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LIVING IN DISGRACE WITHOUT TERM

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Abstract

This paper provides a reading of J.M. Coetzee's novel *Disgrace*. Professor David Lurie, formerly professor of modern languages, then of communication, has seduced one of his students in the Romantics class, and was dismissed by the university after a disciplinary hearing where he refuses to defend himself against the charges. He pleads guilty, denying the right of the university to judge the morality of his conduct. Later he states: "I became a servant of Eros" and "I am not prepared to be reformed. I want to go on being myself." When asked by his daughter to make his case, Lurie says, "My case rests on the rights of desire." Somehow he senses that to state "I was a servant of Eros" or "It was a god who acted through me" was an effrontery. He understands that the case he wants to make is a case that can no longer be made, and if he tried he would not be heard.

But there is another, much more ominous case to be made: his daughter farms on a piece of land which a long time ago had been taken from the Africans who lived there and who now demand restitution. To make their point, they rape his daughter Lucy and set Lurie alight.

The novel raises the question on whether anyone can be "guilty" of something which one has not done personally, merely by association, and whether one should feel shame or disgrace for deeds of people with whom one is associated (as members of a state, an ethnicity, a religion, a profession, the family, etc.). In the ethical center of the novel there is therefore the question of the possibility of atonement, and the acceptance that the one who has been wronged has a right to retaliate.

Keywords

apartheid, Coetzee, guilt, trope of rape

About the author

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In J.M. Coetzee's novel *Disgrace*, Professor David Lurie,¹ who thinks that he has "solved the problem of sex rather well" (1) by employing a prostitute, is later accused of sexually molesting his student Melanie Isaacs, but rejects the right of the university disciplinary committee to interrogate his actions, and in consequence loses his job at the Technical University of Cape Town. Barnard sees

Lurie's profoundly literary, masculinist, and European erotic notions run aground by the politically correct and historically aware gender codes of the contemporary academic establishment, and later by the violent practices of a rising, grasping, and vengeful black patriarchy.

Lurie is against these "puritanical times" when "prurience is respectable." He objects that under the title of "victimization or harassment of students by teachers" (39) his "private life is [made] public business," and he believes that "The community of the righteous, holding their sessions in corners, over the telephone, behind closed doors" produce "gleeful whispers. *Schadenfreude*." In cases like these, he argues, the sentence precedes the trial (42). For Lurie, "The truth is they wanted me castrated" (66). There is, as his ex-wife exclaims, in trials like these "No sympathy, no mercy, not in this day and age" (43). So he is prepared to plead guilty but refuses to explain or to apologize for his behavior in front of the disciplinary committee (he is prepared later, personally, to apologize to Melanie's father). Against the moralistic procedure of the university disciplinary committee, he asserts, "I am not prepared to be reformed. I want to go on being myself" (77). But he concedes "that desire is a burden we could well do without" (90). What he objects to is the confusion of moral and religious discourse and legal discourse. Lurie therefore argues that "Repentance belongs to another world, to another universe of discourse" (58).

Horrell points out that "Lurie's almost incestuous appropriation of Melanie's body is a crime he cannot, ultimately, escape. Melanie and her father lodge a formal complaint with the university" (28). Lurie is prepared to admit his legal guilt (of sexual harassment and falsifying Melanie's academic record), but that is considered inadequate by the committee which demands a full confession, a publicly available document protesting contrition "from the heart." Lurie understands that he is "Not just in trouble. In what I suppose one would call disgrace" (85).

After his "disgrace" he withdraws into the countryside to his daughter who farms on a small holding in the Eastern Cape, what used to be "the Border" between the British settlers and Xhosas. Lurie's personal disgrace follows him to the smallholding of this daughter. But he still rejects the acknowledgement and public confession of guilt, all "religious" notions of "confession," and implicitly the public display of guilt and the demands for public confession as demanded in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). He does not subscribe to the TRC's premise that making the dark secrets of the past public is healing or therapeutic.² Barnard thinks that Coetzee questions the idea that past trauma may be wrapped up and put to rest. Lurie also rejects Lucy's image of him as a "scapegoat." Lurie argues, "Scapegoating worked in practice while it still had religious power behind it. You loaded the sins of the city on to the goat's back and drove it out, and the city was cleansed. It worked because everybody knew how to read the ritual, including the gods. Then the gods died, and all of a sudden you had to cleanse the city without divine help.... The censor was born" (91).

