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## ACCEPTANCE OF THE OTHER: RECONCILIATION IN J.M. COETZEE'S *DISGRACE*

*Rachel McCoppin*

**W**ith the backdrop of post-apartheid South Africa, J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* focuses on David Lurie's inability to understand the Other, as portrayed by his university colleagues, his daughter, and his daughter's South African neighbors. Intruders rape Lurie's daughter, Lucy, locking him in the bathroom, and then set him on fire. Lucy will not talk to him about what happened to her, and more telling, she will not leave her land, even if it means that she could be in danger of its happening again. Lurie wants justice done for these acts of violence and Lucy to flee back to a more conventional lifestyle, but he is forced to recognize that he will never be able to truly understand her or anyone else in the novel, leading him towards a revised understanding of reconciliation.

After the atrocities that occurred during apartheid South Africa a system called the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, TRC, was set up in which people voiced their grievances, with no legal action being done, only to have the truth be made public. As Rebecca Saunders notes, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's "difficult mandate [was] to be at once a quasi-judicial body charged with measuring the accountability of perpetrators and a forum for witnessing the searingly emotional, embodied and profoundly interior testimony of victims" (99).

This is the system that Lurie is forced to accept. He wants justice, but must accept his verbalization of the act in front of others as enough. Along these same lines, he must also account for whatever wrongs he is responsible for. Coetzee's *Disgrace* ties reconciliation together with acceptance of the intangibility of the Other. It is through Lurie's acceptance that he will never understand the Other, or the violence that occurred, which leaves him only accountable for his own personal responsibility.

James Meffan and Kim L. Worthington in "Ethics Before Politics: J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*" point out that "ethics is the ongoing process of self-critique...of putting the knowing ego into question through the process of the exposure to...absolute Otherness"; Coetzee's novel leaves the reader with a message that one cannot control others, or the events in life; one can only be individually accountable for one's own actions.

Coetzee's view of reconciliation in this novel is contested by many critics; therefore, when teaching this novel, it is important to introduce this fact to students. Coetzee is a white South African author writing about the oppressed. This novel is written in third person, though it mainly focuses on Lurie's perceptions; the other characters within the novel are left ambiguous. Even the reader finds actions within the novel confusing, just as Lurie does; for instance, Lucy marries Petrus, a leader over those who raped her, so that she can stay on her land. The reader's inability to grasp the characters' reasoning only reiterates Coetzee's message that one cannot understand the Other.

Lurie revises his perception of reconciliation to fit the culture around him. He learns that true reconciliation only can come about if one is willing to see one's own blame in the situation at hand. This novel undoubtedly invites multiple interpretations and lends itself towards invigorating, dynamic discussion, but it is this point of personal responsibility, without ever truly being able to understand the Other, that allows for classroom discussions to focus on student responsibility in these tumultuous times.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission, TRC, was created to compile a picture of the atrocities that occurred during apartheid, 1960-1994. As Archbishop Tutu pointed out during the TRC, "We are charged to unearth the truth about our dark past, to...contribute to the healing of the traumatized and wounded people...and in this manner to promote national unity and reconciliation" (Cited in Nagy 718). The TRC "articulated its justice...as 'restorative' rather than retributive, its amnesty branch nonetheless operated on the principle of reasonable exchange and measured its judgments in terms of...proportionality—whether the truth had been adequately confessed, and whether the act, omission or offense was proportional to the political objective pursued....it maintained its purchase on the reasonable by measuring ends and means and by bartering amnesty for truth" (Saunders 101). However, the TRC "produced a truth limited by complex political, ideological, juridical, temporal, spatial and material factors" (Saunders 103).

