing to be a place of healing for victims, a place where they could tell their stories and confront their offender without the follow up of a defense lawyer’s questions. While Nassar’s trial and sentencing was not a true example of restorative justice, allowing victims and their families the space and time to speak is one important aspect.

Restorative justice brings together all affected parties of a crime—offenders, victims, and community members—to openly discuss how offenders can be held accountable and make amends in a way that satisfies victims and other affected community members. When Betsy DeVos officially rescinded the “Dear Colleagues” letter that shaped university responses to sexual assault cases, she simultaneously authorized universities to implement restorative justice when responding to sexual assault. Amy Cyphert’s article, “The Devil Is in the Details: Exploring Restorative Justice as an Option for Campus Sexual Assault Responses under Title IX,” explains why such a move was controversial. Supporters view restorative justice as a promising means of helping victims attain reparations where the traditional legal process might otherwise fail, while opponents argue that victims may be pressured to choose restorative justice recourse and that this approach fails to truly hold perpetrators accountable. Cyphert maintains that victims should be empowered to make a choice that is best for their recovery.

The final course module addresses the importance of honoring victims’ needs. After students have read the primary texts of the course and been guided to a place of readerly empathy, the final module seeks to move the conversation from the fictional world to the real

world. Not only will students reflect on the lessons from the course texts, but these lessons will be reinforced by guest speakers—practicing trauma therapists, psychologists, and/or victim advocates—who can provide further insight into the importance of supporting victims who come forward through trauma informed care and empathy. Then, students will be asked to apply these lessons to an imagined dialog between themselves and a friend who tells them they have been sexually assaulted or raped.

The Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network (RAINN) provides a tip sheet for talking to survivors. They emphasize many of the same lessons students have learned throughout the course in terms. First, empathetic responders should respond with statements of belief. In *The Bluest Eye*, Toni Morrison provides a clear contrast between victims who are believed and those who are not. When Pecola tells her mother what Cholly has done the first time, Pauline doesn't believe her daughter and so Pecola doesn't tell her when it happens again. Pecola tells her other self "I did tell her....She didn't believe me when I told her....She wouldn't have believed me [the second time] either" (Morrison 200). Pauline's response stands in sharp contrast to the MacTeer's response to Frieda when she tells them she is sexually assaulted by Mr. Henry. Mr. and Mrs. MacTeer respond with immediate belief. Looking back on the juxtaposition of these characters' experiences, Morrison's novel can help guide students to a response of belief.

Second, RAINN suggests that listeners respond by reminding victims that they are not to blame. Students may be inclined to ask questions that reflect implicit bias towards victims of sexual assault, questions about where the victim was and why they were there, what they were wearing and their relationship with the perpetrator. Empathetic listeners, however, should avoid these questions while still offering victims a chance to speak about the details. They can tell victims that the details of the story have nothing to do with the fact that they are blameless but

can also offer to listen. Saying something like, “if you want to talk about what happened, I am here to listen.” In *The Rape of Sita*, Sita helps Mowski clean the blood from her arms and shoulders but she does not force her to explain what happened. Instead she offers Mowski soup and says, “Here is soup, Mowski, leaf soup made with rice water. I hear your every word. Your quiet strong words” (Collen 194). Sita knows that Mowski has been raped by her husband and beaten by the villagers when she publicly accuses him. Mowski has not spoken about any of this directly to Sita, but Sita, having been a victim herself, acknowledges Mowski’s silence as a form of communication. Empathetic listeners can remember lessons about the unspeakable nature of trauma and honor victims’ silence.

Remembering how trauma is experienced and processed, empathetic listeners should also recognize that each person responds to trauma differently. The three victim-centered novels students have read throughout the course—*The Wars* by Timothy Findley; *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison; and *The Rape of Sita* by Susan Collen—all portrayed characters’ experiences of and responses to trauma in different ways. Robert Ross tries to fight and eventually passes out from the physical and emotional trauma; Cholly silently follows the men’s orders to continue having sex; Pecola freezes and cannot speak; and Sita acquiesces to Rowan in order to avoid further physical harm or death. All of these reactions to trauma are natural. Empathetic listeners can help victims understand that each and every response is valid. Whether a victim screams for help or freezes in silence; immediately tells someone or waits for years; acts like nothing happened or exhibits symptoms of mental illness, their response to trauma is normal. If victims choose to share their story, empathetic listeners can respond with affirmative statements like, “it makes sense that you didn’t want to tell anyone until you were ready” or “It’s okay; lots of

people respond to trauma by freezing.” Helping victims acknowledge their trauma responses as acceptable and normal aids them in seeing their experiences as valid.

Addressing victims’ feelings of isolation is another concern for RAINN which suggests that people respond to victims by reminding them that there are others who can understand and share in their experience of trauma. As students will remember from *The Wars*, Robert Ross’s feelings of isolation as a male victim of rape by his own military brothers left him without recourse to come forward. In *The Bluest Eye*, Cholly, too felt a sense of isolation. For these two characters, the consequences of their isolation were dire. In *The Rape of Sita*, however, Sita finds comfort in Mowski whom she calls “Everywoman” (194). As she contemplates writing the book about “Who was Raped Before?,” Sita looks back at the stories of others and while she is angered and frustrated by the history of perpetual violence against women, she knows she is not alone. She tells Mowski as they discuss what to do that they can find courage in the women before them and from each other: “your courage makes my courage....For without you and your courage, and without past women and their courage...what would become of the future?” (Collen 196). RAINN’s final suggestion is to thank victims for confiding and sharing their story. Acknowledging victims’ stories and the strength it takes to speak about this trauma is important, as the conversation between Mowski and Sita also attests.