Graham sees in the rape of Melanie, whose family name is Isaacs, an allusion to the sacrifice of Isaac by his father Abraham (since Melanie could be Lurie's daughter) (7). His real daughter sees her rape in similar terms, and when she eventually refers to her own rape, "she implies that David's sexual exploit has been like 'pushing the knife in ... leaving the body covered in blood'" (158). Graham interprets Melanie *Isaacs* as David's sacrifice to Eros—"I was not myself ... I became a servant of Eros" (52), but that is Lurie's interpretation. Gaylard thinks that "sex is a problem for Lurie" because of his "culture which is Western, Romantic, erotic" (318). Crous alludes to the theme of masculinity with a focus on Lurie's "mid-life male recklessness" (Ram), his "taste for exotic women" (Horrell), and his concern as a father for his daughter (Azoulay). Kunkel analyzes the precariousness of this masculinity as follows:

Lurie is a devotee of Romantic poetry somewhat at sea among his "post-Christian, posthistorical, postliterate" students. He fears the world is becoming post-*him*, that he, formerly a great womanizer, is becoming, not historically, but physically obsolete: "Glances that would once have responded to his slid over, past, through him. Overnight he became a ghost." It is therefore as a kind of last gasp that Lurie aggressively courts his mediocre but beautiful student, Melanie.

Barnard sees the recurrent trope of rape "without diminishing its traumatic historical reality, or the alarming threat that sexual violence continues to pose in South African society," as one which "traditionally served as potent figure for imagining new, exogamous national beginnings."

One night the smallholding is attacked by burglars who shoot the dogs, rape Lurie's daughter Lucy, and nearly burn Lurie to death. Lucy not only does not report the rape to the police, but also does nothing to try and protect herself from the real risk of contracting a sexually transmitted disease by seeking early medical intervention (Mfune 96). In the view of Mfune, Lucy becomes a subject at the very point she *chooses* not to take any of the above measures and keeps the consequent pregnancy against everyone's (including Lurie's) expectations. To be able to exercise this freedom of choice—no matter how "foolish" the choice one makes in the process may seem—is one marker of agency, and with it of subjecthood. About her rape Lucy says, "It was so personal ... 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? I had never set eyes on them" (156).

Eventually it turns out that Lucy's African help Petrus is behind the attack by his relative Pollux, and Lucy understands that the attack is an attempt to wrest the ownership of the land from her. The theme of uncontrolled crime is a theme of post-apartheid South Africa,³ and Lurie refers

to this theme when he thinks, "It happens every day, every hour, every minute, he tells himself, in every quarter of the country. Count yourself lucky to have escaped with your life" (98).⁴ Farred mentions another aspect of this theme when he remarks, "what substance do the newly enshrined rights of the much ballyhooed constitution have? Does it mean anything at the frontier? Or is this, in typical frontier mythology, a place of lawlessness, a place where the constitution does not apply?" (18). The constitution, a compromise between the white minority and the newly politically dominant black majority, was, on paper, one of the most progressive constitutions achievable. But it did not address the question of the transfer of economic rights, and so "crime ... seems to be a way of bringing recalcitrant whites to their senses, to making their peace with the new black power in the land" (Glenn 90).⁵