What is important, as Saunders has observed, is that, “While there is a strong body of evidence that for many victims who testified at the TRC, the process of turning oneself inside out was cathartic, that it restored a sense of human dignity and made possible the process of healing; there are also numerous troubling instances where this visceral outpouring was clearly painful, wounding and even re-traumatizing...sacrific[ing] one’s personal healing for the nation’s” (Saunders 105). Similar to Coetzee’s *Disgrace*, the TRC “leaves us with a messy, nettle-strewn bed on which the social conscience is destined to find little rest” (Saunders 105). Many critics have discussed a connection to *Disgrace* and the TRC proceedings; Coetzee does address the concept of reconciliation within this novel, but complete reconciliation appears in many ways to be impossible because of the characters’ inability to understand the Other. Without true understanding of past injustice, which according to Coetzee seems impossible because one can never truly know another person’s experiences, complete reconciliation may never happen. What is clear, though, is that Coetzee does provide a means towards personal reconciliation; the past with its injustices may never be resolved, and future justice may also be unclear, but one can decide how to live a meaningful life within this context by not creating more harm towards others.

Coetzee’s message of personal responsibility towards others is an essential component of this novel. Though one will never truly understand the Other, one still has a responsibility to them; this is one thing that can be controlled by the individual.

The novel in large part is meant to be confusing, as Lurie’s perspective is often of confusion; Elizabeth Anker observes that “*Disgrace*, moreover, is a novel with significant ethical purchase... because it refuses any such pretense of certitude” (234). The novel is only narrated through a concentration on Lurie, and this is essential towards understating Coetzee’s message about the inability to grasp the Other; likewise Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has noted that “*Disgrace* is relentless in keeping the focalization confined to David Lurie.... When Lucy is resolutely denied focalization, the reader is provoked, for he or she does not want to share in Lurie-the-chief-focalizer’s inability to ‘read’ Lucy” (Spivak 22). The novel does not “give ‘voice,’ to either Petrus or Lucy,” as main characters of the novel (Spivak 24). This technique allows Lurie, and perhaps the reader to come to the realization that though one cannot understand the Other, this does not mean that one is not responsible for others; instead, one is completely responsible for one’s actions, especially in a time of upheaval.

In *Disgrace*, according to Rosemary Nagy, “Coetzee provokes

a nuanced examination of what it means to be responsible and to take responsibility, particularly, how deep a moral transformation is needed and of whom it should be expected. He relentlessly captures the ambiguities of assigning and taking responsibility, and the limits of moral transformation" (Nagy 709). David Lurie's inability to understand his daughter as the Other forces Lurie to accept responsibility for his actions towards others. He begins as an idealistic, lonely professor who is aware of something missing in his life; he searches in the rural environment of his daughter, yet is still immersed in his old mentality of romanticism, and the violent, darker side of life makes him struggle past his comfortable areas of reasoning. Very slowly Lurie grows to embrace acceptance and humility that is purely occasioned by his experiences with the Other.

In the TRC "the uncertain meaning of 'accepting charges'... presented itself most glaringly in the guise of perpetrators who stonily...recounted acts of unfathomable barbarity, counting on this 'truth' to pay their debt, purchase amnesty and settle the demands of responsibility... [this] led some South Africans to regard the TRC's 'truth for amnesty' deal as...exchanging justice for truth, or as merely canceling debts rather than exacting payment for them" (Saunders 101). The unrest surrounding the TRC is apparent within this novel, though it is on an individual level. The confusion that resulted in the TRC's reconciliation attempt is echoed in Coetzee. The TRC praised victims who forgave perpetrators for the benefit of a new South Africa, calling them "heroes"; "the pressure to forgive misplaced the burden of reconciliation on victims rather than on those who were responsible for apartheid" (Nagy 719). Coetzee allows Lurie to grow into an understanding of his own responsibility in a tumultuous environment. He changes throughout the novel because what he represents about the past society, with his Romantic period interests, no longer holds in this changed South Africa. *Disgrace* "is about guilt bigger than the individual life...acceptable life plans nor ideologies play a significant role...Only those who expose themselves to disgrace and redemption, guilt and atonement are likely to encounter anything close to justice" (Leusmann 61-62). Lurie cannot change much of anything, and learns not to strive for this; what he can change, though, are his individual actions towards others. This message of an individual acceptance of responsibility towards others is seemingly Coetzee's means towards reconciliation.