One aspect missing from RAINN’s tip sheet that I argue is important for empathetic listeners to keep in mind is honoring victims’ needs. Rebecca Campbell et al.’s study, “Adolescent Sexual Assault Victims’ Experiences with SANE-SARTs and the Criminal Justice System,” explains the detrimental effects of unwanted reports—that is, reports about sexual assault made by an outside party against the victim’s wishes or self-reports made under pressure. Campbell explains that in such cases, while the outside party felt they were doing the right thing

by pressuring the victim to report or reporting the crime themselves, victims' recovery was negatively impacted. Empathetic listeners must keep in mind that the victim needs to make their own choices for how to respond.

In this conversation about respecting victims' responses to trauma, students will be reminded of Sita's struggle with how to respond to newfound memories of her rape. Sita contemplates going to the police to report the rape or killing Rowan out of revenge. She clearly looks for a way to restore what has been lost, to repair the damage this trauma has caused. However, she understands that a trial may not end in her favor and that killing Rowan won't do any good. When Sita finally tells her friend about the rape eight years after it occurred, Devina tells her that it is understandable that she didn't come forward before and admits that she and the others women may have pressured Sita to make a decision that wasn't the best for her:

'Maybe,' Devina said, 'your All Women's Front friends, including me, would have gone on and on at you to go to the police in Reunion and press charges and go for a court case....You understood it. I, for one, didn't know it then. I only know it now. You knew it then. At that time, you would have judged the situation correctly, Sita....I know what I would have said: "Go ahead with a case." But what would we have done?' (181)

Devina emphasizes having trust in victims to practice self-care and do what is best for them. Empathetic listeners can encourage and empower victims by asking them what they need, what they want to happen, and how the empathetic listener can help. RAINN suggests that listeners provide victims with information about local resources for sexual assault victims. Empathetic listeners can follow up victims' needs statement with referrals to these resources if they are requested, offers to accompany the victim somewhere like the campus victim advocacy office, or by simply honoring their stories through responsive witnessing.

Because there are many ways that implicit bias can appear in speech and nonverbal language, the final assignment for this course asks students to write a script for responding to an imagined sexual assault victim then play out the script either in a small group or as a class. This project provides an opportunity to celebrate empathetic responses, share ideas for how to convey empathy and care, and adjust any language that may be problematic. Students will thus finish out the course with a practical means of applying empathy they've gained through literary engagement to real world situation

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## **APPENDICES**



## Appendix A: Studies on Empathy and Literature

**Table A:** Peer-reviewed empirical studies and literature reviews of empirical studies of fiction/literature reading and empathy, mentalization (Theory of Mind), perspective taking, and/or emotional transportation from the fields of neuroscience, psychology, social studies, literature, and education.

Citation	Study Summary
<p>Argo, Jennifer J., et al. "Fact or Fiction: An Investigation of Empathy Differences in Response to Emotional Melodramatic Entertainment." <i>Journal of Consumer Research</i>, vol. 34, no. 5, Feb. 2008, pp. 614–623.</p>	<p>Three studies used short stories with varying degrees of fictionality and literary elements included to assess the impact of trait empathy (assessed prior to study) on consumer response to melodramatic entertainment. Serendipitous findings from the experiment found links between high empathy, transportation, and fiction over nonfiction.</p>
<p>Bal, P Matthijs, and Martijn Veltkamp. "How Does Fiction Reading Influence Empathy? An Experimental Investigation on the Role of Emotional Transportation." <i>PloS one</i> Vol. 8, No. 1, 2013.</p>	<p>Researchers conducted two studies of a combined 163 participants to determine if emotional transportation through reading non-fiction vs. fiction increases empathy for 1 week. Readers who were emotional transported via fiction became more empathetic when non-fiction exhibited no-increase and decreased empathy.</p>
<p>Berns, Gregory S et al. "Short- and Long-Term Effects of a Novel on Connectivity in the Brain." <i>Brain Connectivity</i>, Vol. 3, No. 6, 2013, pp. 590-600.</p>	<p>21 participants received resting-state fMRIs for 19 consecutive days. The first 5 days established a baseline. Participants then read 1/9th of a novel for 9 days and received a resting-state fMRI 12 hours after reading. fMRIs continued for 7 more days. Results showed increased, long-term connectivity in areas of the brain associated with perspective taking.</p>
<p>Black, Jessica E. and Jennifer L. Barnes. "The Effects of Reading Material on Social and Non-Social Cognition." <i>Poetics</i>, Vol. 52, Oct 2015, pp. 32– 43.</p>	<p>This study sought to replicate Kidd and Castano's 2013 study (above) regarding reading genre and mentalization. Data from sixty participants reflected the findings by Kidd and Castano.</p>

