

**The Existential Crisis of Coetzee's Protagonists
in *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *Disgrace***


Senior Paper

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For a Degree Bachelor of Arts with
A Major in Literature at
The University of North Carolina at Asheville
Fall 2008

By *Sonya Rikhye*



Thesis Director
Dr. Deborah James



Thesis Advisor
Dr. Lorena Russell

J.M. Coetzee, a South African writer born under the apartheid government, explores fiction as a discourse of postcolonial oppression. Coetzee's unveiling of oppression in South Africa is described by David Atwell as "the nature and crisis of fiction-writing in South Africa today" (4). How does one write about the emotionally charged, fragile topic of South African oppression?

To depict and uncover the oppressive South African environment, Coetzee focuses on the concept of power. Stephan Watson describes this aspect of the post colonial environment: "the human relationship that is basic to it is likewise one of power and powerlessness ... It is this aspect of colonialism that receives the most extensive treatment in Coetzee's fiction" (14). Resulting from colonialism and the oppressive laws of apartheid is a dynamic of power that divides a nation by those who take power and those who become powerless. This essay analyzes the psychology of power that exists between the oppressor and the oppressed. It is this need for power on the part of the oppressor that is dealt with in *Waiting for the Barbarians* (hereafter referred to as *WB*) and *Disgrace*. In these texts, Coetzee presents the story of an oppressive relationship through the voice of the oppressor. The reader receives the story through one perspective which, in effect, silences the voice of the "Other." This limited point of view presents a psychological perspective of the oppressor.

Interestingly, these novels were written in very different political periods. *WB* was published in 1980 as the oppressive apartheid government began to draw international attention. However, it was not until the mid to late 80's that apartheid began to crumble. Published in 1999, *Disgrace*, on the other hand, takes place in a transitional stage, post-apartheid. The environments in which these novels were written drastically differ in relation to the South African situation, yet they share strong similarities in their depiction of oppression.

oppressive relationship. Coetzee depicts what leads to oppression as his fictional characters lose power and seek to regain it through oppression. The oppressor violently takes power through forcing another into powerlessness. At the root of oppression in *WB* and *Disgrace* is an existential crisis. Coetzee studied the works of many existentialist writers including Beckett and Kafka. He credits the work of these authors as influential to his fiction. Coetzee's interest in existentialist literature appears in his portrayal of oppression in *WB* and *Disgrace*. In these two novels, the presence of existentialism is prevalent as the protagonists are faced with existential feelings of purposelessness, a fear of mortality, and alienation.

Existentialism identifies the thought process and the plight of the individual as he or she is confronted with the limitations of humanity. Death becomes the entity that forces the individual to question existence. The limitation of time and the idea that eventually one will cease to exist results in questioning the purpose of life. Along with feelings of purposelessness also arise feelings of confusion and alienation. This consciousness is what is triggered in Coetzee's characters as they experience falls from power as a result of aging and change. In *WB*

of another through the discourse of desire. Patriarchal societies empower both protagonists which grant them sexual power above women who are treated by society and the government as secondary individuals. Sexual power further appears as these protagonists, through sexual appeal, control the desires of women. Loss of this power leads the men into an existential crisis. The oppression that occurs is one of sexual oppression, which becomes the desperate grasp of the men to reclaim their vitality and their power and position in patriarchal societies. In both novels, sexual power becomes allegorical for broader systems of power.

Initial Position of Power

The title *Waiting for the Barbarians* exemplifies the presence of existentialism in the novel, in particular, the notion of purposelessness. Coetzee's title resembles that of the existential play, *Waiting for Godot*, by Samuel Beckett, where the action of the play revolves around two main characters aimlessly waiting for the presence of a vague entity, Godot (God). Beckett's play begins with waiting and concludes with the same anticipation of something that, the audience comes to believe, will never appear. The circular construction of the play, beginning and ending with waiting, speaks to the human experience, and raises the question of whether life and the search to find the purpose of life remain hopeless.

