

The Politics of Touch

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The Politics of Touch: Introduction of Thesis and Project

As I write this introduction, quarantined inside of my apartment in upstate New York due to COVID-19 in 2020, seeing other people infrequently and touching them even less frequently—the meaning of touch has never been so relevant. Like many, I miss the people for whom I love and care. More so maybe, I miss tight hugs, back massages after rough days, sweet embraces, and more. Isolated, I mourn the ability to hold my mother's hand so as to communicate that we are going to be okay and that we will see each other soon enough. Within this worldwide deficit of physical touch during the pandemic, in which something as healing as touch could be the kiss of death, we must find other medicines of comfort. It is my hope and belief that the sense of touch is transient and we will find ways to reach out and touch each other during times of crisis and solitude, when it is most needed.

Through this thesis, I aim to deconstruct and reconstruct what it means to reach out and touch another by analyzing the role of physical touch in literature with a New Historicist approach. In other words, I am reading into the signification of touch within different literary texts while taking into account the text's geographical, historical, and sociological conditions. In a different time, place, and sociocultural climate, the same signifier—such as touch—will necessarily have different significations. Therefore, touch in all of its forms must be read within its individual literary context. Read out of context, communications of touch may be misconstrued and abstracted, resulting in a lack of understanding between individuals, or between readers and the text. As a very affectionate person, I became interested in this topic

when considering what role touch plays in my life, how it communicates or miscommunicates certain messages through the performance of touch, and how these embodied and therefore, coded, messages are read by others. Expanding and reshaping the boundaries of what we consider communication in literature from a Post-Structuralist and New Historicist perspective, an instance of touch within a novel transforms into a story waiting to be read by both the characters and the reader. Through this compelling exploration of the nature and rhetoric of touch in literature, I aim to expand upon the framework of Affect Theory and Materiality Studies as touch is a physical manifestation of an affective experience.

This project benefits from a comparative analysis of literature using a set of texts from different time periods and literary movements in order to survey the contextuality of touch. To create a natural and chronological succession of literary texts, I analyze two different texts from different literary movements. First, I investigate the presence of touch within the English Romantic novel, specifically Frances Burney's *Evelina*, in which Evelina must quickly learn the unspoken social rules within high society life in London that inevitably include the ways we are governed by ideologies surrounding touch. English Romanticism is an interesting place to read into and interpret the signification of touch because of the high sentimentality that characterizes this literary movement. Through my research I have found that the emotional heights of Romanticism translate into embodiment through touch within the literature. The second area of literature I analyze is German Modernism, focusing on Franz Kafka's novella *The Metamorphosis* in which there is a poignant absence of touch. In this absurdist text that emphasizes Gregor Samsa's isolation from humanity as he is turned into a grotesque bug, the lack of touch he receives from the world around him takes on a larger significance when

considering the novel's place in Modernism. The limited presence of touch in *The Metamorphosis* emphasizes both the painful absence of it as well as the desire for it.

Through this project, I aim to answer several questions such as: What is the meaning of touch? What is the role of touch in different literary movements? How can touch be read as a form of embodied word or performative communication? How does the presence and absence of touch come to signify different messages in different literary, historical, geographical, and sociological contexts? Moving forward, how can we adapt our reading practices to take touch into account as a valuable lens? This interrogation of touch—a form of communication and a signifier that is not often questioned or investigated—gestures to that gap in literary analysis and attempts to begin filling it. If readings on touch were explored, it could open up an entirely new field of study and way to navigate literature. With a focus on touch, readers may play with a world of senses in novels, gain a stronger emotional or affective intelligence, and develop a deeper understanding about each text's unique literary context. Reading with a vicarious body (ultimately the goal of this reading practice) enables you to be in an environment when you are not—to touch and be touched by something when you thought it impossible.

Touching The World: Epistemological Approach

In his book, *On Touching—Jean-Luc Nancy*, an exploration of touch and a sort of ode to his late friend and philosopher, Jean-Luc Nancy, Jacques Derrida writes a surreal question that continues to perplex me: “When our eyes touch, is it day or is it night?” (2). Surely, one could look at a clock, a watch, maybe even the sun or moon's position in the sky to find out. Perhaps one does, after their eyes touch, of course. But that is just the thing. For that moment in which

our eyes meet or touch, everything else is secondary. Nothing else matters except for that instance in which my eyes meet yours. If this one-liner teaches me one thing, it is that touch demands attention. With a meticulous eye, I look to moments within literature in which touch cannot be overlooked, bringing this primordial sense into focus.

When our eyes touch, are we seeing or are we feeling? With Derrida's question, he brings both senses into conjunction and leads with touch. Despite the objects that are touching being instruments of visual sight, it is not sight that takes over as the eyes cannot even perceive whether it is day or night, but rather the sense of touch that amplifies a connection being made between the two. In this quest in which I journey through instances and meanings of touch, I cannot escape the epistemological approach of the senses. Through our universal yet simultaneously subjective experiences with our senses, we come to know the world. While the sense of sight is invaluable to human perception, it often dominates epistemological conversations while the sense of touch is backgrounded.

