

“This place being South Africa”:
Reading race, sex and power in J.M. Coetzee’s Disgrace

by Kimberly Chou

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For fellow readers who have picked up this deeply provocative novel and found themselves at its close with more questions than answers—and for those who have yet to join the conversation.

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Abstract

Whatever discourse J.M. Coetzee intended to arouse with Disgrace, his 1999 novel that addresses changing social dynamics in post-apartheid South Africa, the conversation it has inspired since its publication has been dominated by readers' suspicions. Issues of race, and more specifically, accusations of racist writing, have dictated discussion of Disgrace. Considering the novel's premise, a degree of negativity in its reception was unsurprising: the narrative follows a white South African professor's escape to his daughter's farm, after a complicated affair with a student; the farm is soon attacked and robbed by three black men, and the daughter raped. As father and daughter piece together their strained relationship and individual lives, they must reconcile their positions in the "new South Africa," too.

This project examines the reception of Disgrace—by readers in South Africa and abroad—and its influence in literary and public discussion of the novel. In this context, I will argue for what Coetzee aims to do (open up discourse via narrative) and how he does it (conveying distorted human relations through experimentation with structure and form). By drawing on his other novels, I will explain how Disgrace fits into Coetzee's oeuvre and continues exploration of racialized and sexualized power dynamics in society. Disgrace's themes of inequality and human struggle are not new to his work. But with Disgrace, Coetzee reopens and agitates societal wounds—and refuses to provide a resolution—at a time when official and public culture urged reconciliation and optimism. The novel's reception invites further exploration of what Disgrace reveals about Coetzee's work, South African literature, and society.

The introduction provides background on modern South African history and on Coetzee as an author. In terms of familiarizing the reader with South African issues, I focus on problems born of government-enforced racial stratification and the lingering effects after apartheid.

Chapter one explores why Disgrace has provoked such volatile readings, the validity of selective readings, and the need to read Coetzee's work diachronically, or over the period of his career. I will draw on essays by critics including David Attwell, Louise Bethlehem, Albie Sachs and Coetzee himself on South African literature in order to explain how certain readings reflect conceptions of the literature's relationship with reality and how Disgrace challenges those ideas. I will offer an overview of Coetzee's work and major themes, and criticisms of his work—specifically questions related to the idea of culture as a weapon of struggle and authorial responsibility during an age of oppression. This background helps us consider the especially complex interpretations of Disgrace by South African readers.

Chapter two examines how Coetzee's manipulation of narrative conveys the shifting social dynamics in his novels. While Disgrace does not bear the deliberate literary devices that populate earlier works such as In the Heart of the Country and Waiting for the Barbarians, the influences of metadiagnosis and unorthodox narrative constructions can be seen in the novel. Disgrace's limited point of view and its characters' revisions of events illuminate the novel's underlying commentary on human conflict and changing notions of power and identity in society.

Finally, I argue that Disgrace continues Coetzee's conversation with the reader on inequality in human relations, highlighting the new racialized frustrations that have emerged after apartheid. I will also address the author's work since Disgrace, and how he has continued to buck the conventions of literature: by presenting novels as collections of "lessons" or essays, fragmenting narrative via experimentation with page space and ways of story-telling, and increasingly muddling the boundaries of the author-text relationship.

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Short Titles

AOI: Coetzee, J.M. Age of Iron. 1990. London: Martin Secker & Warburg. New York: Penguin, 1998.

Disgrace: Coetzee, J.M. Disgrace. 1999. London: Martin Secker & Warburg. New York: Penguin, 1999.

DP: Coetzee, J.M. Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews. Ed. David Attwell. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992.

ER: Attridge, Derek. J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading: Literature in the Event. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004.

HOC: Coetzee, J.M. In the Heart of the Country. 1977. London: Martin Secker & Warburg. New York: Penguin, 1987.

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“Race in Disgrace”: Attwell, David. “Race in Disgrace.” Spec. issue of Interventions 4.3 (2002): 331-341.

“Strong as Hunger”: Bethlehem, Louise. “‘A Primary Need as Strong as Hunger’: The Rhetoric of Urgency in South African Literary Culture under Apartheid.” Poetics Today 22.2 (2001): 365-389.

WFB: Coetzee, J.M. Waiting for the Barbarians. 1980. London: Martin Secker & Warburg. New York: Penguin, 1999.

“... what happened to me is a purely private matter. In another time, another place it might be held to be a public matter. But in this place, at this time, it is not. It is my business, mine alone.”

“This place being what?”

“This place being South Africa.”

—Lucy and David Lurie, Disgrace, J.M. Coetzee

Introduction

. . .

Even if its characters were carefully devoid of racial markers, or its setting transferred outside South Africa, J.M. Coetzee's Disgrace would be an explosive novel.¹ Disgrace opens as David Lurie, a divorced Cape Town professor, seeks new balm to “the problem of sex” in his middle-age (Disgrace 1). He engages in what he sees as an affair with a student, Melanie Isaacs, a dalliance that ends with the loss of his job and an escape to his daughter's farm in the rural Eastern Cape. Soon after David's arrival, the farm is brutally attacked—three men rob the property, assault David and gang-rape his daughter, Lucy. From this event, the novel advances as the characters deal with the aftermath: Lucy discovers she is pregnant and chooses to keep the baby; David must reevaluate his relationships and his place in society. With Disgrace, Coetzee paints a bleak portrait of human relationships—whether determined by blood or by choice—and the cruelties of which human beings are capable.

But what further complicates the novel is the way race plays into the story, especially considering the cultural and historical space into (and out of) which the novel emerged. The Luries are white, the attackers black, and it can be inferred that Melanie Isaacs is coloured.² The setting in

¹ Two of Coetzee's earliest novels, Life and Times of Michael K and Waiting for the Barbarians helped establish him as an author dealing with issues of power in society and the consequences of human action. Though set in an imagined South African near-future, enflamed by civil war, Coetzee's Life and Times of Michael K (published in 1983, at the height of apartheid oppression and the struggle against it) makes rare indication of any character's race. Waiting for the Barbarians (1980) involves the colonial operations of a nameless empire; though geographical descriptions make it impossible that the fictional empire refers to any actual place on earth, it can be tempting to read the novel as allegorical of South Africa. (In the development of my own interpretation of the novel, I am especially grateful to Teresa Dovey's and Derek Attridge's respective essays on allegory in relation to this novel, for acknowledgement of the usefulness as well as danger of reading allegorically.) I will refer to both of these novels in greater depth at later points of the thesis.

² A term referring to South Africans of mixed race descent, “Coloured” (capitalized, along with “White,” “Black” and “Indian,” as racial categories during apartheid) has also been reappropriated as part of cultural identity by some of the people of mixed sub-Saharan African, British, Dutch,

which these characters operate is post-apartheid South Africa, circa 1997, in cosmopolitan Cape Town and the Eastern Cape countryside. Published in 1999, *Disgrace* and its white South African author met an audience familiar with class-infused racial tension, farm attacks, land disputes,³ and media depiction of what Coetzee has called “the *ne plus ultra* of white colonial horror-fantasies”: black-on-white rape (259).⁴ The legal system of racial segregation called apartheid had ended earlier that decade, but South Africa was still dealing with the lingering effects of such social architecture. It is these circumstances that make reading and understanding *Disgrace* incredibly complicated. In a conversation with David soon after the farm attack—a passage I have chosen as the epigraph for this thesis—Lucy makes the distinction between “another time . . . another place” and the particular post-apartheid space the characters inhabit, in order to explain to David why she refuses to report the rape to the police. “In another time, another place [what happened to me] might be held to be a public matter. But in this place, at this time, it is not” (112). But we can also read Lucy’s view of South Africa in the years immediately after the fall of apartheid as applicable to *Disgrace* as a work of literature: to write about South Africa at that time was to throw one’s

South Asian and Malay ancestry to which it refers. Others do not accept the term and find it offensive; some choose to identify as black instead (the term black encompassing all “non-white” persons, or, in the view of Black Consciousness leader Steve Biko, the term black serving all persons except for whites, or “non-blacks.”) In necessary use of this term in this thesis, I will use “coloured,” lower-case, with this spelling. To use the capitalized form, I feel, is to further acknowledge the apartheid system’s categorical use of the term.

³ Reports of farm attacks in the media have contributed to the conception that the attacks are usually perpetrated by poor blacks attacking white-owned farms. For statistics on farm attacks and murders, and links to newspaper accounts of such incidents, see the South African Human Rights Commission’s 2008 report [Progress made in terms of Land Tenure Security, Safety and Labour Relations in Farming Communities since 2003](#), its [National Inquiry Into Human Rights Violations in Farming Communities](#) and Genocidewatch.org’s 2002 report on Boer (white Afrikaner) farmer deaths.

⁴ Coetzee refers to this “ne plus ultra” in an essay on Daphne Rooke’s *Mittee*, in a 2001 collection of his criticism, [Stranger Shores: Essays 1986-1999](#).

novel into the spotlight of a unique political and social situation.

Arguably, South Africa still is affected by the history of apartheid mentality and policy. Society is no longer legally confined to what Coetzee once referred to as “vertical intercourse,”⁵ or the giving and receiving of orders between masters and serfs, but decades under such a structure has produced the socio-economic disparity visible today in the existence of informal settlements of shack dwellings outside cities where beachfront properties sell for millions of South African rands. Furthermore, government policies such as the affirmative action program Black Economic Empowerment (BEE), intended to aid the people oppressed by the old system, reinforce, in a way, racial categorization in their reliance on racial labels. It can be argued that continued use of terms like “coloured,” in policy as well as casual parlance, is antithetical to the principle of non-racialism upon which the new democracy was founded. New and lingering issues in post-apartheid South Africa fuel continued discussion of race—and, transitively, I would argue that depiction and use of race in literature during this time also require continued discussion, especially such hotly debated works as Disgrace. While race has dictated the reception of the novel, additional reasons why the novel remains relevant are the other social questions it raises and the critical essays that have emerged from the shadow of racial discourse in more recent years. With this project, I aim to provide adequate space for these different points of conversation.

...

Before approaching Disgrace, it is first necessary to understand the history into which Coetzee placed it. The National Party government established apartheid in 1948, and the

⁵ In his acceptance speech for the 1987 Jerusalem Prize, Coetzee alludes to the 1957 Immorality Amendment Act, Act No. 23, which banned interracial sex and marriage in South Africa: “... a law was passed making sexual relations between masters and slaves a crime ... the most pointed of a long string of laws regulating all phases of social life, whose intent was to block forms of horizontal intercourse between white and black. The only sanctioned intercourse was henceforth to be vertical; that is, it was to consist in giving and receiving orders” (“Jerusalem Prize” 96-97).

categorization of different races infiltrated all reaches of life: it determined where people could work, where they could buy homes, to which places they could travel and when—in short, “all phases of social life” (Coetzee, “Jerusalem Prize” 97). Negotiations to dismantle the old system and form a non-racial democracy began in 1990; apartheid ended, officially, in 1994, the year of South Africa’s first national elections with universal suffrage. This was only the beginning of the long national process of recovery, and central to how this process played out in the public sphere was the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). Created by the coalition government led by the Nationalist Party and the African National Congress, the TRC staged public hearings where both victims and perpetrators of injustice during apartheid could make their stories heard. The TRC sessions were broadcast nationally between 1996 and 1998.

Disgrace was written and set in these promising but tense few years immediately after apartheid; it was published a year after the TRC concluded, a time when the novel’s themes of confession and absolution would have hung especially heavy in the air. For readers aware of—and, for South Africans, living in—this atmosphere, Coetzee’s acknowledgement of immediate history can be detected in the subtlest details: the grave, deliberately multi-racial board that disciplines David Lurie for sexual harassment in Disgrace can be read as allusive to that other, very public committee. Knowing this background, as South African readers would have then, allows non-South African readers to understand why a novel already provocative in its use of black-on-white rape and choice of an older, white protagonist with arguably old-fashioned beliefs would be as incendiary as it was. Coetzee’s novels are famously difficult to read because of the author’s unflinching eye toward reoccurring elements of torture and inequality and, often, the sense of cool detachment in his prose. (In his review of Disgrace, critic James Wood speaks of how Coetzee’s novels “feed on exclusion; they are intelligently starved” (42).) In this respect, Disgrace is perhaps

the most challenging novel in Coetzee's oeuvre: the demands it makes on its readers to focus on interracial conflict is far from comfortable, especially at a time when official and popular culture encourages recovery from South Africa's racialized past. By creating a novel that reopens still-unhealed wounds of race relations and refuses to provide resolution, Coetzee was not offering to this sensitive environment a novel that could be easily loved. But the point of this novel is not to resolve or offer answers for the society on which it meditates. Is it even possible to set a timeframe for recovery, after years of oppression? Instead, Disgrace agitates old conflicts in a new setting. Considering this background, it seems natural, then, that readers living within the recent history of South Africa would approach literature involving the pressurized intersections of race, sex and power with caution, if not outright suspicion.

With this project, I want to first explore the reception of Disgrace in South Africa and abroad, and the factors that contributed to the marked volatility of its readings. Again, the issue of race has dominated public discussion of the novel, but I argue that it is not just South Africa's troubled, racialized history (first under colonialism and segregation, then apartheid, and now the lingering effects of those old systems) that influences how one would read Disgrace. In the space of my first chapter, I will focus on what has emerged as the highest-profile reading of Disgrace—that of the African National Congress (ANC),⁶ in a submission to the South African Human Rights Commission's 2000 hearing on racism in the media—and then double back to examine how modern socio-political history and literary culture have influenced this reading. South African

⁶ The ANC has dominated national and most regional politics since the first democratic elections in South Africa with universal suffrage, in 1994. Currently, it remains the party in power, but recent intra-party conflict—resulting in a 2007 rift between supporters of then-president Thabo Mbeki and deputy president Jacob Zuma, Mbeki's 2008 resignation, the predicted 2009 election of the controversial Zuma (current ANC party leader) to the presidency, and the most recent break-away formation of the Congress of People's Equality (COPE) party, among other changes—may spell major shake-up in South Africa's dominant party system in the coming years.

writers and cultural critics developed distinct, though contested ideas of literary production during apartheid, the dominant motivation of which was to “tell the truth” of the period; this agenda of literary commitment was issued and followed perhaps most forcefully by black writers (“Strong as Hunger” Bethlehem 367). I will draw on critics including Lewis Nkosi, Nadine Gordimer and Njabulo Ndebele to provide background on the debate over what constitutes “South African literature,” in writing during and after apartheid. This contextualization of the ethics of reading and writing in South Africa in the years leading up to and following Disgrace is by no means definitive. In noting the respective stances of major figures in apartheid-era literary discourse, I seek to outline ideas crucial to South African literature and cultural production in order to explore possible influences on the ANC’s reading of Disgrace.

But to borrow David Attwell’s words from his essay “Race in Disgrace,” I want to examine both what the novel *invites* and what it *aims* to do (332).⁷ Like Attwell, among other critics, I believe Coetzee seeks to open up discourse with his narratives; one could call it his own brand of literary commitment. In exploration of how Coetzee experiments with fragmented narratives and plays with literary constructions and points of view that highlight the inequality between his characters, I have purposed this thesis to look at race relations and social conflict in post-apartheid South Africa, and the human actors involved in the particular narrative of Disgrace, but also what Coetzee does with these subjects and the ways in which he writes about them.⁸

⁷ Not only one of the world’s premier scholars on Coetzee’s work, David Attwell is arguably the editor and academic colleague who has worked most closely with Coetzee—notably with Doubling the Point, a collection of essays by and interviews with the author (facilitated and edited by Attwell).

⁸ In considering ways to evaluate Coetzee’s work, I must acknowledge the influence of poet Philip Larkin, who, like Coetzee, rarely conceded to interviews in his lifetime. In an interview with The Paris Review in 1982, Larkin said, “I think a poet should be judged by what he does with his subjects, not by what his subjects are” (in response to a question about frequent themes and subjects in Larkin’s work.) I feel that the sentiment translates well to reading Coetzee’s fiction.