Within Coetzee's novel, "waiting" as the existential expression of purposelessness is present through the concept of the Empire and also appears in the Magistrate's description of his life. The Empire exists as a vague entity that rules over the settlement where the story takes place. The Empire, as the story reveals, gains power through protecting the citizens from the "barbarians." As the Empire instills fear in the citizens of a barbarian attack, the Empire and its citizens remain in a constant state of waiting for barbarian aggression. Patricia Merivale in

“Audible Palimpsests: Coetzee’s Kafka” describes this: “The extended boredom of non-action in frontier garrison duty gives these individuals or collective lives meaning and purpose only through the hope of invasion, thus turning waiting into the central human (in)action and non-happenings into the key events of a human life” (159). What Coetzee constructs in *WB* is the acute feeling of purposelessness that supplements the human condition. “Waiting” becomes the central plot of *WB* which speaks of the Empire’s continuous anticipation of a barbarian attack, but it also refers to the life of the individual. The Magistrate states of his life, “All I want now is to live out my life in ease in a familiar world, to die in my own bed” (*WB* 75). The Magistrate does not seek adventure, change, or honor; instead what he has resigned to is a life of waiting. Coetzee presents the image of a man in search of an easy, quiet life to pass the time until death. This embodies the existential notion of the purposelessness of existence. The individual is born into a world of limits and suffering, doomed to wait until his death. It is under this title and the attached notion of purposelessness that Coetzee presents his story of a man who becomes an oppressor.

Furthermore, the title summarizes the cycle of oppression as we view the purposelessness of the Empire (through the term “waiting”) and the attempt to gain purpose and power through naming the “Other” as enemy (seen with the term “barbarians”). The enemies of the Empire are the natives of the land, who existed before the Empire, and as the Magistrate admits will remain after the Empire is gone. The use of the term “barbarians” speaks of the perspective that individuals outside the Empire are considered uncivilized because civilization, to the Magistrate and the government, exists within the rules of the Empire. Paradoxically, as the story unfolds, the officers of the Empire become barbaric as they torture and kill other human beings.

As the Empire waits for the barbarians to attack, the reader becomes aware of the fictitious accounts of barbarian aggression reported from the capital. The Magistrate reveals his doubt about the threat of the barbarians, "In private I observed that once in every generation, without fail, there is an episode of hysteria about the barbarians ... Show me a barbarian army and I will believe" (*WB* 8). This observation asserts the Magistrate's disbelief in the barbarians as a threat. Instead, this fear of the barbarians becomes a creation of the Empire as a means of controlling the citizens and creating a false sense of legitimacy. The Empire declares its importance through promising safety from the barbarians. In fact, the Empire seems to only exist in relation to the barbarians. In defining the barbarians as "other," the Empire gains power and authority. The title *Waiting for the Barbarians* speaks of the desire of the oppressor to name another individual as "other" in attempts to gain purpose and power. Through the title alone, Coetzee demonstrates the presence of existentialism and the cycle of oppression in *WB*.

WB and *Disgrace* take place during the fall from power experienced by the protagonists. These characters exist in states of powerlessness. However, Coetzee chooses to provide insight into the past to demonstrate the degree to which the lives of the characters change as they fall from power. Coetzee introduces the cycle of oppression through an image of the protagonists in the past, during their initial positions of power. In doing so, the reader becomes aware of the extent to which these characters fall, the manner in which they lose power, and the desperate state that results.

The cycle of oppression begins in *WB* with evidence of the Magistrate's previous political and social power granted by the Empire. The Magistrate, as an officer of the Empire, reigns over a tiny settlement in the outskirts. He receives power through his relation to the governing body. Commanding other officers and serving as the link between the settlement and

the capital, the Magistrate appears to be the highest ranking officer permanently living in the settlement. Within this small community, the Magistrate becomes the highest authority, placing him in a position above everyone else in the settlement, including women. The Magistrate speaks of the sexual power he had in his youth:

I remember how in the first years of my appointment here ... how sometimes a restless wife, leaning over the half-door with the hearthfire gleaming behind her, would answer my gaze without flinching; how I would fall into conversation with young girls promenading in twos and threes, buy them sherbet, then perhaps lead one away into the darkness ... For years I wore the well-fed look of a prize boar.

(*WB* 45)

The Magistrate describes his youth, armed with the power granted to him by the Empire. He speaks of himself through the female gaze, naming himself a “prize boar.” This term speaks of a sense of economic advantage. Prize boars are well fed, fat, grandiose and therefore attest to the wealth of its owner which represents the Magistrate’s political power.

This quotation also describes sexual power that was derived from the Magistrate’s attractive appearance in his youth. The term “prize boar” speaks of an animal judged by appearance. In a contest, it is compared to others and is deemed the winner. Through this passage we find that the Magistrate’s pride lies in his ability to attract women, which exists as sexual power. The Magistrate in his past remained in a position of power.

Disgrace follows this same cycle of oppression which begins with the protagonist, David Lurie—a white professor of communications in Cape Town—as an individual who, under the apartheid government, was placed at the top of a social and political hierarchy before his fall from power. Lurie’s description of the past depicts his previous state of empowerment, largely

resulting from his sexual attractiveness, but also from the inherent social position awarded to white men in South Africa during apartheid.

