The question of Pleasure addressed here came to mind at last year’s PALA at Larry Stewart’s witty and sharp presentation as it focused on Fanny Hill. I decided to look at the lexical item PLEASURE in the corpus of 100 Novels that I have investigated for the related issue of the Presentation of the Body. Two angles of vision: 1) PLEASURE is viewed in one hundred novels, 1719-1997 (chart #1); a narrative of decline emerges, and raises questions. 2) PLEASURE is mapped out in four novels so one can see how the redundancy functions to define character and conflict in different contexts.

The particular focus here is on Pleasure, but the more general focus is on making meaning, and making the process more accessible and the results more adequate. In this work I am exploring how the writer’s brain lays out meaning for the reader’s brain to pick up on—the novel is a brain print. It presents itself as a word-by-word series, but its organization demands memory, and memory depends on repetition, or redundancy as information thinkers say; memory builds a semantic web. The redundancy forms patterns and relationships, and that is where meaning making begins.

Pleasure seems to begin with our earliest biological organization as a tropism away from the aversive toward the “good enough”. Pleasure is in the first place experienced as bodily, in our biological organization, an incentive to do what is necessary. Naturally, Pleasure for human beings has become quite complex as it spread from the necessary to the aesthetic where it can be organized, cultivated, militarized, capitalized, and/or neuroticized or fetishized. In this work, today, however, I’m interested in the local level with “Pleasure” as it shows up, as a lexical item, in a hundred novels, and looking at “Pleasure” from a psychological starting point in a group of individual novels. We find, as we look at individual texts, that Pleasure reveals a source of tension, and thus perhaps of character. Pleasure is a good touchstone—what the writer marks as PLEASURE constitutes the range of The Good in the face of The Problematic.

For Freud, thinking as a biologist as well as a psychoanalyst, Pleasure is a cessation of tension. He tells us that “an unpleasurable tension” will be processed by the mind in “a direction such that its final outcome coincides with a lowering of that tension—that is, with an avoidance of unpleasure or a production of pleasure.” Freud also noted that “the factor that determines the feeling is probably the amount of increase or diminution in the quantity of excitation in a given period of time” (p.8). [SE, V 18, p.7]. Decades later a psychologist working in a research intensive mode, and thinking biologically/neurologically, Silvan Tomkins, whose powerful work focuses on affects (Shame & Its Sisters 1963, 1964), also sees a reduction of tension at the core of pleasure which he calls “enjoyment/joy”: “The smile of joy is innately activated...by any relatively steep reduction of the density of stimulation and neural firing” (Shame & Its Sisters, 81). Tomkins notes that the reduction may be in relation to negative (e.g., anxiety, fear) or positive (e.g., seeing a friend, orgasm) experiences, and that “it is the steepness of the gradient of stimulation reduction which is critical” (81).
I want to suggest that in addition to the built in biological mechanisms, for human beings (and others) there is a necessary precondition for the experience of pleasure—the Other. As D.W. Winnicott says, there is no infant. That is, an infant is not a stand-alone item. So, with pleasure, it is useful to see the pleasure of one with the presence (including imaginatively) of the Other. At birth and for some time thereafter, that Other is the one Winnicott calls “the good enough mother.” The first tension might be the “too muchness” of the change (from in to out), the first diminution might be of being swaddled and snuggled; the next tension might be hunger, and the diminution might be one’s first meal. For some time we are regulated by an Other, generally responsive to our needs and vulnerabilities.

If Pleasure is a diminution of tension, Pleasure offers a window into what tension is strong enough to be called Pleasure when it stops. Pleasure is felt by a person, but pleasure is first sustained, cultivated and mediated by an Other person—there would be no pleasure without the Other. Next, Pleasure is of necessity addictive, and sets up a model of gratification, which can be magnified and distorted, offering deep neurological rewards with no real world connection (a death drive). Though, equally, it can be cultivated or domesticated. For Freud there is a kind of depressive logic to the reduction of tension—it is also what death is, the ultimate reduction. For Tomkins, however, the narrative of enjoyment/joy is potential growth—via increasing bands of interest and thus concern. For Tomkins pleasure is not a zero sum game, but more of what James Carse would characterize as an infinite game, played to continue to play (as opposed to finite games which are played to be won. Tomkins imagines that we can construct our pleasures (though he is as well aware of the dark side as Freud).

With these general thoughts in mind, we will look at a group of 100 classic, modern and contemporary Anglophone novels (1719-1997) to explore PLEASURE—i.e., the word “pleasure” and its conceptual texture. In addition to a chronological chart of PLEASURE, there are maps of what constitutes PLEASURE in a few individual novels—Robinson Crusoe (1719), Fanny Hill, Jane Eyre, and Beloved—to see the range of possibilities.