In the second chapter, I will examine how Coetzee has sought to provoke discussion in his experimentation with narrative in past novels, and how Disgrace continues this pursuit of discourse with its demanding narrative choices. I draw on two earlier novels, Waiting for the Barbarians and In the Heart of the Country, to illustrate how Coetzee has represented shifting dynamics of power, and how the experimental narrative form of these novels conveys layers of social and political inequality. Specifically, I analyze Coetzee's recycling of imagery and language in multiple works, his use of limited points of view, and the device I call "false correctives," or the mimetic rewriting of passages that purposely distorts narrative reliability. In novels where disruptions of power in a relationship are further complicated by issues of race and sex, Coetzee manipulates the shape and structure of the narrative to maximize the effect of these shifts in balance. Instances of this strategy in the three novels I have mentioned involve the event of "rape" (as forced, unwanted sexual action, such as in Lucy's case) but also the complicated issue of "not-rape" (such as the hard-to-define relationship between David and Melanie, a sexual affair acknowledged as not wholly undesired but not fully consensual either). My exploration of Coetzee's deliberate experimentation with narrative will also afford space to discuss the depictions of sex and sexuality in these works. Questions surrounding "rape" and questionable sexual relations that are "not-rape" in Disgrace are among those sparked by the novel that I believe deserve more attention in public discussion. Some of these issues have been raised in later discussion of Disgrace, with wider consideration of the suggested link between David and Lucy's rapists, and Lucy and Melanie, in essays and journal articles, for example.⁹

In regards to rape as an event or action and the hazy bounds of "not-rape," at the time Disgrace was published, media attention had made issues of sexual violence in South Africa

⁹ For examples, see Poetics Today 22.2 (2001) or Interventions 4.3 (2002): 342-351.

increasingly unavoidable. “Media reports documenting high levels of sexual violence in South Africa increased noticeably in the national press during the late 1990s,” says Lucy Valerie Graham in her scholarly essay on reading rape in Disgrace.¹⁰ One voice in particular—that of journalist and rape-survivor Charlene Smith, in a 1999 article for The Washington Post—argued that “rape is endemic” in South African culture. Smith’s account of her rape, and her criticism of the treatment of rape victims by South African police and the hospital systems, attracted much media attention internationally—and the ire of then-President Thabo Mbeki, who protested that Smith’s assumptions were deeply racist and further claimed that certain rape statistics were exaggerated (BBC). I consider the politics of rape in South Africa—especially how interracial rape has been depicted in the media, often for racist ends—as another influence on readings of Disgrace that might account for why readers would be so upset by the novel’s incident of black-on-white rape. I wish to address sexual harassment and violence in South Africa with the sensitivity they deserve. But for the purpose of my argument that Coetzee’s unorthodox narratives mean to provoke as much as they tell stories, I will primarily focus on a point Graham reaches in the conclusion of her essay: “Since the stories of Melanie and Lucy are elided in Disgrace, the responsibility for such an imagining is left with the reader.”¹¹ I believe that we should continue to extend the discussion of

¹⁰ Lucy Valerie Graham’s “Reading the Unspeakable: Rape in J.M. Coetzee’s Disgrace” appeared in a 2003 edition Journal of Southern African Studies. Public discourse on rape in South Africa has changed dramatically since the essay was published, due to the high-profile rape trial—and later acquittal—of ANC leader Jacob Zuma in 2006.

¹¹ Graham goes on to say, “For although the stories of Melanie and Lucy in Disgrace can only remain [theirs] alone, to consign rape to a space outside articulation may contribute to a wider phenomenon of silencing” (444). The essay takes a historical look at how rape has been depicted in South Africa media, and the part interracial rape narratives have played in furthering racism in culture, before turning to look at Coetzee’s writing of rape in Disgrace. I am indebted to Graham’s analysis of media depictions of rape, in helping formulate a foundation with which I was able to approach the subject, but will refrain from further commenting on issues of rape except in consideration of such issues in Coetzee’s novels.

Disgrace specifically in the direction of how narrative opens up discourse—and part of that is how Coetzee specifically leaves the women’s stories untold, at least from their respective points of view. This limitation in the narrative aims to provoke further questions of sex, rape and queerness (in the case of Lucy, whom David thinks to be a lesbian) tied to the novel.

Finally, this thesis will conclude by reading Disgrace in the greater context of Coetzee’s body of fiction—as a work reflecting the novels that came before it, but also representing a break before a major directional shift in writing. In Apartheid and Beyond: South African Writers and the Politics of Place, critic Rita Barnard hypothesizes that Disgrace marks “Coetzee’s farewell to the genre (pastoral) that absorbed so much of his critical attention and creative energy in the first half of his career” (40). But instead of a farewell to the colonial or post-colonial pastoral, or even a farewell to South Africa (though Coetzee has yet to return, in his writing of fiction, to his birth country as a subject or setting),¹² I argue that Disgrace marks the point of Coetzee’s departure from work that adheres more closely to conventional novel construction. In his literary output after Disgrace, Coetzee returns to more exaggerated experimentation with structure, especially in the novels Elizabeth Costello (published in 2003) and Diary of a Bad Year (2007). Post Disgrace, Coetzee shifts in subject and genre, but most drastically he challenges the definition of “What is a novel?” in a fashion that even long-time readers of Coetzee, familiar with his memoirs disguised as third-person narratives and novels constructed as series of letters, would find unorthodox.¹³

¹² A number of book blogs have reported that the third installment of Coetzee’s Scenes From a Provincial Life *autrebiography* series, in which he has written about coming of age in South Africa and abroad in the third-person, will be published in the late summer or early fall of 2009. To be titled Summertime, the work will be Coetzee’s 20th book.

¹³ Coetzee’s novels that can be read as memoirs are Boyhood: Scenes from a Provincial Life (1997) and Youth: Scenes from a Provincial Life II (2002). Foe (1986) and Age of Iron (1990) are constructed as one-sided correspondences of letters. The senders are a female castaway writing about “Cruso” to author Daniel Defoe, and an elderly classics professor dying of cancer at the end of apartheid, writing to her daughter in the United States, respectively.

Elizabeth Costello and Diary of a Bad Year are structured as lectures and essays written by the protagonists. In truth, Coetzee presented a number of the lessons-cum-chapters of the former as lectures before the publication of the novel, and the latter is further split into three parts, in three perspectives separated into sections on each page. These experiments echo Coetzee's avant-garde play on structure with earlier works like In the Heart of the Country and Dusklands. But besides the presentation of these books, what is also different now is that they appear to moralize—that is, the characters of these novels, the titular Mrs. Costello and J.C. often opine on ethical matters in the lectures and essays they produce. (The collection of essays to which J.C. is contributing, in Diary of a Bad Year, is in fact called Strong Opinions.) The characters and their beliefs, then, are presented in a way closer to the other work Coetzee published at the time—as Coetzee the literary critic, 2005's Inner Workings, a collection of essays on various writers. The similarity in form between Coetzee's work in fiction and non-fiction prompts consideration of a particular quandary about Coetzee as a novelist: his manipulation of the author-character relationship, and possible conflation of the author with his characters.

With Coetzee, throughout his work, there is an alternate blurring and reinforcing of the perceived *cordon sanitaire* between the “author” and his “text,” or the ideas of the author and the ideas of the characters. The question of whether the author's thoughts are manifesting themselves in those of the characters arises especially with characters like David Lurie who actually resemble Coetzee in terms of physical/personal similarities (white, middle-aged male) and life circumstances (university professor, linguist). In his most recent novel, not only does J.C. share the author's initials, the character is revealed to be a new resident of Australia; J.C. has also written a number of prize-winning novels, including one called Waiting for the Barbarians, and one scene in the

novel suggests a plaque from the Swedish Academy hangs on his office wall.¹⁴ Upon closer examination, the characters of Mrs. Costello and J.C. and their respective thoughts are caricatures, if anything, of a strong, opinionated writer; at most, they are caricatures of different sides of Coetzee the author. I argue that with Elizabeth Costello and Diary of a Bad Year, Coetzee increases possibilities of conflating author with character in order to further enforce distance between the two—it is a different way of establishing the “constructedness and craftedness” and the sovereign power of the author.¹⁵ Coetzee the man is known for his incredible elusiveness and refusal to grant interviews.¹⁶ This aura of mystery inadvertently invites readers to read further between the lines of the material that Coetzee *does* provide—which raises the risk of over-interpretation. There are limitations to this debate, not the least of which is that truly, only one person (Coetzee himself) can provide the answers. But what I find more rewarding is to examine both what these experimentations with narrative invite and what they aim to do. In situating Disgrace as a moment of transition between Coetzee’s earlier novels and these later works, my focus is not just what Disgrace does as a novel, but also what Coetzee’s work has done, in the years before and after Disgrace. Throughout his career, if not necessarily always pleasing the reader, Coetzee has more importantly engaged and provoked the reader.

¹⁴ Coetzee’s Waiting for the Barbarians was published in 1980. He won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2003.

¹⁵ In J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading: Literature in the Event, Attridge refers to the “constructedness and craftedness” illustrated by mimetic writing in In the Heart of the Country, which I analyze at length in chapter two of this thesis.

¹⁶ In Doubling the Point, Coetzee explains to David Attwell what it is about giving interviews (in the genre of literary journalism) that troubles him: “An interview is not just, as you call it, an ‘exchange’: it is, nine times out of ten . . . , an exchange with a complete stranger, yet a stranger permitted by the conventions of the genre to cross the boundaries of what is proper in conversation between strangers. I don’t regard myself as a public figure, a figure in the public domain. I dislike the violation of propriety, to say nothing of the violation of private space, that occurs in the typical interview” (DP 65).

But what Coetzee has chosen to do with his writing has rarely fit the expectations of other writers and critics working in South Africa. During apartheid, when South African literary culture most strongly urged writers to be overtly political in their work, Coetzee was often criticized by author-colleagues like fellow Nobel laureate Nadine Gordimer for a seeming lack of literary commitment to writing explicitly against oppression (at least compared to other writers.) While I argue that Coetzee's work is indeed informed by South Africa, and his novels more subtly address South African issues, the more straightforward moralizing his critics have asked for has finally emerged in his recent work as he has become not only a South African author, in the eyes of his international readership, but also (or even more so) a global author. At the same time, again testing the relationship between author and text, these apparently moralistic essays and lectures are filtered through characters that both do and do not resemble Coetzee—showing that the author, in his continued output, still refuses to meet anyone's demands but his own.

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I studied abroad in South Africa in the winter of my junior year, electing courses at the University of Cape Town, in an English department where, once I announced my intention to pursue a thesis on Disgrace, I quickly sensed that many others had already written, were writing, or were thinking about writing their theses on Coetzee. In terms of cultural relevance, history and lineage, it certainly makes sense. Coetzee is, without question, the most famous author to come from South Africa. The University of Cape Town is Coetzee's alma mater, where he studied for bachelors degrees in English and mathematics and later taught for several years, and the English department remains a hub of great thought on the author and his work.

Back in Michigan, most people I had spoken to about my still-nebulous thesis plans were not as familiar with Disgrace or Coetzee. But at UCT, and certainly in an English department with

Coetzee specialists like Carrol Clarkson, the idea of writing on Disgrace, much less race and Disgrace, was rather boilerplate. Further research and repeated readings of the novel found my dominant interests shifting toward how Disgrace fits into the author's body of work, and the thematic and narrative elements present in earlier novels that can be found in Disgrace. If public discussion of the novel is to move away from the overwhelming focus on race, attention paid to the novel in literary discourse will further open up different issues for contention. In some way, I hope this project, my small intervention, will contribute to the effort.

Chapter I:
Disgrace and the Politics of Reading and Writing

“To speak of this”—I waved a hand over the bush, the smoke, the filth littering the path—“you would need the tongue of a god.”

—Elizabeth Curren, Age of Iron, J.M. Coetzee

. . .

Shouts and murmurs: Talking about Disgrace

Since its publication in 1999, reception of J.M. Coetzee’s Disgrace in South Africa and abroad has been mixed, with readers alternately enthusiastic in praise and damnation. In one review, literary critic James Wood called it, in regards to the writing, “a novel with which it is almost impossible to find fault” (42). That year, Disgrace won Coetzee an unprecedented second Booker Prize.¹⁷ The increasing critical attention Disgrace garnered—which, furthermore, could only have helped Coetzee’s chances for the Nobel Prize, which he received in 2003—would indicate that the novel and those who championed it “succeeded” in the literary sphere. But Disgrace, by virtue of its subject matter, does not exist in the world of literature alone. To set the novel’s narrative of coercive sexual action and violence, complicated further by race, in the early years after apartheid immediately invites scrutiny of what Disgrace says about post-apartheid South Africa. Derek Attridge, in his essay “Age of Bronze, State of Grace,” outlines many readers’ overriding concerns about the novel’s social and political implications:

[D]oes the novel, as one of the most widely disseminated and forceful representations of post-apartheid South Africa, impede the difficult enterprise of rebuilding the country? Does the largely negative picture it paints of relations between communities hinder the steps being made toward reconciliation? Is it a

¹⁷ Coetzee first won the Booker Prize in 1983, for Life and Times of Michael K. Two year’s after Coetzee, Peter Carey became the second author to win the award twice—first for 1988’s Oscar and Lucinda and then 2001’s True History of the Kelly Gang.

damagingly misleading portrait of a society that has made enormous strides in the direction of justice and peace? Even readers whose view of the artist's responsibility is less tied to notions of instrumentalism and political efficacy than these questions imply—and I include myself among these—may find the bleak image of the 'new south Africa' in this work hard to take. (ER 164)

As Attridge comes to conclude—and as I will argue in this thesis—the answers to these questions cannot be resolved with a simple yes or no. With Disgrace, Coetzee reopens old wounds born of racial tension during apartheid and further agitates new ones that have emerged after the fall of the old system, in the sheer act of writing about such conflicts in Disgrace. But he refuses to provide any resolution. The novel's seemingly inadequate ending—in which David “gives up” (to euthanasia) a dog he had grown attached to while volunteering at a rural animal clinic—raises further questions still, including a number of pointed suggestions that the author is more concerned with animal rights than human rights. Disgrace's lack of resolution, I argue, and not just its bleak portrait of South Africa, is what makes the novel especially “hard to take.” Thus, exploration of the questions raised in the novel's reception, and the factors behind them, remain important to the legacy of Disgrace. It remains relevant now, as discussion of Coetzee's professional and personal decisions (writing about subjects outside of South Africa, moving and becoming a citizen of Australia) invoke speculation on the consequences of Disgrace, and as the upcoming theatrical release of a film adaptation of the novel may very well reopen questions of representation.¹⁸

¹⁸ The film version of Disgrace—starring John Malkovich as David Lurie, directed by Steve Jacobs and adapted as a screenplay by Anna Maria Monticelli—premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival, where it won the International Critics' Award. I commented on the politics of book-to-film adaptations, specifically the filming of Disgrace in different locations in South Africa, in a March 2008 column for The Michigan Daily newspaper.

To best understand why the novel has inspired such varied critical readings, it is necessary to consider Disgrace in multiple spheres of conversation—spaces whose boundaries, such as that between the literary and public spheres, are difficult to distinguish in the first place. Arguably, in South Africa, the discussion of literary production is intrinsically entwined with discussion of literature’s role in the public sphere; I will address this debate later in the chapter. Throughout this section, I aim to explore the especially complex readings that emerge from points where critical readers engage in the conversation about Disgrace from multiple angles. For example, South African author Chris van Wyk, who grew up in a coloured township, grounded the novel’s social failings in its literary ones: “I believe Disgrace was a racist book,” he said. “The white characters are fleshed out, the black evildoers are not” (Donadio). Van Wyk is not alone in his sentiments. Coetzee’s depictions of black South Africans in Disgrace have inspired some of the harshest criticism, and consequently the role and significance of race in Disgrace dominated early public debate. Even now it remains somewhat impossible—and unwise—not to acknowledge race in ongoing conversations about the novel. In his essay “Race in Disgrace,” published in a 2002 edition of the journal Interventions dedicated to the novel, David Attwell bemoans the need to consider the tangled interpretations of the author’s use of race, due to the “obvious revulsion for racialized discourse, and especially for racialized politics, which is intrinsic to most of Coetzee’s oeuvre, including Disgrace” (332).¹⁹ Simply because the author writes about race does not mean the novel warrants a racialized reading; but Coetzee’s writing is susceptible to such readings, and thus we must consider both what the novel aims to do as well as what it invites, even now, as we approach the 10th anniversary of its publication. To be able to talk about the literariness of Disgrace

¹⁹ See footnote number seven in the introduction for more on Attwell and his position in the world of Coetzee studies.

—in this thesis, specifically how Coetzee manipulates narrative to provoke discourse—and other issues the novel raises, we must first address the direction that public debate has taken.

...