Often when acknowledging the existence or validity of something, we desire a visual proof, something that confirms or denies a belief in the manner of observatory sight. Upheld by the common phrase: *I'll believe it when I see it*, truth and knowledge about the world is so frequently paired with an individual's ability to see it. But where and how does the nature of touch exist within an epistemological context? How can touch lead us towards a deeper knowledge than sight allows for and why is it more or less peripheral than the dominating sense of sight? Arno Boehler, a Vienna-based philosopher says in a lecture:

Whenever I touch something I am convinced by the very evidence of the sense of touch that there exists something else, something *real*, as I have been indeed

touched *by* something. *And this is the very meaning of touching: it gives us a sense of reality.* (Boehler)

Boehler's experiences with the sense of touch are grounded in epistemology, phenomenology, and individual identity. As with sight, though perhaps in a different manner, touch confirms or denies ideas we have about the world around us as we reach out and learn, such as when babies learn about their surroundings nearly through touch alone by exploring different surfaces and objects with their hands and mouths. Phenomenologically, an experience of touch as described by Boehler is two-fold. In other words, the subject is touching the object while simultaneously the subject is being touched by the object. During that moment of contact, both the subject and the object are part of a connective experience. If you are open to an expansive ontology, perhaps in that moment the terms 'subject' and 'object' lose their hierarchies as both are joined in the equalizing event that touch brings forth. As touching something is doubly being touched *by* something, it is an avenue of not only information about the world (the subject touches the object) but also information about oneself (the object touches and affirms something within the subject). Thus, the sense of touch creates a rich instantaneous experience where one learns about the abject other and their own identity.

When this tactile epistemological approach is applied to reading literature, each moment of touch becomes a potential site of knowledge about the characters, of critical analysis concerning sociological conditions, and of self-discovery for the reader. Through reading and touching other contexts, a reader learns just as much about their own identity and context as the one they are reading about. In a literary phenomenological approach to touch, a reader's senses come alive, feeling and learning through the whole body. The attention-grabbing instance of

touch is more than anything an opportunity to learn—what it means, how it feels, what it is to be that person in that situation, and what shapes touch in that text.

The Word Embodied: Reading Touch as Material Communication

Other than being one of the five senses from which we perceive the world, touch also functions as a method of communication. Just as language is a system comprised of signs or signifiers, so too does touch belong to this system. The signifier, a touch, will necessarily carry signified messages to the person receiving the touch. For instance, a hug is a tactile moment of communication between two individuals—it could communicate warmth, greetings, or a combination of messages depending on the sociocultural conditions surrounding the touch and the unspoken codes that govern touch.

Through performing a naturalistic study on the semiotics of touch, Stanley E. Jones and Elaine A. Yarbrough find that touch functions as a cultural code and that it may be more easily decoded through analyzing the specific context of each individual moment of touch. They write that as people move into adulthood:

The impulse to touch and be touched is increasingly funneled through a complex cultural code for tactile behavior. Simply stated, touch becomes part of a symbol system. And...the prerequisite for satisfaction of the need for touch is an understanding of the code. (Jones and Yarbrough 20)

It is these politics of touch that rule our tactile world. Never neutral, touch must be decoded according to this larger symbol system that we all subscribe to on account of our being born into a society with preexisting ideologies. However, depending on who we are, when we are, and

where we are, our symbol system for touch will be different. Therefore, if you do not understand a specific society or culture's politics of touch, you will touch and be touched in ways that are possibly inappropriate and signify false messages.

Jones and Yarbrough agree that a large shortcoming of past research regarding touch is that “the role of context in shaping those meanings has been ignored” (21). In their research they adapted the contextual analysis method, a qualitative approach to note instances of touch as they occur in real life. The investigators took several external factors into consideration such as closeness of relationship, rejection or acceptance of the touch, verbalization accompanying the touch, and so on. Ultimately, while the researchers were looking for the significations of different touches and were able to connect touch to certain motivations such as support, appreciation, inclusion, sexual advances, affection, playfulness, compliance, greetings/departures, etc.—touch does not necessarily have a clear relationship with its intention and must be read alongside its given context. Aligning with this context-based analysis, Jones and Yarbrough write:

It is more reasonable to hypothesize that touches have a variety of rather precise meanings which could be uncovered if the context of each touch, including accompanying verbal statements and other elements of the social situation, were to be examined. (Jones and Yarbrough 21)

This well performed sociological study proposes that the meaning of touch is largely contingent upon contextual elements affecting the situation.

Despite this naturalistic study about touch not being literary in nature but rather sociological, we can still absolutely adopt a similar approach in examining instances of touch

within literature. Jones and Yarbrough's study offers an interesting and incredibly insightful methodology to inspect each touch to yield meaning while considering many contextual forces at play. By honing in on this decoding skill, literature is enriched as touch communication translates into another form of dialogue between characters.

Affective Touch: Constructing Touch Motivated by Affect

While my project investigates instances of touch, it is also deeply concerned with the forces that drive those moments. As I read and felt with my vicarious body as opposed to seeing with my readerly eyes, I noticed the waves of affect that often accompany literary instances of touch. Leaning into this affective turn allows for a richer understanding of the characters, their unmediated emotions, and the sociological conditions that drive physical connection. In bringing attention to touch and its motivational forces, the relationship between affect and the body becomes more interconnected, overcoming the tired dualistic war between mind and body.