Lurie is first introduced as a professor of the Romantics, attempting to write his opera on Byron. There is an element early on that shows that he has become disillusioned with life; he knows that his students' treat him with indifference: "their indifference galls him more

than he will admit. Nevertheless he fulfills to the letter his obligations toward them, their parents, and the state” (4). But he is immersed in a lifestyle of idealism. When he is caught having an affair with his student Melanie, he refuses to apologize because he claims that to apologize formally to a college committee would be something false. They don’t really care if he apologizes, and he doesn’t feel he owes them an apology; the only basis for it would be to save his reputation, or follow authoritative procedures. His romantic nature will not allow him to bend in the face of bureaucratic authority. He resigns because of some level of pride.

This scene addresses the TRC process; Lurie admits to the university committee, but they aren’t satisfied, like the TRC—redemption comes within to Lurie (Sarvan 27). Lurie’s refusal to plead guilty to the university early in the novel reveals the novel’s sentiment that pleading guilty does not always equate ethical responsibility. At this early point in the novel Lurie does not accept responsibility for his actions.

Many critics, such as Rosemary Nagy and Sue Kossew, have connected this part of the novel with the TRC process, making any apology of guilt automatically earned amnesty for past crimes; “Interestingly, remorse was not considered part of the TRC process, as it was deemed too difficult to measure its sincerity. Lurie refuses public repentance, drawing a distinction for the tribunal between a ‘secular plea’ of guilty, and the more spiritual realm of repentance which Lurie believes to be ‘another universe of discourse,’ that of the soul” (Kossew 159). Lurie retracts from the community, “choosing exile over reconciliation” (Nagy 716).

Through Lurie’s indignation at the process of apology forced by the university committee, Coetzee is condemning the efficiency of the TRC and its goal of reconciliation; “guilt...as a dischargeable debt is what Nietzsche calls ‘the oldest and naïvest moral canon of justice,’ one that relies on an idiom of equalizing, translates human action and suffering into calculable values, presumes that ‘everything has its price [and] all things can be paid for,’ and makes justice into more or less a branch of accounting” (Saunders 100).

Coetzee does portray Lurie as guilty of wronging Melanie, and for this Lurie is accountable, though it takes him much of the novel to realize this. In the beginning, Lurie is “unwilling to recognize the extent of his own act of violence toward Melanie...In this pretence, we see that the complexities of establishing and acknowledging responsibility are compounded by how violence is defined and recognized” (Nagy 714). As Sarvan points out “Melanie is twenty-one, childlike in appearance, with the hips of a twelve-year-old and ‘neat’

breasts. The relationship carries overtones of rape: she is passive throughout the act; he usurps her, forcing her sweater upward. He thrusts himself upon her, and she crumples like a marionette" (27). Again, at this early point in the novel, Lurie is unable to accept his own accountability towards Melanie; he must visit his daughter and experience trauma in order to learn the importance of his personal responsibility towards others.

As has been stated, when Lurie goes to visit his daughter, Lucy, on her rural compound, he is a very different man before the central tragedy of the novel ensues. It is this tragedy that forces Lurie to face the full force of the Other. It is evident from the beginning that he doesn't understand his daughter Lucy, but it takes the act of violence done to them for him to realize the magnitude of his inability to understand her.

Intruders rape Lucy, while Lurie is locked in the bathroom, helpless; the intruders then set Lurie on fire. Lucy will not talk with him about what happened to her, and more telling, she will not leave her land, even if it means that she could very possibly be in danger of its happening again. Lurie is forced to recognize, very slowly, that he will never be able to truly understand Lucy. This is Lurie's main struggle throughout the book. He wants to face Petrus, a local leader who protects the perpetrators; he wants justice done to the boy whom Petrus protects, and most of all, he wants Lucy to flee back to a more conventional lifestyle. But Lurie is forced to accept the TRC process; he wants justice but must accept his verbalization of the boy's act in front of Petrus' party as enough.

