



Niklas Manhart

J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*. A Realistic Criticism of 'New' South-Africa?

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J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* - a realistic criticism of 'New' South-Africa?

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1. Introduction: A troubled novel

Ever since its publication in 1999, J.M. Coetzee's award-winning novel *Disgrace* has stirred up a lot of controversy. Some praise it for "unblinkingly depicting the lack of progress South Africa has made towards its declared goal of a non-racial, non-sexist democracy" (Attridge 2002, 317), others criticize it harshly "for painting a one-sidedly negative picture of post-apartheid South Africa" (ibid.). Its negative depiction of blacks has been seen as an endorsement of white racist stereotypes. The most drastic attack on *Disgrace* was the submission to the United Nations as a typical example of white racism in South Africa.¹

While the public reception might have been problematic, the reaction among literary critics has been positive. The sheer amount of research to date shows that Coetzee certainly knows how to appeal to his peers. The editorial to a symposium dedicated to *Disgrace* puts it like this: "Not since the aftermath of an earlier metatext by Coetzee, *Foe*, have we seen such multiples of invested, engaged and argumentative critical writing about a South African author" (Editorial of *Scrutiny* 2002, 3). An "extraordinary number" of critics have dealt with this novel (Attridge 2002, 316), analyzing numerous aspects of it. In this paper, I want to cover two of them in particular.

First, I want to analyze the degree of realism in *Disgrace*. Before the end of the Apartheid-era in 1994, all of Coetzee's novels were located in a remote setting,² alluding to the events in South Africa but never striking at their core. In contrast, *Disgrace*, written after the dismantling of Apartheid, is set against an apparently realistic background. Has realism really found its way into Coetzee's writing, and if that is the case, what were the reasons for this change?

This leads me to the second aspect. Over the years, Coetzee has often openly criticized the repressive system. One would assume that his opinion of South Africa would have improved with the changes in 1994 as a brighter future seemed ahead. In 1999, his portrayal of South Africa is grim and deeply troubling.

¹ The African National Congress, the leading political party, submitted *Disgrace* to an investigation of the Human Rights Commission about racism in the media (Jolly 2006, 149).

² *Age of Iron* (1990) is also set in South Africa at the time of its composition, but the presence of the "obtrusively symbolic" character Vercueil "de-realizes" the narration (Cornwell 2002, 312).

In this sense, *Disgrace* can be read as a criticism of `New` South Africa.³ I will try to highlight this aspect by analyzing Lurie's non-confessions and the rape of Lucy as well as further criticisms.⁴

2. Why realism?

2.1 Coetzee, realism and resistance writing

According to Gareth Cornwell, literary realism “reflects the worldly contingency of ideas, dramatizing the contexts in which the ideas acquire meaning” (Cornwell 2002, 308). It is a direct connection between the words on a page and the things to which they refer. But the reader should not rely on this direct relationship anymore, as modern literary approaches have changed it drastically: “Modernist experimentation [...] has permanently destabilized the code on which literary realism depended for the authority of its representations” (ibid. 309), in Coetzee's own words turning the dictionary into “just one code-book among many” (quoted from ibid.).⁵

Coetzee himself has always tried to undermine “the illusion of reality that storytelling seeks to establish” (ibid., 307), asking himself “whether it isn't simply that vast and wholly ideological super-structure constituted by publishing, reviewing and criticism that is forcing on me the fate of being a ‘South African novelist’” (Attridge 2000, 99). Seeing realism as a limitation, Coetzee tried to free his novels from the immediate background of Apartheid.⁶ This forced detachment created tension, as Coetzee “cannot avoid having to deal with his national situation. Every attempt to hold South Africa at arm's length [...] simply confirms the intensity and the necessity of his struggle” (Attwell in Horstmann 2005, 31). Bearing Coetzee's skepticism in mind, the verisimilitude of *Disgrace* deserves a closer look.

³ “‘New’ South Africa” as in the ethnically diverse South African democracy after 1994 (also called ‘Rainbow Nation’).

⁴ I leave out the role of animals in *Disgrace* and its implications only for reasons of space. While its consideration would certainly have been interesting, its omission does not affect the main conclusions I draw in any way.