The ANC spotlight

Perhaps the one actor that has most profoundly shaped public discussion about Disgrace—providing, at the very least, the highest-profile reading of the novel—is the African National Congress (ANC).²⁰ An oral submission to a 2000 South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC) hearing on racism in the media, presented in the name of the ANC, cited passages from the novel to illustrate still-present racist attitudes. “In the novel,” says the report, which was read into the record by then-Minister of Public Enterprise Jeff Radebe, “J.M. Coetzee represents as brutally as he can, the white people’s perception of the post-apartheid black man” (ANC). “J.M. Coetzee makes the point that, five years after our liberation, white South African society continues to believe in a particular stereotype of the African” (ANC). In order to understand how racism still permeates media coverage, the submission continues, “we must start from this basic point—that many practitioners of journalism in our country ... carry this stereotype in their heads at all times” (ANC).

In citing Disgrace, the ANC points out similarities between the novel and representations of black South Africans in the media. The submission recognizes a high-profile, internationally recognized novel and uses it as a dramatic, if somewhat clumsy, introduction to the body of the

²⁰ David Attwell addresses which members of the ANC, exactly, were responsible for the submission in “Race in Disgrace (332-333). The text of the submission was included as an epilogue to A Marriage Made in Heaven, a 2001 book critiquing an opposition party, the Democratic Alliance; the book was authored by a collective which called itself Tau Y Gragramla (“the roaring lion”), which claimed it did not speak for the whole of the ANC. Because this earlier SAHRC report was submitted in the name of the ANC, for the purposes of this thesis I will credit it to the party.

submission: examples of continued “unashamedly racist journalism” in South African newspapers and by foreign correspondents in South Africa. But because of its rhetoric and word choice, the transcribed text of the submission leaves ambiguous whether the quoted passages from Disgrace are intended to illuminate the kind of persistent racist thought visible in media, or are intended to make an example of the novel, itself, as a racist work. The submission suggests both, to a degree: At some points it can be read as praising Coetzee for his ability to depict prevailing, problematic social attitudes; the ANC’s congratulations to its “son of the soil” for the 2003 Nobel Prize also contributes to the idea of overall support of the author.²¹ But whatever the original intention of the SAHRC statement, many have read it as a denunciation of the novel—and this assumed damnation has impacted (negatively, as critics such as Peter D. MacDonald would argue) continued discussion of Disgrace as well as Coetzee’s more recent work.²² Later in this chapter, I will return to the ANC’s treatment of the novel. But first, I want to examine possible factors that have fueled readings like the ANC’s and those of other South African critics.

...

Literary culture during apartheid and beyond

On Coetzee’s post-apartheid vision, fellow Nobel laureate Nadine Gordimer had few kind words, even years after the novel’s publication. “In the novel *Disgrace* there is not one black person who is a real human being,” she said in an interview in 2006, in Johannesburg. “If [Disgrace is] the only truth he could find in the post-apartheid South Africa, I regretted this very much for him” (Donadio). On a superficial level, because of the nature of the critiques voiced by

²¹ Rachel Donadio makes reference to this in her essay “Out of South Africa,” published in 2007, in The New York Times: “No sooner had the A.N.C. congratulated this ‘son of the soil’ than an opposition party [the Democratic Alliance] said the A.N.C. owed Coetzee an apology for its earlier denunciation of Disgrace. The A.N.C. stood by its criticism.”

²² See Peter D. McDonald’s essay “Disgrace Effects,” also in the 2002 special issue of Interventions, on the effect of “suspicious readings” on the legacy of the novel.

fellow South African authors, it is possible to mistakenly imagine a divide between the metropolitan and South African receptions of the novel. But there is not so basic a division. Instead, what I argue is that for readers in South Africa—whether writers and critics themselves, or not—Disgrace presents an especially challenging read, because these readers have experienced the recent history that informs the novel. This background creates potential for richer, more complex readings, but also raises the chance of negative reactions to the novel. (Certainly, one can argue that a “portrait” of South Africa is still different than an exact “likeness.” No matter, what Coetzee presents on the novel’s pages does not exactly cast the new South Africa in the most flattering light.) The time in which Disgrace was published was a delicate one to be writing about issues with interracial undertones because of politics but also because of the expectations of literary production in the previous decades.

Written and published in the years immediately after the end of apartheid and the transition to a non-racial democracy, Disgrace entered an environment focused on moving forward. The encouragement to acknowledge the wrongs of the past and lay issues out in the open, yet move on, became institutionalized in facilitative processes, most prominently in the new government’s Truth and Reconciliation Committee hearings (TRC). Essentially, the TRC became a re-created—and widely broadcast, via television and radio—public sphere. Confessions of suffering or having made others suffer during apartheid were subject to guidelines only inasmuch as the TRC asked participants to tell the whole truth; expression of contrition on the part of the guilty was not required. In a way, as a specially constructed space for conversation, the TRC took up the mantle that South African literature had carried for so long during apartheid: the commitment to telling the truth.

“In the years preceding the transition to democracy . . . the revelatory thrust of South African literature was often glossed as an agenda of ‘literary commitment,’ most forcefully perhaps by black writers,” writes Louise Bethlehem in her 2001 essay “A Primary Need as Strong as Hunger” (367). Although consensus about any goals or protocols of literature after apartheid had yet to emerge when *Disgrace* was published, what remained very clear—and had finally found a place in official culture—was this long-running concern with exposing the reality of South Africa. The degree to which this kind of writing was expected during the anti-apartheid struggle is perhaps best displayed by a quotation from Keorapetse Kgositsile in Bethlehem’s essay: “In a situation of oppression,” Kgositsile said, “there are no choices beyond didactic writing: either you are a tool of oppression or an instrument of liberation. It’s that simple” (Bethlehem 367).

But writing in a situation of oppression is not as simple as Kgositsile posits, other writers and critics have argued. This commitment to or preoccupation with transmitting “reality” in literature (depending on one’s position) has not existed without contention—not so much criticism of the motivation to write against apartheid, but what happens when a specific style of writing overwhelms all literary production.²³ “Realism” as a literary construct becomes somewhat messy in a South African context, considering the expectation of fiction being less a literary meditation on reality but rather a copy of reality. By wholly adhering to this agenda, argued black South African writer and critic Lewis Nkosi, writers fell into a creative rut with fiction “which exploits the ready-made plots of racial violence, social apartheid, interracial love affairs which are doomed from the beginning, without any attempt to transcend or transmute these given ‘social facts’ into artistically persuasive works of fiction’ ” (370). Nkosi’s discussion of black writing during apartheid, inaugurated in the 1960s, questions the very definition of this kind of strictly purposed literature: is

²³ In my definition of “the real,” I refer to Bethlehem’s use of “reality” as “the lived substratum of individual and collective existence experienced as the real” (368).

it, in fact, literature? Without further imagination, this kind of writing lacks the necessary literariness to *be* literature; any attempts to build upon or break free from what Nkosi calls “ready-made plots” are quashed, and the author submits to what Bethlehem calls “the rhetoric of urgency” (368). Though Nkosi’s focus is on black writing in the 1960s, I would argue that to hold a limiting attitude toward writing can compromise any writing, no matter an author’s race.²⁴ “The commitment to literary truth-telling evident here constrains the range of discursive forms available to literary production in English, whether by blacks or whites,” says Bethlehem (366). In questioning literature where “the dramatization of the message is the major concern,” to quote Es’kia Mphahlele, it becomes necessary to consider the ramifications for other discursive forms of writing.²⁵

Nkosi scorned writers’ interpretation of the dominant realist aesthetic as “journalistic fact parading outrageously as imaginative literature” (110). In her essay, reconsidering Nkosi’s criticism, Bethlehem asks whether it is possible to separate this kind of literature from other modes of discourse, namely journalism (369). What results from writing with such an agenda is a too-close relationship between journalism and literature, making the idea of social mimesis in a novel closer to one of direct representation; the end-goal “literature” is compromised or even pushed aside out of a need to capture the hulking immediacy of apartheid history. Considering this background, the ANC’s use of Disgrace to introduce its submission to a hearing on racism in the media does not seem so far-fetched.

²⁴ In her essay, Bethlehem makes reference to Nkosi’s Home and Exile published in 1965 and his 1966 essay “Fiction by Black South Africans,” the version published in African Writers on African Writing, edited by G. D. Killam.

²⁵ Es’kia Mphahlele explains that, in the writing of authors like Mtutuzeli Matshoba, “[t]he intention to *make* literature is either ignored or subdued” (14). See Mphahlele’s “South African Literature vs. The Political Morality,” an essay on authors writing in response to the oppressive political regime, for more on the formulation and structure of this kind of politicized writing.

But the protocols of writing during apartheid—and its limitations—can translate to reading as well. Specifically in reading Disgrace, I want to consider the reader in South Africa. A crucial perspective to consider in Disgrace's differing receptions is the particular circumstance of a South African person—whether his or her profession involves literature and literary criticism or not—reading this novel that is situated in a particular (and particularly tense) South African space. Certainly, Coetzee draws on issues and emotions common to the human experience in Disgrace: the fear of losing one's abilities, for example, or questions of one's place in society. But because he sets the story in the time and place of post-apartheid South Africa, and involves the characters with all of their possible racial, sexual and gender conflicts in the novel's very specific permutations, Coetzee creates a text that results in a different, more complicated reading by the South African reader. I do not mean to suggest that the South African reader is the "ideal" reader, or that there is a single, specific South African reader. Instead, I suggest that the novel can be more fully understood by a reader that has lived in the environment that informs the author and his work, for better or worse. In that sense, I feel that the novel is markedly "South African," though it does not necessarily fit the characteristics or the motives of what members of the South African literary community (including Coetzee) would term "South African literature," or at least the expectations of South African literary culture that evolved during apartheid.²⁶

Further adding to the debate is Coetzee's view on South African literature. In the days when apartheid was in its death throes, Coetzee argued that, to an extent, South African writers simply could not escape the influence of South Africa. This idea adds another layer of complexity

²⁶ Though I discuss ideas of South African literature shared by McDonald in "Disgrace Effects," I want to make clear that my definitions of "South African novel" and "South African literature" are not quite the same as his. "Disgrace Effects" puts it this way: Disgrace is not "wholly contained by its South Africanness, since it circulates, like many contemporary novels in English, simultaneously within myriad public spheres ... It may ... be a story set in South Africa and written by a South African, but it is not *ipso facto* a 'South African novel' " (322).

as to why South African writers would write the reality of South Africa into works of fiction. In his 1987 acceptance speech for the Jerusalem Prize, Coetzee spoke of a vast literature shackled by the brutal truth of what was happening outside its pages. Literature cannot operate in a vacuum, but it was as if South African literature was acted upon by a magnetic force. Its texts could not escape reality, especially in regards to human interaction, because the very nature of living in a society where some people are more equal than others distorts South Africans' understanding of the range of human interactions. "The deformed and stunted relations between human beings that were created under colonialism and exacerbated under what is loosely called apartheid have their psychic representation in a deformed and stunted inner life," Coetzee said (98). Thus, in the output of South African writers, "all expressions of that inner life ... suffer from the same stuntedness and deformity," resulting in a literature preoccupied by what Coetzee calls "torsions of power": interactions based on inequality, such as contestation and domination (98).

Coetzee delivered his Jerusalem Prize speech at a time when apartheid was nearing its end, but when it was still impossible to know what would take its place. In this speech, Coetzee admits that he, too, as a writer, is affected by the ugliness of human relations in South Africa. Beyond the lack of imagination in the politically purposed literature that Nkosi speaks of, disregarded before it has a chance to enter the text, Coetzee suggests an *inability* to imagine outside the world South African writers inhabited. "The *crudity* of life in South Africa," Coetzee says, "... make[s] it as irresistible as it is unlovable" (99). The word "irresistible" (its root *resist*, and the inability to do so) at once encompasses those writers who felt compelled to write about South Africa as well as those who found its themes of inequality invading even work set outside of South Africa. In his interpretation of why authors wrote as they did at the time, Coetzee's fatalistic option also transcends choice: To choose to write about apartheid-era issues and events in South Africa is one

thing; but even for writers who do not recognize the rhetoric of urgency in their work, the brutal truth of everyday life, especially in terms of how human beings treat other human beings, will unavoidably slip into their writing.

The line I chose for this chapter's epigraph comes from a scene in Coetzee's novel Age of Iron where Mrs. Curren surveys the devastated township around her. To her companion, she acknowledges the sheer inadequacy of language in times of unfathomable circumstance: " 'To speak of this'—I waved a hand over the bush, the smoke, the filth littering the path—'you would need the tongue of a god' " (99). Even for Mrs. Curren, whose former life as a classics professor was rooted in Latin (itself the germ of so much modern language!) words cannot convey a township in flames. Truly, I would argue, words meet their limits in depicting the cruelties of which human beings are capable. I would go so far as to venture that Mrs. Curren's admission can be read as Coetzee's sly suggestion that perhaps writers are ultimately incapable of capturing the ugly truth of apartheid that they feel so compelled to document, a "truth too brutal for art to hold" ("Jerusalem Prize" 99)—and this implication of South African literary producers includes Coetzee himself. What is writing but an exercise of Samuel Beckett's famous line to "Try again. Fail again. Fail better"?²⁷ This predicament is particularly true for writing that seeks to convey circumstances to a reader who has never experienced (or ever will experience, firsthand) what the author wants to address. Language, by definition and construction, is a semiological system. With spoken and written words we attempt to represent the world in which we live; to meditate on this reality requires another level of signification, and further distance from the real act or event.²⁸ Does

²⁷ Says the speaker in Beckett's Worstward Ho, a prose piece written in 1983: "Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better."

²⁸ For more on theories of sign and signification inaugurated by Ferdinand de Saussure, see Saussure's collection of Writings in General Linguistics, as transcribed from his students' lecture notes.

Disgrace, five years after the end of apartheid, illustrate a new attitude toward writing about South Africa? Has Coetzee himself transcended the “truth by the bucketful” he mourned in Jerusalem?

I want to argue that the novel reflects a coming shift in the author’s writing (in subject matter, in genre, in style) at a time of national transition after decades of oppression in society. It also comes at a time of South African literature’s transition from a different (but in its own way oppressive) sense of obligation in writing. But in regards to reading Disgrace at the time it was published, the past influences on literary production in South Africa still lingered. It is difficult to shift out of dominant protocols of writing and reading; one could attribute it to a kind of creative inertia, applicable to the practice of literary production and consumption. This is especially true in a historically and continually historicized space, one Donadio describes as “a country where every inch of physical and moral ground is contested.” To read Disgrace with a new mindset is more difficult still because of the demands that the novel makes on its readers.

With its subject matter and sparse, unflinching prose, Disgrace is an unsettling novel for anyone to read, much less a reader for whom farm attacks and rape appear regularly in the newspapers. Negative reaction to the novel by South African literary critics and other readers was not and should not have been all that unexpected. By exploring social problems at a time when most other public figures were emphasizing the democratic potential of South Africa after the end of apartheid—and choosing a morally questionable older white male as his protagonist—Coetzee positioned his novel in a challenging place in the post-apartheid sphere. “J.M. Coetzee has always been discomforting to read, but increasingly the index of his significance has come to be the resistance he arouses, if not the repression he reveals, in many of his readers,” writes Michael Bell.²⁹ As I argued earlier, the incredible attention generated by Disgrace—so much of it because

²⁹ From the essay “What Is It Like to Be a Nonracist? Costello and Coetzee on the Lives of Animals and Men” in J.M. Coetzee and the Idea of the Public Intellectual.

of readers' mixed, volatile reception of the novel—could only have helped raise Coetzee's profile leading up to consideration of the author for the 2003 Nobel Prize.

With Disgrace, on the surface, Coetzee offers a novel with a main character born of the old caste, still grasping the values and beliefs of that demographic; he spins the novel's major dilemmas out of the "colonial *ne plus ultra*" black-on-white "rape fantasy" (Stranger Shores 259); and, finally, refuses to end with a neat, straightforward moral for the reader after the pains of getting through these aforementioned provocations. In creating this composition for Disgrace, Coetzee was not unleashing a novel that could be easily loved, especially by readers tired of just these things. The transformation of South Africa from an oppressive state to a promising non-racial democracy, or what then-Anglican Archbishop of Cape Town Desmond Tutu declared "a rainbow nation," was still fairly new at the time Disgrace was written and published. I do not believe there is an obligation for an author to moralize in fiction or provide readers with answers to each question raised by the narrative.³⁰ However, especially at a time when other public figures were emphasizing promise and optimism, a grim novel like Disgrace can be a jarring—and unwelcome—read. Mixed reaction to Coetzee's work is not new, however, and examining criticism of Coetzee's past novels will allow us to situate Disgrace in the author's body of work. In my analysis of readings of Coetzee's earlier work below, I will show how the politics of writing—and the causal effects on reading—help explain reception of those works.