When we look at the corpus as a whole, the zoomed-out view shows that the use of PLEASURE changes radically over time, markedly declining in use in mid-19th century. Several avenues might be explored to contextualize this striking shift. I’d like to know what else shifts in the semantic realm, particularly what might “take the place” of PLEASURE. The decline may signify a change in the way tension and release are present in a novel—this would require mining for affects as named (sad) or as enacted/embodied (cry) to see if it’s Pleasure alone among affects to shift? Interestingly, the representation of the HEART is also at its high point in the 18th Century and then declines precipitously, though lingering a bit longer than PLEASURE (Chart #2). This change may signify a change in the way the novel, as a form of social consciousness, has learned to convey affect in writing without necessarily naming the feeling as such. And/or maybe there is a great depression in response to the tumultuousness of 1848. A century later, in Catcher in the Rye there are only two uses of Pleasure—one refers to the response of a teacher to his deceased brother (it was a pleasure to teach him), and the other is an expression of increased tension: “Oh,’ I said. I let
it drop. I was afraid he was going to crack the damn taxi up or something. Besides, he was such a touchy guy, it wasn’t any pleasure discussing anything with him” (108-109). Pleasure has not left us—certainly not in Amsterdam—but it has transformed into a different way to mark what is important. If we pull the thread of Pleasure from any given novel, as with other such threads, we end up in a web of meaning. The diachronic course of PLEASURE is striking, and it will be interesting to see it in the fuller context of AFFECTS in general. Is it replaced with DISTRESS, what Freud might call Anxiety? I can’t answer any large historic questions, but I can see there is one. So, let’s turn to some concrete material, from which some ideas will germinate. So, zooming in on Beloved:

The first web is from Toni Morrison’s Beloved (1987) (Map #1), chosen partly because its formulation of Pleasure is, like so much else in the novel, exquisitely and precisely formed. Pleasure is distributed among all the characters, in some proportion to their centrality. What constitutes PLEASURE is largely in the form of familial connection—domestic love contains all pleasures. Working like a good redundancy, PLEASURE, is used (generally) to mark something important to the emotional well-being one has as a person in a family and a family in a community. When examined ensemble, they are consistently about local love, nurturing relationships, inclusive of sexuality and of the “selfish pleasure” of being able to make something for one’s child. The PLEASURES here are tender, and sorely needed in a novel enveloping so much pain. The tension behind the pleasure is the anxiety of living in a world of people who are at once blind to one and abusive to one; and in a world in which one’s own mother could be seized by her demons.

Next I want to look at “the first” English novel, Defoe’s Robinson Crusoe (1719) (Map #2). This novel’s use of Pleasure is telling, most pronounced in its aggressive acquisitiveness; and interestingly in its negative descriptions. It unfolds narratively with several paternal promises of life’s “pleasure” if he will follow the path the father has laid out; Crusoe is not interested in that, he rejects it. Pursuing his own path leads him to being enslaved where he facilitates the Pleasures his master enjoys: “he had appointed to go out in this boat, either for pleasure or for fish.” This is a kind of pleasure that Crusoe also seems to reject in that any actions he reports are purposeful—there is virtually no play. The next instance of pleasure is animal pleasure—bodily enjoyment—and here, too, Crusoe’s writer is tagging this moment—it will never be seen again—no bodily pleasure (between his marriage and his widowerhood is one sentence, whose hint at pleasure was that he was “not...dissatisfied” to have been married). The next instance is Crusoe’s first pleasure—not abstractly talking about it in the future or characterizing the behavior but actually experiencing it—and, it is the killing of an animal. The tension behind the pleasure is not about being relieved for one’s life, because the lion was not threatening, but about one’s power to get what one wants (in this case, water, near where the animal is). This matter of control is where I’d pin Crusoe: most of his PLEASURE comes from successful domestications, the desire for home, and colonial desires. There is only one instance of interpersonal pleasure—the opposite of Morrison. The tension behind Crusoe’s pleasure is an anxiety of not having enough. There is no doubt some irony in Crusoe’s seeing himself as King, but none in the pleasure he takes at
surveying the fruitful valley in front of him—"This was all my own; and I was king and lord..."

On one level, there is sexual pleasure in Fanny Hill—her very names suggest the pleasures that the novel will teach us, and in case one doesn’t get it, the full title of the novel includes: Memoir of a Woman of Pleasure (map #3). With about two hundred forty mentions of Pleasure, Cleland novel is an outlier. Notwithstanding, PLEASURE as developed is complex, and I think that Cleland’s placing of sexual Pleasure in the print culture leaves the word with an erotic coloration where ever it travels—including Emma, a novel that very much lives in the MIND, and nonetheless expresses a range and depth of PLEASURES. One of the complexities of Fanny Hill is as the novel plays itself out in a series of episodes, she appeals to us separate her pleasures from those parties she provides pleasure to; we learn of her alienation virtually through it all. So, while there is a lot of Pleasure for some, Fanny as narrator lets us know at virtually every turn that her pleasure is often null and always secondary, and that it is only on being reunited with Charles that her pleasure is full.