Before examining the relationship between touch and affect, it is imperative to first have an understanding of what affect theory is and what it can potentially do. As affect theory is still in its infancy and therefore a developing field of inquiry, the ideas which constitute it are vast and sometimes contradictory. In essence, affect theory emerged as a sort of cure for the debilitating disease of thinking exclusively in binaries that so frequently accompanies Western literary analysis and theoretical approaches; For example, some popular dualisms being mind/body, man/woman, civilization/nature, human/animal, etc. The concept of affect theory deliberately subverts these ingrained cognitive systems by asking deeper questions about the range and experience of human emotion. Affect theory negates the mentality that the mind and

the body are separate entities. When we “feel” something, what is happening? Is it a force or charge within our bodies? Or must our minds first process a bodily feeling for it to become an emotion? The mind and body, these notorious foes, must work together synergistically to create the intense forces of affect. In thinking about emotional experience in its relation to the body, it seems a natural progression to interrogate the affective motivations behind what leads one to touch another.

If affect were to take a physical form, it would certainly manifest as touch. When reading about affect, specifically Brian Massumi’s brand of theory, I noticed something oddly similar about their intense nature—both affect and touch command a certain attention and escape the subject’s narrative. Massumi, one of the key founders of affect theory, writes in his essay “The Autonomy of Affect:” “It [intensity] is a state of suspense, potentially of disruption. It’s like a temporal sink, a hole in time, as we conceive of it and narrativize it. It is not exactly passivity, because it is filled with motion, vibratory motion, resonance” (Massumi 86). In discussing this kind of intensity that characterizes affect, he could just as easily be writing about touch. Like touch, affect is an intense, visceral, non-discursive force that lives in the body. Touch and affect both exist outside of a narrative until, like Massumi believes, we understand and process affect as emotion and then attach a narrative to it. In that affective non-representational state that evades signs, language, and narrative we are moved to motion—we are moved to touch. Despite being separate from or perhaps before signs, affect crystallizes as touch, another immediate and corporeal experience, and then it may be coded and read after the experience.

In *Evelina*, an early Romantic novel, I expect affect to often motivate touch as Romanticism is characterized by a high degree of sentimentality. However, in a Modern text like

The Metamorphosis, it is interesting to note the isolating forces that precede touch as the text is marked by a profound solitude. Carrying the insight of the close connection that affect and touch share, readers may better attune their vicarious bodies to read with meticulous attention. They may begin to ask questions like, ‘What kinds of emotional experiences precede moments of touch in this novel?’ or ‘What motivates a character to reach out for another?’ Awakening the tactile body, reading literature with this skill makes way for a heightened emotional intelligence towards the characters and an enriched sensory experience for the reader.

Sociological Touch: Touching Frances Burney’s *Evelina*

Frances Burney’s novel, *Evelina*, published in 1778 in England during the early Romantic period is deeply entwined with the significations of touch. Surprisingly, *Evelina* is replete with instances of touch despite the common conception of that time period as being rather reserved or modest. Moreover, *Evelina* is an epistolary novel composed solely of letters; The instances of touch present in the novel are not happening as we are reading them, but are narrativized and structured most often by the character Evelina who usually addresses these letters to her father figure, Mr. Villars. In this way, the reader is never truly faced with the moment of touch, but rather its retelling in a controlled epistolary format. Nor are the characters ever physically together—all the novel offers are the letters written back and forth between characters. Through this epistolary format, Burney immediately embeds her novel with a distance and space between the characters. This sense of distance is eradicated each time a character touches another, holding the attention of the touched character and the invested reader so very closely. Perhaps it is this exact distance, or absence of touch as a result of the epistolary

format and social etiquette of the time period, that further emphasizes or draws my attention to the presence of touch within the novel.

The titular character constantly finds herself in uncomfortable social situations in which she endures at best, embarrassment, and at worst, physical assault. Evelina Anville—whose name is an anagram perfectly fit to describe this poor objectified character—is a young woman of sixteen who was raised and educated by Arthur Villars in the modest and unsophisticated countryside of Berry Hill. As she leaves simple Berry Hill and enters fashionable high class London, Evelina must quickly learn what it means to be a woman within this specific social stratification. As a result of her questionable and isolated upbringing, she is often ignorant of socially coded behaviors and suffers greatly for her inappropriate blunders. In an apology to her dear friend, Lord Orville, Evelina says, “I am new to the world, and unused to acting for myself,—my intentions are never willfully blameable, yet I err perpetually!” (Burney 306). Her being “new to the world” is her admittance into this elite society as a single young woman with a limited education and obscure background. Unfortunately, it is this ignorance of nuanced social conduct that leaves Evelina vulnerable to unwanted sexual attention and non-consensual touch. In this new and heady setting of London, Evelina experiences touch shaped entirely by sociological context.

During her first week in London with the Mirvans, trusted friends of Mr. Villars, Evelina has many adventures including going to theatres, gardens, shops, and balls. In public arenas such as these, Evelina’s social ineptitude becomes apparent as she commits several faux pas leading to her confusion, astonishment, and humiliation. At one of the balls, a gentleman who we later know to be Lovel, approaches Evelina “bowing almost to the ground, with a sort of swing, and

waving his hand with the greatest conceit” and says, ““Madam—may I presume?’—and stopt, offering to take my hand...’Allow me, Madam...the honour and happiness”” (Burney 30).