Lurie tries to guess the reason for Lucy's behavior: "Is it some form of private salvation you are trying to work out? Do you hope to expiate the crimes of the past by suffering in the present?" But Lucy rejects his interpretation. "Guilt and salvation are abstractions. I don't act in terms of abstractions" (112). Instead, she asks, "What if *that* is the price for staying on?" (158). Lurie interprets the situation differently. "They want you for their slave," but Lucy insists it is not slavery but "Subjection. Subjugation" (159). Lurie does not really understand the events because he is excluded from Lucy's understanding of the rape: "*You don't know what happened*" (134). So Horrell's view that Lucy is paying with her body, through its violation, the debts of the white colonists/settlers (31) is problematic, if one takes her own statements seriously. Horrell sees Lucy in their "territory" and they will be back to ensure that whites remember "history," but that interpretation is expressly contradicted by Lucy.⁶ Lurie in turn wants Petrus to confess in the same way he eventually confessed to Melanie's father. "*Yes it was a violation*, he would like to hear Petrus say; *yes, it was an outrage*" (119).

On the other hand, Lucy understands that "It was history speaking through them ... a history of wrong ... It may have seemed personal, but it wasn't. It came down from the ancestors" (156). She is therefore prepared to marry Petrus (who started out working for her). The deal she is prepared to enter into is "I contribute the land, in return for which I am allowed to creep under his wing" (203).⁷ Lucy is "prepared to do anything, make any sacrifice, for the sake of peace" (208). And she is prepared to raise the offspring of the rape: "It will be ... a child of this earth" (216). Guilt and salvation in her view are abstractions. Eventually, she accepts the offer of marriage of Petrus and decides to bear the child of the rapist.⁸

Azoulay summarizes her view of the novel as follows:

The heart of the novel concerns two women, both in their twenties, both of whom have undergone a traumatic sexual experience; the connection between their two

stories, the creation of a connection, is the reader's task, a task at which Lurie himself fails. (34)

Graham, too, sees the two incidents of rape as central to the narrative meaning in the novel. She claims that "most commentators have skirted around the issue of sexual violence as a social problem in South Africa." She sees this reticence as symptomatic, "as South African literary criticism has tended to steer away from analyzing rape portrayal and its relation to social context" (5).

Graham points out that "ironically, as Lurie 'usurps upon' Melanie with thoughts of 'Aphrodite, goddess of the foaming waves' (25), Coetzee implies a critique of his Romantic version of desire, and a warning that veiling the other in sublimity may obscure abuse and may permit one to behave unethically toward another body" (7). Gaylard (318) reminds us that "Lurie has made a study of Western Romanticism on which he has written three books: one on the 'genesis' ... of Mephistopheles (via Boito's *Faust*), one on 'vision as eros,' the third on 'Wordsworth and the Burden of the Past' (4). Notice that all of these tracts center on the devil in the past in that they all deal with past Western Romantic masters" (318).⁹

Glenn, too, sees a shocking parallel between the two rapes and the incidents that follow (87). Lurie returns to Cape Town to spy on Melanie in the theater without her knowing he is there. Her boyfriend reacts angrily and physically, drives him off. After the rape Pollux returns to spy on the naked Lucy, and Lurie reacts angrily and drives him off. Both Pollux and Lurie seem driven by unknowable motives to return to the scene of the intimate crime. "Lurie is thus, as many critics have pointed out, both father angry at the man who has done things to his daughter and the seducer of the innocent daughter—a moral vertigo made most clear in the scene with Melanie's father in George." Lurie eventually asks the father of Melanie for forgiveness; in this private and personal setting he is prepared to acknowledge his guilt.

After his return, he settles down in the small community and helps with the euthanizing of stray dogs. The savagery of this dog euthanasia is obvious: "Something happens in this room, something unmentionable: here the soul is yanked out of the body" (219). Horrell points to the use of the word "*Lösung*" (142, 218) and reminds us that this is "a word used by the Nazis to indicate the 'final solution,' echoing Elizabeth Costello's controversial equation of battery farming with the Nazi death camps in *The Lives of Animals* and *Elizabeth Costello*" (31). According to Kunkel, "He has come to feel akin to the dogs—reduced to the body, a packet of flesh without transcendent meaning. Ironically Lurie refers to himself as 'a dog undertaker, a dog psychopomp; a *harijan*'" (146).¹⁰

Coetzee in *Doubling the Point* argues against Descartes as follows: "Whatever else, the body is not 'that which is not,' and the proof that it *is*, is the pain it feels. The body with its pain becomes a counter to the endless trials of doubt" (248).¹¹ Mfuné refers to Coetzee's critique of the Cartesian dichotomy between mind and body as his "attempt to find a way of bridging the perceived gap between mind and body through a valorization of the body and its capabilities" (91).