Table A: Empathy and Literature Studies Continued

<p>Bouley, Theresa M. and Pheobe Godfry. "Reading Outside the Boundaries: Children's Literature as Pedagogy for Empathy and Understanding of Social Justice in the College Classroom." <i>The Journal of Effective Teaching</i>, Vol. 8, No. 1, 2008, pp. 33-41.</p>	<p>Students at a small liberal arts college taking a class on Deviance watched the film <i>Corrections</i> (2001) about juvenile corrections facilities. Course discussion about the film followed. Students then read Toni Morrison's <i>The Big Box</i> (1999). Researchers documented changes in students' empathetic responses to juvenile delinquency following a discussion of the fictional work.</p>
<p>Braun, I. K. and G. J. Cupchick. "Phenomenological and Quantitative Analyses of Absorption in Literary Passages." <i>Empirical Studies of the Arts</i>, Vol. 19, No. 1, Jan. 2001, p. 85.</p>	<p>24 participants (12 male, 12 female) read two literary passages with contrasting emotional and descriptive styles and rated them on an 11-item questionnaire. They then engaged in a follow up interview. Both the questionnaire and interviews were coded for reading comprehension, reader absorption, empathy, and sympathy. More literary passages led to increases reader comprehension, absorption, and empathy.</p>
<p>Cupchik, Gerald C., et al. "Emotional Effects of Reading Excerpts from Short Stories by James Joyce." <i>Poetics: Journal of Empirical Research on Culture, the Media and the Arts</i>, Vol. 25, No. 6, June 1998, pp. 363-77.</p>	<p>48 participants in 4 groups read James Joyce excerpts with contrasting styles and emotional themes. Groups were instructed to read either as as spectator or while identifying with the protagonist. Participants reported their emotional experiences in terms of time ("fresh emotions" or "emotional memories") and feelings experienced. Readers directed to empathize with the protagonist experienced fresh memories and feelings akin to those of the protagonist.</p>
<p>Djikic, Maja. "Reading Other Minds: Effects of Literature on Empathy" <i>Scientific Study of Literature</i>, Vol. 3, No. 1, 2013, pp. 28-47.</p>	<p>100 participants completed a questionnaire packet that measured reading habits (including genre), personality traits, and affective and cognitive empathy. They then read a nonfiction essay or a fictional short story and were retested using an additional non-self-report empathy scale. Participants who read the short story had increased cognitive empathy and readers who read more fiction had higher affective and cognitive empathy scores.</p>

Table A: Empathy and Literature Studies Continued

<p>Djikic, Maja, et al. "On Being Moved By Art: How Reading Fiction Transforms the Self." <i>Creativity Research Journal</i>, Vol. 21, 2009, pp. 24-29.</p>	<p>166 participants completed several questionnaires including the Big Five Inventory (BFI) and an emotion checklist. The experimental group read a short story by Chekhov while the control group read a documentary/factual report that followed the story. Participants then retook the BFI and emotion checklist hidden within a new set of questionnaires. The experimental group showed significantly greater changes in empathy and other tested emotions/traits.</p>
<p>Drag, Wojciech. "Cutting to the Chase: Microfictions, Empathy and the New Sincerity." <i>Brno Studies in English</i>, vol. 44, no. 1, Jan. 2018, pp. 103–118.</p>	<p>24 participants read five microfictions by David Foster Wallace and Dave Eggers and then answered two follow up questions regarding empathy for the characters and connection to the fictional works. Researchers analyzed results to find connections between narration style, literary elements, and empathy.</p>
<p>Fjällström, E., &amp; L. Kokkola. "Resisting Focalisation, Gaining Empathy: Swedish Teenagers Read Irish Fiction." <i>Children's Literature in Education: An International Quarterly</i>, Vol. 46, No. 4, Dec. 2015, pp. 394–409.</p>	<p>35 students were asked to read a story written from a first person point of view and rewrite it from another character's point of view. The rewritten stories were coded and analyzed and follow-up interviews with six students were conducted.</p>
<p>Hakemulder, F. <i>Moral Laboratory: Experiments Examining the Effects of Reading Literature on Social Perception and Moral Self-Concept</i>. John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2000.</p>	<p>Hakemulder reviewed and synthesized empirical studies on literature and empathy conducted before 1999.</p>
<p>Johnson, Dan R. "Transportation Into a Story Increases Empathy, Prosocial Behavior, and Perceptual Bias Toward Fearful Expressions." <i>Personality and Individual Differences</i>, Vol. 52, No. 2, Jan. 2012, pp. 150-155.</p>	<p>In Study 1, 62 participants read a story written exclusively to promote compassion then completed various followup tests including The Positive and Negative Affect Scale (PANAS), a likert scale assessing readers' transportation into the story, and a test to assess prosocial behavior wherein the examiner dropped their pen and recorded whether or not the participant helped pick it up. In Study 2, 32 participants completed the same tasks/tests and an emotional perception task was added. Results showed that greater transportation in the story increased empathy and prosocial behavior.</p>