Evelina refuses to give her hand to him in a dance because she simply does not want to dance with him. When he asks her if she has a prior engagement with another gentleman, she denies this and tells him that she will not dance at all (31). Soon after a very handsome gentleman, Lord Orville, “desired to know if I [Evelina] was engaged, or would honour him with my hand” (Ibid.). Evelina then voluntarily joins him in a dance and sits to converse with him despite her trepidation and fear towards strange men. Of course, her first suitor then approaches them and incredulously asks, “May I know to what accident I must attribute not having the honour of your hand?” (34). In response, Evelina “was seized with a fit of laughing, first affronting the poor beau, and then enjoying his mortification” (37). Her laughter, probably a product of her own discomfort, and refusal of a man is socially inappropriate, causing intrigue in her and her character. When Evelina has no answer other than astonishment and laughter he accuses her of harboring ill manners, however, she does not know the unspoken laws that govern public balls, or touch either. For Burney writes as Evelina, “so giddy and heedless I was, that I had not once considered the impropriety of refusing one partner, and afterwards accepting another” (35). It is with these specific rules and codes—that Evelina is faultlessly blind to—that the social space operates. One can only function well in a society where they understand and live by the inherent rules of that sociological context. However, when Evelina tries to work within the system she still slips into unfortunate circumstances due to her limited knowledge of social etiquette.

For instance, Evelina learns from her experience at that ball that it is inappropriate to refuse a man your hand when he asks for a dance. She rather cleverly finds a loophole in this rule

at the next ball she attends by telling another gentleman who “begged to have the honour of dancing” with her that she “was *already engaged*” (Burney 41). While she thought this would allow her the freedom to dance if she chose to, whenever, and with whomever, she was mistaken.

Burney writes:

I suppose my consciousness betrayed my artifice, for he looked at me as if incredulous; and, instead of being satisfied with my answer, and leaving me, according to my expectation, he walked at my side, and...began a conversation...’Is it really possible that a man whom you have honoured with your acceptance, can fail to be at hand to profit from your goodness?’ (Burney 42)

This gentleman is then fiercely determined to help Evelina find her non-existent partner to whom she is already engaged until Evelina can no longer keep up the charade. In an effort to escape him, Evelina seeks refuge with Mrs. Mirvan, who tells her that she “must either go down one dance, or avoid his importunities by returning home” (45). In this ultimatum, Evelina is forced to either dance and be touched by this stranger, or leave the ball altogether. Ultimately, she consents (is it really consent after his constant badgering and Mrs. Mirvan’s instruction?) to give her hand to him for a dance—”And thus was my deviation from truth punished; and thus did this man’s determined boldness conquer” (Ibid.). Her acquiescence to dance with him was not enough; while they were dancing, this gentleman continued to ask questions about Evelina’s partner, trying “every means in his power to make me own that I had deceived him” (Ibid.). Despite Evelina’s efforts to play by the asinine rules of this sociological system that denies women autonomy, she still has to experience non-consensual touch, public embarrassment, and

shame for trying to outsmart her suitor. As a result of these experiences, Evelina learns the contextual rules policing her behavior and her body.

In *Evelina*, if you have not noticed from the aforementioned citations, there is a close relationship between touch and honour. When a gentleman asks for a lady's hand, he asks for the honour of having her hand. The association between touch and honour within this sociocultural context of high class London is reflected in their language. Literally, 'honour' is usually never far away from 'hand' in the novel. Some examples in the text include: "he hoped, he said, that I would again honour him with my hand" (Burney 33), "Lord Orville did me the honour to hand me to the coach, talking all the way of the honour *I* had done *him!*" (36), "the honour of this young lady's hand" (45), etc.. Within the instance of touch, there is an implied honour that the lady gives and the gentleman takes. This is not to say that as a rule governing touch that touch is always in conjunction with honour—that link is a part of the unique code of touch that exists in this specific historical, geographical, and sociological context. In this cocktail of social conditions, a lady may give her hand (and with it her honour) to a gentleman after his prompting, a gentleman may take a lady's hand (though with some impropriety, perhaps), but a lady cannot freely give her hand (thus giving away her honour!). This more or less overt connection between honour and touch communicates much about the signification of touch in the novel and contextual period. For instance, when a gentleman is honoured with or given the honour of a lady's hand, and that honour is taken from her, is the lady now less honourable? Is there an endless reserve of honour in respectable women, or does it get siphoned out the more she is touched by men? The convolution and inherent misogyny of relating honour to touch in this

society leads Evelina to be judged as morally degenerate or less respectable when she is assaulted by men on a dark walk in Vauxhall.

Accompanied by her party consisting of her crude grandmother Madame Duval and her ill-mannered distant cousins, the Branghtons, Evelina goes to Vauxhall, one of the most famous pleasure-gardens in London. After their meal there, her female cousins decide that they would like to have “*a little pleasure*” by taking a stroll down the dark walks of Vauxhall, shaded alleyways that were frequently sites for lovers’ sexual encounters (Burney 196). Evelina advises against this, fearing they will lose the rest of their party in this vast garden, but the Branghton sisters disregard her and so she follows them down the dark alleyway. The shocking scene that follows happens thusly:

By the time we came near the end, a large party of gentlemen, apparently very riotous, and who were hallowing, leaning on one another, and laughing immoderately, seemed to rush suddenly from behind some trees, and, meeting us face to face, put their arms at their sides, and formed a kind of circle, that first stopped our proceeding, and then our retreating, for we were presently entirely enclosed. The Miss Branghtons screamed aloud, and I was frightened exceedingly: our screams were answered with bursts of laughter, and, for some minutes, we were kept prisoners, till, at last, one of them, rudely, seizing hold of me, said I was a pretty little creature. (197)