...

Reading Coetzee, reading Disgrace

While Bethlehem and Nkosi speak of a literary commitment perhaps "most forcefully" emphasized by black writers, such politicized writing—and expectations of a certain kind of writing—was and is not limited to black South Africans. Useful in considering reception of

³⁰ For an opposing view, see Salman Rushdie's review of Disgrace, published in The Boston Globe.

Coetzee's apartheid-era work is Clive Barnett's essay, "Constructions of Apartheid in the International Reception of the Novels of J.M. Coetzee," in which he discusses the role white South African writers played in literature of the time. "Literature acquired a peculiar importance in shaping international understandings of the nature of apartheid," Barnett says (288). Barnett reasons that the work of white South African authors filled the space between South Africa and the international community, while keeping South Africa at a distance—a kind of "white author's burden," if you will, of being selectively representative as an elite conductor of English-language literature for international (re: Western) readers, but never truly representative of the (non-white) majority of people in the country that informs the author's work (288).³¹ The emphasis placed on the writing of white South Africans was a specifically moral one; the representations of South Africa imparted by certain white authors helped make apartheid an issue of international concern:

The work of white writers such as Alan Paton, Nadine Gordimer, Andre Brink, Breyten Breytenbach and J.M. Coetzee, came to hold a central place in defining an international canon of respectable, morally robust and liberal oppositional literature ... Fiction by South African writers has, then, in no small part been constituted from the outside in, shaped by the international audiences upon which it depended as the consequence of its own marginalization from the everyday life and from the political and cultural struggles of the majority of South Africans.

(Barnett 288-289)

Nadine Gordimer, especially, was one of the strongest voices in the artistic movement against apartheid, and certainly one that caught the attention of the international community. South

³¹ Barnett's "Constructions of Apartheid in the International Reception of the Novels of J.M. Coetzee" focuses on academic and non-academic reviews of In the Heart of the Country and Waiting for the Barbarians, in particular.

Africa's first Nobel laureate and an outspoken critic of apartheid, Gordimer deals with issues of the subaltern and representational politics in her work. Gordimer has also been one of Coetzee's peers who has long criticized him and his writing for not being overtly political enough.³² The authors' perceptions of each others' work is especially significant considering that they are the most internationally prominent figures in the South African literary scene; arguably, they are two of the most famous writers identified with Africa as a whole. Gordimer introduces in her review of Life and Times of Michael K, for the New York Review of Books, a point that illuminates both the detachedness that so often permeates Coetzee's work and how her own political concerns influence her reading.³³

And so J.M. Coetzee has written a marvelous work that leaves nothing unsaid—and could not be better said—about what human beings do to fellow human beings in South Africa; but he does not recognize what the victims, seeing themselves as victims no longer, have done, are doing, and believe they must do for themselves. ... The exclusion is a central one that may eat out the heart of the work's unity of art and life. (444)

³² An example of the criticism Coetzee received, in Bethlehem's essay: "Coetzee was accused, with increasing vehemence over the course of the early 1980s, of what South African literary criticism construed as a 'dehistoricization' of the 'real' " (375). The novels Waiting for the Barbarians (with its nameless empire) and Life and Times of Michael K (with its South African near-future and imaginary war) were both published in the early 1980s.

³³ Barnett talks about the role of non-academic reviewers of literary writing, such as the New York Review of Books and the book section of the Sunday Times (United Kingdom), in shaping the rhetoric and discussion of South African literature outside South Africa, i.e. speaking of white South Africans authors as "trapped" by location (similar to what Coetzee says in his Jerusalem Prize acceptance speech) "into dealing repeatedly with the same themes of living in an oppressive society" or presented South African society as "uniquely racist ... race is identified as the only axis of power of significance."

Gordimer's reaction to Life and Times of Michael K is certainly warmer than her reaction to *Disgrace*. But what one takes away from the review is Gordimer's big question: why does Coetzee write about everything "but"? Would Life and Times of Michael K be a more "complete" novel, in the eyes of Gordimer and like-minded critics, if the title character's parting thought was not the Romantic idea of drinking from an exploded well with a simple teaspoon and string?³⁴

To attempt to answer Gordimer's claim that the absence of victim agency is indeed a lack, I find it useful to draw on Albie Sachs's famous rejoinder, "Preparing Ourselves for Freedom," in which the ANC member asks for a reconsideration of the use of culture as a weapon of struggle against oppression.³⁵ In regards to cultural production in South Africa, Sachs says, "It is not a question of separating art and politics, which no one can do, but of avoiding a shallow and forced relationship between the two" (187). To seek out a certain facet of the relationship between art and politics in a work—or to look for a particular political idea in a novel's unity of art and life—is not necessary if the work does not lend itself to that consideration. The idea simply *might not be there* because the artist has made the choice not to include it. In "Preparing Ourselves for Freedom," Sachs uses Dumile Feni as an example in visual art: "Dumile ... was asked once why he did not draw scenes like one that was taking place in front of him: a crocodile of men being marched under arrest for not having their passes in order. At that moment a hearse drove slowly past and the men stood still and raised their hats. 'That's what I want to draw,' he said" (188). With Life and Times of Michael K—and *Disgrace*, and an oeuvre that has consistently bucked "the solemn formulas of commitment that people ... have tried for so many years to impose," to borrow words from Sachs—perhaps Coetzee is making his own declaration: "That's what I want to write."

³⁴ At the end of the novel, such an image appears as part of Michael K's fantasies of his immediate future (Life and Times of Michael K 183-184).

³⁵ Sachs' paper was first presented at an ANC in-house seminar on culture in Stockholm, Sweden in 1989, and then Lusaka, Zambia in 1990.

Coetzee's work has long frustrated readers' and critics' expectations by the author's "refus[al] to play the role of writer-as-statesman" (Donadio). One of the major criticisms of Coetzee's work during apartheid, as illustrated by Gordimer's review of Life and Times of Michael K, was that it was not explicitly political enough. Even in the realm of professional academic literary criticism that Barnett examines, alongside general literary journalism internationally, critics did not know quite how to place Coetzee's work. "In this reading-formation, it is the *political* value of literary fiction that is emphasized. Within the dominant frameworks for assessing the political credentials of South African fiction during the 1970s and much of the 1980s, radical academic critics found it difficult to ascribe an unambiguously positive political evaluation to Coetzee's work" (297). Coetzee's work does not easily fit into what constituted the majority of literary production during the apartheid era—neither the "dominant realist aesthetic" Barnett speaks of, infused with moral and political intention, nor writing with an agenda whose dramatized message compromises the "making" of literature, as Mphahlele said. The difficulty in pinning down the political perspective in Coetzee's novels "is in no small part a deliberate effect," Barnett argues. "Political and ethical ambivalence is a theme of all of his fiction" (297). But what this difficulty in categorizing Coetzee can do is encourage further examination of the different methods the author uses to open up conversation. I want to begin by taking another look at Life and Times of Michael K, in the context of Gordimer's review.

Gordimer's and Coetzee's contributions are both important to shaping South African literature and literature as a whole, but the two authors do not fill the same roles. Perhaps Gordimer's version of Life and Times of Michael K would focus on what people like Michael K in real-world South Africa have done, are doing, and believe they must do for themselves, but Coetzee's novel is not purposed to show how the victim is active. What Gordimer asks, in her

review, is for literary representation of active struggle against oppression by those oppressed. But it is possible to see how Coetzee's novels and essays are and have always been informed by South Africa: his ways and intentions of furthering discourse on South African issues manifest in what he does with his subjects. Coetzee best illustrates the shifting dynamics of power between people stratified by race, gender and physical differences in his experimentation with conventional novel form and structure. In terms of allusion to the history and times of apartheid South Africa, Coetzee's references do exist—they are simply hidden beneath the surface. For example, In Life and Times of Michael K, Coetzee provides few physical descriptions of the characters, much less racial markers; and the novel is set in an alternative near-future, of a South Africa consumed by civil war. But parallels to the real world that inform the novel lie thinly veiled: At one point, Michael K's friend refers to the notion that farm and business owners want workers from the camp to mysteriously appear, do all of the work for "blood cheap," and "be gone in the morning leaving everything nice and clean" (Life and Times of Michael K 82). To South African readers in the early- through mid-1980s—when the book was written and published—the allusion to the apartheid-established operations of masters and serfs would have been too clear to ignore. Under apartheid, blacks did not own the land, yet their labor effectively paid for white-owned farms. Black labor was what ensured the fields were sowed and reaped, homes cleaned and streets swept.

Compared to his earlier novels, Disgrace appears to be one of the more straightforward works of Coetzee's oeuvre, in terms of references, implicit or explicit, to the real world with which it is concerned. With Disgrace set in a real time (the late 1990s, post-apartheid) and real place (Cape Town and near Grahamstown in the rural Eastern Cape), it is easier to mistakenly, or purposefully, read this literary meditation as direct commentary. Is the novel a window on what Coetzee really believes about the new South Africa—and by extension, perhaps other white South

African authors? Succumbing to this temptation is what produces readings where assumptions of the author's racism overwhelm all other points of conversation. But it is also possible to fall into the trap of reading the novel allegorically, even though Disgrace does not have the obvious symbols and constructions of a novel like Waiting for the Barbarians. In fact, because of how close to the "real" the characters, places and events of Disgrace appear to be, there are graver consequences in reading this novel as allegory. To rephrase my earlier question about Coetzee and South African authors, does what David Lurie thinks (about black South Africans, about rape, about romantic relationships) translate to what white South Africans think in the real world? Consideration of such a question is where the sheer outrageousness of David's thoughts proves useful in actually defending the novel: David's beliefs and the claims he makes throughout the novel show him to be a caricature of a person.

Certainly there are white South Africans who share sentiments similar to those of the character. But I would argue that part of what makes David clearly a fictional character is the number of unsavory beliefs Coetzee assigns to him. In an early attempt to seduce Melanie, David tells her, "... a woman's beauty does not belong to her alone" (16); later on, after his daughter's rape, he thinks, "Raping a lesbian worse than raping a virgin: more of a blow" (105). By making David beyond provocative in his thinking, on one hand, but contradicting this part of his persona with David's concern for his daughter and the dogs he helps care for at the clinic, Coetzee can use the character of David Lurie for what he is: a *character* and a vehicle for navigating this post-apartheid story about societal change. Arguing for an author's intent is a difficult endeavor. Nonetheless, given the commitment to issues of inequality and human suffering evinced in Coetzee's earlier work, to think that the author has suddenly jumped to writing characters who are simply racist or sexist, or broadly representative of an entire group of people, would be outrageous

in its own way. Reading diachronically, then—or over the span of Coetzee’s oeuvre and not just a single work—can contribute to a deeper understanding of what the author does with Disgrace and how the novel actually continues his conversation with the reader about human relationships and interaction.

An author’s intent may be one thing, but how readers interpret it, especially when one is reading in a socio-historical space as difficult to navigate as post-apartheid South Africa, is wholly another. As Fredric Jameson hypothesizes in “Metacommentary,” “in modern times what cries out for interpretation is not the art of other cultures so much as it is our own” (11); when we read, often what we project from our in-most depths results in interpretations that reflect us, the reader of the text, more than its author.³⁶ Readings of Disgrace in South Africa are susceptible to this tendency, with readers disagreeing with the author on the culture depicted: a version of their own. This is not to say that South African readers do not see other ways to read besides with an eye trained on a work’s inherent politics. Similar to how writers who were part of the cultural movement against apartheid committed to writing a certain way, addressing only certain subject matter, readers, too, make a choice. However, we can see the limitations on fiction that resulted, and the complications in fiction’s relationship with other discursive forms of writing. But, as I have argued, the scenarios and thoughts reflective of certain parts of reality present in Disgrace prompt readers’ suspicions more often than not.

...

Return to the ANC

Moving on from general questions of reading Disgrace allegorically, I want to return to one reading of the novel that has become known for the assumptions it makes, the African National

³⁶ Also useful in consideration of ideas of allegory and international expectations of South African literature is Jameson’s essay “Third World Literature in the Era of Multi-National Capitalism.”

Congress's submission to the South African Human Rights Commission's (SAHRC) hearing on racism in the media—and the submission has also become known for the assumptions other readers have made about it. Even if the African National Congress is not suggesting that Disgrace is some sort of subjective journalism, in its use of the novel in a submission to the SAHRC hearing, the submission's language makes it especially difficult to disengage the two fields of writing. Introducing colonial General Hertzog's ideas on Afrikaner nationalism, and his idea of the black African as a primitive, immoral child, the ANC statement claims this stereotype is further "reported on" by Coetzee. After saying that the novel suggests white South Africans emigrate to avoid territorial conflict like what David and Lucy Lurie find themselves in, the submission says, "Accordingly, the alleged white 'brain drain' must be reported regularly and given the necessary prominence!" (ANC). Furthermore, the ambiguity of the language and the structure of the report gives an overall mixed impression: On the subject of racism in the media, the submission makes clear that it still very much exists; but it approaches Disgrace with language that can be read as somewhat praising Coetzee's ability to "represent" and "make [a] point" of existing racism in society, while its inclusion of the examples from Disgrace and its use of the novel in the SAHRC hearing at all suggests that the ANC believes the novel to be a racist book. Peter McDonald, in his essay "Disgrace Effects," further suggests that the submission implies that the ANC believes Coetzee himself, and not just his novel, to be racist (McDonald 326).

What makes the ANC, as an institution, qualified as a literary critic? Despite its history of promoting culture as a weapon and debate of culture for this purpose,³⁷ the political party certainly does not make the most nuanced reading of Disgrace as a work of literature. In its evaluation of the novel as a product of white South African culture and thought, the ANC is very selective in its way

³⁷ See Albie Sachs' argument to discontinue the use of culture (including literary writing) as a weapon of struggle in "Preparing Ourselves for Freedom," which I reference earlier in this chapter.

of reading—inspired by the suspicions raised by the novel’s subject matter, the reading is performed as if with a filter, to trap examples that could be read as suspect of racism. The ANC’s treatment of Disgrace, says David Attwell in “Race in Disgrace,” could be “an outright accusation, an implied accusation, or an unwarranted inference by some readers based on inconclusive evidence in the ANC’s text” (332). But the fact is that the ANC’s reading of the novel, and its inclusion in the high-profile SAHRC hearing, “is part of the tangled record [of discussion about the novel] which needs clarification” (332).

Thus, just as we must consider both what the novel *does* (open up racial discourse, according to Attwell) as well as *invites* (accusations of racist writing), we must do the same for the ANC’s treatment. Even if the ANC appears limited or “incorrect” in its reading of the novel, the place the SAHRC submission has taken in public debate necessitates that one talk about it when discussing the reception of Disgrace. Public debate has centered on the racialization of the novel (or the racialized politics of the novel, depending on where one stands), not necessarily the ethics of reading. The politics of attention surrounding Disgrace have continued to pervade discussions not just about the novel but about Coetzee’s professional and personal choices since then: In the essay “Out of South Africa,” published in The New York Times before the release of Coetzee’s most recent novel, Diary of a Bad Year, essayist Rachel Donadio considers how much the volatile reception of Disgrace factored into Coetzee’s decision to move to Australia.³⁸ In a speech Coetzee gave at his citizenship ceremony, in front of 200-odd literary fans and members of the public, he said his move was an active choice. “I did not leave South Africa because I had to,” he said. “In fact I didn’t so much leave South Africa—a country with which I retain strong emotional ties—as come to Australia” (Debelle). But in the introduction to her piece, Donadio asks, “Were his 2002 move and his taking of Australian citizenship last year a betrayal of his homeland, or a rejoinder to

³⁸ Coetzee moved to Adelaide, Australia in 2002, and became a citizen in 2006.

a country whose new government had denounced one of his most important novels as racist?” Donadio provides two possible explanations here, both negative. At this point, the ANC submission’s most significant contribution to ongoing discussions of Disgrace is the notion that it is a condemnation of the novel. Somewhat ironically, much like what has happened with Disgrace, the ANC’s treatment of the novel is another case where what a text intends to do becomes overshadowed by the incredible attention paid to what readers believe the text suggests.

...