⁵ As verbalized by Lurie: “The language he [Petrus] draws on with such aplomb is [...] tired, friable, eaten from the inside as if by termites. Only the monosyllables can still be relied on, and not even all of them. What is to be done? [...] Nothing short of starting all over again with the ABC. By the time the big words come back reconstructed, purified fit to be *trusted* once more, he will long be dead” (*Disgrace*, 129, my italics).

⁶ In contrast to fellow South African writer André Brink, who firmly believed that literature has a “regenerative social influence” (Van Collar 2006, 26).

2.2 The fictional mode of *Disgrace*

The majority of South African writers are rather conventional in their style, whereas Coetzee has always been trying to implement (post-)modern elements into his writing. He deploys various literary means in order to avoid crude realism, such as the discontinuity of place and time, a psychoanalytical approach or intertextuality (Mennecke 1991, 8f). In *Disgrace*, this is not so evident. The locations are real, the time is identifiable and the novel is written in his “trademark” present tense, so the “representational mode [...] appears to be conventionally realist” (Cornwell 2002, 312). What are the reasons for this change?

This question is essential in regard of *Disgrace* raising awareness for problems in current South Africa, and Cornwell gives the following as an answer:

He is writing in a society in which meaning has been restored to the activity of the writer, or rather, perhaps a society in which, now that all voices are permitted to be heard, all are equally authorized to create meaning. In such a context, *Disgrace* seems to me to represent a deeply serious ethical gesture, [...] exposing [the] readers [...] to a *radically different ethical perspective* on situations and events with which they are all too familiar (ibid., 313, my italics).

This sounds indeed like a critical, realistic perspective. However, that is not to mean that a political background has entered his writing only in *Disgrace*. While he may be no “resistance writer” (Attridge 2000, 99), Coetzee has always been a political writer. Under the changed sociopolitical circumstances, he simply felt that a different, more realistic literary mode would suit his concerns better. But in spite of the newfound realism, his *radically different ethical perspective* remains morally ambiguous. This ambiguity is personified by the character of David Lurie, the focalizer. With the use of a limited omniscient narration (Longmuir 2007, 119), Coetzee requires the reader to “counterfocalize” (ibid.), therefore critically questioning Lurie’s narration. Reluctant as Coetzee is to “assign easy ethical labels” (Kossew 2003, 159), he is yet to give easy political statements.

3. Lurie’s non-confessions

3.1 The hearing at the university

David Lurie, 52-years old, divorced and professor of communications at a university in Cape Town, sees himself as an old-fashioned womanizer in the vein of Byron. He lives out his temperaments with a prostitute, Soraya. The dark color of her skin is not the only feature she shares with his next conquest, Melanie, one

of his students: They both fulfill his bodily needs, which he returns with money and grades respectively.⁷ Although he thinks that he has “solved the problem of sex rather well” (1),⁸ his *liaison* with Melanie has negative repercussions. A scandal ensues, gaining momentum day-by-day. Her father comes into his office, appalled by the behavior of somebody who should have taken care of his child. After the official complaint word spreads, finding its way into the local newspaper. Lurie is called into the Vice-Rector’s office. As he refuses both legal advice and counseling, a hearing is instigated in order to decide on his future at the university. In front of the committee, his attitude is not what one would call submissive. Confronted with the charges, he pleads guilty at once and invites the jury to “pass sentence, and let us get on with our lives” (48). This joviality is not mutual and his “subtle mockery” (50) is not what they are looking for: a full confession and public repentance. Lurie does not take their request seriously and offers to “shed tears of contrition” (52). As a “servant of Eros” (*ibid.*) he shows no trace of guilt, not willing to provide more than a simple admission that he was wrong.

One of the last comments by the committee puts the entire situation into a different perspective, mentioning “the long *history of exploitation* of which this is part” (53, *my italics*). Considering the colonial background of male and white subjugation, the hearing is not an isolated episode. It is the crucial part of a “teasing conjunction of non-confession [...] and post-apartheid catharsis” (Boehmer 2006, 135), suggesting a strong parallel with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

3.2 The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC)

Echoing the situation in post-WW2 Germany, the end of the Apartheid called for a means of finding its perpetrators and helping the victims. (Van der Elst 2006, 40). For this purpose, the TRC was installed under the leadership of Desmond Tutu. The problem it had to solve collectively was similar to the individual one in *Disgrace*: How do we achieve moral cleansing?