Jane Eyre (map #4) gives us a biography of PLEASURE— as she goes from Gateshead to Lowood and then to Thornfield, Marsh End and Ferndean, the nature and quality of her pleasure shifts. The first instance of pleasure is meager, a doll, a transitional object, but she brings the narrative to an end with her child. As we follow Jane from one place to the next, we see her maturational needs being met or addressed or threatened. Her pleasure is generally in connection with a human being for whom she shares some passion. One bit to look at is the seduction scene in Jane Eyre, which begins with Jane being grilled about her paintings and (19) and saying that the y constituted her “keenest pleasures”. Rochester picks up on the word and directly notes that her “pleasures” have been few—by marking this absence, he is bringing up sexuality—a tension from which he seeks release. In the group of iterations of pleasure that follow, one sees Rochester’s aggressive drive for PLEASURE.

CONCLUSION: While the PLEASURE of each novel will have different flavors, the bulk of the ingredients are same. Pleasure serves different purposes, though it maintains a similar dynamic. In Beloved Pleasure is focused on local relationships—it marks family, domesticity, the ordinary as the place of tenderness and protection. The naming of the family as a key source of pleasure defends against and seeks to amend the long history of separations. Going back in time to the beginning of the novel, Defoe’s work is much more diffuse than Morrison’s, but the aggressive/acquisitive side shows up as dominant; and opposite Morrison, there is no familial pleasure. The anxiety the PLEASURE releases would seem to be deprivation. Cleland’s Fanny Hill emphasizes physical, sexual pleasure; there is a narrative deconstruction of Pleasure as male is separated and alienated from female (at many times). Sexual pleasure is a great defense against alienation even as it may create it for the other. In Jane Eyre Pleasure is used to shadow developmental shifts—Jane goes from a child to a girl, to a woman several times over (e.g., we see her after she has sex with Rochester). Jane begins with a pleasure deficit, a pleasure deprivation (others are marked as having it), and then collects enough over time.

I look forward to extending these ideas, zoomed in and out.
As if he were sunk in the pleasure of a deep sweet sleep, she thought she would have known she didn't have to grind her hipbone anymore. Sethe saw in sunlight for the shadow he saw the rest of the week.

Several even nodded and smiled at her mother; no one, apparently, able to withstand sharing the pleasure Paul D was having.

It was an unexpected pleasure, she thought, to see those two hours in the afternoon--walking around the corner of the room and just stand there a minute or two, naked from shoulder blade to waist, relieved of the weight of her breasts, smelling the stolen milk again and the pleasure of baking bread--telling about the earrings...an unexpected pleasure. 'Well, I'm saying it's a selfish pleasure I never had before,' she thought, as she sat in the soft sun.

The pleasure and surprise it created in her mother and her brothers, the pleasure they took in her soft “Thank you.” Would there be a little space, she wondered, a little time, some way to hold off eventfulness, to push business into the corners of the room and just stand there a minute or two, naked from shoulder blade to waist, relieved of the weight of her breasts, smelling the stolen milk again and the pleasure of baking bread?

The pleasure she felt at having found the house dissolved, suddenly longer-lived. She had never seen Beloved this happy. She had seen her pouty lips open wide with the pleasure of sugar or some piece of news.

But Denver was not doing anything to make this trip a pleasure. She agreed to go—sullenly—but her attitude was “Go ahead. Try and make me happy.” Denver had taught herself to take pride in the condemnation Negroes heaped on them; the assumption that the haunting was done by an evil thing looking for more, none of them knew the downright pleasure of enchantment; of not suspecting but knowing the things behind things.

Would there be a little space, she wondered, a little time, some way to hold off eventfulness, to push business into the corners of the room and just stand there a minute or two, naked from shoulder blade to waist, relieved of the weight of her breasts, smelling the stolen milk again and the pleasure of baking bread?

But, as she began telling about the earrings, she found herself wanting to lie—killing it, perhaps it was Beloved’s distance from the events itself, or her thirst for hearing it—in any case it was an unexpected pleasure.

As when I got here, even before they let me get out of bed, I stitched her a little something from a piece of cloth Baby Buglar had. Well, all I’m saying is that a selfish pleasure I never had before; I couldn’t let all that go back.

So looking at each other intently was a Sunday-morning pleasure, and Sethe examined her as though stiring up what he saw in sunlight for the shadow he saw the rest of the week.

“Tell me, Sethe,” Sethe said. “Tell me, Sethe.” She had been waiting for this, but she was not prepared for the direction.