In the social order during apartheid, laws claimed and enforced white supremacy over the black majority. These laws, created by the colonizers and expanded by the apartheid government, were constructed by white men and therefore outlined a government and social order where white men were placed at the peak. Pamela Cooper writes of the social hierarchy of white men in South Africa and its relation to Lurie: "At fifty-two, Lurie is broadly representative of an older social order: the officially defunct South Africa of Afrikaner dominance, statutory racial oppression, and the uneasy pleasures of white privilege" (Cooper 1). This social assertion of the privilege of white men serves as the environment in which Lurie lived in his youth. Placed above individuals of other races and genders, Lurie views women as secondary individuals, which is seen through the way he solely views women as tools to fulfill his desire. Coetzee focuses on Lurie's position of power in his youth as above women who were treated by the government and society as secondary citizens.

Lurie's sexual power was further heightened by his attractive features that awarded him, in his opinion, the desire of every woman. The third-person narration speaks of Lurie's perspective of his sexual power, "If he looked at a woman in a certain way, with certain intent, she would return his look, he could rely on that" (*Disgrace* 7). He has sexual power over the desire of women. This privilege and power granted from his position as an attractive white male resulted in Lurie relying on desire as his niche, his position in society, to the extent that the novel calls desire "the backbone of his life" (7). He constructed his identity based on the sexual power he was given. Coetzee presents images of Lurie's past where he was in a position of power in order to have a point of comparison to depict the intensity of Lurie's fall from power. In

understanding the initial position of power, when reading about the fall from power, the reader better understands the gravity of the situation, and the existential questioning that results.

Fall from Power

It is with this knowledge of the past that Coetzee presents the protagonists' fall from power. In *WB*, the Magistrate loses political power as Joll takes over the settlement. Joll walks into the settlement wearing sunglasses (a foreign object to the Magistrate) which represents his youth. The sunglasses physically slow aging by avoiding the need to squint in the sun and thus prevents wrinkles, which causes the Magistrate to acknowledge: "It is true, he has the skin of a younger man" (*WB* 1). Metaphorically, the sunglasses represent the introduction of a new generation. Joll proclaims, "At home everyone wears them" (*WB* 1). The Magistrate, who has no familiarity with the glasses, becomes an outsider of this new generation. Joll, like the sunglasses, represents a new, younger system, one unknown to the Magistrate and the settlement. With this new authority, the Magistrate finds that his power declines. He is unable to control Joll, who is in the settlement under "emergency power," and the Magistrate becomes an observer as Joll tortures the barbarians. The Magistrate speaks of Joll's intrusion on his position by declaring after Joll leaves on a small voyage, "So I ride back, relieved of my burden and happy to be alone again in a world I know and understand" (14). As Joll takes power from the Magistrate, the Magistrate feels displaced. Faced with a loss of power, the Magistrate loses authority and his role in the settlement, which leads to existential feelings of purposelessness.

This loss of power to Joll translates to a form of emasculation. As Joll takes over power, the Magistrate is deprived of his job. Joll purposely chooses others instead of the Magistrate to assist him in his work. This occurs when Joll asks for a translator, a skill the Magistrate seems

most capable of: "I will need someone to help me with the language. The guard, perhaps. Does he speak it?" (*WB* 7). Later, when the Magistrate asks why Joll did not choose him for the job, Joll replies that the Magistrate would have found it tedious. The Magistrate questions if Joll intends to keep the Magistrate distant from the work of the Empire. This may be due to the Magistrate's disapproval of torture, but nevertheless, it prevents the Magistrate from working. The Magistrate, unable to work, remains in the home, straining to hear prisoners' screams from outside.

Additionally, although the Magistrate is not allowed to intervene with Joll's work, he is responsible for housing and feeding Joll. The text states, "He is quartered here at the inn because this is the best accommodation the town provides. I have impressed it on the staff that he is an important visitor... 'We must make a good impression on him'" (*WB* 2). In this passage the Magistrate works to accommodate Joll, and goes through the necessary preparations to impress him. As the Magistrate states, "*We* must make a good impression" [emphasis added], the reader finds that the Magistrate is also being judged by Joll. It is his duty to house Joll and make his stay comfortable. His position becomes that of serving Joll. He is forced outside of the "work" realm of the Empire and into the home. In this way, the Magistrate takes on the role of the traditional wife. As the Magistrate loses his political and sexual power, he also loses his place in the world. The Magistrate's existence becomes purposeless. This emasculation of the Magistrate, suggests that he has been placed on equal footing with women, demonstrating his loss of status above women.