⁷ Did Lurie rape Melanie? Probably not. Although the act is described as “undesired” (25), she “even helps him” and even comes back to Lurie later. Bearing the power politics between student and professor in mind, I will leave it at “rape”. Lucy Graham would be disappointed by my interpretation (Graham 2002, 13), but I disagree with her accusations against Lurie.

⁸ All references without further context are in *Disgrace* [1999] 2000.

The TRC's approach was confessional, based on the arguable equation of religious rhetoric and the conflation of catharsis and contrition (Horstmann 2005, 141). Reconciliation was seen as a matter both public and religious, as opposed to an equally possible secular atonement (Boehmer 2006, 137). The TRC had to face a similar frustration as the committee at Lurie's university: "The admissions of those who confessed but who failed to acknowledge their guilt, those who seemed to remain in their hearts unrepentant." (Cornwell 2002, 316).

Catharsis and the role it should play in the process of reconciliation is central here. My dictionary defines 'catharsis' as "a relief through the open expression of strong feelings". Lurie questions this notion of repentance through public contrition. To cope with the legacy of Apartheid, "receiving an amnesty for any public admission of guilt" (Kossew 2003, 159) is not sufficient. We gain more insight into this view with Lurie's second non-confession, his apology to Melanie's father.

3.3 The apology to Melanie's father

After their "heated" (165) first encounter, Lurie visits Melanie's father and her family, feeling the need to apologize. The father being absent, he is ushered into their house by Melanie's younger sister, Desiree. Her sight evokes strong carnal temptations in Lurie, who imagines the two of them in bed together. He visits Mr. Isaacs at work and gives him his version of their affair, attributing his actions to the "flame" Melanie "kindled" in him (166). Not satisfied by Lurie's account, Mr. Isaacs invites him to dine with the family, resulting in an expectedly tedious situation. After the meal, Lurie makes another attempt at explaining himself, incriminating the "lack of the lyrical" (171) and finally making a formal apology. Only at this point Mr. Isaacs responds. Trying to grasp Lurie's words in his own terms, he brings God into play, expecting Lurie to learn a biblical lesson.

This passage is a double reference to the TRC. It captures the racial politics⁹ as well as the discrepancy between religious and secular atonement. In Sue Kossew's words, "again, the notion of an easy redemption, a sincere expression of apology, is made complicated by David's inner recalcitrance and his own awareness of his desire for confession and absolution" (Kossew 2003, 160). What are we to make of Lurie's *recalcitrance*?

⁹ It can be safely assumed that the Isaacs are black.

Against the wider background of the new-formed South African society, it reflects the view that “the process of coming to terms with the legacy of Apartheid” is not over, but will be a “painful and long-drawn-out” process (Attridge 2000, 101). While watching the rehearsal of a play which mixes up races and old prejudices in a jolly manner, Lurie says: “Catharsis seems to be the presiding principle: all the coarse old prejudices brought into the light of day and washed away in gales of laughter.” (23). Not only does Coetzee raise doubts about the achievements of the TRC, he also actively challenges predictions of an unproblematic transition between the doom of the Apartheid-system and a morally just and open-minded, ‘new’ South African society. This feeling is strengthened as Lurie, exasperated by the discovery of Petrus’ role in the rape of Lucy, says that, “in the old days one could have had it out with Petrus. [...] It is a new world we live in” (116).

4. The rape of Lucy

4.1. The deceptively idyllic rural life

After the events in Cape Town, Lurie decides to visit his lesbian daughter Lucy, who lives alone on a farm in the countryside of the Eastern Cape. Her only companion on the farm is the co-proprietor Petrus, who looks after the dogs she breeds. At first, Lurie is skeptical about rural life, he calls Lucy “this throwback, this sturdy young settler” (61). But with the passing of the days its “idiot simplicity” (170) starts to appeal to him. He helps Lucy with her duties and starts to work in a clinic for animals, slowly leaving the mess he has caused in Cape Town behind. Even the troubled relationship with his daughter improves. But as soon as he gets used to the pastoral idyll, Lucy gets gangraped by three black men.