Table A: Empathy and Literature Studies Continued

<p>Johnson, Dan R. “Transportation Into Literary Fiction Reduces Prejudice Against and Increases Empathy for Arab-Muslims.” <i>Scientific Study of Literature</i>, Vol. 3, No. 1, 2013, pp. 77-92.</p>	<p>Group 1 67 participants read a literary story with transportation elements about a counter-stereotype Muslim woman while a control group of 102 participants read a non-transportation version of the story. Group exhibited increased empathy for Arabs post intervention.</p>
<p>Johnson, Dan R., et al. “Potentiating Empathic Growth: Generating Imagery While Reading Fiction Increases Empathy and Prosocial Behavior.” <i>Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts</i>, Vol. 7, No. 3, Aug. 2013, pp. 306–312.</p>	<p>Ninety-eight participants read the same short story but were randomly assigned to either focus on the imagery of the narrative, pay attention to semantics, or read leisurely. Participants who read with a focus on imagery were significantly more transported into the story and reported higher levels of empathy. These readers were over 3 times more likely to exhibit prosocial behavior than those who read leisurely.</p>
<p>Kidd, D. C., and E. Castano. “Reading Literary Fiction Improves Theory of Mind.” <i>Science</i>, Vol. 342, no. 6156, 2013, pp. 377–380.</p>	<p>Kidd and Castano conducted 5 experiments to assess if and how reading influences affective and cognitive mentalization/ToM. Groups were assigned to read pop-culture fiction, literary fiction, non-fiction, or nothing. The study found that reading literary fiction most enhanced both affective and cognitive ToM in comparison to other groups.</p>
<p>Kidd, David., and Emmanuel Castano. “Reading Literary Fiction and Theory of Mind: Three Preregistered Replications and Extensions of Kidd and Castano (2013).” <i>Social Psychological and Personality Science</i>, Vol. 10, No. 4, 2019, pp. 522-531.</p>	<p>Kidd and Castano replicated their earlier 2013 study with three new extensions to confirm their earlier findings and assess if popular fiction characters were more easy to mentalize than literary fiction. Their results confirmed those of their earlier study but there was no statistical difference between popular fiction and literary fiction characters in increasing true belief mentalization.</p>
<p>Koopman, Emy M. “<u>Effects of ‘Literariness’ on Emotions and on Empathy and Reflection After Reading.</u>” <i>Psychology of Aesthetics Creativity and the Arts</i>, Vol. 10, No. 1, 2016, pp. 82-98.</p>	<p>142 participants were randomly assigned one of three versions of an excerpt about child loss from a literary novel: the original excerpt and two modified versions with varying degrees of foregrounding and other literary elements removed. Participants who read the original version scored higher on empathy than those who read the modified versions.</p>

Table A: Empathy and Literature Studies Continued

<p>Koopman, Emy M. &amp; Hakemulder, F. “Effects of Literature on Empathy and Self-Reflection: A Theoretical-Empirical Framework.” <i>Journal of Literary Theory</i>, Vol. 9, No. 1, 2015, pp. 79-111.</p>	<p>A literary analysis of existing studies of literature’s impact on empathy and self-reflection that informs their argument for how and when literature succeeds in increasing reader empathy and self-reflection.</p>
<p>Koopman, Emy M., et al. “Reader Responses to Literary Depictions of Rape.” <i>Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts</i>, Vol. 6, No. 1, 2012, pp. 66-73.</p>	<p>34 participants read one of four representations of rape written with varying combinations of explicit/allusive detail and aesthetic/non-aesthetic style and wrote free-responses which were evaluated for experienced distance, perceptions of realism and of beauty, emotional versus intellectual reaction, empathy, tension, and arousal. Aesthetic texts with explicit detail were met with higher empathy.</p>
<p>Koopman, Emy M. “Empathic Reactions After Reading: The Role of Genre, Personal Factors and Affective Responses.” <i>Poetics. Journal of Empirical Research on Culture, the Media and the Arts</i>, Vol. 50, June 2015, pp. 62-79.</p>	<p>210 participants read two texts from one of multiple genres (expository, life narrative, literary narrative). Researchers assessed how text genre, personal factors (trait empathy, personal experience, exposure to literature), and affective responses during reading (sympathy/empathy) influence empathic understanding and pro-social behavior.</p>
<p>Koopman, Emy M. “How Texts About Suffering Trigger Reflection: Genre, Personal Factors, and Affective Responses.” <i>Psychology of Aesthetics Creativity and the Arts</i>, Vol. 9, No. 4, 2015, pp. 430-441.</p>	<p>210 participants read two texts from one of multiple genres (expository, life narrative, literary narrative) both about grief and depression one week apart. After each week participants completed a questionnaire. Narrative texts had longer lasting effects on reflection and results confirm earlier evidence that narrative texts lead to more emotional experiences and reflection.</p>
<p>Kuzmičová, Anežka, et al. “Literature and Readers’ Empathy: A Qualitative Text Manipulation Study.” <i>Language and Literature: Journal of the Poetics and Linguistics Association</i>, vol. 26, no. 2, May 2017, pp. 137–152.</p>	<p>Researchers conducted a qualitative analysis to explore how literariness affects empathy in readers. Thirty-seven participants read one of two versions of a short story with different degrees of literariness. Participants’ written responses were assessed for indications of empathy.</p>