This loss of power to Joll and the introduction of the new order also reveal the age of the Magistrate. Within the novel, the Magistrate is an old man. His youth and features decline which results in his loss of power over the desire of women. The Magistrate reflects on his aging body during sex: "there were unsettling occasions when in the middle of the sexual act I felt myself

losing my way like a storyteller losing the thread of his story. I thought with a shiver of those figures of fun, fat old men whose overburdened hearts stop beating, who pass away in the arms of their loves with an apology on their lips and have to be carried out and dumped in a dark alley to save the reputation of the house" (*WB* 45). His age in relation to sex embarrasses him. He fears and desires sex. To the Magistrate the aging body becomes grotesque. The Magistrate's disgust with his aging body is seen through his descriptions of his naked form: "my thin shanks, my slack genitals, my paunch, my flabby old man's breast, the turkey-skin of my throat" (*WB* 31). He is embarrassed by his body as his youth fades. The Magistrate loses his sexual appeal and thus his power.

In *Disgrace*, Lurie's power and privilege is lost as the era of apartheid ends and Lurie begins to age. Pamela Cooper defines Lurie as he enters post apartheid South Africa: "Lurie becomes an exile in his own land. He is politically estranged, for the status of white power is declining in South Africa" (Cooper 6-7). The end of apartheid South Africa also speaks of the fall of the status of white men. As post-apartheid South Africa attempts to equalize the position of all citizens, the white man inevitably must fall. Evidence of Lurie as part of the generation of the old system appears in the text as his secretary maintains,

'You people had it easier. I mean, whatever the rights and wrongs of the situation, at least you knew where you were.'

'You people?' he says. 'What people?'

'I mean your generation.' (*Disgrace* 7)

The secretary comments on the clear positions given to white society, and the loss of that position as the new order arrives. Lurie experiences both the power of the old system and the introduction of a new system where this power declines. The new system seeks to create race and

gender equality, which places men next to women on the hierarchy. Lurie is no longer positioned above women.

Additionally with the passing of time, Lurie becomes aware of his old age which directly results from his loss of sexual power. Although Lurie is only fifty-two, his loss of power over the sexual desire of women introduces the notion of aging and death. Sue Kossew speaks of the treatment of aging in *Disgrace*: “Ageing men and women are ‘disgraceful’—dissociated from their bodies and from society—they are ‘ugly’” (3). No longer in his youth, his power to seduce women lessens. Abruptly after we are told of Lurie’s sexual power in the past, the narrator states: “Then one day it all ended. Without warning his powers fled. Glances that would once have responded to his slid over, past, through him. Overnight he became a ghost. If he wanted a woman he had to learn to pursue her; often, in one way or another, to buy her” (*Disgrace* 7). Additionally, line one of the novel identifies Lurie’s present age as past his sexual peak through stating: “he has, to his mind, solved the problem of sex rather well” (1). The “problem of sex” described by Lurie reinforces the notion of Lurie’s loss of power over the desire of women. Sex has now, in his present, become a problem, while the desire to fulfill his sexual urges remains. Yet, he has lost the agency, used in his youth, to seduce women. Instead, sex becomes a problem in need of a solution.

This loss of sexual power is heightened when he is turned down by a prostitute, Soroya. As Lurie encounters sex as a problem, he turns to a prostitute to fulfill his desires. Within their arrangement, she plays the game of an intimate lover. In this fictional world, which comes with a price, Lurie is once again desired. However, this problem resurfaces when Lurie views Soroya in the life outside of their secret meetings, walking with her sons. Resulting from this encounter, which blends her family life with her work as a prostitute, Soroya ends this sexual arrangement.

The fantasy that Lurie creates of this relationship as one of mutual enjoyment is destroyed as he learns of her indifference. He realizes that his feelings toward Soroya are not returned. The text states of their sexual relationship: “an affection has grown up in him for her. To some degree, he believes, this affection is reciprocated” and further “her affinity with him can surely not be feigned . . . he trusts her” (*Disgrace* 2-3). With her absence he realizes that his trust in her and his belief in her affection are false. As Soroya ends their sexual encounters, the fictional world of caring lovers abruptly ends and Lurie’s loss of sexual power is intensified. Lurie, a man who believes women to be lesser than him, is turned down by what society views as one of those at the bottom of the hierarchy, a woman who uses her body for money. When a prostitute refuses him, she takes power through controlling the relationship. Lurie has attached himself to her and she discards him. To Lurie, this represents the ultimate loss of power over women.