These blatantly drunk men terrify, trap, and assault Evelina and the Branghton sisters as if they were hunting prey for sport. Social niceties and etiquette are thrown aside as one of the strange men grabs Evelina, violently touching her body without her approbation. She struggles and

manages to be free of him and tries to run out of the alleyway in order to seek light, society, and safety but is “met by another party of men” who taunt her threateningly, as well. Burney writes, “In a moment, both my hands, by different persons, were caught hold of” (Ibid.). In this position, Evelina is controlled by and completely vulnerable to whatever fate these awful men design for her. When she cries aloud for these men to let her pass, who should recognize her voice in this dark alley but Sir Clement Willoughby, an antagonistic character who continually tries to court Evelina despite her clear contempt for him. After she recognizes him also, she pleads for his immediate aid and he disengages the other men, claiming that he has first right to her (198). When they are safely away from these predators, Willoughby asks incredulously, “My dearest creature, what wonder, what strange revolution, has brought you to such a spot as this?” (Ibid.). “Ashamed of my situation, and extremely mortified to be thus recognized by him,” Evelina has no answer to his hypocritical question. She experiences shame and mortification for having been seen by him in the dark walks of Vauxhall, a place notorious for coquetry or sexual advances, yet was he not also there? Willoughby questions what has caused this great condescension in her character that has led her to vice—he shames her for being the kind of woman who enters the dark walks of Vauxhall (a less honourable woman) without even a shred of self assessment that he is the kind of man who assaults women in the same dark walks. Due to the interrelation between touch and honour as well as the code that polices touch which this society upholds, women receive harsh judgement for being touched (even if it was non-consensual) and giving away their honour which is tied to their body, while men remain in the same social station regardless of their predatory behavior.

Under the protection and direction of Willoughby, Evelina is led to another dark alleyway. When she realizes that they are not on their way to seeking her party as she thought they were, she exclaims, “‘Good God!’ I cried, ‘where am I?—what way are you going?—’ ‘Where,’ answered he, ‘we shall be least observed’” (Burney 198). In response, “My heart beat with resentment; I pushed him away from me with all my strength, and demanded how he dared treat me with such insolence?” (199). As a result of her unprotected status and her presence in the dark walks, Willoughby takes advantage of her vulnerability with the ill intention of having her alone with him against her will. As Evelina discovers his intentions and feels such contempt for him growing, a powerful affect causes her to push him away—a forceful touch that subverts the disgraceful way men touch women, and also gives her space to disengage from him and finally find her way out of the alleyways.

When Evelina is reunited with her party, they discover that she and her cousins have been in the dark walks of Vauxhall and question her motivations for being in such a place. She does not answer but rather tells them to make haste in finding the Branghton sisters who got separated from her (Burney 201). Evelina and her time spent in the dark walks catches the attention of Mr. Smith, one of the Branghton sisters’ romantic interests, “who coming suddenly behind me, and freely putting his hands on my shoulders, cried, ‘O ho, my little runaway, have I found you at last? I have been scampering all over the gardens for you’” (202). Mr. Smith’s action of putting his hands on Evelina’s shoulders is the most intimate form of touch present in the novel; Evelina has never been touched like that before, especially not by a strange and improper man such as Mr. Smith. This instance of touch in particular would be impossible to skip over without a proper analysis. Accompanied by verbal flirtation and his hearing of Evelina’s whereabouts in the dark

alleyways, Mr. Smith thinks he can put his hands on Evelina's shoulders because he has a certain perception of her character that is ultimately linked to her lack of honour. As a result of his construction of Evelina as a less honourable woman because she was in the dark walks, he thinks her more accepting of his inappropriate and hasty touching of her shoulders. Evelina endures several accounts of assault and non-consensual touch that day in Vauxhall because of the debilitating politics of touch that govern the sexes in different ways within this social strata.

I have discussed the manner in which touch functions between the sexes, of which in this novel there are plenty of instances, but have not yet mentioned touch between members of the same sex, of which there are much fewer instances in *Evelina*. Between the sexes within this specific context, touch is almost always related to honour, however between members of the same sex, touch may be associated with protection or affective comfort. For example, a woman might seek the protection of another woman and hold her hand or be closely by her side. In *Evelina*, the titular character and her party spend the evening in a garden in which there is a display of fireworks. Distracted by the sights and sounds of the fireworks show, Evelina soon loses her party and is left vulnerable in a crowd of strangers. Then—

a young officer, marching fiercely up to me, said, 'You are a sweet pretty creature,' ...and then, with great violence, he seized my hand. I screamed aloud with fear, and, forcibly snatching it away, I ran hastily up to two ladies, and cried, 'For Heaven's sake, dear ladies, afford me some protection!' They heard me with a loud laugh, but very readily said, 'Ay, let her walk between us;' and each of them took hold of an arm. (Burney 234)

In the face of familiar danger when she is separated from her party, such that she has experienced at other gardens in London, Evelina recoils from a strange man's touch and immediately seeks the touch of other women. She knows that the officer intends her harm and quickly assumes that two other women would sooner save her than harass her, perhaps because as fellow women living in this context, they understand the dangers that come to unaccompanied ladies in public arenas. While the ladies laugh at her predicament and turn out to be antagonizers as well, ultimately imprisoning her through their grip, they do first offer Evelina their protection *through* touch. Each of the ladies acts as a buffer, safeguarding Evelina from harm as she walks between the two of them at their side. Moreover, Evelina expects the same kind of touch—each of her arms being held—to protect and support her in this context, while earlier when Evelina's arms are seized by men, it communicates messages of fear and control over her body. With the same variable in this novel, touch, Evelina holds different expectations from its presence as it exists in different contexts consisting of different variables, such as gender.