The reader understands Lurie's shock and confusion; he is Lucy's father, and she has expressed that she thinks it is even likely that violence could enter her home again. It is hard not to see Lucy as very strong, even admirable, though she is an enigma. As Kossev and Marais observe, "Lucy is enabled to take important steps towards overcoming her disgrace and finding ways to live in a future South Africa that does not entail guilt and punishment; when she learns to share the land, endure her suffering and make compromises" (Cited in Zembylas 229). Lucy embodies "the excesses of bearing responsibility" (Nagy 711); it is Lucy "who has suffered the most egregious of violations, takes *all* the sins of apartheid—something for which she alone cannot possibly be held responsible" (Nagy 714).

Accepting personal responsibility is central to reconciliation. The character of Petrus represents those under apartheid who didn't take personal responsibility:

Petrus by vacating the scene, relieves himself of explicit responsibility for the attack on Lurie and Lucy. The parallel with white South Africans' claims of ignorance...about state torture and death squads is unmistakable. And Petrus, like apartheid beneficiaries, prospers from the attack that he passively ignored. His pretense that the past is over and done is surely inadequate, yet even if he were to hand the boy over to the police, it is not clear that the boy can be held responsible. There is something mentally wrong with the boy... [and] he was following orders. (Nagy 717)

This is much like the TRC stating that amnesty "was contingent on following orders, and on the denial of responsibility from the uppermost echelons of the state and beneficiaries in general" (Nagy 717). According to Nagy, "Petrus' understanding of reconciliation has had far more resonance in South Africa than that of taking moral responsibility" (721). Coetzee here seems to be addressing the limits of the TRC. On one end of the spectrum, there is Lucy who takes full responsibility for what she is not responsible for, and on the other end, there is Petrus, who takes no responsibility. Lurie falls in between both extremes; Lurie may represent the reader and his/her role of acknowledging personal responsibility in his/her own life. Lurie must accept Petrus' system, and accepts and supports Lucy's decision to care for the baby she carries from the rape. Coetzee creates a middle ground for Lurie, of self reflection and personal accountability.

Again Lurie does not understand Coetzee's form of reconciliation at the start of the novel, but he changes through his inability to understand Lucy; as stated by Marais and Spivak, this novel is not to give a voice to the Other; it about the refusal to give a voice to the Other (Cited in Zembylas 226).

After the tragedy, Lurie and Lucy both take the focus away from themselves; Lucy will now care for her baby, and Lurie begins to care for unwanted dogs. Reconciliation, as Michalinos Zembylas states, "demands that we reach a new level of ethical responsibility and community...inconsolable mourning becomes a way of testifying to a renewed form of relationality with/to the Other" (229-230). In this novel, "inconsolable mourning is thus rewritten as ethical... commitment.... *Disgrace*... forces us to confront the brute materiality of the suffering engendered by oppression... bear[ing] witness to the brutality of history and the responsibility for the Other" (Zembylas 230). Violence was done to them presumably because of past hurt and injustice, but Lucy and Lurie stop the perpetuation of violence by not returning it; instead, they will show love towards others and care for others, starting a new process.

After the scene of violence, and after Lurie is forced to accept Petrus' system of justice, Lurie learns that he must face his own



accountability and responsibility towards others. With Petrus, Lurie now knows what it is to experience the pain of a disingenuous judicial system, and because of this Lurie undergoes a transformation towards accepting responsibility for his own actions to others. This is revealed in his apology to Melanie.

When Lurie confronts Melanie's father, he asks Lurie why he has come to him, and though Lurie is there to apologize, he cannot. He dodges a true apology with the father. He speaks of abstract excuses, and the father understands that this isn't really an apology; he asks him what it is that he has learned. Lurie responds that he doesn't believe in God, but that a part of him believes that he has been punished for his past sins, and that is why he and his daughter were victimized. This reveals Coetzee's message of responsibility for one's own accountability.

Lurie is done speaking to the father, and he goes into a separate room with the mother and the younger daughter. No words are spoken in this scene, which makes it very different from his university hearing; Lurie walks up to the women and "with careful ceremony he gets to his knees and touches his forehead to the floor" (173). An act of ultimate humility it seems; it shows a respect for the Other putting himself entirely aside. Yet immediately after doing this selfless act, a surge of desire pulses through him for the young daughter. This line does not change the action that he has committed though; instead, it only serves to show that he is still human, which in itself means that humility and responsibility will have to be a constant choice, a constant struggle.