In both novels, resulting from the fall of power, the protagonists plunge into an existential crisis. As these characters lose their political standing, they are displaced. Confronted with a loss of power, both protagonists are submersed in a society where their previous social roles have been destroyed and new ones have yet to be created. With the introduction of a new order they are pushed into confusion as their positions are taken over. As the characters become aware of their eroding power and identities, they find life purposeless. Stephen Watson speaks of the purposeless world Coetzee’s characters find themselves in, “All of Coetzee’s novels contain passages which express a great longing for history. They are unflinching in their desire for a world of event, for a narrative in which there is direction and purpose . . .” (32). The Magistrate and Lurie are thrust into discontinuous, alienated worlds.

In addition, the awareness of aging, and the transformation of the body as time progresses, confronts the male protagonists with the limits of death. Kossew identifies what

results from aging from the perspective of the characters: “self-disgust, uselessness, and superfluity—a loss of authority” (3). Sex and desire become the medium through which they view their mortality. Lurie’s loss of the female gaze and the Magistrate’s view of his aging body force an awareness of the looming fate of humanity: death.

As the reader views the existential crisis that the characters are confronted with, the reader connects with the protagonists. Through first-person narration in *Waiting for the Barbarians* and a limited third-person narration in *Disgrace*, Coetzee traces the psychological perspective of these oppressors as they become aware of the existential existence. In *WB*, at this point during the fall from power, before the Magistrate turns to oppression, the Magistrate serves as the voice of reason as he chastises Joll for torturing the barbarians. He voices judgments and feelings that the reader holds. In comparison to Joll, the Magistrate seems heroic as he argues for the release of the prisoners and demands that they are fed. The Magistrate makes an effort to distance himself from the harshness of the Empire and the actions of Joll. The reader connects with the Magistrate as he attempts to separate himself from the role of the oppressor.

In *Disgrace*, as Lurie speaks of his two divorces and his profession, where he receives little respect from his students and his peers, we are presented with an image of a pitiful man, falling. Kossew states of Lurie’s work, “he is also intellectually castrated in the ‘emasculated institution of learning’ that is the Cape Technical University, where he is an outdated intellectual forced to teach Communications rather than his specialist field of modern languages” (3).

We sympathize with these protagonists as they live absurd existences, working daily at professions that have no personal meaning. The existential author Albert Camus in “The Myth of Sisyphus” defines the absurd as the “unspeakable penalty in which the whole being is exerted toward accomplishing nothing.” Speaking of the workforce and its existential feelings of

purposelessness Camus continues about the absurd existence, “The workman of today works every day in his life at the same tasks, and this fate is no less absurd.” We find Coetzee’s protagonists to be victims in an alienated and purposeless world. The reader connects with the oppressor as he/she grapples with these same existential questions.

Through the presentation of the fall from power and the limited point of view, Coetzee invites the reader to connect with the protagonist. It is in creating this relationship between the reader and the protagonist that we enter the conclusion of the cycle of oppression as the protagonists turn to oppression.

Choice of Oppression as Coping Mechanism

As the protagonists in *WB* and *Disgrace* fall from power, they become aware of their existential existence. Their worlds become purposeless and their mortal fate tragic. It is in attempts to regain their position in the old social order where they had youth and purpose through positions of power, that the Magistrate and Lurie turn to oppression. Sexual objectification becomes the means through which the protagonists seek to regain purpose and vitality. These men claim women’s bodies in order to gain power over the “Other.” The existential questioning that all individuals are confronted with does not result in oppression necessarily. However, it is the sense of chaos and lack of understanding of self that occurs in this crisis that causes some, namely the protagonists in *Disgrace* and *WB*, to choose violence and oppression.

In *WB*, sex, to the Magistrate, serves as a medium through which he asserts his masculine power. As he falls from the social hierarchy, the Magistrate attempts to claim power over the

women he sleeps with. He searches to objectify these women in order to claim superiority over them.

After Joll enters the settlement, the Magistrate speaks of the countless sexual experiences he has with a prostitute named "The Star." His encounter with this woman seems to have increased with the presence of Joll, and therefore increases as the Magistrate loses power. This relationship serves as a medium through which the Magistrate is able to assert his masculine power. He treats this woman as an object through claiming her body. He defines sex with "The Star" as a power relationship where he enters her and she receives him. Describing himself as the only actor, she becomes the object. The Magistrate describes the sexual experience, "to desire her has meant to enfold her and enter her, to pierce her surface and stir the quiet of her interior into an ecstatic storm; then to retreat, to subside, to wait for desire to reconstitute itself" (*WB* 43). Sex is viewed as a military offensive as the Magistrate pierces her, as if with a sword; he violently forces entry into her body. Within her, he alters and spoils her insides, creating a storm. After he gains possession and ownership of the body, he "retreats," which speaks of sex as an act not of unification but one where the Magistrate remains distant from the woman as he claims power and leaves. He demands subjectivity, describing himself as the only actor. The woman becomes her body as she receives him. Sex, to the Magistrate, becomes a medium through which he gains power over the "Other."