Another instance in which Evelina is touched by a woman, it is a touch motivated by affective care when Evelina experiences distress. After a tumultuous scene between Madame Duval and Captain Mirvan, the two most volatile characters in the novel, Madame Duval threatens Evelina if she dares not to obey her. In the charged event that follows, Evelina's friend Miss Mirvan and Sir Clement Willoughby both reach out and touch Evelina, though for different reasons. Burney writes, "Miss Mirvan took my hand, and most kindly endeavoured to raise my spirits: Sir Clement, too, approached me, with an air so interested in my distress...and, taking my other hand, said, 'For Heaven's sake, my dear Madam, compose yourself'" (Burney 87). This affectionate scene is the only instance in which there is a shared touch between Evelina and her

dear friend Miss Mirvan. In response to Evelina's terror and anxiety, Miss Mirvan knows there is nothing she can say to assuage the pain of her friend—she can only hold her hand and be there to comfort and support her. Quite a foil to Miss Mirvan, Willoughby also takes her hand while saying the equivalent of 'calm down' to someone in clear anguish. By bringing attention to these moments of touch, *Evelina* transforms into a rich sociological text that unveils the motivations of characters to reach out and touch another within the context of the late 1700s in high class London. Through this tactile reading practice, I am able to read *Evelina* in a new light and be touched by the character Evelina in a new sense.

Absence of Touch: Touching Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis*

Franz Kafka's novella, *The Metamorphosis*, first published in German in 1915 (although I will be working with the 1961 English edition, translated by Willa and Edwin Muir), is permeated with themes of isolation, alienation, and personal responsibility. Yet it is within this Modernist text that is characterized by separation, distance, and coldness that we see shadows of touch and warmth, profound moments that might have been missed if one were not looking for them. In fact, it is the bleakness of the text that draws my attention to these moments of connection and touch. Despite the touch being more indirect and covert compared to *Evelina*, its abstract presence in a Modernist text illustrates physical touch's indelibility from the human condition. In this absurdist story in which the traveling salesman Gregor Samsa awakens and finds himself transformed into a giant insect, he still manages to hold onto a shred of his humanity through touch. While Gregor Samsa—the insect—must remain inside of his room to avoid terrorizing his human family, he is the most human of them all as he desires their

wellbeing, care, and touch. As *The Metamorphosis* corresponds to Modernism's themes of alienation and individualism through Gregor's transformation and the palpable absence of touch, the minimal but present touch in the story allows the reader to see traces of connection and community that cannot be erased.

From Gregor's perspective within this new and exciting body, his sense of touch becomes heightened as he interacts with the space around him. When he wakes up inhabiting the body of an insect, his body becomes his primary focus as he lays in his bed. Sensory descriptions of his insect body flood the novella, especially in the beginning as he struggles to emerge from bed, a simple quotidian action he has taken every morning of his life in the body of a human. This mundane part of his day is transformed, correlating to his transformed body. Immediately in *The Metamorphosis*, Kafka emphasizes how our bodies and the ways they are touched shape the way we experience this world. Life as an insect is necessarily vastly different from life as a human being based on their differing sensory abilities and perceptions. For instance, Gregor no longer takes the same interest in food as he once did as a human and has much trouble navigating things like doorknobs, but he learns to enjoy his new body and its unique capabilities. Kafka writes:

for mere recreation he had formed the habit of crawling crisscross over the walls and ceiling. He especially enjoyed hanging suspended from the ceiling; it was much better than lying on the floor; one could breathe more freely; one's body swung and rocked lightly; and in the almost blissful absorption induced by this suspension it could happen to his own surprise that he let go and fell plump on the floor. (Kafka 115)

Obviously as a human, Gregor had no way of experiencing these kinds of joys that his insect body embraces. Gregor engages in an almost childlike sense of play and self-discovery as he learns what is fun and feels good to his body. His increased awareness of his body and tactile experience allows him to tune into feelings of joy associated with his body.

Gregor's excitement about his new capabilities is even reflected in the sentence structure of this excerpt; as his body zig-zags and crisscrosses over the walls and ceiling, so too does this section seem to resonate moving this way and that way with the use of semicolons and then coming to a hard stop as he falls to the floor. With this meticulous correspondence of content to form, Kafka directs our vicarious body to feel movement in the sentence, to crawl along the walls with Gregor.

Noticing Gregor's new habit of exploring the walls and ceilings of his bedroom, his younger sister who becomes his primary caretaker (another interesting transformation as Gregor was the breadwinner for his family when he was human) decides to remove the furniture from his room so as to not hinder his movement. Initially, Gregor looks forward to having his room cleared of furniture but after hearing his mother's protestations against it—"doesn't it look as if we were showing him, by taking away his furniture, that we have given up hope of his ever getting better?"—Gregor quickly changes his opinion (Kafka 116). Kafka writes, "Did he really want his warm room, so comfortably fitted with old family furniture, to be turned into a naked den...at the price of shedding simultaneously all recollection of his human background?" (Ibid.). It is interesting to me that as an insect, it is the furniture in his bedroom that reminds him of his humanness. It is the objects he comes into contact with on a day to day basis that affirms his identity as a human being. When Gregor feels as if his family denies his humanness or the

possibility of him ‘getting better,’ he becomes resolute in his need for everything to remain as it was in his room. Confident that this is what Gregor would have wanted, his sister Grete starts moving out his furniture with the help of his mother. Piece by piece, Gregor sees the objects bound to his human life ripped from his room.