The remaining chapters show a very changed Lurie, a man who is personally responsible, a man past his earlier, Romantic pride. He has taken it upon himself to move permanently back to Lucy's rural lifestyle after attempting to go back to his old home. He has given up his opera about Byron. He helps Bev Shaw euthanize dogs. Lurie has learned from Bev Shaw that putting the dogs to sleep is an act of love. This is Lurie's reconciliation with the past; "the dogs symbolize him as he was and perhaps also the anonymous lives discarded by apartheid. Even the worst of dogs is deserving of dignity and understanding. This implies that openness and understanding are preferred in eliciting acknowledgment of responsibility.... This is not, however, to patronize or let those responsible off easily. Lurie must continually work at it, it is hard, and he is far from complete.... we see that with grace comes obligation, and grace is not infinite" (Nagy 724).

Allowing his favorite dog to die is the essence of Lurie's struggle throughout the novel; it is the letting go of not only the ones he loves,

like Lucy, to make her own decisions, but it is also something bigger. Allowing the dog to die is his realization that everything in life is fleeting. He has finally come to terms with the Other. As cited by Kimberly Wedeven Segall in Zembylas, Lurie participating in the dog's death shows his "refusal to be oblivious about the suffering and tragedy of life." He can accept the bad that did happen to him and Lucy, and he can go on. It suggests that he knows further trouble is likely in his life, but he now harbors the knowledge of acceptance. He has to let go of the dog, almost as if its fate is to die. If he were to hold onto it, he would be still immersed in his old struggle. He is no longer the romantic professor, longing for a life on idealistic terms; he accepts his personal responsibility in a world he may not be able to change with humility. As Marais states "Lurie's offer for death... of the dog he expresses fondness for, [is] 'the transformation of his desire for the Other into self-substituting responsibility'" (Cited in Diala 58). *Disgrace* allows the concept of personal responsibility to reveal hope for communal responsibility.

*Disgrace* is an excellent choice to include in the classroom; it always initiates dynamic class discussion. The controversies, tragedies, and uncomfortable situations tied to this novel create great opportunities to discuss concepts like the Other and personal responsibility.

Antjie Krog claims that "only literature provides inspiration to reach the Other and thus perform the miracle of reconciliation between conflicting groups" (Cited in Zembylas 224). Teaching *Disgrace* allows students a chance to look at the Other with Lurie's sense of confusion. As has been discussed previously, Coetzee never reveals an in-depth understanding of any character besides Lurie with the intention to force readers to acknowledge the inability to truly know another person.

Zembylas argues that literature bears witness to the "insistence on remaining inconsolable before history and the Other's suffering" (224). *Disgrace* provides a chance to question students—is it important to accept that each individual cannot ever understand the experiences of another? *Disgrace* would suggest that this important. This novel shows students that Lurie indeed changes throughout the novel by witnessing trauma and learning his limits with the Other. It suggests that students can change by reading another's experiences, but only by accepting and respecting the inability to completely know the Other.

As Bouchard, Schweber, and Zembylas point out, "it has been

argued that introducing students to trauma narratives and testimonies is an important way of approaching controversial issues such as war, cross-cultural conflict, genocide, racism and terrorism (Cited in Zembylas 230). In course discussion, it is very important that “Educators and their students...resist the process of verbalization that turns suffering into another (digestible) historical narrative; instead, we are urged to confront the indigestible materiality of the suffering (Zembylas 231). Zembylas’ message is a good one; though one cannot understand what victims of trauma went through completely, it is vital to read trauma narratives without needing to understand or “digest” trauma. It should be difficult for students to read this material, but it is important for them to learn to commiserate with others, by understanding that they cannot ever know the extent of their suffering; as Sara Ahmed observes, “creating affective connections with others who suffer aligns us with them” (Cited in Zembylas 231).