Sexual objectification also serves as a way for the Magistrate to regain his youthful vitality. The Magistrate notes of his desire, "So I thought: 'It is nothing but a matter of age, of cycles of desire and apathy in a body that is slowly cooling and dying. When I was young the mere smell of a woman would arouse me; now it is evidently only the sweetest, the youngest, the newest who have that power. One of these days it will be a little boy'" (46). Aware of his aging

body and its progression toward death, the Magistrate turns to sex. Sex becomes an act capable of restoring youth, as if he absorbs the age of his partner.

Interestingly, although the Magistrate claims the bodies of women he sleeps with, the central relationship of the text, between the Magistrate and the barbarian woman he objectifies, is a relationship void of sex. Different from "The Star," his sexual objectification of the barbarian woman serves as his attempt to cope with the purposelessness of his existence. With the appearance of Joll, not only has the Magistrate's power lessened, but Joll's acts of torture, raise the question of the Magistrate's identity. Who has the Magistrate become, what is his identity as an individual who serves and upholds a destructive Empire? To what extent is he guilty of the disfigurement of the barbarian woman?

He does not enter her because his interest, what he attempts to claim ownership over, is the outer layer of her body: her skin which contains the traces of her torture. Through her scared body he seeks to uncover his own identity. Molesting her, through washing and oiling her body, becomes a means to find the truth of his identity, as Brian May states, "The specific form of asceticism that is Coetzee's target in *WB* is the long Western tradition of transcendent vision, a tradition that too often deals with the body, when it deals with it at all, masterfully—either as obstacle or as means" (14). As he takes in the barbarian woman, her scars become a cryptic language as he seeks to interpret his connection to her destruction. He believes she holds the answer to the question of his purpose and identity.

Ali Behdad terms this use of the "Other" as a means to find identity as "colonial eroticism" in "Eroticism, Colonialism, and Violence" which he defines as "Colonial violence is about an erotics of dissolution. Imperialism is ultimately a disturbing attempt to produce a sense of continuity between the discontinuous identities of the colonizer and the colonized" (Behdad

203). He continues, “Dissolution can be achieved either through a cold-blooded militarism-discipline, torture, and pain – or through a benevolence and humanism and embodies pleasure, desire, sexuality” (202). The Magistrate’s sexual relationship with the barbarian woman serves as an attempt at dissolution. He seeks to claim her body and her past experiences with Joll. As the colonizer attempts to colonize the body, he tries to absorb her story through sexual oppression.

Although he does not forcefully enter the barbarian woman, his actions appear equally invasive. He searches for truths within her body in the same manner that he was able to regain power in the past, through sexual objectification. He describes this ritual of objectification:

First comes the ritual of the washing, for which she is now naked. I wash her feet, as before, her legs, her buttocks. My soapy hands travel between her thighs, incuriously, I find. She raises her arms while I wash her armpits. I wash her belly, her breasts. I push her hair aside and wash her neck, her throat. She is patient. I rinse and dry her...I feel no desire to enter this stocky little body glistening by now in the firelight. It is a week since words have passed between us. I feed her, shelter her, use her body, if that is what I am doing, in this foreign way. There used to be moments when she stiffened at certain intimacies; but now her body yields when I nuzzle my face in her belly or clasp her feet between my thighs. She yields to everything. (*WB* 30)

In this passage, Coetzee presents the reader with a range of contradicting emotions. Dramatic irony through point of view appears as the Magistrate declares one thing but his actions prove the opposite. After the first washing of the barbarian woman’s feet, this passage brings the reader up to the present, where the Magistrate no longer just washes up to her calves, but now we find, she is naked. The Magistrate claims to incuriously search her body, believing he has no sexual desire

for this woman. However, his hands, as they soap her body, find themselves in her innermost part, between her thighs. He describes his lack of desire, yet this thought is contradicted in the same line by his observation of her glistening skin.