Due to Gregor’s inability to verbally communicate with his family, he cannot tell them to stop their actions that are causing him agony. Instead, as a means to preserve the order in his room, and as an extension of that—his humanness—Gregor simply crawls on top of one of his beloved objects, a framed picture Gregor had cut out from a magazine of a lady wearing fur. This is not the first time we have seen this picture, as Kafka mentions it on the first page of the novella: “It showed a lady, with a fur cap on and a fur stole, sitting upright and holding out to the spectator a huge fur muff into which the whole of her forearm had vanished!” (Kafka 89). The reappearance of this picture in the story and Gregor’s decision to rescue it from being taken from his room highlights the picture’s value to Gregor and to the story of his transformation as a whole. Gregor takes the time, money, and effort to frame this cut out that is a glorified pin-up photo in his bedroom, illustrating its worth to him. He perhaps values and admires this picture for various reasons: the dream of wealth and success associated with being covered in furs, the aesthetic beauty of the picture, or the obvious sexual implications of hanging a woman’s picture on your bedroom wall. However, more than just a pin-up photo or decor, he chooses it as the object he saves with his insect body when his semblance of humanity is threatened. Kafka writes:

He was struck by the picture of the lady muffled in so much fur and quickly crawled up to it and pressed himself to the glass, which was a good surface to

hold on to and comforted his hot belly. This picture at least, which was entirely hidden beneath him, was going to be removed by nobody. (118)

As an object he saw and valued as a human, this picture reminds Gregor of his humanness. How profound, that when Gregor's symbolic humanness is being torn from him, he finds comfort and relics of his human identity in an object representing various human vices: greed, envy, and lust. In seeking to hold onto what made him human other than his body, he chooses an image of a human wrapped in animal fur. This instance of touch conveys a sense of irony in Kafka's outlook on humans—the object that most confirms humanness in Gregor is the picture of a woman zoomorphized with animal flesh. Simultaneously, the touch between Gregor and the picture also confirms an animalistic barbarism as part of the human condition. In this point of contact between the two, Gregor is anthropomorphized as he touches the image of the woman, and the picture of the woman reveals the animalistic tendencies of humans. In the cold absence of touch from his family due to their disgust at his transformed insect body, the few moments of touch such as these, even if they are not between two human people, scream for critical attention.

For instance, because for the majority of the story Gregor is inside of his bedroom, his walls become sort of an extension of his body, a bodily border like his skin. When he or his family press themselves against his door or walls, they are in a way touching each other. Before Gregor's family discovers that he has transformed into a gigantic insect and is making a scene at his having overslept despite having a day of work ahead of him, Gregor imagines that “perhaps they were all leaning against the door and listening” (Kafka 99). His family comes close to his room, leaning against his door and in a way, touching him. They are not afraid of coming close and touching the borders of his room when they do not question his humanness. However, after

the discovery of his metamorphosis his family enforces distance or a lack of touch with Gregor. Even after about a month since Gregor's transformation, his sister Grete enters his room to tidy up and tend to his needs and upon seeing him unconcealed, "not only did she retreat, she jumped back as if in alarm and banged the door shut...This made him realize how repulsive the sight of him still was to her, and that it was bound to go on being repulsive" (113). Upon seeing him, she literally jumps back and slams the door, increasing the amount of distance and forming a barrier between her and Gregor. Reaffirming the notion that Gregor is disgusting and undeserving of something as humanizing as touch, his family and charwoman usually go out of their way to avoid touching him by increasing their distance from him or things he may have touched with another object. For example, his sister takes away his food with either cloth to cover her bare hands or a broom to sweep away whatever Gregor does not eat (107). Her efforts to avoid his touch, even indirect touch, communicate messages of deep rejection and alienation. Even following Gregor's death, his body is not respected but rather pushed around by the charwoman's broomstick (137). Since he is seen as a filthy animal as opposed to a valued and loved member of the family, Gregor's family rejoices the day Gregor dies—the day they are no longer burdened by him. His difference in species and ostracization from his own family is reinforced by these poignant moments of separation and dehumanization. Despite his family's repulsion at the sight of him, Gregor still desperately wants to be considered a member of the family as prior to his transformation he was the most valuable to them. However, whenever Gregor quits his room and the boundaries of his isolation, considerable harm comes to him.

On one occasion, when Gregor emerges from his room and peers up at his father to see him much changed as well—a man finely dressed in a uniform as opposed to the sluggish man

he was before—his father reacts quite poorly to Gregor’s escape from his chamber. In the fight to corral Gregor back into his room, his father starts throwing several apples at him. Kafka writes,

An apple thrown without much force grazed Gregor’s back and glanced off harmlessly. But another following immediately landed right on his back and sank in; Gregor wanted to drag himself forward, as if this startling, incredible pain could be left behind him; but he felt as if nailed to the spot and flattened himself out in a complete derangement of all his senses. (Kafka 122)

At first, his father’s throwing of the apples comes off as a sort of playful warning to Gregor. But as the next apple hits and sinks into his back, the apples become weapons of war. His father enacts violence upon his son Gregor not with his bare hands, but by throwing apples at him. Not even in violence will his father touch him directly, a further assault on his less than human identity. Moreover, as a result of this violence, Gregor’s body and range of movement are never the same, impeding his bodily freedom. The apple incident comes to represent familial toxicity and sacrifice:

The serious injury done to Gregor, which disabled him for more than a month—the apple went on sticking in his body as a visible reminder, since no one ventured to remove it—seemed to have made even his father recollect that Gregor was a member of the family, despite his present unfortunate and repulsive shape, and ought not to be treated as an enemy, that, on the contrary, family duty required the suppression of disgust. (Ibid.)