While she is being attacked, Lurie is locked in her bathroom, unable to help her. After killing her dogs, the criminals set him on fire. His burns, however, heal quickly, but the damage inflicted on Lucy seems irreparable. She escapes his embraces and refuses to lay charges with the police, explaining that what has happened to her is “a purely private matter” (112). Even when one of the rapists turns out to be a relative of Petrus, who in some way was behind the attack, she forbids Lurie to inform the authorities, saying that “what has happened to me is my business, mine alone, not yours, and if there is one right I have it is the right

not to be put on trial like this, not to have to justify myself – not to you, not to anyone else.” (133). Lurie offers her to move to Holland, but stubbornly she refuses to move away. Her explanations remain vague, and to make things worse, she “seeks a new accommodation” (Attridge 2002, 104), accepting to marry Petrus and carrying out a baby conceived during the rape. The irrationality of her behavior is unsettling to say the least.

But before analyzing it in detail, it is necessary to assert Lurie’s role in the rape in relation to Lucy. This gives us valuable information about both the structure of the novel in general and about Coetzee’s criticism of the instrumentalisation of women.¹⁰

4.2 The multiple juxtaposition of Lurie and Lucy

The rape of Lucy is part of a multiple juxtaposition. Not only does it reflect Lurie’s “rape” of Melanie, her silence after the rape mimics Lurie’s.¹¹ They both avoid confessing with a “dogged bodily endurance” (Boehmer 2006, 137). While the parallels are definitely there, they should not be overstated, as Mike Marais does by calling the two acts “identical” (Cornwell 2002, 319). Gareth Cornwell discards this as “nonsense” (ibid.). He points out the permanent damage inflicted on Lucy as opposed to Melanie and compares the description of Melanie’s “rape”, which is detailed, with the one of Lucy, which is nonexistent. Horstmann adds another interpretation, showing that Lucy’s rape not only serves as a reflection of Lurie’s own “rape” of Melanie, but also of the uncountable carnal crimes that happen in South Africa.¹² This needs to be pointed out, as Lucy Graham criticizes that most critics of *Disgrace* “have skirted around the issue of sexual violence as a social problem in South Africa” (Graham 2002, 5). As Lucy

¹⁰ While I only cover the patriarchal aspect, Lurie’s entanglement in colonial thinking should be noted. His depiction as a victim during the rape scene is undermined by his use of colonial symbols. He draws on a background of white hegemony, comparing himself to an “Aunt Sally” (95), a “pilloried female figure”, which is usually depicted as black (Longmuir 2007, 120). He sees himself in a “cauldron” (95), the “classic image of black on white violence” (ibid.).

¹¹ Note the dichotomy of the telling names: Lurie – “lurid“, Lucy – “Lux”/“lucid“ (cf. Horstmann 2005, 132) and Lucy “the light one” and Melanie “the dark one” (*Disgrace*, 18) (Graham 2002, 15). A second source for Lucy’s name would be Wordsworth’s ‘Lucy’ (Marais 2006, 85).

¹² According to the historian Robert Ross in his *Concise History of South Africa*, “the legacy of apartheid was harsh. [Rape] became so widespread that a South African woman, on average, could expect to be violated twice in her lifetime” (quoted from Horstmann 2005, 138). In a survey of Interpol South Africa had the highest amount of rape cases, still comparable to a war zone (quoted from Graham 2002, 6).

says about the three rapists, “they are rapists first and foremost. Stealing things is just incidental. A side-line. I think they *do* rape” (158).

While Lurie’s “rape” of Melanie is questionable, the notion of mastery through domination is not alien to him. In a way, rape is an instrumentalisation of women. Lurie “routinely reduces women to the status of objects with which to gratify his desires” (Marais 2006, 76). As he says to Melanie: “a woman’s beauty does not belong to her alone.[...] She has a duty to share it.” (16). The oft-quoted description of their first sexual intercourse strengthens this impression, in his own words: “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.” (25). Later Lucy pinpoints this feeling quite graphically when she asks Lurie “When you have sex with someone strange – when you trap her, hold her down, get her under you, pull all your weight on her – isn’t it a bit like killing?” (158). His answer should not surprise us: “Sometimes. For some men” (159). This criticism of the instrumentalisation of women is part of a broader criticism as shown in part 5.2.