The Magistrate is conscious of his objectification of the barbarian woman. We see her response to this invasion of her body as he describes her as patient (which speaks of her role as an object and not a participant; she waits, patiently, for him to finish). He describes the progression in the relationship where she first met his advances with stiffness, now, he notes, she yields to everything. Disturbingly, the Magistrate aware of the change in the woman's response to him, which seems to result more from him wearing her down instead of her consent to this ritual, does not find this change problematic. He declares, as the reader and the barbarian woman already know, that he uses her body. Yet, this realization does not prevent him from performing the ritual. He acknowledges the invasiveness of his actions and his objectification of the barbarian woman. However, he does not feel burdened by the trauma he inflicts on an individual, who once was resistant to him and who he has now silenced, as she yields to him. As the Magistrate describes this ritual of washing, he objectifies the barbarian woman despite the psychological trauma he puts her through, claiming his desire as superior to her mental state. He believes that in finding his identity through searching her body that he will be able to, once again, make sense of his world. Sexual objectification in *WB* is used as a selfish and violent means to escape the limits of humanity identified in existential philosophy.

In *Disgrace* as in *WB*, sex serves as the medium through which Lurie attempts to reclaim his masculine power. Mike Marais in "'Little Enough, Less than Little: Nothing': Ethics, Engagement, and Change in the fiction of J.M. Coetzee" speaks of Lurie's sexual aggression: "the scene must be read as Lurie's attempt to possess the 'Other', to assert control over her"

(175). His sexual harassment of Melanie serves as a means for Lurie to gain power over another. He violently asserts the old social order, the order in which he was attractive and powerful, through raping his student. Pamela Cooper states of the sexual relationship between a professor and a student as one of power: “Within this emotional spiral, the affair by which he ‘falls’ recasts lust from a private entitlement—the once unspoken right of male professors to sex with their students ...” (Cooper 25). This right speaks of the old social order where women were secondary citizens. It is through this previously accepted claim to power that Lurie attempts to return to as he copes with his absurd existence.

Lurie’s attempt to deal with an absurd existence results in the objectification of his student Melanie. Lurie treats Melanie as a sexual object as he abuses his power as a professor and takes advantage of her. Objectification occurs as Lurie disregards Melanie’s feelings and views her body as a rightful possession of men. The novel voices his perception while he sleeps with Melanie: “Not rape, not quite that, but undesired nevertheless, undesired to the core. As though she had decided to go slack, die within herself for the duration ...” (*Disgrace* 25). He enters her because he desires her despite his knowledge that she does not want to have sex. He places his desire above hers. Elleke Boehmer’s discusses the rape of Melanie as sacrificial which applies to Lurie’s sexual objectification of Melanie as he sacrifices her body and her mental state in order to gain his lost power over the “Other ” (136).

Further Lurie objectifies Melanie by claiming her body. He views her body as an object to be shared. Armed with his phallus, Lurie views himself as a soldier of Eros as he takes on the mythical role of the lover driven by forces he cannot control. Quoting a Shakespearean sonnet as evidence of Melanie’s role as an object, Lurie seeks to justify that her beauty is not her own and should therefore be shared and taken by others, “‘From fairest creatures we desire increase,’ he

says, 'that thereby beauty's rose might never die'" (*Disgrace* 16). Lurie, through Shakespeare's language, claims Melanie's beauty and therefore her body. He attempts to justify his desire and his rape of Melanie through claiming that his passions are of poetic magnificence and thus uncontrollable. Lurie further objectifies Melanie and attempts to justify himself through stating, "She does not own herself; perhaps he does not own himself either" (*Disgrace* 19). Once again he maintains that Melanie does not have possession over her body.

Stefan Helgesson speaks of the body and the colonizer's view of the body as "Other." His analysis discusses the "black body" and how the white colonizer chooses to view the body as an example of "Otherness" (24). This argument also speaks of the female as "other." Lurie, in disregarding Melanie's plea for him to stop, views her as "Other." He associates her body as separate from the person. The female body becomes a site of his desire and not representative of and encompassing a person. In separating her body from her mind and control, he sees her as an object alone; an object that he is free to touch without her consent (which is exactly what he does). Further, he attempts to shed blame and guilt by stating that he is not himself. Instead, he sees himself as a poet in praise of her beauty, unable to control his desires. Ownership of the body serves as a means to assert masculine power that existed in the old system under apartheid. In recreating this order he seeks to regain his previous position as the top of the social hierarchy.

Through the limited point of view, we examine Lurie's view of sexual oppression as restoring his vitality. The text states of the morning after he sleeps with Melanie, "He wakes the next morning in a state of profound wellbeing" (*Disgrace* 19). Appeasing his sexual desire through violently entering a student who displays obvious signs of fear and unwillingness, Lurie feels alive. In wooing a student, which becomes more an assertion of his power as professor, Lurie feels he has regained his mastery of sex and women. His taking of Melanie serves as a

vampiric feeding. She rejuvenates him, allowing him to regain a sense of his youth as he takes from her.