Lurie, who at the university has been reduced to teach Communication 101 and an occasional lecture on Romanticism, now wants to write an opera, *Byron in Italy*, an opera about Byron's relationship with the young Teresa Guiccioli, but does not get very far with this project. Shocked by the rape of his daughter, Lurie slowly revises the concept of the opera. Understanding that the Romantic tradition, for which Byron stands, has aided in his misperception and abuse of Melanie, he changes the focus of the opera away from Byron. In the center of his libretto are now the voices of Byron's abandoned daughter and of Teresa, "now middle-aged," asking whether he "can find it in his heart to love this plain ordinary woman" (182) (Graham 12). Coetzee describes Byron in 1820 as "fat, middle-aged at thirty-two" (87) and of Teresa he says "the passage of time has not treated Teresa kindly" (181). This is the end of the erotic, time "*has dried up, the source of everything*" (183). Thus in the end we see Lurie, come down from the lush Baroque chamber opera, plunking away on a toy banjo, thinking about including a dog in the opera. "Would he dare to do that: bring a dog into the piece, allow it to lose its own lament to the heavens between the strophes of the lovelorn Teresa's? Why not?" (215). Lurie, who lamented his "lack of the lyrical," is now reduced to the care for the "plain ordinary" Bev Shaw and for the dog to whom he gives the gift of death (Graham 12).¹²

Therefore, Lurie, contrary to his previous romantic tendency, reduces love to its physiological basis. "A woman in love, wallowing in love; a cat on a roof, howling; complex proteins swirling in the blood, distending the sexual organs" (185). When asked by his daughter to make his case, Lurie says: "My case rests on the rights of desire" (89), and refers to the spectacle of a dog who would get excited and unmanageable whenever there was a bitch around and who would be beaten by its owners until it associated his sexual urges with the beating. Lurie then says, "There was something so ignoble in the spectacle that I despaired ... No animal will accept the justice of being punished for following its instincts" (90). Yet somehow he senses that to state "I was a servant of Eros" or "It was a god who acted through me" (89) was an effrontery. He understands that the case he wants to make is a case that can no longer be made, and if he tried he would not be heard.

While *Disgrace* is an ostensibly realist text, Gaylard points out the intertextual elements and metafictional components in the story through which Coetzee questions the permissibility of introducing individual complexity into the wider social concerns, which in turn always tend to reduce complexity (315). Coetzee has often been accused of being an advocate of an isolated

individualism with no regard for the common good, of avoiding the political in an intensely social and political situation. Yet, as Mfune has shown, one of the goals of his literary practice seems to be to find a balance between rugged individualism and a controlling rationality, on the one hand, and smothering collectivism on the other (91+). The reactions to *Disgrace* from all sides show that this novel has touched a very sensitive and political nerve in the new South Africa.¹³ One of the questions which the novel raises is the question of “white” guilt, and what “whites” are prepared to do about it.

Glenn points out one of the reasons for the dismay of many critics writing about *Disgrace*:

For Coetzee to have stayed in South Africa throughout the worst years of apartheid was enormously important to those of us who, in the country, had to doubt, regularly, whether there was any point in maintaining a position as (white) opposition to apartheid. His presence, critique, and creativity stood as signs that things would get better, there would be light at the end of that historical tunnel. For him to leave after “liberation” and emancipation, after the coming of the new South Africa, was a blow to white intellectuals in that it suggested that things were now worse, beyond any hope of redemption or improvement, out of his and our moral and intellectual power to inform, enlighten, or change. (81)