Location, location, location

So how does Disgrace fit into the greater map of South African literature? In its own way, I believe that Disgrace is a novel about ordinary people in extraordinary circumstances. Coetzee crafts the story and its details to be especially challenging to read. Njabulo Ndebele’s “The Rediscovery of the Ordinary” is useful in understanding how the novel’s literariness matches up to Nkosi’s and Sachs’s urging of greater persuasion and imagination in South African writing. In South African literature, the ordinary daily lives of people should be the direct focus of political interest, argues Ndebele in his essay, “for the struggle involves people not abstractions” (57). Ndebele’s challenge in this essay, written in the 1980s and published in his 1994 book of the same title, is for South African literature, its producers as well as its readers:

If it is a new society we seek to bring about in South Africa then that newness will be based on a direct concern with the way people actually live. That means a range of complex ethical issues involving man-man, man-woman, woman-woman, man-nature, man-society relationships. These kinds of concerns are destined to find their way into our literature, making it more complex and richer.

(57)

It is possible to see Ndebele's essay as a suggestion of what must be changed about literature, preceding a time of transition. As I have tried to illustrate thus far, Disgrace is close to answering the call of "the ordinary," if we are to go off Ndebele's definition. Arguably, certain elements of the novel smell faintly of the sensational—the situation of a woman becoming pregnant because of rape, for example, is a difficult trope to pull off. But Coetzee manages to use Lucy's rape and decision to keep the resultant pregnancy to agitate the already complex web of social tensions within the characters' universe—David's and Lucy's ability to understand each other is further complicated over Lucy's decision to have the child, for example. Essentially, Disgrace is about the relationships between human beings, and the problems that arise out of inequality in spaces of interaction; these themes are not new to Coetzee's work. But with Disgrace, Coetzee tackles, unapologetically, the complex ethical issues associated with such relationships at a time when readers are still especially sensitive about how these relationships are portrayed.

In Attwell's contextualization of the ANC's treatment of Disgrace, he comments that "one can only agree" with Michael Marais's thought that "the paradigms that inform our reading habits are, it seems, coextensive with the ways in which we see the world in general" (27). These reading habits result in an inability to fully see what Disgrace does and not just the suspicions it invites for the readers who adhere to these inculturated literary filters. Disgrace does not aim to involve itself in racialized or racial politics and discourse; instead it prompts discourse *on* race. Attwell argues that the novel "contains and sublimates race, by drawing it into larger patterns of historical and ethical interpretation" (340). Yet the fact that "this gesture is not received in the public sphere with anything like the seriousness it deserves, confirms everything that the novel itself broods over so apparently airlessly, a history seemingly given over entirely to the struggle for political, material and sexual

power” (340). One issue here, I feel, is that the loudest voices are the ones whose concern with race in the novel overwhelms the discussion in the public sphere. This gesture may indeed be taken seriously, but the voices of readers who want to talk about how Coetzee opens up racial discourse rather than racializes discourse may not be heard because of the majority of those who have argued the opposite. In time, once talk of the more sensational criticism inspired by the novel is exhausted, continued debate will make way for other readings.

But if this history Attwell speaks of—“seemingly given over entirely to the struggle for political, material and sexual power”—is an underlying reason why discussion of Disgrace has remain largely racialized and race-focused, it may prove more difficult to set a timeline for recovery in regards to the discussion of societal issues addressed in literature than to set a timeline for recovery of society itself, after apartheid. Coetzee certainly does not cast the new, post-apartheid South Africa in the most flattering light, in Disgrace, but the novel’s underlying torsions of power and issues of human inequality are matters that have a deep history in South Africa. The novel forces readers to consider the fact that these tensions, exacerbated by sexual and race relations, still very much exist. To confront both society’s promising but still recovering present as well as its ugly past, all at once, is a task many readers may find “hard to take,” as Derek Attridge says (ER 164).

Furthermore, what Coetzee chooses to write about and the ways in which he depicts elements taken from reality creates tension in the author’s ongoing conversation with the reader, an idea I will pursue further in the conclusion of this thesis. In his book J.M. Coetzee: South Africa and the Politics of Writing, Attwell argues that “Coetzee is more concerned, then, with narrative and its relation to other discourses than he is with representation per

se” (13-14). While his readers appear primarily concerned with one thing, Coetzee—as he has seemed for most of his career—appears concerned with another: the craft of literature. In the following chapter of this thesis, I will consider how Coetzee’s concern with narrative—which emerges in his novels in the upending of “conventional” narrative style and form—opens up a more far-ranging discourse than simple representation.

Chapter II:
Narrative and Discourse in the Novels of J.M. Coetzee

. . .

On writing

In the previous chapter, I suggested a foundational problem in South African writers' preoccupation with literary truth-telling during apartheid, one based on the nature of language. Because language, at its most basic, is a system where the smallest units (letters and words) are symbols to begin with, even the best attempts committed to truly capturing "reality" in literature fall short. "Realism" is only representative of "the real."³⁹ Furthermore, this purposed realism—because of its emphasis on political message over imagination, persuasion and other qualities that distinguish literature from other discursive writing—compromises the definition of South African literature as *literature*. If it is no longer the case that a monolithic truth swamps the South African writer's imagination, making it impossible to do anything but try again and fail again at capturing "South Africa," what motivates South African literature after apartheid—at the time Disgrace was published, five years after the official end of apartheid, and now, fifteen years after the fact?

As I discussed in chapter one, to break from certain, forcefully championed protocols of writing and reading can be difficult; debate over literary commitment and the use of culture against oppression in South Africa evinced a particularly forceful adherence to politicized fiction. But instead of striving to represent a reality that refuses to be contained by the bounds of language and literature, more useful for further developing discussion may be the different *means* by which an author can present a literary invention of a specific event or time and place. It is not just the representative ability of language in literature but the construction of a work that determines how

³⁹ Earlier, in note number seven, chapter one, I referred to Louise Bethlehem's definition of "reality" as "the lived substratum of individual and collective existence experienced as the real" (368).

successfully a work achieves its aims. To develop this idea and the way in which Coetzee's work subscribes to and also pulls away from his notion that South African literature is one trapped by the brutal truth of reality ("Jerusalem Prize" 98), I want to read Disgrace alongside two of his earlier novels, In the Heart of the Country and Waiting for the Barbarians.

Coetzee's limitation of points of view in Disgrace allows the reader more-or-less unfettered access to David Lurie's thoughts, but elides the stories of Melanie and Lucy, among other characters. Coetzee's choice of a free, indirect narrative style challenges the reader to traverse the narrative via the beliefs and actions of the novel's protagonist. This construction is also a more difficult way to convey the imbalance of power created in human interactions amplified by sex or race; if Coetzee is indeed holding up a mirror to society, the gaze lingers on a figure who is at once profoundly unsympathetic (as an older, slightly racist, arguably sexist and homophobic white South African) and demanding empathy (as a father unable to connect with his daughter, and as someone reluctantly, but finally accepting changes in his personal life and in greater society that he may or may not understand). The manipulation of narrative to emphasize emotions or particular perspectives is not new in Coetzee's novels—and the way Disgrace's narrative is structured and unfolds is rather conventional when compared to Coetzee's earlier novels. In In the Heart of the Country and Waiting for the Barbarians, the stunted, deformed human relationships that emerge are reflected in the structure of the novels themselves: in the novels' fragmented storytelling, moments of blankness in a narrator's reportage, and veiled references to the real world. Understanding Coetzee's plays on narrative in his earlier novels allows us a new depth with which to read the diagetetic ways in which he conveys unequal human interactions in Disgrace.

...

Experimentation and the art of fiction

In the Heart of the Country and Waiting for the Barbarians introduce notions of otherness, sex and sexuality that reappear in *Disgrace*. But, perhaps even more significant in viewing Disgrace as a turning point in Coetzee's oeuvre, the two earlier novels also demonstrate how the author's manipulation of structure and narrative form conveys the shifting equations of race, sex and power that constitute his subject matter; the influence of Coetzee's career-spanning experimentation with these devices can be felt in Disgrace. To analyze the effect of authorial choices on the way each novel tells its stories, I want to examine Coetzee's use of repetition and literary echoes, what I will call "false correctives," limited points of view and other modifications of traditional story-telling. In doing so, I also want to create space to discuss the issues these devices frame, with specific focus on the complicated sexual lives of Coetzee's characters.

With their fractured narratives, Dusklands and In the Heart of the Country—his first two novels—introduced Coetzee as a writer who challenges conventional structure and form.⁴⁰ Coetzee breaks the narrative of In the Heart of the Country into numbered journal entries, each varying in length, presented as the regular reportage of a young woman living on an isolated farm in the South African Karoo semi-desert. In one entry, a single line, protagonist and narrator Magda remarks, "How can I be deluded when I think so clearly?" (126); elsewhere she characterizes herself as "a crazy old queen" (138). The suggestion of madness creates a problem of narrative unreliability. This instability allows Coetzee to utilize what Derek Attridge calls "mimetic writing" (ER 26) and I will refer to as "false corrective." In Coetzee's method of mimetic writing in this novel, a passage is rewritten immediately following the original; sometimes the narrative proceeds from the original, and at other times, it continues on from the rewritten passage. This device creates the sense that the narrative has been "corrected," but because it is not a direct substitution

⁴⁰ Dusklands was published in 1974 and In the Heart of the Country in 1977, both by London company Martin Secker & Warburg.

and because of the established narrative unreliability, what results is further confusion of what events have actually happened and what have not—nothing has been corrected at all.⁴¹ Such an example occurs over the course of seven entries in In the Heart of the Country: in the scene set forth, Magda and Hendrik argue, she stabs him with a fork, and then he assaults and rapes her. Magda retells the series of events with specific actions overlapping, introducing a number of issues (sexual action fueled by hatred, racialized interactions between characters, interracial and incest taboos) that invite further exploration in the novel and Coetzee’s work.

In the first version of the passage (entry 205) Magda takes the fork and “lunge[s] at [Hendrik]. The tines scrape his shoulder, probably not even piercing the skin” before he throws her to the floor and kicks her; Magda weeps with shame, knees in the air “[like] how a bitch must look,” with the assumption that Hendrik intends to sexually violate her as well (HOC 104). The second time, Magda again only scrapes Hendrik with the fork and he forces himself upon her, as she pleads, “Not here, not on the floor, please, please!” (105). At the beginning of entry 207, Hendrik throws Magda against the wall and the fork again falls to the floor and she begs again, “Please not like this on the floor!”; here the focus is on what Magda says as the assumed violation happens, sobbing “Why do you hate me so?,” a question that will prove central to her ultimate frustration with Hendrik. With her cry, Magda opens up conversation on hatred’s role in sexual interaction, specifically forced intercourse. Coetzee weaves this discursive thread into Disgrace, in David and Lucy’s conversations after the farm-attack and gang-rape. I will return to consider this motivation later on in this chapter, in closer analysis of the Luries’ conversations.

⁴¹ This device first appears in Dusklands, in the “double deaths” of Jan Klauer, the man-servant attending adventurer Jacobus Coetzee, the narrator of “The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee” (the second half of Dusklands). In two separate paragraphs, the author writes two scenes of Klauer’s death, creating a narrative paradox. In the first, Klauer is swept away while crossing a river; in the second, both Klauer and Jacobus Coetzee cross safely.

As a result of the narrative's doubling back and rewriting of the scene in In the Heart of the Country, Attridge says, "Hendrik's rape of Magda is described twice, or rather, two rapes are described, since there are significant differences between the two events" (ER 26). The spirit of Dusklands' narrative paradox resurfaces here, but extended in length and heady imagery, and narrated not by an onlooker but the victim of this different form of "death": a bludgeoning of Magda's will, the termination of her virginity. Following Magda's address of Hendrik in entry 207, the next three entries depict different variations of the first rape scene—either Hendrik has acquiesced to Magda's pleas of "not on the floor" or it is a different, subsequent "unusual afternoon in [Magda's] life" (HOC 106). After the act is finished in this version, Magda returns to the fork: "Fingers grip the spine of a fork, the tines flash out, plunging through the patched shirt, ploughing through the skin. Blood flows. Two arms grapple, the fork falls" (HOC 108). Finally, at least in her imagination, Magda becomes the one plunging through the other's body and rending blood—reversing roles from the previous paragraph, in a way.

Because the false correctives of the Hendrik-Magda rape construct the sense of multiple instances of rape, even though there is but one rape that occurs in the passage, the reader becomes aware of the sheer impossibility of these narrative anomalies occurring in sequence, Attridge says. Each new entry appears to "correct" the entry that came directly before it, but because they double-back in time and rewrite the same scene, with little forward movement chronologically, the correctives are illogical. By arranging the different versions of the event as subsequent entries, Coetzee creates the effect of a convolution of words on the page as well as in the reader's mind. The impossibility of this passage of a whole being true forcibly shifts the reader's attention to "the constructedness of the events and the craftedness of the descriptions, as well as of the author's sovereign power to do whatever he pleases with the narrative" (ER 26). It is a moment when the

author reinforces his stamp on the novel. Doing so illustrates the roles this kind of conscious “constructedness” and “craftedness” play in Coetzee’s writing, in terms of conveying the story or stories that make up the novel.⁴² What I want to draw from reading the false correctives of In the Heart of the Country, to supplement discussion of how Coetzee conveys inequality in sexual relations in Disgrace, is the very craftedness of the device. The craftedness makes clear that Coetzee is playing in the world of fiction. The ways in which he constructs unequal relationships in Disgrace, via other experimentations with the narrative, does not appear nearly as deliberate. Nonetheless, just as we cannot tell truth from fiction with Magda’s journal, there are also pieces that we cannot assume as all true in Disgrace; this includes David’s reimagining of Lucy’s rape, and by extension, David’s thoughts (and beliefs) as a whole. Yet, I would argue, some readers do anyway—and these assumptions in reading the text can easily slip into assumptions about what the text says about race-motivated farm attacks, rape or post-apartheid South Africa.

Although it is ultimately up to the reader to interpret a text, a reading must begin with what the author provides. In the case of In the Heart of the Country, Coetzee densely packs the novel’s 138 pages with material, as recollections repeat and rewrite themselves in Magda’s mimetic reports; with Disgrace, characters’ recollections and re-imaginings of the novel’s central act of violence unfold in a fashion that better fits “conventional” narrative exposition. But in Disgrace the reader must deal with the constraints of David Lurie’s point of view: though he is in the house with Lucy when the event of rape occurs, he is hampered by the walls separating them, the physical limitations of his battered body, and later on, the question of his ability to see the event from a woman’s (specifically, in the case of his daughter, a victim’s) perspective. In this way, David is

⁴² Future mentions of “constructedness” and “craftedness” are references to the words as used in Attwell’s Ethics of Reading.

distanced from Lucy's experience and the reader is removed further still, as the reader is made to rely on David.

Before shifting this part of the conversation to Disgrace and Waiting for the Barbarians, I would like to make final note on the false correctives of In the Heart of the Country. I see the Magda/Hendrik scene series as a more localized, literal play on Beckett's command of "Try again. Fail again. Fail better." This idea seems rather fitting because of Coetzee's background as a Beckett scholar. In regards to his earlier work, Coetzee's doctoral dissertation was a stylistic analysis of Beckett's prose, and the specter of dense, Beckett-style monologues can be seen in Magda's journal. The mimetic entries of the scene appear as Magda's repeated attempts to tell her story, though the very nature of their construction (overlapping, contradictory, chronologically suspect) means that the passage ends with no clear answer as to what happened. Another way to look at the Beckett influence is through Coetzee's own work on Beckett: In an essay presented at a symposium marking the 100th anniversary of the dramatist's birth, Coetzee painted a scene typical of Beckett's plays (one character, sparse setting, illogical task) in order to unpack new significance from absurdity. Coetzee spoke of the moment in Beckett's writing not of elucidation, as a reader trying to puzzle out the meaning of a Beckett piece might expect, but one cognizant of pure unknowing: "This (Beckett's) is not a meaningless universe, that is, it is not a universe without rules," Coetzee says. "But getting to understand the rules of the universe counts for nothing, in the end. The universe is interested not in what you can understand *but at what point you cease to understand*" (27, emphasis added).⁴³ The points where Magda's narrative overlaps and contradicts itself illustrate where her understanding begins to cloud, but also where the reader's understanding

⁴³ "Eight Ways of Looking at Samuel Beckett" was presented at a 2006 Beckett symposium in Tokyo, and published in Rodopi's 2008 Samuel Beckett Today: Borderless Beckett, Tokyo 2006.

of the situation and the novel as a whole becomes compromised. The discourse this narrative opens up, then, becomes a literary discussion, about what manipulation of structure does to story-telling.

...