Further, sex serves as a way to forget his absurd position. After Lurie sleeps with his secretary he considers erasing sex from his life which would be “A clearing of the decks, at least, so that one can turn one’s mind to the proper business of the old: preparing to die” (9). Lurie identifies sex as something that allows the individual to forget his existential existence. Sex becomes a temporary escape from one’s awareness of his or her mortality. Because of Lurie’s perspective of sex as a way to cope with and prevent his absurd existence, he objectifies women.

Both the Magistrate and Lurie attempt to escape an existential crisis and the limits on humanity through sexual objectification. Coetzee demonstrates the role of existentialism in the cycle of oppression, yet he does not attempt to justify the reaction of the protagonists. Rather, through his constructed limited point of view that, at first connects the reader to the protagonist, he creates a paradox as the characters turn to oppression.

Coetzee, through first-person point of view has established a relationship between the protagonist and the reader. As the characters turn to oppression, a point of disconnect occurs between the reader who does not approve of the actions of the protagonist. This point of disconnect appears as the reader becomes aware of the limits of first-person and limited third-person points of view. The voice through which the reader receives the story cannot be completely trusted as dramatic irony exists between what is said by the protagonists and what actually seems to take place.

In *WB* dramatic irony is seen through the text when the Magistrate first brings the barbarian woman up to his room. Coetzee, through the Magistrate’s perspective, presents the voice of the Magistrate as he claims his actions are well intentioned, yet concludes the passage

with the Magistrate's molestation of the barbarian woman. Derek Attridge describes this varying information through the protagonists' perspective as "the complex unfolding of feelings and association" (Attridge 70). The scene with the barbarian girl unfolds in the text through the Magistrate's viewpoint:

The fire is lit. I draw the curtains, light the lamp ... "This is not what you think it is," I say. The words come reluctantly. Can I really be about to excuse myself? Her lips are clenched shut, her ears too no doubt, she wants nothing of old men and their bleating consciences. I prowl around her, talking about our vagrancy ordinances, sick at myself. Her skin begins to glow in the warmth of the closed room ... The distance between myself and her torturers, I realize, is negligible; I shudder. "Show me your feet," I say in the new thick voice that seems to be mine. "Show me what they have done to your feet." (*WFB* 27-28)

Derek Attridge in analyzing this passage speaks of the range of emotions expressed. The reader is aware of the seductive environment created by the Magistrate through the fire and the drawn curtains. The Magistrate, identifying himself as a predator along with the reader, becomes disgusted by his actions as he seems to apologize for what the environment suggests. He realizes that his actions are those of a force imposing power on another which connects him to the torturers (Attridge 68).

The Magistrate, aware and disgusted by his invasive actions (which can be seen in the passage above as he states he is "sick of [him]self"), concludes these feelings with the beginning of his sexual objectification of the barbarian woman as he takes her feet for the first time. The Magistrate moves from caressing the woman's feet to her calves. As he describes this method as a means of entering her, of unleashing her secrets, the reader finds a connection to the Magistrate

problematic. Through these points of disconnect between the Magistrate and the reader, Coetzee invites an outside perspective which judges the Magistrate as an oppressor.

In creating this paradox, Coetzee forces readers to judge themselves; to question their connection to the voice of the oppressor. Where does the reader stand in this relationship? Does the reader, as an active participant in the interpretation of the story, partake in the oppression of these women?

These questions of who is responsible and the different levels of responsibility represent the larger problem of creating a South Africa free from oppression. How does a nation, terrorized by oppression mourn and move on from a past that defies labels? Barbara Harlow and David Atwell discuss this gray area created by Coetzee when speaking of the South African environment, “ambiguity seems to be the distinguishing feature” (Harlow 6). The uncertain and changing environment of South Africa refuses any clear and constant application of justice.

Samuel Durrant compares the goals of the TRC (South African Truth & Reconciliation Commission) with the works of Coetzee. In this comparison he raises the question of how a nation is able to mourn and move into the future when the past continues to influence the relationships in the present. Coetzee speaks of the present situation in South Africa as a result of colonialism and the oppressive relationships it creates: “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” (Jerusalem 98). After years of oppressing the black majority, even after the end of apartheid, racism and oppression remain a part of the present as they are still embedded in the political and social structure of South Africa. Coetzee humanizes the oppressor through depicting the

existential crisis as the root of oppression which demonstrates the complexity involved in the larger problem of creating a new South Africa free from oppression.

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