

A Review and Commentary on *Disgrace* by J. M. Coetzee

Vickie Dailey, English 308

Disgrace by J. M. Coetzee is a disturbing book that forces the reader to confront the darker side of life and deal with ethical issues and the baser instincts of humanity. Nevertheless, while ethical issues are examined, they are not resolved. It feels more like Coetzee thrusts these images disturbingly into the reader's psyche, forcing them to deal with these problems internally. To me, some light could have been found at some point in the 220 pages of this book. Unfortunately, perhaps Coetzee felt that he could better express an underlying statement about the history of racial oppression in South Africa without incorporating light subject matter into it. There appears to be no humor, no relief—comic or otherwise—throughout the novel. What we see of David Lurie's life, and the lives of the other characters in the book, is tragic. Certainly Coetzee could have given a playful side to David, the main character. Perhaps this would have shown what exactly his student Melanie found compelling about him. As it is, the reader can only venture to guess. The traumatic events that are later told would have appeared even more traumatic had the author added a greater contrast between the lighter, more human side to his characters and the serious content of the novel.

In many ways, this is a story about the powerful and powerless. Initially, David Lurie is in a role of power which turns to powerlessness after a sad turn of events. David, a professor who is reciting a poem by Byron to his class, states that the poem is about a fallen angel "condemned to solitude" (34). This poem in some ways foreshadows what is to become of David's life. He is a failure at love who loses his job and reputation, moves in with his daughter (Lucy) in the country and is then beaten and trapped in the bathroom as his daughter is raped. Later his house is vandalized and he eventually takes a job killing and incinerating unwanted dogs. Coetzee constantly draws parallels among these different examples of power and powerlessness throughout the novel.

Coetzee examines the underlying theme of powerlessness through the rape of Lucy. Rape has been a way to subjugate women since ancient times when a rape was conducted as a regular means to bring a woman into a man's tribe or nation. As Donna McNamara and Bonnie Clairmont state, "The English word 'rape' is derived from the Latin 'rapier' which means to steal, seize or carry away." Unfortunately, rape is still regarded as a way to steal, seize, or carry away, and today it does so by forcing women into subjugated and submissive roles and stealing access to their most private and intimate parts. Lucy describes the act as one of "Subjection. Subjugation" (Coetzee 159). However, Lucy's rape is not simply about the subjugation of women. She tells her father:

"The reason is that, as far as I am concerned, what happened to me is a purely private matter. In another time, in another place, it might be held to be a public matter. But in this place, at this time, it is not. It is my business, mine alone."

"This place being what?"

"This place being South Africa." (Coetzee 112)

As the novel goes to demonstrate, Lucy is incorrect in her assumption that her rape is a private matter. Indeed, throughout the rest of Coetzee's book, the theme of public racial oppression and powerlessness is portrayed as part of everyday life.

Lucy's rape is not the first instance of sexual power and powerlessness presented in the novel. When David is teaching at Cape Technical University, Melanie is one of his well-to-do students. Technically, some would describe David's advance on Melanie, in a surprise visit to her apartment, as a rape. Yet when Melanie doesn't fight or resist his advances, but instead helps him remove her clothes by raising her arms and hips, a very fine line is drawn between rape and consent. Coetzee not only foreshadows future events with David's statement that "she is too surprised to resist the intruder who

thrusts himself upon her” (24), he also alludes to the professor’s intrusion into her life. In David’s statement he shows that when he takes Melanie’s body he also intrudes into her home, her social life, her psychological wellbeing, her college, her career plans and, last but not least, her body. Often, sex in its more base instincts, causes problems in all areas of a one’s life unless one is old and mature enough to handle the inevitable consequences of sexuality. Melanie is neither of these. David’s treatment of her emphasizes the theme of power and powerlessness as it illustrates that he at first has power over her, then loses his power as a result of his actions.

There is a subtle irony in the fact that David Lurie is publicly disgraced for seducing a college student, yet when three black men rape, rob and attempt to murder Lucy, they get away with their crimes. David and Lucy’s power and powerlessness come to parallel the racial conditions in South Africa. There is some small redemption in the end when David, in spite of his failures at life, love, and women, chooses to support his daughter’s decision to keep the baby that she doesn’t love since he feels that “love will grow [because] one can trust Mother Nature for [it]” (216). Yet the novel does not indicate Lucy’s thoughts about the multiracial child, and it would, therefore, be presumptuous to assume that she does grow to love the child. In the novel, the ending implies forgiveness and a fresh start at life for both David and Lucy, but nothing is assured.

Disgrace further parallels the racial oppression of blacks in South Africa with the treatment and view of dogs in the country. This is illustrated in the discussion that Lucy has with David about the animals when he states, “as for animals, by all means let us be kind to them. But let us not lose perspective. We are of a different order of creation from animals. Not higher necessarily, just different. So if we are going to be kind, let it be out of simple generosity, not because we feel guilty or fear retribution” (74). David here is not really talking about the dogs; he is talking about whites and their view of blacks. This view directly reflects the view of white people towards blacks in post-Apartheid Africa. His statement does not illustrate his power over the powerless dogs as much as it illustrates that he feels for them. The dogs are not a parallel for David’s own power and powerlessness, but for South African blacks in a post-Apartheid nation in which he does feel guilt and does fear retribution, but wishes he could simply be kind. While this book deals with the social and economic tensions as related to different societal statuses and races, it also touches on the roles of class, age and gender. The story is both painful and depressing, made all the more profound in the lean prose that Coetzee uses in telling it. A story like this cannot come across as strong with unnecessary embellishments and flourishes

Honestly, Coetzee’s novel is a difficult one to read. The subject matter is both grim and harsh. I felt that I gained very little in reading this book other than the straightforward use of dialogue and unembellished prose. Maybe embellishments and forceful writing would have detracted from the reality of the grim situations—after all what the book is about is pretty straightforward. Complicated prose may have diminished its seriousness. Yet it also seems true that Coetzee could have brought more lightness to the prose and made his characters more likeable without detracting from this serious subject matter.

Works Cited

- Coetzee, J. M. *Disgrace*. New York: Penguin, 1999. Print.
- McNamara, Donna, and Bonnie Clairmont. “History of Sexual Violence.” *InteractiveTheatre.org*. Aaron Propes, 2000. Web. 21 Nov. 2009.