Despite all the talk about individualism, when it comes to serious human rights violations and genocides, we tend to think in larger categories than the individual, and apportion blame to entities such as the “Germans” (for the holocaust), the “Hutus” (for the massacre of the Tutsis), or the “Whites” for the horror of apartheid. But belonging to a group seen as perpetrators does not necessarily mean that one is a perpetrator oneself. There are many shades of grey: those who merely benefited (willingly or unwillingly) from the politics of apartheid (e.g., getting a job reserved for whites), even if they voted for the liberal opposition, those who supported the government at the polls without being perpetrators of human rights violations, those who were conscripted into the army and willingly or under threat took part in actual atrocities, and those who designed the deliberate policies which army and police carried out with more or less enthusiasm. Nobody in South Africa can deny not to have been involved one way or another, and in an interview with David Attwell, Coetzee declared that he regarded himself as “historically complicit” (qtd. in Horrell 25).

Yet, as Mfune insists, Coetzee has an acute sense of the value of the individuality of each and every being (91). Contrary to ecological and political approaches that tend to regard individual

beings as cogs in huge systems, his focus is first and foremost on the individual being in her/his/its own right. The question is whether anyone can be “guilty” of something which one has not done personally, merely by association. Another question is, whether one should feel shame or disgrace for deeds of people with whom one is associated (as members of a state, an ethnicity, a religion, a profession, the family, etc.). In the ethical center of the novel there is therefore the question of the possibility of atonement, and the acceptance that the one who has been wronged has a right to retaliate.

It has been suggested that parallel to personal disgrace and punishment, Coetzee tells the story of guilt and punishment of the apartheid society (Mfune 95). For such critics Coetzee seems to argue against the South African solution of the Truth Commission, which seems too much like the demand of the university disciplinary committee for repentance, which he considers to belong to the moral discourse of the church, not the legal discourse of crime and punishment. Instead Coetzee in the person of Lurie’s daughter, Lucy, accepts the rape and violence of the oppressed against their erstwhile oppressors (even if the two were not personally guilty of the injustices of apartheid). It is the price she is prepared to pay to stay in the country and on the land. In this subjection to the new rulers, Lucy is “a frontier farmer of the new breed.” That raises the question whether the writer as an intellectual has to be responsible or accountable in and to the struggle against injustice. Bethlehem maintains that “Coetzee characteristically refused so much as even to grant the terms in which this debate was framed” (21). Attridge, in the chapter “Against Allegory: and the Question of Literary Reading,” takes to task the tendency among some critics to cast Coetzee’s writing in a public light by reading it allegorically, that is, by “treat[ing] fictional characters as representatives of South African types or individuals” (Mfune 64).

Because South Africa is not a theocracy, many had problems with the religious underpinnings of the TRC, while the crimes confessed to were political. “Since the religious acknowledgement of guilt and confession are deeply personal and private affairs, displaying them in the public arena, as was demanded by the TRC is, at best, theatrical” (Mfune 95). In Lurie’s own view, he has been “purged” from a society ruled by censors, “watchers.” In Horrell’s view, “Coetzee’s recent fiction presents a vision of the world *in the absence of grace*” (28). But that description implies the very “religious” terminology, which Coetzee would reject. The public debate about Coetzee’s work has shown that his novels are, for the most part, not amenable to public debate, always leading to the persistence of some discomfort long after they have been read. Given the response of many readers, Attwell’s description of Coetzee’s novels as “resistant texts” (26) is apt.

NOTES

1. Glenn points out that one of John Coetzee's students at UCT was called David Lurie (79+). He is now an award-winning documentary photographer. This nominal originary of the main protagonist of Coetzee's novel suggests the uneasy, uncanny relationship (whether theoretical, legal, or symbolic) between fiction and real-life when it comes to names and places.

2. Horrell argues that *Disgrace* is not an allegory for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission—or at least it is not a witness to the efficacy of the commission's testimonies of confession and repentance (31). The power of words is not celebrated in Coetzee's novel.

3. When Lurie goes back to his house in Cape Town, he finds "The bars over one of the back windows have been torn out of the wall and folded back, the windowpanes smashed ... His sound equipment is gone, his tapes and records, his computer equipment ... A raiding party moving in, cleaning out the site ... Booty; war reparations; another incident in the great campaign of redistribution" (176).