4.3 Possible explanations for Lucy’s behavior

One common explanation for Lucy’s behavior is that she stands for ‘the white people’ who have to settle their debts with the atrocities of the past (Van der Elst 2006, 39), “simply renew[ing] the cycle of domination and exploitation that has defined the history of South Africa for centuries past” (Cornwell 2002, 316).¹³ Lurie shares this view, to him “rape is an expression not of individual agents, but of history working through the individuals involved” (Marais 2006, 80), as exemplified by his assertion that “it was history speaking through them. [...] A history of wrong” (156). But when Lurie asks Lucy: “Do you hope you can expiate the crimes of the past by suffering in the present?”, she rejects this possibility by saying that “[g]uilt and salvation are abstractions. I don’t act in terms of abstractions” (112).

In contrast to this ‘realist’ approach, Gareth Cornwell gives an ‘allegorical’ reading. He suggests that her behavior is a “deluded attempt of a traumatized women to make logical sense of what has happened to her, to make

¹³ By the sheer thought of that implicit message, famous South African writer Athol Fugard felt “disgusted” (Van der Elst 2006, 43).

her experience meaningful by construing it in some sense as necessary or deserved” (Cornwell 2002, 317). In order to face her situation and cope with the damage the rapists have inflicted on her, she must “integrate the awful memory into her experience to render it manageable so that she can begin to live again” (ibid., 316). While he deems the realist reading “unlikely” (ibid., 318), he has to admit that “it is not impossible that we are being asked by Lucy’s response [...] to ponder the wages of white historical sin and contemplate the costs of genuine national healing and reconciliation” (ibid.).

Elleke Boehmer gives a different interpretation. As opposed to Lurie, Lucy projects her disgrace only on herself. This is strengthened by her carrying a visible proof – the baby. Boehmer sees this as a continuation of the long-time subjection of women in South Africa (Boehmer 2006, 145-146). This feminist view is shared by Rosemary Jolly. To her, Lurie’s proposal of expatriating and leaving her farm behind is not self-preservation, but only another form of patriarchal subjugation. (Jolly 2006, 166). While they both mention some interesting points, I think that reducing this issue to one of gender would mean failing to grasp its ethnic and historic implications.

In the end, it is not possible to single out a “best” explanation for Lucy’s behavior. Again, Coetzee manages to elude an easy reading. By “using Lurie as a focalizer, the novel denies direct access to Lucy. And, in emphasizing Lurie’s unreliability [...], the novel requires the reader to find the true Lucy.” (Marais 2006, 84). Whatever her motives may be, from the perspective of *Disgrace* as a criticism of ‘New’ South Africa, Lucy’s “unthinkable” behavior dramatizes the radical transformation South Africa is required to undergo (Cornwell 2002, 314), resembling Lurie’s non-confessions in this respect.

5. Further criticisms

5.1 Retribution and redistribution

Lucy’s child of “mixed race” is at the very least an “ambivalent message of hope and defeat“, “symbol[izing] a change in the ‘tenancy’ of the land” (Kosew 2003, 160). This change is expressed by the dangers that “white” farmers are exposed to in *Disgrace*. Ettinger, an old farmer of German origin, has turned his farmhouse into a “fortress”, with “bars, security gates, a perimeter fence” (113). The precariousness of Lucy’s well-being need not be repeated. Lurie says

that “we should just have [...] waited for the next attack. Or cut our own throats” (133). After the rape, Petrus slowly but surely takes over her farm, ultimately making her choose between marriage and exile. Lucy “would be mad to feel safe” (187). The moral ambiguity of this situation is evident. As native inhabitants, the black people can be seen as the original rightful owners. But does this fact alone authorize crime?

This connection between retribution and redistribution (Boehmer 2006, 140) is addressed throughout the novel, be it only a woman’s beauty (16) or anything (98). Lurie’s proclaims that “what there is must go into circulation, so that everyone can have a chance to be happy for a day. [...] That is how one must see life in this country: in its schematic aspect” (ibid.). Albeit schematic, this aspect is still startling when Lucy compares the rapists to “debt collectors, tax collectors” (158). When Lurie temporarily goes back to Cape Town to find his apartment raided, he stresses the circulatory aspect again: “A raiding party moving in, cleaning out the site, retreating laden with bags, boxes, suitcases. Booty; war reparations; another incident in the *great campaign of redistribution*” (176, my italics).