Denver gave her. That smile was both pleasure and surprise [at seeing Paul D]...an unexpected pleasure...sethe & crawling--already baby?...sethe & crawling--already baby?

A reduction of pleasure at some special effort the older woman made.

She had seen her pouty lips open wide with the pleasure of sugar or some piece of news.

So looking at each other intently was a Sunday-morning pleasure, and Sethe examined her as though stirring up what he saw in sunlight for the shadow he saw the rest of the week.

‘Well, put these on. Maybe they’ll light his way.” Convinced her son was dead, she held the stones to Sethe. “I need holes in my ears.”

‘It’s too late,” said Baby Buglar. “Soon you’ll be up to it.”

Sethe jingled the earrings for the pleasure of the crawling-already?...did who reached for them over and over again.

Then the mood changed and the arguments began. Slowly at first. A complaint from Beloved, an apology from Sethe. A reduction of pleasure at some special effort the older woman made.

Early Visual Pleasure

EARLY VISUAL PLEASURE

Baby Suggs to Denver

One of the boys on the floor sighed. As if he were sunk in the pleasure of a deep sweet sleep, he sighed the sigh that flung the shuttles into action.

SETHE & HALLIE Intimacy

Pleasure in Beloved (1997), Character and Themes

THE COMMUNITY BE: DENVER, ETC.

BELOVED

PAUL D

Denver sat on the bed smiling and providing the music. She had never seen Denver this happy. She had seen her pouty lips open wide with the pleasure of sugar or some piece of news.

Denver gave her.

Some even laughed outright at Denver’s clothes of a house, but it didn’t stop them caring whether she ate and it didn’t stop the pleasure they took in her soft “Thank you.”

One of the boys on the floor sighed. As if he were sunk in the pleasure of a deep sweet sleep, he sighed the sigh that flung the shuttles into action.

One of the boys on the floor sighed. As if he were sunk in the pleasure of a deep sweet sleep, he sighed the sigh that flung the shuttles into action.
I observed an extraordinary sense of pleasure appeared in his face, and his eyes sparkled, and his countenance discovered a strange eagerness, as if he had a mind to be in his own country again, continually poring upon the means and possibility of my escape from this place. And that I may, with the greater pleasure to the reader, bring on the remaining part of my story, it may not be improper to give some account of my first conceptions on the subject of this foolish scheme for my escape, and how and upon what foundation I acted.

I descended a little on the side of that delicious vale, surveying it with a secret kind of pleasure, though mixed with my other afflicting thoughts, to think that this was all my own. When I came home from this journey, I contemplated with great pleasure the fruitfulness of that valley, and the pleasantness of the situation, it was the governor’s pleasure they should not stir anywhere but by my direction.

I could not write or eat, or do several things with so much pleasure without a table. It looked like a general magazine of all necessary things; and I had everything so ready at my hand, that it was a great pleasure to me to see all my goods in such order, and especially to find my stock of all necessaries so great.

I gave humble and hearty thanks that God had been pleased to discover to me even that it was possible I might be more happy in this solitary condition, than I should have been in a liberty of society, and in all the pleasures of the world. He listened with great attention, and received with pleasure the notion of Jesus Christ being sent to redeem us, and of the manner of making our prayers to God, and His being able to hear us, even into heaven.

Besides the pleasure of talking to him, I had a singular satisfaction in the fellow himself...began to love...
f

all the pleasure in Fanny Hill

1. "A WOMAN OF PLEASURE"
2. "Moral Pleasure"
3. "Natural Pleasure"
4. "Sensuous Pleasure"

The pleasure is from the desire of tension in the body, she didn't know she carried—and released that tension, relishing the mark of absence.

1. "Some Fortune"
2. "Some Freedom"
3. "Some Lesson"
4. "Some Option"

5. "Some Knowledge"
6. "Some Taste"
7. "Some Love"
8. "Some Sport"

This pleasure is the culmination of the accumulation of physical tension that occurs in the body to a critical mass in Fanny's case, a set experience of this release, the tensions have been holding back for a long time, i.e., pleasure and guilt were not internally united.

1. "Some Change"
2. "Some Shift"
3. "Some Transformation"
4. "Some Revolution"

5. "Some Materialization"
6. "Some Symbolization"
7. "Some Institutionalization"
8. "Some Legitimization"

This pleasure is from the desire of tension in the body, she didn't know she carried—and released that tension, relishing the mark of absence.

1. "Some Fortune"
2. "Some Freedom"
3. "Some Lesson"
4. "Some Option"

5. "Some Knowledge"
6. "Some Taste"
7. "Some Love"
8. "Some Sport"

This pleasure is the culmination of the accumulation of physical tension that occurs in the body to a critical mass in Fanny's case, a set experience of this release, the tensions have been holding back for a long time, i.e., pleasure and guilt were not internally united.