Through a glass, darkly

For the reader of Disgrace, granted only what David sees, hears and thinks, the crux of the novel's greater narrative—Lucy's rape—happens as if off-stage. By handicapping David during the farm attack and gang-rape, Coetzee leaves the reader as much in the dark as David—if not more than him—in regards to what actually happens to Lucy during the time David is locked in the bathroom. The narrator makes David the reader's eyes and ears; not seeing and not hearing, left with only the imagination, David and by extension the reader must mentally construct what they did not witness. "Since the stories of Melanie and Lucy are elided in Disgrace, the responsibility for such an imagining is left with the reader," writes Lucy Valerie Graham. David is essentially an outsider to Lucy's rape, connected to the scene because he is terribly aware of it and yet physically unable to act; this sense of failure to protect his daughter contributes to increased tension in the Luries' relationship. While Magda, the victim, revisits the episode with Hendrik via In the Heart of the Country's corrective entries, it is David, someone who can sympathize with the victim (but perhaps can identify with the perpetrators more than he would wish), who reimagines the afternoon of the farm attack in Disgrace, having visions of his daughter calling for help (103) or dreaming of "a bed of blood, a bath of blood" (159). He visualizes the event of the rape, "from where he stands, from where Lucy stands":

Lucy was frightened, frightened near to death. Her voice choked, she could not breathe, her limbs went numb. *This is not happening*, she said to herself as the men forced her down; *it is just a dream, a nightmare*. While the men, for their part, drank up her fear, reveled in it,

did all they could to hurt her, to menace her, to heighten her terror. *Call your dogs!* they said to her. *Go on, call your dogs! No dogs! Then let us show you dogs!* (160).

In his repeated attempts to come up with his own version of what happened, David creates multiple rapes that are perhaps completely different than what actually happened. Again, because of the point of view, how are we, as readers, to know what has actually happened and what has not? To guess that one would be “frightened, frightened near to death” in such a situation as Lucy’s would be a more than reasonable assumption. But because the imagined scene is written with the outside narrator’s chilly detachment and straightforward language—not “David thinks Lucy was frightened” but “Lucy *was* frightened” (emphasis added)—and is set apart in its own paragraph, Coetzee allows the reader to entertain the notion that the details could be fact and not just the product of David’s mind. Thus, this “responsibility” of imagining of which Graham speaks is also accompanied by the potential danger of accepting for truth what is merely suggested. The way in which Coetzee handles the revisitation of scenes in Disgrace does not match the obvious constructedness and craftedness of In the Heart of the Country, but David’s thoughts are replications of reality nonetheless. We can also read the limited parts of Lucy’s experience that she reveals to her father, spread over different conversations, as another series of repetition and revision, also decidedly less crafted than the metadiagnosis of the Magda/Hendrik rape. Immediately after the attackers have left with David’s car and the household goods, and damage in their wake, Lucy makes it clear to her father that her story is “[hers] alone”:

‘David, when people ask, would you mind keeping to your own story, to what happened to you?’

“You tell what happened to you, I tell what happened to me,” she repeats.

He does not understand.

“You’re making a mistake,” [David] says in a voice that is fast descending to a croak.

“No I’m not,” she says.

“My child, my child!” he says, holding out his arms to her. When she does not come, he puts aside his blanket, stands up, and takes her in his arms. In his embrace she is stiff as a pole, yielding nothing. (99)

In this last line, the definiteness of the heavy words “yielding nothing” suggests the difficulty in hearing Lucy’s story; in fact, because of the limited point of view, the reader can never truly access Lucy’s story. Eventually, first in the Luries’ conversation after driving to Port Elizabeth on reports of the stolen car, then after seeing one of the rapists at neighbor/farm-hand Petrus’s house-warming party, Lucy begins to reveal more and more details of what happened when David was locked up and left to burn in the bathroom. Though she protests to her father that she does not operate “in abstractions,” like guilt and subjugation, Lucy only volunteers abstractions in response to David’s prying questions about what happened: how the rapists spurred each other on “like dogs,” how she felt only “hatred.” Lucy’s refusal to report the rape to the police is one matter, and perhaps an irresponsible one in consideration of other women, if the attackers really “do rape” as a vocation with robbery on the side, as she posits. Her hesitance to tell David about it is another issue; how comfortable can it be to tell one’s father the details of a rape? But Lucy’s unwillingness to confide in David (just as he is trying to be a good father and take care of her, although before moving to the farm he had not seen his daughter in over a year) exacerbates the tension of their relationship. They already treat each other with the measured civility of acquaintances.

We can also read Lucy and David’s multiple arguments and conversations about the rape as yet another form of corrective narrative: her experience of events versus his experience, what she

chooses to reveal versus what he imagines to make up for her refusal to talk. That there are multiple accounts of that day's farm attack, however, does not make it easier for the reader to deduce what actually did happen—at most, the “truth” of this part of the narrative is what we achieve in our pursuit of the “real,” which is never revealed because the author constructs the novel in such a fashion that Lucy's story must be kept silent. In her reading of rape in *Disgrace*, Graham asserts, “For although the stories of Melanie and Lucy in *Disgrace* can only remain '[theirs] alone', to consign rape to a space outside articulation may contribute to a wider phenomenon of silencing.” For narrative effect, the stories of Melanie and Lucy must remain closed. But what writing about such a topic can do is prompt further discussion of the topic, especially fitting at a time when media reports of rape are at a high, as Graham reports in her essay, and discussion of rape as “endemic in South African culture” has made its way into BBC webcast denials by Thabo Mbeki. Instead of focusing on depictions of rape—particularly interracial rape, considering the history of media accounts playing into *swart gevaar* or apartheid-era “black peril”—what would be useful furthermore would be to transfer the conversation to the problem of rape as a rising statistic in South Africa; we could also examine how the element of desire in Melanie's interactions with David complicates notions of coercive sexuality, and open up discourse from there.⁴⁴

...

“Are she and he on the same side?": Difficult conversations

The idea of hate motivating rape, introduced in *In the Heart of the Country*, surfaces in David and Lucy's dialogue when father and daughter drive home from Port Elizabeth, after

⁴⁴ Perhaps that there has not been more discussion about rape stemming from the novel reflects what Elleke Boehmer considers Coetzee's inability to truly embody or convey female characters (or to “be the woman,” to borrow Coetzee's words), thus factoring into the elision of women's stories and the outrageousness of some characters' beliefs about women or actions as women (David Lurie's musings on lesbians, Elizabeth Costello's views and lectures). See Boehmer's essay “Coetzee's Queer Body.”

looking for David's stolen car. Lucy finally volunteers her feelings about the rape, and her admission shifts from being about her own experience to implicating her father—and all men—to some degree:

Halfway home, Lucy, to [David's] surprise, speaks. "It was so personal," she says. "It was done with such personal hatred. That was what stunned me more than anything. The rest was ... expected. But why did they hate me so? [...] Hatred ... When it comes to men and sex, David, nothing surprises me any more. Maybe, for men, hating the woman makes sex more exciting. You are a man, you ought to know." (156-158)

Magda's appeal, "Why do you hate me so?" appears, rephrased, in Lucy's question to David, "But why did they hate me so?" The obvious difference from Magda's plea is that Lucy is addressing her father here, and not her attackers; because Lucy reveals few concrete details about the rape to her father, the reader does not know whether she posed this same question to the rapists. Yet, as Lucy's damning last words would suggest, should not David be able to provide an answer?

David's function as a man and (hetero)sexual being would seemingly put him in the same camp as the rapists. Her insistence "You are a man, you ought to know," followed by the equation of forced sex with a kind of murder (*Disgrace* 159), seems to levy a less-than-subtle charge at her father—one that David infers, assuming that his daughter is hinting at his messy dalliance with Melanie or even his sexual history and the way he treats women. The idea that his relations with Melanie could have been unwanted and non-consensual, to the degree that Lucy would make a connection between him and her rapists, clearly bothers David.

Another example of David's unease at this association comes earlier in the novel, when David asks his daughter for details immediately after the rape:

"Can I guess?" he says. "Are you trying to remind me of something?"

“Am I trying to remind you of what?”

“Of what women undergo at the hands of men.”

“Nothing could be further from my thoughts. This has nothing to do with you, David.”

(111)

David hears Lucy’s insinuations—to him, his daughter, but also a recent victim of rape—whether real or merely perceived. Despite and because of the fact that the reader experiences Lucy’s rape from David’s limited perspective, instead of the more sympathetic and standard choice of the victim, Lucy, the questions of sex as a weapon and its effects on either gender take on a different nuance. After Lucy’s small speech, David works her last words over in his head: “*You are a man, you ought to know*: does one speak to one’s father like that? Are she and he on the same side?” (*Disgrace* 159). Furthermore, David asks if he has it in him to not just see from the male perspective, but to “be the woman”; at that point in the novel, he finds that he cannot quite answer that question. Because of the nature of David and Lucy’s relationship, that of father and daughter, a certain anxiety about whether he has failed to protect her in other ways complicates his thinking. From these conversations, Coetzee has raised a new concern: whether, in the relationships of men and women, the conception of a singularly male collective unconscious or experience, or a singularly female collective conscious or experience, ultimately defeats any semblance of taking sides (or simply allying with a certain side out of familial duty, for example). In this instance, nature triumphs over choice.

Further muddling the notion of different sides is the fact that the words and sentiment similar to Lucy’s retort that the rape should remain “[her] business, and [hers] alone” appears in a very different context several chapters beforehand, during David’s sexual harassment hearing in Cape Town. Asked to elaborate on his side of the story, David snaps at one of the members of the

panel, “What goes on in my mind is my business, not yours, Farodia . . . Frankly, what you want from me is not a response but a confession. Well, I make no confession. I put forward a plea, as is my right. Guilty as charged. That is my plea. That is as far as I am prepared to go” (51). Of course, the irony is that Lucy later uses similar words to explain her own refusal to “confess” about her experience of sexual coercion—and the position she is in, as a victim of rape, appears near opposite to where David is coming from, as the one dominant in his sexual relationships. Coetzee’s decision to limit the point of view to David Lurie lends greater complexity to the novel’s discourse on sex and power overall, especially when connected to the Melanie storyline.

In the case of a limited point of view, as readers, what we get of the other characters’ feelings we must divine from dialogue or the main character’s reaction to what these others say or do. In the grander scope of the character, the reader does not know much about Lucy’s relationship with Helen. The “facts” we learn about Lucy and her personal life, such as her sexual orientation, are all based on David’s ideas because *Disgrace* relies on a projection of David’s thoughts. Although the novel never makes clear whether Lucy is a lesbian or not, the fact that David believes his daughter to be a lesbian raises questions about sexuality and the politics of heterosexual rape (and not just interracial rape, an issue that has been heavily discussed in regards to the novel, mostly related to the suggestions that this kind of racialized sexual violence makes about black South Africans). Lucy’s sexuality becomes something else that should be considered in the politics of sexual action—especially since David makes a number of questionable statements about lesbianism and rape, such as the aforementioned “Raping a lesbian worse than raping a virgin: more of a blow” (105).

. . .

Echoes and meta-references

Returning to In the Heart of the Country, the description of the Magda-Hendrik encounter, down to specific sexual details, reads with a similarly “painful vividness” (ER 26) as the scene in which David shows up unannounced at Melanie’s flat and coerces her into sex in a way that is “not rape, not quite that, but undesired nevertheless, undesired to the core” (Disgrace 25). The echoes in Disgrace of scenes in other novels depicting compromising or coercive sexual encounters cannot be coincidental. In this section, I will look at how Coetzee references scenes (down to a seeming recycling of imagery) from In the Heart of the Country and Waiting for the Barbarians in writing the episode where David literally attempts to sweep the unwilling Melanie off her feet. One way to read Coetzee’s work diachronically is to note how language and imagery resurface in multiple novels, especially in scenes where he aims to emphasize the levels/degree of inequality between characters. Perhaps we can view these echoes as part of Coetzee’s ongoing conversation with the reader about shifting dynamics in racialized and sexualized human relations—or, specifically in the earlier novels, his own proof that the influence of how people treat each other in apartheid South Africa is impossible to shake.

The two episodes I have noted in In the Heart of the Country and Disgrace, read side-by-side, invite a different connection between characters: between David and Hendrik, as opposed to David and Lucy’s rapists. In this case, it is not that David, too, is a man and simply ought to know, and that he believes his actions toward Melanie are inspired by Eros not malice; but these actions, however much under the spell of a transcendental lust, elicit a reaction from Melanie strikingly similar to Magda’s. In the first rewriting of the passage (entry 208), as Magda reluctantly undresses before Hendrik, she resigns herself to “a woman’s fate” (HOC 106).

I lie down on the bed with my back to him ... It is too late now, things will follow on from a beginning to an end. I must simply endure until finally I am left alone and can begin to

rediscover who I am, putting together, in the time of which there is blessedly so much here, the pieces that this unusual afternoon in my life is disarranging (106).

The “not-rape” episode with David and Melanie bears uncanny resemblance to Magda’s account, even though they are written in different points of view, one with access to the thoughts of the “violator” versus the first-person account of the “victim.” In the entry, Magda introduces Hendrik as “this stranger”; Melanie is “too surprised to resist the intruder who thrusts himself upon her” (Disgrace 24). Once undressed, Melanie burrows under the bedcovers and turns her back on David; during the event, David recognizes that Melanie acts as if resigned “to go slack, die within herself for the duration . . . So that everything done to her might be done, as it were, from far away” (Disgrace 25). This sense of removal echoes Magda’s first version of the rape, when she says, “things are being done to me, I feel them far away” (HOC 105). Both women attempt to separate themselves mentally and emotionally from their physical bodies during the sexual acts.

But what distinguishes Melanie’s and Magda’s experience from Lucy’s is the element of desire present in their respective sexual interactions; this additional layer of complexity to what could otherwise be seen as a one-sided “relationship” also appears in Waiting for the Barbarians with the barbarian girl and the Magistrate. In Disgrace, especially, desire on the part of Melanie makes the reader consider what exactly constitutes “not-rape,” an issue I will address again later in the chapter.

. . .

“No country, this, for old men”

If not the most likable protagonist, David Lurie certainly creates a more challenging perspective from which to tell the stories within Disgrace. As an example from Coetzee’s earlier work, The Magistrate in Waiting for the Barbarians is not always the most sympathetic figure,

either. The characters' positions at the start of each novel—as men with some amount of power in their respective domains, but facing change, with varying degrees of grace and acceptance—allow for a comparative study of their interactions with others, specifically characters that would be characterized as “the Other.”⁴⁵ Both Melanie Isaacs and the barbarian girl are characterized by what I call a “double Othering,”: they are women but are also of a different race or ethnicity than the men with whom they are involved. Coetzee has written the scenario of an older man involved with a younger woman multiple times in his work, introduced in Waiting for the Barbarians and revisited, in variations, in Foe, Disgrace, Slow Man, and most recently, Diary of a Bad Year. The relationships built on the older man-younger woman trope in Waiting for the Barbarians and Disgrace reveal the most useful comparisons, in terms of storytelling and contributing to a dialogue on human interactions stratified by sex and power. As a result of their actions, both David and the Magistrate become outcasts in their communities. The Magistrate's trip to return the girl factors into his arrest, and discovery of David's affair with Melanie costs him his job. But while the protagonists' dalliances negatively impact their own lives, they damage the women to a greater degree. The narration of each novel (through the voice of the Magistrate in Waiting for the Barbarians and a third-person speaker limited to Lurie in Disgrace), however, suggests that each man trusts his good intentions, if clouded by lust (Lurie's case) or a puzzling fascination (in the Magistrate's case). In both novels, at certain points, the characters of these women serve more as symbols than human beings.

The Magistrate seems to acknowledge that his involvement with the barbarian girl is somewhat unusual, a pairing of opposites partially inspired by charity and anthropology. Just as he strains to read the paper slips discovered outside the settlement, thought to be of some long-ago

⁴⁵ In the formulation of my understanding of the Other, issues of elision and the postcolonial woman, I am indebted to Edward Said's Orientalism and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's “Can the Subaltern Speak?”

civilization, the Magistrate struggles to read the girl for clues of her background—and perhaps by extension, background on the barbarian people: “It has been growing more and more clear to me that until the marks on this girl’s body are deciphered and understood I cannot let go of her” (WFB 31). The Magistrate’s compulsion to read the barbarian girl as a text is veiled by his preoccupation with her body, which he ritually oils and massages. His obsession with the “text” of the girl’s body—the details of her background and the details of her torture by Colonel Joll, specifically—become tightly entwined with the ritual. Despite the suggestiveness of the oiling and massing ritual, the Magistrate’s desire for the girl, for the most part, is not sexual. In the novel, he repeatedly questions why he is involved with her and, for most of the novel, is uncomfortable with the idea of sex with the girl. “Lodging my old man’s member in that blood-hot sheath makes me think of acid in milk, ashes in honey, chalk in bread” (WFB 33). By describing their potential union with such poisonous metaphors, the Magistrate heightens the contrast between him and the girl.