4. Barnard refers to "Jonny Steinberg's *Midlands*: a gripping work of reportage about a farm murder, which would significantly enrich an international reader's understanding of the social resonances of Coetzee's *Disgrace*.... *Midlands* is particularly striking in the way in which it uses the events leading up to and following a murder to probe the changes—new vulnerabilities, new micro-geographies, new social and (un)employment structures—brought about by the end of apartheid."

5. "Petrus, whose behavior before and after the rape and robbery remains ambiguous, reinstitutes traditional patriarchy, but with the modern benefits of land ownership and title deeds" (Glenn 90).

6. "The transactions between Lucy and Petrus about the land can be read as a fairly direct commentary on South African issues. In housing his brother-in-law, one of the criminals who raped Lucy, Petrus becomes a rather sinister embodiment of black claims for the restitution of farm land and even of Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) logic. Yet Petrus claims, as he gets the farm and Lucy as supernumerary wife, that he is her protector and owner" (Glenn 90).

7. Under the title "SA farm exodus shock," *The Times* reports on 4 April 2011: "Democratic Republic of Congo, Malawi and even the former Soviet state of Georgia are just some of the countries to which South African farmers are fleeing to escape harsh farming conditions, compounded by a government they say is making their jobs 'unbearable.' From 120 000 in 1994, only 37 000 commercial farmers remain, which has led to the country teetering on the brink of becoming a net importer of food."

8. Once again, it is Lucy who has understood all this; who, despite her father's pleas and proposals about emigration, has accepted her "place in the scheme" (216). She has chosen to stay on the land on terms which dictate a complete relinquishing of all property, all rights—even her unborn child will belong to her new master and "protector," Petrus (Horrell 31).

9. "Satan has a number of faces, as we might expect. As Lucifer, he is a fallen favorite, fallenness being the narrative trajectory of the novel. He is also the snake, significantly called 'serpent' (16), David Lurie's 'totem,' an image of venomous seduction, danger, corruption, and cunning, but also of change, growth, and spirituality. Lurie describes his sexual 'temperament' under this totem as 'lengthy, absorbed, but rather abstract, rather dry, even at its hottest' (3)" (Gaylard 318).

10. *Disgrace* offers a perspective of “human in the image of dog” where death, stripped of mysticism and transcendence, becomes an animalistic and even brutal event that could happen at any moment (Graham 10).

11. Coetzee, discussing the significance accorded to the suffering body in his work, adds “entirely parenthetically” that he “as a personality” is “over-whelmed” by the amount of suffering in the world. His fiction constitutes a “paltry defense” against “that being overwhelmed” (*Doubling the Point* 248). As with Lurie’s care for the dog carried to its death in the final paragraph of *Disgrace*, for Coetzee it appears that there is some resignation and pathos, since the writer’s gesture can only be ‘little enough, less than little, nothing’ (220) in the face of immeasurable suffering (Graham 9).

12. “But he was wrong. It is not the erotic that is calling to him after all, nor the elegiac, but the comic. He is in the opera neither as Teresa nor as Byron nor even as some blending of the two: he is held in the music itself, in the flat, tinny slap of the banjo strings, the voice that strains to soar away from the ludicrous instrument but is continually reined back, like a fish on a line. So this is art, he thinks, and this is how it does its work! How strange! How fascinating!” (184+).

13. “As for black South Africans, the reaction of many was shown by the African National Congress’ heated reaction to the novel and what it was in fact saying about race relations in the country—feelings that led a group, probably including President Thabo Mbeki, to report the novel to the Human Rights Commission hearings into racism in the media, but with uncertain intentions and consequences. Nor should it be thought that the issue of black South African hostility to the novel has ceased: the Australian producers of the film in 2007 had to use a foreign African actor for the role of Petrus because, according to them, well-known local black actors resisted playing a role that seemed so closely linked to the stereotyping of black men as rapists or condoners of rape” (Glenn 81).

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