Table A: Empathy and Literature Studies Continued

<p>Liao, Hung-Chang, and Ya-huei Wang. "The Application of Heterogeneous Cluster Grouping to Reflective Writing for Medical Humanities Literature Study to Enhance Students' Empathy, Critical Thinking, and Reflective Writing." <i>BMC Medical Education</i>, Vol. 16, No. 234, 2016.</p>	<p>Over a 15-week period, 47 participants took a literature course in the medical humanities while a control group (n=47) took a course that did not include literature but the same content otherwise. Pre and post intervention, participants completed an Empathy Scale in Patient Care (ES-PC), a critical thinking disposition assessment (CTDA-R), and a reflective writing test. Collected data was assessed for increased empathy. Behavioral empathy increased only in the intervention group while intelligent empathy increased in both groups.</p>
<p>Mar, Raymond A. et al. "Bookworms Versus Nerds: Exposure to Fiction Versus Non-Fiction, Divergent Associations with Social Ability, and the Simulation of Fictional Social Worlds." <i>Journal of Research in Personality</i>, 40, 2006, pp. 694-712.</p>	<p>94 participants completed an Author Recognition Test specifically designed to include both fiction and non-fiction authors and The Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI) designed to measure traits like empathy. Fiction readers scored higher on empathetic concern and perspective taking than non-fiction readers in the study.</p>
<p>Mar, Raymond A. et al. "Exploring the Link Between Reading Fiction and Empathy: Ruling Out Individual Differences and Examining Outcomes." <i>Communications</i>, Vol. 34, 2009, pp. 407-428.</p>	<p>The researchers sought to replicate the findings of their 2006 study (above) while ruling out other factors for their findings. The participants were assessed for traits of openness, the tendency to be drawn into stories, and gender before participating. Controlling these possibly influential variables, the study was completed in the same way as the 2006 study. Mar et al found that fiction exposure still correlated with empathy. Results were in line with those of their previous study.</p>
<p>Mar, Raymond A. "The Neural Bases of Social Cognition and Story Comprehension." <i>Annual Review of Psychology</i>, Vol. 62, 2011, pp. 103– 134.</p>	<p>A literature review and Meta-analysis of existing fMRI and PET studies related to Theory of Mind (ToM)/mentalization and perspective taking/empathy. Twenty-three of the analyzed studies specifically used fiction/literature. These story-based stimuli better illuminated regions of the brain associated with ToM and perspective taking than studies that used other stimuli like music, art, and non-fiction texts.</p>

Table A: Empathy and Literature Studies Continued

<p>Mar, Raymond A. et al. "Emotion and Narrative Fiction: Interactive Influences Before, During, and After Reading." <i>Cognition and Emotion</i>, Vol. 25, 2011, pp. 818-833.</p>	<p>Literature review of empirical research related to fiction reading and emotional responses.</p>
<p>Malecki, Wojciech, et al. "Can Fiction Make Us Kinder to Other Species? The Impact of Fiction on pro-Animal Attitudes and Behavior." <i>Poetics</i>, Vol. 66, Feb. 2018, pp. 54-63.</p>	<p>Three studies were conducted to investigate the effects of narrative empathy on pro-animal attitudes after 1 week (Study 1, n=62), 2 months (Study 2, n=410), and in practical action for animals (Study 3, n-186). Study 1 was positive while Studies 2 and 3 were negative, but results gave researchers cause to retest (See Malecki et al 2019, below).</p>
<p>Malecki, Wojciech, et al. "Feeling for Textual Animals: Narrative Empathy across Species Lines." <i>Poetics</i>, Vol. 74, June 2019, pp. 1-8.</p>	<p>Three different narratives were given to 209 participants in order to test whether narrative empathy for animals improved behavioral empathy (measured in attitudes toward animals and their welfare). The results were positive.</p>
<p>Mangen, Anne, et al. "Empathy and Literary Style: A Theoretical and Methodological Exploration." <i>Orbis Litterarum</i>, vol. 73, no. 6, Dec. 2018, pp. 471-486</p>	<p>Eighty-one participants from three Nordick countries read one of two versions of Katherine Mansfield's short story "The Fly" (the original or a version without literary devices). In the first session, participants' reading comprehension skills were assessed along with baseline empathy through the Reading the Mind in the Eyes Test (RMET). Three weeks later, participants read the assigned version of "The Fly" and completed adapted versions of the Narrative Engagement Scale, the Story-World Absorption Scale, and the RMET. Correlations between reading experience, transportation, and empathy were observed, though others could not be tested due to sample size.</p>
<p>Mohammadzadeh, Behbood, et al. "Enhancing Disability Awareness and Empathy through Children's Literature about Characters with Disabilities: A Cognitive Stylistic Analysis of Rodman Philbrick's <i>Freak The Mighty</i>." <i>Quality and Quantity</i>, Vol. 53, No. 1, 2018, pp. 583-598.</p>	<p>Six participants read Rodman Philbrick's <i>Freak The Mighty</i> in accordance with Text World Theory. Reader Response interviews followed and were analyzed for indicators of empathy for disabled characters.</p>