The physical caressing of her body is but part of the ritual, the other half being verbal investigation of her story: “ ‘What did they do to you?’ I murmur. My tongue is slow, I sway on my feet with exhaustion. ‘Why don’t you want to tell me?’ ” (WFB 31). The Magistrate reinforces the girl’s barbarian heritage (and thus, her Otherness) by referring to her as “the barbarian girl” and in the way he repeatedly asks her to tell her story, resorting to imagination when she refuses. Confession versus story-telling, and one’s inability to confess versus refusal to confess, appear throughout Coetzee’s work. The Magistrate’s obsession with the barbarian girl is inspired by her refusal to tell her story, or more specifically, refusal to explain how she was tortured by the Empire’s Colonel Joll. Her blind, broken body is closed to the Magistrate’s reading, despite however much he tries to project his desires upon her. She becomes representative of the barbarians’ story of torture at the hands of the Empire, and the practice of anointing and washing

her body—the image of which alludes to both idol worship and a more classic Biblical image of Mary Magdalene at the feet of Jesus, but with gender roles reversed—becomes a way for the Magistrate to absolve his complicity in the Empire’s actions. The act is a literal attempt at washing his hands of the Empire’s abuses.

By contrast, Melanie’s story matters little to David at the beginning of *Disgrace*. David is consumed by her beauty, but his descriptions of the lust or love he feels for her transcends earthly human pleasure, as if overtaken by the god of love. Driven by his Romantic feelings toward his new romance, when David does want an identity for his new lover, he creates one, renaming her Mélanie, “the dark one.” What Melanie knows of David’s story comes only from questions that she asks. After they have sex for what turns out to be the last time, she asks him about his divorce (“ ‘... twice. Married twice, divorced twice’ ” (*Disgrace* 29)), whether he regularly sleeps with students, and if he is not “collecting” women (“ ‘Aren’t you collecting me?’ ”). David is obsessed with Melanie’s physical body, whereas the Magistrate interest is fueled by the barbarian girl’s untold history. Even after the affair ends, and even after David is no longer in Cape Town, he feels pangs of lust sparked by the memory of “[Melanie’s] neat little breasts ... her smooth flat belly. A ripple of desire passes through him. Evidently whatever it was is not over yet” (*Disgrace* 65). Though the frequency of their appearance slows, then fades away by the end of the novel, these episodes appear like a few frames spliced into a film. Coetzee punctuates these flashes with quick, strong imagery: Melanie riding away on a motorcycle, knees apart, pelvis arched, “*I have been there! he thinks*” (35), or a recollection of the tendon of her inner thigh, as it once tightened against him (29). It is easy to forget how David ended up on Lucy’s farm in the Eastern Cape, once the plot advances after the farm attack. But these flashes of memory work to remind the reader of the affair, as in the novel they remind David of Melanie.

By only providing David's or the Magistrate's experience, Coetzee privileges these dominant males for effect: the reader is forced, in a sense, to empathize with these protagonists, and is obscured from others' views of them; readers must consider the feelings of the least sympathetic party in each affair, in order to navigate the rest of the narrative. Thus a number of the demands Disgrace makes on its readers, in regards to accepting a less than sympathetic protagonist, can be seen in Coetzee's earlier work in Waiting for the Barbarians. But aside from the main characters' similarities, what are especially useful to note—and allow another connection to In the Heart of the Country—are the deliberate echoes of language and imagery in specific scenes.

In contrast to David's fond recollections, the Magistrate, after he delivers the girl to a barbarian caravan in the desert, soon has difficulty recalling even her face. "I detect in myself a reluctance, a resistance . . . I am surprised by it but I do not resist; she is ugly, ugly" (WFB 46). Yet there is a common physical aspect between the two couples. The Magistrate's ritualistic oiling and massaging of the barbarian girl's body is echoed in scenes where David and Melanie have sex, uniting the two literary pairs in strange psycho-physical resemblance. The similarities are unavoidable—and by creating a connection between the goings-on of David's and the Magistrate's physical bodies, Coetzee forces the reader to consider other possible similarities in the characters and their relationships.

In the narration, the Magistrate confesses, "But more often in the very act of caressing her I am overcome with sleep as if poleaxed, fall into oblivion sprawled upon her body, and wake an hour or two later dizzy, confused, thirsty. These dreamless spells are like death to me, or enchantment, blank, outside time" (31). Again, on the surface it is "caressing," but with the Magistrate's motivation, it is more an attempt to "read" the girl, and retrieve her history. Although

the Magistrate only has sex with the girl during the desert crossing, the “blank, outside time” into which he falls after each interrogation/bathing ritual is a kind of separation of self not unlike sexual ecstasy. More than once, he refers to it as “oblivion,” first in the passage excerpted above, where he explains the phenomenon, and later in his frustration with “[his] bondage to the ritual of the oiling and rubbing, the drowsiness, the slump into oblivion” (WFB 41). For David, too, sex with Melanie turns to oblivion. The first time, “[t]hough she is passive throughout, he finds the act pleasurable, so pleasurable that from its climax he tumbles into blank oblivion” (Disgrace 19). The significance of these specific literary echoes is not just in their frequency and similarity, but in the brief gaps in storytelling they indicate: The reader glimpses David’s and the Magistrate’s thoughts (and for the most part, only their thoughts) in the respective novels, but what is going on outside these characters’ minds becomes obscured in the sudden moments of blankness. Critic James Wood writes in his review of Disgrace, “One always feels with this writer a zeal of omission. What his novels keep out may well be as important as what they keep in” (42). Wood’s words illuminate not only Coetzee’s sparse prose, but also his careful narrative construction. David’s tumble into oblivion after sex with Melanie, which invariably creates further distance from Melanie’s story for the reader, too, reemerges in the cruelest form as the blankness forced upon him by the attackers during the time of Lucy’s rape. The two scenes I have just noted are significant for what they lack: they omit part of the story that continues on when David is incapacitated, though incapacitated in a different sense, in each scene. Because the free, indirect style of the narration allows the reader relatively unfettered access to David’s thoughts, for the narrative to plunge into these moments of blankness is jarring.

...

Disgrace and the issue of desire

The relationship, if that is the appropriate term, between the Magistrate and the barbarian girl is primarily one-sided, and it is also the case, to some degree, with David and Melanie's relationship. Their physical encounters are most telling. When he appears at her flat unannounced and takes her to bed despite her protests, the words Coetzee uses to describe this encounter make it clear that the sex is "undesired to the core" (*Disgrace* 25). David never explicitly acknowledges the unwanted sex with Melanie as rape, but he can see the effect of his actions on her: "She does not resist. All she does is avert herself; avert her lips, avert her eyes ... as soon as she is bare, she slips under the quilted counterpane like a mole burrowing, and turns her back on him" (*Disgrace* 35). Each of Melanie's reactions is an avoidance of action — not to receive him, not to kiss, not to look. This episode is the most explicit in terms of revealing Melanie's underlying unease with the affair.

At the beginning of the passage, the narrator sets the scene very much like a rape scene—and much like the rape in *In the Heart of the Country*: "He has given her no warning; she is too surprised to resist the intruder who thrusts himself upon her. When he takes her in his arms, her limbs crumple like a marionette's" (*Disgrace* 24). She acquiesces, as Magda does (*HOC* 24), because it is simpler not to struggle. What David thinks immediately at the end of the encounter is as close as he gets to admitting (if only inside his head, for his own sake) that the sex was non-consensual: "Not rape, not quite that, but undesired nevertheless, undesired to the core. As though she had decided to go lack, die within herself for the duration, like a rabbit when the jaws of the fox close on its neck" (*Disgrace* 24). Once it is over, and David realizes the act was "a mistake, a huge mistake," he imagines Melanie running a bath, "trying to cleanse herself of it, of him ... stepping into the water, eyes closed like a sleepwalker's" (25). In this scene, for effect, Coetzee makes Melanie into a non-person—someone not fully conscious, a sleepwalker, David's prey—

just as the barbarian girl becomes less a person but a symbol for the Magistrate, emblematic of her people, a projection of his desires.

Despite what both parties realize to be a huge mistake, after the fact, David and Melanie have sex once more before the end of the affair—and before Melanie files a sexual harassment complaint at the university. Not only that, after avoiding David for a week (skipping the class, including the midterm exam, ignoring his phone calls), Melanie appears at David’s house unannounced—in search of, she claims, simply a place to crash (*Disgrace* 26-27). With this scene, Coetzee introduces a new complication to the affair: Melanie is not, after all, a simple marionette. Her agency, displayed in her realization that she can perhaps exploit David, too, comes as a surprise in the narrative and makes David reconsider the affair:

She is behaving badly, getting away with too much; she is learning to exploit him and will probably exploit him further. But if she has got away with much, he has got away with more; if she is behaving badly, he has behaved worse. To the extent that they are together, if they are together, he is the one who leads, she the one who follows. Let him not forget that. (28)

This passage, taken from the last paragraph of the scene (and the chapter), shows Coetzee’s skill with narrative as well as how he manipulates language. At the beginning of the paragraph, we are introduced to Melanie as a figure of power: she is the one in control, “behaving badly ... learning to exploit him” (28). But as the passage progresses, with its parallel structure shifting between what “she” does and “he” does, the language begins to shift so that we are again made aware of David’s dominant role in the relationship. Compared to whatever Melanie is doing or has done, David’s actions are always the greater (“got away with much ... got away with more,” “behaving badly ... behaved worse”). By the last two sentences, David’s authority has been fully reasserted;

the last line, “Let him not forget that,” might as well be “Let *the reader* not forget that.” Yet, again, these are David’s thoughts. As the novel progresses, the plot reveals situations in which David has very little power and is even completely powerless, such as in the case of the farm attack. By establishing David early in the novel as someone accustomed to being in control, and reasserting control when necessary, Coetzee is able to illustrate to more dramatic effect over the course of Disgrace how David changes and how David’s grasp of his powers (physical, sexual, emotional) changes.

Tied into Melanie’s agency in the previous scene is the element of desire I mentioned earlier in the chapter, in noting the difference between Melanie’s and Lucy’s respective experiences. A week after the episode of sex “undesired to the core” (Disgrace 25)—a scene that, thanks in part to the novel’s *style indirect libre* narration, possesses a voyeuristic quality—and soon after David’s self-assertion of authority, David and Melanie have sex one last time. “She is quick, and greedy for experience . . . One moment stands out in recollection, when she hooks a leg behind [David’s] buttocks to draw him in closer . . . the tendon of her inner thigh tightens against him, he feels a surge of joy and desire” (29). Afterwards, Melanie asks David about his personal life, then gets up and “strolls around the room picking up her clothes as little bashful as if she were alone” (25). The contrast between this scene and the couple’s previous sexual encounter is disruptive in the reader’s surprise in Melanie’s seeming change in feeling as well as how it complicates the degree of reciprocity in this “relationship.” Looking forward in to the father-daughter conversations, then, the connection between David and Lucy’s rapists suddenly takes on new complications. With the introduction of this element of desire, the narrative again provokes discussion about the politics of sex—and the boundaries of consensual sex and “not-rape” become even more difficult to navigate.

...

What we talk about when we talk about *eros*

Lurie's and the Magistrate's descriptions of Melanie and the barbarian girl, respectively, evince fetishization more than love. However, the characters trust their intentions, and each believes himself to be acting upon a kind of love. David truly believes he is possessed by the god of love. "I was not myself," he says at his sexual harassment hearing at the university, "I was no longer a fifty-year-old divorcé at a loose end. I became a servant of Eros" (*Disgrace* 52). In the passage where he arrives unannounced at her flat one afternoon, David carries Melanie to the bedroom "astonished by the feeling she evokes ... Strange love! ... from the quiver of Aphrodite, goddess of the foaming waves, no doubt about that" (*Disgrace* 25). David's explanation of his passion is grounded in this mysticism, not unlike that woven into the work of Byron, David's favorite writer, or Wordsworth. When he apologizes to Melanie's no-nonsense father, David describes himself as a man enflamed by desire, a flame lit by Melanie. "In Melanie's case, however, something unexpected happened. I think of it as a fire. She struck up a fire in me. ... [I]n the olden days people worshipped fire," David says to Mr. Isaacs. "They thought twice before letting a flame die, a flame-god. It was that kind of flame your daughter kindled in me" (*Disgrace* 166). As if further deluded by his work with the Romantics, David speaks in the language of his favorite poets in his address of the affair to other parties. Similarly, Magistrate describes his need to bathe and oil the barbarian girl as a kind of bondage. While the Magistrate's bonds to the girl manifest themselves physically, David's obsession with Melanie is not as evident in his acts of physical "love" with her as it is in his language. His lapses into Romantic language in descriptions of her further bind him to his profession and reinforce the professor-student distinction that makes the affair seem inappropriate from the onset.

David's obsession intensifies when he meets the Isaacs family: He meets Melanie's much-younger sister, Desiree, and briefly fantasizes of bedding both girls at once, completely without irony. "Melanie the firstborn, the dark one, then Desiree, the desired one. Surely they tempted the gods by giving her a name like that! ... The two of them in the same bed: an experience fit for a king" (*Disgrace* 164). This fantasy of being in bed with two young girls reminds the reader of the difference in age between David and his lover and contributes to the queer "father-daughter" dynamics of their relationship. In both *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *Disgrace*, the men acknowledge such dynamics in their relationships: When in jail the Magistrate thinks, "I gave the girl my protection, offering in my equivocal way to be her father" (*WFB* 79), while in the scene where a distraught Melanie arrives at David's house, he says, "'Tell me what is wrong.' Almost he says, 'Tell Daddy what is wrong' " (*Disgrace* 26). A few pages earlier, driving Melanie home in the rain, the day after they first have sex, David thinks, "*No more than a child! What am I doing? Yet his heart lurches with desire*" (*Disgrace* 20) as he watches her lick a drop of rain from her lip. In the same scene, as he tries to lighten the mood, he realizes "he has forgotten how to woo. The voice he hears belongs to a cajoling parent, not a lover" (*Disgrace* 20). Ultimately, the Magistrate cannot take the place of the barbarian girl's dead father, and David cannot make up for his strained relationship with his daughter by comforting his young mistress. But by acknowledging the element of an "incest taboo" in older men-younger women scenarios, the author creates additional depth in the already complicated relationships he has created for his characters.

Coetzee's return to David's musings on age also works to elucidate how the character changes during the novel. At the end of *Disgrace*, his advancing age makes his self-interests again seem frivolous when he realizes the actuality of Lucy bearing a child: musing on "becoming a Joseph," David thinks, "What pretty girl can he expect to be wooed into bed with a

grandfather?” (Disgrace 217). The thought also seems cruelly self-centered considering the circumstances he’s in—thinking on the future as he watches his daughter before him, gardening, pregnant after rape. By being able to see inside David’s mind, we are able to see how some of his views change as the events of Disgrace progress, as well as how some stay the same.

...

The advantages of Coetzee’s chosen point of view

While Derek Attridge refers to David and Lucy’s “loving” relationship in his essay “Age of Iron, State of Grace” (ER), if indeed the familial bonds were once close, by the start of Disgrace they have loosened. Lucy calls her father by his first name; this is the first sign that theirs is not a conventional, or at least very close, parent-child relationship. When David first moves in with Lucy after leaving Cape Town, it is the first time he has seen her in a year (Disgrace 59). David even admits to himself, “he has not been much of a success” as a father, “despite trying harder than most” (Disgrace 217). After David pleads with Lucy to tell her story after the farm attack and rape, the one part of her greater life story that she reveals to him says more about their relationship with him than anything else. Her outburst comes in an eruption of emotion not dissimilar to that of her literary sister, Magda, in its sudden honesty and unseen irony: “David, I can’t run my life according to whether or not you like what I do. Not any more. You behave as if everything I do is part of the story of your life. You are the main character, I am a minor character who doesn’t make an appearance until halfway through” (Disgrace 198). But David is the main character of Disgrace; Lucy does appear halfway through the novel. This is one of the rare times where we are granted her point of view. “Well, contrary to what you think, people are not divided into major and minor. I am not minor. I have a life of my own, just as important to me as yours is to you, and in my life I am the one who makes the decisions” (Disgrace 198). The irony of her speech forces the reader to

recognize, again, the author's "craftedness" in the writing of this novel. But with David as the main character, we are made to consider the issues of the particular time and place of Disgrace through his perspective. At the time of its publication, Disgrace may not have fit the South African literary community's expectations for a novel addressing changing social roles of people and torsions of power, immediately after the end of apartheid, but under the cover of a middle-aged white academic struggling with changes in his environment, the novel finds new—and at times, incredibly uncomfortable—ways to explore pertinent issues. "The problem of sex" that preoccupies David at the beginning of the novel turns out to be about much more than the act of physical intercourse.