Not only does Gregor's father commit a purposeful act of violence against him because he abhors his son's existence as an insect, but no one even does him the kindness of removing the weight of the apple from his back, which the apple has permanently damaged. However, it is this same apple that acts as a physical reminder for his father that Gregor is his son, he belongs in the family. The burden and pain caused by the apple marks Gregor's sacrifice to his family—which is apparently a family duty within the context of the Samsa household. With this sacrifice, Gregor is also forced to give up his newfound love of crawling all along the walls and ceiling as his injured body is no longer capable of doing so. The presence of touch in the apple incident (the apple thrown by his father hits Gregor's body) further indicates the level of hatred that accompanies Gregor's metamorphosis. Despite Gregor's family's violence against him, he still somehow desires their touch.

In the early days after Gregor's transformation, he is the sole topic of conversation amongst his family members. Gregor does not know this firsthand, but only knows from eavesdropping on his family through the walls. Despite being confined to his bedroom, Gregor finds ways to touch and be touched by his family. Kafka writes, "But although Gregor could get no news directly, he overheard a lot from the neighboring rooms, and as soon as voices were audible, he would run to the door of the room concerned and press his whole body against it" (Kafka 109). In the first few days following Gregor's change, his isolation and separation from his family is probably the most deeply felt in direct comparison to before his transformation. Therefore, the sentence above communicates a desperation to connect with his family, even if it is just with their voices, even if it is just through the walls. The physical space and his physical

condition as an insect may separate Gregor from his family, yet he still manages to find human ways to touch them.

The lack of touch Gregor receives from his family is so difficult for him to bear that he even begins to plot and fantasize about being close enough to touch his family, specifically his sister Grete. During his sister's violin performance for the lodgers who stay at their home in order for the Samsa family to afford their home without income from Gregor, Gregor hears the music and is drawn from his room. Almost in a trance,

He was determined to push forward till he reached his sister, to pull at her skirt and so let her know that she was to come into his room with her violin, for no one here appreciated her playing as he would appreciate it. He would never let her out of his room, at least, not so long as he lived. (Kafka 131)

In desiring the attention and close kinship of his sister, Gregor wants to have her and her music all to himself. However, he fails to realize that in this daydream of keeping his sister forever in his room she would essentially be a prisoner, just as isolated and lonely as he is. More than keeping her close to him and in his space, Gregor dreams of their embrace after he tells her his plans to support her by sending her to the Conservatorium—"After this confession his sister would be so touched that she would burst into tears, and Gregor would then raise himself to her shoulder and kiss her on the neck" (Ibid.). Clearly this scenario could never be actualized because Gregor does not have the ability to communicate with his sister nor would she ever willingly touch him. Gregor's somewhat inappropriate fantasy with his sister is a sign of just how out of touch with reality he is. His imagination runs wild and with impropriety at the notions of touch and human connection because he is starved of them in his room.

Though there really is no redemption for Gregor at the end of *The Metamorphosis*, there is some redemption for his family following Gregor's death. Early in the morning at the end of March, when they discover Gregor's corpse, "a certain softness was perceptible in the fresh air" (Kafka 137). While strange at first that Gregor's family would feel a softness on the day of his death, death is another transformation that clears space for growth and new opportunities—just like the morning, early Spring, and fresh air. Without Gregor, the Samsa family sheds the burden of having to hide him away in his room and come up with the money to pay for a home they cannot afford. Additionally, as a result of Gregor's transformations (by becoming an insect and by death) each member of his family is moved to join the workforce and be self-sufficient in order to support themselves as opposed to relying on Gregor to bring in income. In mourning Gregor's death, his family also grows to be closer to one another as their body language is a reflection of their newly developed bond: "Mr. Samsa appeared in his uniform, his wife on one arm, his daughter on the other. They all looked as if they had been crying; from time to time Grete hid her face on her father's arm" (Ibid.). Unexpectedly in this Modernist text, the Samsa's lean on one another after the loss of Gregor and in this short moment, they are a closely knit and united family. Ultimately, it is through touch that the family is able to grieve together and move forward by supporting each other as a community.

Conclusion: Reading With a Vicarious Body

Through this project, I have garnered a new sense of reading for myself and a reading practice I hope others can find equally as valuable and applicable to a wide range of literary texts. Dear reader, I challenge you to read the next novel you pick up with a sense of touch in

mind. I promise that you will touch and be touched by words in a way you never imagined. Reading with a vicarious body is an expansive experience and practice. It can mean being sensitive as a reader to sensory or tactile descriptions, focusing on instances of touch within a text whether the touch is directly person to person or indirect through objects, supplanting your own body with the body of a character to imagine what something might feel like, analyzing the context that surrounds moments of touch such as speech and setting, and anything else you might think of! In approaching texts with this lens, texts and their readers are enriched with a different tactile perspective. Readers will discover a world of sensations they may have otherwise overlooked, the unspoken rules surrounding touch that police society, deep emotional bonds with characters as they come to understand them better through their physical actions, and a heightened awareness of the way their own bodies touch the world around them. Reading with a vicarious body is an extended project to leave one speechless when words are not enough.

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