Table A: Empathy and Literature Studies Continued

<p>Peer, Willie van, and Henk Pander Maat. "Narrative Perspective and the Interpretation of Characters' Motives." <i>Language and Literature: Journal of the Poetics and Linguistics Association</i>, Vol. 10, No. 3, Aug. 2001, pp. 229–41.</p>	<p>Expanding on their 1995 study about literary perspectives and character sympathy, Peer and Pander Maat use this study to see if the same manipulated materials resulted in not just varying sympathy but different interpretations of the story and the characters' actions as either egotistically or legitimately motivated. Their study led to insights on narrative and readerly empathy.</p>
<p>Pereira, Pires et al. "Turning Ideologies Inside Out: Developing Young Readers' Empathy for Critical Voices in Narrative Fiction." <i>Changing English: Studies in Culture and Education</i>, Vol. 21, No. 4, 2014, pp. 359-370.</p>	<p>Researchers conducted a critical discourse analysis (according to John Stephen's methodology) to assess changes in adolescent readers' empathy for literary characters over time.</p>
<p>Pino, Maria Chiarri and Monica Mazza. "The Use of 'Literary Fiction' to Promote Mentalizing Ability. <i>PloS One</i>, Vol. 11, No. 8, 2016.</p>	<p>Replicating Kidd and Castano's 2013 study, Pino and Mazza assigned 214 participants one reading from either literary fiction, nonfiction, or science fiction genres and assessed participants' mentalization and empathy abilities before and after. In line with Kidd and Castano's findings, fiction readers scored higher on empathy and mentalization in posttests than their non-fiction counterparts.</p>
<p>Riquelme, Enrique, and Ignacio Montero. "Improving Emotional Competence Through Mediated Reading: Short Term Effects of a Children's Literature Program." <i>Mind, Culture, and Activity</i>, Vol. 20, No. 3, 2013, pp. 226-239.</p>	<p>92 children participated in an early intervention program aimed at increasing children's emotional competence using literature. Researchers measured facial emotion recognition, empathy, and emotional lability as dependent variables. The experimental groups outperformed the control groups in all three areas.</p>
<p>Samur, D., Tops, M., &amp; Koole, S. L. (2017). "Does a Single Session of Reading Literary Fiction Prime Enhanced Mentalising Performance? Four Replication Experiments of Kidd and Castano (2013)." <i>Cognition and Emotion</i>, Vol. 32, 2017, pp. 130– 144.</p>	<p>In four studies of a combined 1006 participants, Samur and Koole sought to replicate findings from Kidd and Castano's 2013 study. Their study failed to confirm that a single reading session enhanced mentalization abilities but confirmed that longterm fiction reading habits had a positive impact on mentalization and empathy.</p>



Table A: Empathy and Literature Studies Continued

<p>Schrijvers, Marloes, et al. “Transformative Dialogic Literature Teaching Fosters Adolescents’ Insight into Human Nature and Motivation.” <i>Learning and Instruction</i>, Vol. 63, Oct. 2019.</p>	<p>Qualitative and quantitative data was collected from 332 participants in two separate groups to assess how Transformative Dialogic Literature Teaching (TDLT) affected empathy and insight into human nature. Data from 166 participants in the TDLT group vs. 166 participants in the control illuminated that TDLT fostered empathy and insight into human nature.</p>
<p>Stansfield, John and Louise Bunce. “The Relationship Between Empathy and Reading Fiction: Separate Roles for Cognitive and Affective Components.” <i>Journal of European Psychology Students</i>, Vol. 5, No. 3, 2014, pp. 9-18.</p>	<p>Researchers examined the relationship between lifetime fiction reading exposure, narrative transportation, and empathy. Thirty-three participants completed questionnaires (including the Author Recognition Test, the Interpersonal Reactivity Index, the Transportation Index, and the Affective Empathy Index), before and after reading a fictional short story previously used in a classroom setting by Susan Keen. Researchers found a correlation between high fiction readership and cognitive empathy and that experiences of transportation led to affective empathy.</p>
<p>Tabullo AJ, et al. “Associations Between Fiction Reading, Trait Empathy and Theory of Mind Ability.” <i>International Journal of Psychology &amp; Psychological Therapy</i>, Vol. 18, No. 3, 2018, pp. 357-370</p>	<p>Researchers replicated the Reading the Mind in the Eyes task for a non-white, hispanic group of 208 participants to assess if the positive correlation between empathy and reading held true for a specific non-caucasian group. Findings were consistent with previous studies.</p>
<p>Vezzali, Loris, et al. “The Greatest Magic of Harry Potter: Reducing Prejudice.” <i>Journal of Applied Social Psychology</i>, Vol. 45, No. 2, Feb. 2015, pp. 105-121.</p>	<p>Three studies amongst elementary, high school, and university students sought to test whether reading the Harry Potter series improves attitudes (empathy, sympathy, acceptance, compassion) toward stigmatized groups (immigrants, homosexuals, refugees). Results supported the main hypothesis that reading Harry Potter increased positive attitudes towards stigmatized groups.</p>

## **Appendix B: Classroom Activities and Discussion Prompts for John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman***