Aging, David no longer masters the powers he once had: "He could always count on a degree of magnetism. If he looked at a woman in a certain way, with a certain intent, she would return his look, he could rely on that. That was how he lived; for years, for decades, that was the backbone of his life. Then one day it all ended. Without warning his powers fled" (Disgrace 7). But not only is his once-easy sexual charm waning (which is what seems to be David's greatest concern, at least at the start of the novel), his position in the world is changing, too—in academia, as a disgraced professor, and in post-apartheid society, as a white South African male. He is part of a dying caste, and it is one into which he has been born into (white, middle to upper-middle class) and has to some degree elected into as well (educated, teaching within a field—literature, specifically the Romantics—that is dying as well). While Lucy projects some semblance of having come to terms with her position in the situation and circumstances she has been dealt, David confronts his changing identity with reluctance. To choose a character like David Lurie as the protagonist of this post-apartheid novel is not the most sympathetic decision, or the most popular.

But to have David Lurie serve as the protagonist of Coetzee's literary meditation on post-apartheid South Africa continues the author's history of provoking discourse, not just engaging it.

Disgrace may not be as unorthodox in its structure as Coetzee's earlier novels, and comparison shows the different ways the author has conveyed torsions of power throughout his work. But Disgrace shows a continued commitment to exploding open discourse via narrative. Unpacking the devices with which Coetzee aims to convey the torsions of power in his earlier novels—especially the deliberate, exaggerated construction of “false corrective”—enables a richer reading of Disgrace. Understanding false correctives, limitations of points of view and even specific moments of elision (such as when the Magistrate tumbles into his “oblivion,” during his rituals of massaging the barbarian girl's body), creates a foundation from which to further explore similar devices in Disgrace. The ways in which Coetzee attempts to convey inequality in the sexualized and racialized human interactions in this later novel are far less “crafted” and “constructed” than those in Waiting for the Barbarians and In the Heart of the Country. Thus, in some ways, there is a greater potential for the reader to fall susceptible to accepting what David Lurie thinks as actually having happened in the novel. To understand the novel's seeming proximity to reality and actual distance from it—to be able to distinguish real from false without the aid of deliberate narrative constructions—is yet another demand Disgrace makes of its readers.

Conclusion:

Explosive Questions and Dialogic Writing: Beyond Disgrace

“... in a larger sense all writing is autobiography: everything that you write, including criticism and fiction, writes you as you write it. The real question is: This massive autobiographical writing-enterprise that fills a life, this enterprise of self-construction ... does it yield only fictions? Or rather, among the fictions of the self, the versions of the self, that it yields, are there any that are truer than others? How do I know when I have the truth about myself?”

—J.M. Coetzee to David Attwell, in Doubling the Point

...

Up to this point, I have attempted to illustrate both what Disgrace aims to do and what it has invited. In the process of examining influential readings of the novel and possible motivations behind these readings, as well as how Disgrace can be located in Coetzee’s ever-provocative body of work, I have come across several other questions. This final section of the thesis engages questions that seem to preoccupy, at one point or another, many readers of Coetzee: that of the relationship between the author and his text, or more specifically, his characters.

Throughout his career as a novelist and critic, J.M. Coetzee has continuously blurred and reinforced the *cordon sanitaire* perceived between an author and his work. We can see it as but another way that the author has challenged conventions—those of South African literature and writing under oppression, of narrative structure, and of the author-character relationship—and stymied readers along the way. Frankly, for a reader trying to puzzle out the relationship between the author’s beliefs and those expressed by his characters, the material Coetzee provides can be maddening.

“Everything that you write,” Coetzee has said, “writes you as you write it” (DP 18).⁴⁶ This ever conscious, reflexive statement, part of an answer to David Attwell’s question about autobiography, invites further investigation. How are we to read this statement in relation to Coetzee’s work, especially the fiction in which some readers have connected characters’ beliefs (i.e. the outrageous beliefs of David Lurie) with Coetzee’s? To have some knowledge of an author’s background can aid understanding of his or her work; it is especially necessary in the case of a historicized socio-political space like post-apartheid Africa, which is why I argue for the complex case of the South African reader of Disgrace in chapter one. But to let an interest in how an author “truly” feels or truly believes over-influence a reading can also compromise the reading. Instead of reading backward in attempts to link Coetzee with the work that “writes [him],” I suggest a closer look at the effects of Coetzee challenging the author-text relationship.

The idea of all writing as autobiographical, in a sense, manifests itself in Coetzee’s 2003 Nobel Prize lecture. Customarily, recipients of the prize for literature have taken the podium to speak on their work over the years—or as an opportunity to speak their minds on issues other than the literary, under an international spotlight. (Harold Pinter’s 2005 speech on “Art, Truth and Politics,” pre-recorded as the playwright was ailing at the time, was an impassioned damnation of the Bush administration and its politics.) The content of Coetzee’s lecture, actually a short story titled “He and His Man,” can be seen as both reflective of and a continuation of his work in fiction. The address resembles the other lectures that Coetzee had been giving leading up to the 2003 publication of Elizabeth Costello, a novel whose protagonist’s “lessons” on subjects such as “The

⁴⁶ In the interview, Attwell asks Coetzee what it is that “enables you to speak about the relationship between your critical activity and your fiction” (DP 17)—considering that Coetzee’s fiction forces readers to question its narrators, his criticism has looked closely at autobiographical “truth” in the work of other writers, yet he himself had written little autobiographical prose at that point (1990). See note number seven in the introduction for more on David Attwell and Doubling the Point.

Novel in Africa” and “Realism” had first been given in talks by Coetzee; the subject shows Coetzee revisiting his own earlier revision of a literary classic, Daniel Defoe’s Robinson Crusoe.

“He and His Man” has been interpreted as Robin or Cruso *writing about* Daniel Defoe—years after returning as a castaway, having survived to tell the tale and collect reports from “his man.”⁴⁷ In Coetzee’s exploration of the idea of a character (the product) imagining the author (the creator), he prompts a new way in which to consider his statement that “all writing is autobiography.”

How are they to be figured, this man and he? As master and slave? As brothers, twin brothers? As comrades in arms? Or as enemies, foes? What name shall he give this nameless fellow with whom he shares his evenings and sometimes his nights too, who is absent only in the daytime, when he, Robin, walks the quays inspecting the new arrivals and his man gallops about the kingdom making his inspections?
(“He and His Man”)

By upending the traditional concept of author-character or author-text (that is, the former creating the latter), Coetzee flirts with a question that has long-preoccupied certain readers and critics of his: How much of J.M. Coetzee, the person and his personal beliefs, is expressed in his characters? In other words, how close are “he” and “his man”? The pairings Coetzee offers as options, as seen in the passage excerpted above, are defined by both closeness and distance. Even twin brothers, after all, no matter their physical likeness or familial feelings—and here I hesitate to say the obvious—are two different human beings, two different entities that have not been one since the

⁴⁷ In Coetzee’s reworking of Defoe’s original tale, 1986’s Foe, Cruso (spelled without the *e*) dies of a fever on the way back to England. The novel is narrated, mostly as a series of letters to a Mr. Defoe, by female castaway Susan Barton, who washes up on Cruso and Friday’s island after the ship in which she was sailing to find her kidnapped daughter is mutinied.

womb. (Perhaps they had always been separate: fraternal twins.) While drawing the “he” of the short story and “his man” together, and toying with this contorted imagining of the two figures, at the same time, Coetzee reinforces the separation between “he” (Robin/Cruso) and “his man” (Defoe)—as well as the distance between he, himself, and the men and women of his characters.

Coetzee’s best illustration of this unbridgeable distance reveals itself at the end of the lecture:

Will this man, in the course of his travels, ever come to Bristol? ... But he fears there will be no meeting, not in this life. If he must settle on a likeness for the pair of them, his man and he, he would write that they are like two ships sailing in contrary directions, one west, the other east. Or better, that they are deckhands toiling in the rigging, the one on a ship sailing west, the other on a ship sailing east. Their ships pass close, close enough to hail. But the seas are rough, the weather is stormy: their eyes lashed by the spray, their hands burned by the cordage, they pass each other by, too busy even to wave. (“He and His Man”).

The worlds where an author exists and his characters exist must remain, always, to some degree separate, no matter how close they may seem. As I proposed earlier in this thesis, Disgrace marks a point less of farewell than a point of leaping forward and the embrace of a different focus.

Different, but not entirely new: Coetzee returns to exaggerated experimentation with narrative structure in Elizabeth Costello and Diary of a Bad Year, with a zeal reminiscent of his deliberate constructions in novels such as In the Heart of the Country and Dusklands. But in this evolution in

his fiction, Coetzee also further challenges the relationship between the author and his characters, building upon the potential for caricature hinted at with Disgrace's David Lurie.

Since Disgrace, the characters of Coetzee's novels have become increasingly similar to the author in physicality and occupation, and their opinions increasingly exaggerated. His fiction in the last ten years—Elizabeth Costello, Slow Man and Diary of a Bad Year—have deliciously toyed with the idea of an author simply writing a novel (with the Mrs. Costello character intervening in the Slow Man protagonist's life and attempting to write it as he lives it), and the questions that have bubbled up around his own relationship with his work (with the characters Mrs. Costello and Diary of a Bad Year's J.C. resembling him to various degrees, and moralizing in their literary output). In this same period, Coetzee has also released two collections of literary criticism, Stranger Shores: Essays 1986-1999 in 2002 and Inner Workings: Essays 2000-2005 in 2007. He has also released a volume of *autre*biography, Youth: Scenes from Provincial Life II, a memoir-cum-novel in the style of Boyhood: Scenes from Provincial Life I. Considering this recent catalogue, it becomes tempting to draw another parallel between Coetzee and his work; it is almost too perfect an example of art-imitating-life to be coincidental. Just as Coetzee has collected and published his output as a critic and essayist, in his other occupation as a novelist, he is writing *about* other imagined writers crafting their own collections.

At most, what can we do but read Mrs. Costello and J.C. as caricatures of Coetzee or the author-persona many readers believe Coetzee to be? More interesting, in my opinion, is the way in which Coetzee flirts with the author-character conflation in order to assert to the reader the difference between the author and character. It is the craftedness and constructedness of Diary of a Bad Year, in its characters but also its three-part “narrative” and physical use of the page, that creates the most room for conversation. After Disgrace, Coetzee shifts in subject and genre, but

most drastically he challenges the question, “What is a novel?” with experiments in novel form and structure. The narrative experiments of Elizabeth Costello and Diary of a Bad Year echo Coetzee’s play on structure in earlier works like In the Heart of the Country and Dusklands. The former is arranged as a series of “lessons,” addressing topics ranging from realism to vegetarianism to the novel in Africa; before Elizabeth Costello was published, Coetzee first presented part of the lessons as a lecture series.⁴⁸ Diary of a Bad Year, his most recent novel, appears split across the book pages as three parts: the essays for a German collection called Strong Opinions to which the J.C. character has been asked to contribute, and in the second half, essays on softer subjects; a narrative strain in the voice of J.C.; and a narrative account by Anya, the beautiful young neighbor J.C. enlists as a typist, which is interrupted by her boyfriend Alan’s words later on.

These last two novels have inspired debate about the thoughts of Coetzee’s characters, and whether they are indeed the author’s own, under cover; such issues, of course, were part of the attention surrounding Disgrace. Furthermore, the novels’ respective presentations as lessons and essays impart a certain irony: After being chastised for much of his career for not being political enough (Foe was even derided by some critics as politically irrelevant), here Coetzee has finally, and quite explicitly, laid opinions bare. They are not opinions attributed to him, but to Elizabeth Costello and J.C.; and the opinions are so extreme that it would be difficult to reconcile all of these opinions in one person, Coetzee. We can see the degree of *outré* in the protagonist’s beliefs as a further amplification of what Coetzee started with the questionable beliefs of David Lurie, with his thoughts on lesbianism, for instance.

What else we might do with these latest works, and examining the whole package of Diary of a Bad Year in particular, is to consider Coetzee’s multiple occupations as a writer: literary critic,

⁴⁸ In 1998, for his engagement in the Tanner lectures at Princeton University, Coetzee gave a series of “lessons” purported to be authored by a (fictional) older Australian writer, Elizabeth Costello. This series, “The Lives of Animals” reappears in Elizabeth Costello.

essayist, novelist. Is it possible to view his most recent novels as an amalgam, to some degree, of Coetzee's roles as essayist and novelist? What these latest novels challenge, besides the author-character dynamic, is the question of what constitutes "a novel"—and with Coetzee's use of fictional "lessons," assignation of outrageous opinions to his characters, and the unorthodox use of white space, he illustrates yet a different kind of "craftedness" and "constructedness" in his work.

But why, exactly, this major shift in writing? I do not want to do too much reading back into the past, or into the future, or attempt to sleuth out Coetzee's personal motives. Other critics have done that already. But perhaps we can make the argument for this change in style and focus of subject matter as one of continued evolution and an expansion of the author's literary output. Instead of a break away from South Africa or from the pastoral, perhaps he has, to borrow his own words from his Australian citizenship ceremony, not so much left South Africa as "come to" another place: a position under the global spotlight, as an author not just of "South Africa" but of the so-called "international community" or international literary scene. Is his creative movement back toward deliberate structural experimentation evidence of Coetzee answering a different call, and writing about different subjects as a global author? The answer to this question cannot be resolved with a simple yes or no—and thus, it is not unlike the Derek Attridge question with which I introduced this thesis, or perhaps all other questions about Coetzee's work.⁴⁹

While Coetzee's recent, unorthodox novels tackle such subjects as "The Humanities in Africa" and "The Lives of Animals," to give examples of two "lessons" from Elizabeth Costello, we must note that Coetzee assigns these opinions to deliberately crafted characters. The character of J.C. shares so many similarities to the J.M. Coetzee that the public recognizes—such as authorship of Waiting for the Barbarians, fierce dislike of the Bush administration and, it is hinted,

⁴⁹ See page 17 of the introduction for earlier reference to Derek Attridge's address of readers' overarching concerns with Disgrace.

a Nobel Prize—that the character is too ridiculous to *be* a replica of Coetzee. Furthermore, note how exaggerated these opinions are: in “The Lives of Animals,” for example, Mrs. Costello compares the killing of cattle at abattoirs to the extermination of Jews in the Holocaust (Elizabeth Costello 64-65). If these were indeed Coetzee’s own beliefs, would he—who has said “I don’t regard myself as a public figure” (DP 65) and “I dislike . . . the violation of private space” (DP 65)—so readily proclaim these beliefs as his own in a book, which can easily become part of public space?⁵⁰ After all, if I have reached one conclusion in this thesis, it is that the boundaries—if indeed there are any—between the literary sphere and the public sphere, literary discussion and public discussion, are impossible to distinguish. At the very least, what we can conclude is that with these new novels, Coetzee is still refusing to concede to anyone else’s “solemn formulas” (Sachs 187) for literature. Readers of Coetzee may not always be pleased—or always understand—what the author aims to do with his work, but they can trust that they will be engaged and provoked to some degree.

In my analysis of Disgrace and its volatile reception (and, perhaps most importantly, the factors behind such reader reaction), and in my exploration of what Coetzee has sought to convey with the novel and his earlier work, I hope to have established a foundation from which to better investigate novels such as Elizabeth Costello and Diary of a Bad Year. With this thesis, I have pushed to get past the questions readers initially raise in selected reading of Disgrace and past the overwhelming, racialized focus of early discussion of the novel. By reading Disgrace in the context of Coetzee’s oeuvre in order to expand current discourse about the novel, however, I have discovered other questions to explore—and these questions of narrative experimentation, author-text relationship and the politics of Coetzee’s writing can be directed at the especially layered

⁵⁰ Of course, adding to the complexity of the Coetzee-Costello question is the fact that Coetzee himself is a long-time vegetarian (like Costello) and first gave “The Lives of Animals” as part of a Tanner lecture series, as I noted above.

material of the author's recent novels. Disgrace, in my opinion, is not just Coetzee's novel that found itself in the center of a discursive firestorm, or simply a very provocative novel whose intentions have been, for the most part, overshadowed by readers' suspicions. Disgrace marks a period of transition in South African society and South African literature, as well as change in Coetzee's oeuvre.

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