To be aligned with the suffering is important to help create a conscientious student, as a citizen of the world, yet, Lauren Berlant warns one not to imply identification with the Other’s suffering (Zembylas 231). Again, *Disgrace* makes this point clear—one must be responsible for others without assuming he/she knows what is best for the Other. Spivak “insists that those who are recipients of stories such as trauma narratives have a tremendous responsibility: first, not to presume that suffering can be understood universally, and second, to be vigilant about mis-uses of such stories. There is never anything transparent or universal about the meaning of wound” (Zembylas 232). Students may be desensitized to suffering; “a critical approach to witnessing trauma and suffering in the classroom urges educators and their students to question the taken-for-granted assumptions about the self and the Other and what it means to respond to the Other’s suffering” (Zembylas 233). Once students have discussed their ideas as to Coetzee’s message towards the Other and post apartheid suffering, a dialogue of moral/personal responsibility is essential.

During the TRC “The accountability of individual perpetrators [was] embedded within the accountability of political leaders [and the dominant system]. It was expected that the moral conscience of passive bystanders would be reawakened during the witnessing of victim and perpetrator testimony...the commission held public hearings... in order to better understand how ordinary people were able to ‘turn a blind eye’ to the impoverishment and suffering of fellow citizens” (Nagy 715). As the TRC stated “Ordinary South Africans ‘did not see themselves as represented by those the Commission defines as perpetrators, failing to recognize the “little perpetrators” in each one

of us” (Cited in Nagy 715). This point is essential—Lurie learns that to only hear another’s injustice is not enough; he learns that he must accept his own responsibility for injustice. This concept is one that initiates great classroom discussion creating an atmosphere where students can discuss concepts like: what current events students feel need amended, how responsible do they feel for their role in a present day unethical situation, and is Coetzee’s message of reconciliation with one’s self a suitable attitude to counter modern violence?

Kevin B. Theissen states that “45 per cent of white South Africans in 1996 either thought that apartheid was not unjust or did not know whether apartheid was unjust” (Cited in Nagy 717). And “the majority of South Africans knew quite clearly that apartheid was a crime against humanity and that torture and other gross abuses were being systematically conducted. But in the face of domestic and international pressure, electoral support for the apartheid regime actually grew (Cited in Nagy 710). *Disgrace* provides an opportunity to discuss students’ feelings about their role in the world and their responsibility towards others. Coetzee’s backdrop of post-apartheid South Africa allows a good opportunity to view present day indifference to a matter that was so blatantly unethical. Without a sense of individual responsibility, these atrocities seem only destined to continue; students need to acknowledge that these matters must be discussed in terms of their own responsibility.

Finally, according to Ian Glenn, many critics “felt the novel was ‘racist’...and that it presented not only a pessimistic view...of the whole future of South Africa... the novel, with its soundings of farm attacks and land redistribution and of old alarms about white female vulnerability to black male sexuality, clearly resonated and became a cultural work worth debating” (Glenn 81). Students need to discuss this element as well. Traumatic and controversial accounts need to be analyzed by students. Students need to be involved in an open format where they can speak freely about this time in history, and what it means to reconcile past injustice. Whether they agree with Coetzee or not isn’t important; what is important is the conversation.

The TRC’s “final report wisely emphasized that it should not be taken as complete, unitary or authoritative truth, but as an initial step toward understanding, as a basis for debate and as one among many efforts to reconstruct the past, the collective memory and historical record” (Saunders 104), and this is exactly what Coetzee’s *Disgrace* allows students the opportunity to do. *Disgrace* suggests a different process of attaining grace through an acceptance of the Other, and the TRC’s process of hearing and not understanding the Other is part of Coetzee’s message of transformation and healing. As Zembylas

observes "What *Disgrace* tells us is that...there is no easy resolution of the difficulties between reconciliation and responsibility, and to presume otherwise may distort past and future" (Zembylas 230). Readers of *Disgrace* will hopefully begin a process of self-reflection towards their own responsibility to present situations that need to be reconciled.

*Rachel McCoppin*

University of Minnesota, Crookston  
United States of America

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