1. Students will watch Dr. Bryan T. Marks' video on Implicit Bias and take at least one of the Harvard Implicit Association tests at [implicit.harvard.edu](http://implicit.harvard.edu). Follow up class discussion: What do you know or believe you know about victims of sexual assault, either those who report or those that do? What do you know or believe you know about perpetrators of sexual assault? What percentage of victims who come forward are telling the truth? How do you know these things about victims and perpetrators? Popular portrayals on television or in movies? What you've heard about high profile rape cases? How peers have responded and spoken about victims who come forward?
2. What is your initial perception of Sarah? What information from the novel informs your thoughts of her? What is the community's perception of Sarah? What information informs the public's opinion of her?
3. How would you characterize Victorian beliefs about women? How do these beliefs compare to popular perceptions about women today?
4. Realworld application: Assign students in small groups a recent case of sexual assault known to the public. Have students use their social media skills to find tweets and comments on Facebook posts or articles. How do commenters respond to victims? Is there evidence of the victim blaming characterizations (slut/whore, liar, mentally ill, confused, regretful)? How do commenters respond to the perpetrator? Come together as a class and write some common found language on the board.
5. After reading the account of the trial of Emile de la Ronciere including in the novel, prompt students to discuss their thoughts on Marie de Morell and de la Ronciere in regards to what they know or think happened, the characters' respective blameworthiness and guilt, and the effects of this story on how readers characterize la Ronciere and de Morrell. Ask, what are you inclined to believe about la Ronciere and Marie de Morrell? Following this conversation, hand out the pages from Floriot's work that are cited in Fowles' endnote. Help students construct a timeline of the event and what actually happened. Does this information about the night of Marie de Morrell's assault influence or change your perception of Marie de Morrell and/or la Ronciere? Why/how? What purpose does it serve within the novel to only include the version of the story wherein la Ronciere is exonerated? Why does Fowles include the Trial de la Ronciere in his text? What effect(s) does it have that he provides readers information about the trial only snippets at a time? Why doesn't he include Floriot's revelation about the event? Did Fowles fairly portray this historic case? Why might he choose to withhold the full story?
6. How does Fowles' novel capture a shift in society's view of women who report a sexual assault?

7. What is Fowles' purpose for including Matthaei's work on deceptive and mentally ill women? How is this nonfiction text meant to influence the reader's experience of the story world?
8. Can you point to details or quotes from inside the novel that influence or support your reading of Sarah? If not, what outside factors might be influencing your judgement and perception?
9. How does reading Matthaei's book complicate Charles' feelings for Sarah and his interpretation of her intentions? Are his interpretations based upon Sarah's actions or his own internal reactions?
10. Discussions around female sexuality are changing, but our culture is still fraught with stereotypes and assumptions about women's sexual behavior. What are some of these beliefs or assumptions? How might these ideas or our implicit bias inform a reading of Sarah in this ending?
11. Why Does Charles assume that Sarah must have a romantic partner or interest? How are his assumptions influenced by Victorian attitudes towards women?
12. What is the impact of the different endings on how readers view Sarah? How fair or accurate are these various responses to Sarah?

### Module 1 Writing Assignment

Choose one of the three endings of *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. How does this ending disrupt or reinforce implicit biases against female victims of sexual assault

OR

How does the community of Lyme's response to Sarah shape or influence her self-perception? Support your argument with concrete evidence from the text.

## Appendix C: Classroom Activities and Discussion Prompts for Timothy Findley's *The Wars*

1. In small groups, ask students to think of a fictional character or a real person that they think of as masculine. What characteristics do they possess that make them masculine? As a class, write a definition of masculinity and list traits students identify as masculine. On the other side of the board, do the same for femininity/feminine traits. Draw students' attention to terms that may have negative connotations and to directly opposing traits.
2. Assign student groups to conduct a close reading of certain pages, chapters, or scenes (ex. the scene in which Robert Ross and Teddy Bulge fight), then ask students to place Robert Ross on the spectrum of masculine and feminine created earlier (above).
3. Why does Heather ask Robert to fight Tom Bryant? What are her expectations of Robert and masculinity?
4. Why does Robert fight Bulge? Is this violent reaction akin to the reaction Heather wanted from Robert? If yes, why or how? If no, why or how not?
5. Why does Robert join the military?
6. What does Findley say about the military and masculinity? How does the military reinforce hegemonic masculinity? What does Robert learn about being a man from his time as a soldier?
7. As the novel continues, how does Robert's character change or evolve? What does he learn about masculinity from being in the military? How does he perform masculinity? Would you now place his character somewhere else on the masculine-feminine spectrum than you had earlier?
8. Read "Trauma and the Freeze Response" by Dr. Leon Seltzer. What are the possible physical responses to trauma?
9. Remind students of the course's accessibility statement. Allow students to read Section 5, Chapter 4 (Robert's rape) individually or in small groups and answer the following questions before coming together as a class to discuss. What is Robert's physical response to what is happening? Does Findley provide details of his mental and emotional responses (his thoughts and feelings)? What might Robert be thinking or feeling during this traumatic experience? What signs are there that this experience is traumatic for Robert?
10. How does Robert's rape affect his masculine identity? What is the symbolism of the Weber?
11. In the aftermath of Robert's rape, how does he respond? Why does he respond this way?
12. What definition of masculinity would be more inclusive of all men and provide room for men to be vulnerable? How might rethinking masculinity help male victims of sexual trauma?

What changes can we make in the real world to help men feel safe to report sexual assault and openly talk about their experiences?

Module 2 Writing Assignment

Trace the evolution of Robert's masculine identity from the beginning of the novel to the end.

OR

Conduct a close reading of Section 5, Chapter 13 (210-213). Why is Robert so intent on saving the horses?

## **Appendix D: Classroom Activities and Discussion Prompts for Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye***

1. Read pages 5-6 as a class. What do we learn from this preface about the narrative to come?
2. Much of the story is told from the perspective of children, namely 9-year-old Claudia. What is the dynamic set up between children and adults?
3. Morrison juxtaposes information about the Breedlove family with stories about other characters within the community like Miss Marie, Maureen Peal, Mr. Henry, China and Maginot Line, and Geraldine and Junior. Assign students in small groups one of these minor characters. What do readers learn from these secondary characters? How do they fit into the community? How do they impact the Breedlove family?
4. When Mr. Henry assaults Frieda, how does her family respond? How does the community respond?
5. Pages 110-131 focus on Pauline Breedlove. Working as a class, perform a character analysis of Pauline. What do we know about her past, her relationship with Cholly, her role as a mother? How does she fit into what we know about trauma?
6. Pages 132-161 provide an in-depth look at Cholly Breedlove. What do we know about Cholly's past? Along with recounting his upbringing as an orphan, Morrison tells readers about a foundational experience in Cholly's past: his sexual assault by threat of force by two white men. What is Cholly's response as this trauma is unfolding? Does he rape Darlene? Is he a victim of rape, too? How does he respond to this trauma? What cognitive, behavior, emotional, social, and existential responses can you identify in the narrative?
7. Morrison provides this extensive look at Cholly's past just before she recounts his rape of his daughter Pecola on pages 161-163. Why does Morrison do this? What effect does this have on reading of Cholly as a perpetrator?
8. Remind students of the course's accessibility statement. Allow students to read pages 161-163 (Pecola's rape) individually or in small groups and answer the following questions before coming together as a class to discuss: Why does Cholly rape Pecola? What evidence is there in the narrative that this is a traumatic experience for Pecola? Why might Morrison have chosen to privilege Cholly's perspective in this scene rather than Pecola's? Does Pecola bear any of the blame for the rape she endures?
9. What is Pauline's response to her daughter when she finds her on the floor following the rape? How does this affect Pecola's response to trauma? Find textual evidence to support your argument.
10. What do we know about Pecola before her rape? Does she change as a result of this trauma? How?

11. What is the community's response to Pecola following the news of her rape and impregnation by Cholly? How is the community's response to Pecola different from their response to Frieda? Does the community play a role in Pecola's breakdown? Why is the community unable to respond to Pecola with care and empathy? How does the community's experiences of trauma affect their response to traumatized individuals?
12. Soaphead church writes a letter to God after Pecola asks him for Blue Eyes. What is his role in the community? Is his desire to help Pecola selfless?
13. Read the final paragraph on page 206. How does this passage reflect (on) the rest of the narrative?

### Module 3 Writing Assignment

Compare Frieda and Pecola's trauma responses and those of the community. What informs these very different reactions?

OR

Analyze Morrison's community as both a community of traumatized people and a traumatized community.

## **Appendix E: Classroom Activities and Discussion Prompts for Susan Collen's *The Rape of Sita***

1. Read pages 1-16 together as a class. Who is the narrator? What is the narrative structure of the novel? What can we expect from this novel in terms of structure and narration?
2. What are the emotions Sita experiences in the scenes Iqbal recounts? What is she experiencing? What do/did you experience while reading these scenes? Why did Collen choose to keep readers in the dark about Sita's rape until more than half way through the novel?
3. Provide students the handout about PTSD signs and symptoms. In small groups, have students identify the signs and symptoms of PTSD in the first 163 pages of the novel.
4. What happens to Sita as she sits on the bus in Reunion? What are her physical and psychological symptoms? Why might she be having this reaction?
5. As Iqbal recounts Sita's rape, he raises several questions about Sita's role in her own victimization. As a class, discuss/answer each question. Why does Iqbal ask these questions? How do these questions reflect implicit bias towards victims or our victim blaming culture?
6. After Sita is hit over the head by Rowan, the narrative changes from Iqbal's voice to that of an omniscient narrator. What effect does this shift have on readers? How does this new narrative style reflect Sita's experience of trauma?
7. In small groups, assign students to research the literary references of the names Sita and Rowan Tarquin. Why might Collen have chosen these names? Do these allusions maintain their original meaning or does Collen invert or change them?
8. Sita agrees to take her own clothes off for Rowan. Why does she do this? Is this an act of consent? How does this act complicate her understanding of her victimization?
9. Sita tells herself on pages 153-154 that her body is just a shell and not really hers. Why does she tell herself this? Does she actually believe this?
10. How does Sita react in the aftermath of the rape? What actions does she contemplate? Why doesn't she report the rape to the Reunion police or kill Rowan?
11. Sita confides in her friend Devina about her rape. How does Devina respond? What can we learn from her response about how we might respond to real life victims?
12. What does it mean to be a witness? Why is witnessing important to both survivors and their communities?
13. What transition has Iqbal gone through as a narrator and character? Can we see him as a lesson in empathy?



14. Why does Sita ask Iqbal to tell her story? What effect does the story have being told by Iqbal instead of Sita?

15. What is Iqbal's vision of the future? Is this attainable?

Module 4 Writing Assignment

How does Sita's identity as an activist influence her response to her rape in both positive and negative ways?

OR

According to Collen's novel, what role does patriarchy play in rape culture?