But the depiction of social inequalities in *Disgrace* is tainted. As we have to share Lurie’s privileged perspective, we “gain virtually no understanding of the inner world of the other who has been excluded from such a privilege” (Attridge 2000, 102). Once again Lurie, being a “great deceiver and great self-deceiver” (188), fails to be a faithful witness. But even with his help this issue would have been difficult to solve. Coetzee does not suggest a possibly more equal social distribution; nor does he take a clear stance on the issue of redistribution. He simply alludes to a shift in the perception of the threat that crime poses to the white population in South Africa.

While the rampant crime rate certainly has not dropped after the end of the Apartheid-era¹⁴, the perceived threat grew significantly. During the segregation, the white people were shielded against the poorer part of the population. After the end of the brutal oppression of the black population by the police, crime could spread more freely outside of the townships, thereby exposing the privileged to a

¹⁴ In 1997 there were 24,588 murders, 52,160 cases of rape, 249,375 home burglaries and 13,011 carjackings (CNN.com 1999).

hitherto unknown threat. These considerations certainly show that calling South Africa an “ethical minefield” is appropriate (Sorensen, quoted from Kossew 2003, 161).

This new feeling of endangerment by the white population is, similarly to Coetzee’s previous criticisms, part of a recurrent theme in *Disgrace*: “the common experience of old certainties gone” (Attridge 2000, 100). Lurie addresses this feeling when, concerning Soraya’s faith, he says: “That would be unusual for a Muslim, but all things are possible these days” (3).

5.2 Rationalization

The critique of rationalization is certainly the broadest criticism in *Disgrace*. It cannot be restricted neither locally to South Africa nor temporally, as the process of modernization with its predilection for “economistic interrogation” (Attridge 2000, 103) has been accompanied by critical voices ever since, one of them being Coetzee. *Disgrace* portrays “with immense distaste a new global age of performance indicators and outcomes measurement, of benchmarking and quality assurance, of widespread prurience that’s also an unfeeling Puritanism” (Attridge 2000, 105).

The credo of efficiency and productivity has also taken over Lurie’s university, who comments on the “great rationalization” (3) ironically, but with a bitter undertone. Once a professor of literature, he was forced to teach communications, a subject he finds “preposterous” (3) and feels no relation to. Under these premises, his success as a teacher is expectedly little. Though he dutifully carries out this tasks, his supposedly central “obligation” (4) goes amiss: imparting knowledge. He describes his university as a

transformed and, to his mind, emasculated institution of learning [where] he is more out of place than ever. But then, so are other of his colleagues from the old days, burdened with upbringings inappropriate to the task they are set to perform; clerks in a post-religious age (4).

Once again, Lurie’s hypocrisy is evident. While he criticizes the dangers of an education system dictated by the rules of supply and demand, he replicates this model of consumption in the way he fulfills his corporal needs (Jolly 2006, 160). Besides the aspect of the instrumentalisation of women as shown in 4.2, this alludes to another great problem in South Africa: Poverty and prostitution lay the foundation for the spread of AIDS, one of the major problems in current South

Africa.¹⁵ Although Lurie is preoccupied that his daughter might contract a disease after the rape (106), he is careless about others. After seeing Soraya he sleeps with Melanie (Graham 2002, 7), and later on he hooks up with an unknown “streetwalker” (194) he randomly picks up, thereby endorsing this ever-growing problem.

6. Conclusion

As I tried to show, *Disgrace* is ambivalent in its criticism of South Africa. Coetzee’s view, albeit pessimist, “expresses no yearnings for the system of Apartheid” (Attridge 2000, 105). I think that accusations of the novel exploiting stereotypes can safely be discarded. Seen as a wake-up call, *Disgrace* certainly manages to raise awareness for the many problems that still haunt the young democracy.

I should point out that *Disgrace* can be read on many different levels, and restricting oneself to its “almost unrelievedly grim” (Attridge 2000, 106) political aspect would not do Coetzee’s skills as a writer any justice. For example, the negative social picture is countered by Lurie’s positive personal development. Through his dedication to animals and music he overcomes his disgrace, starting a new life and rebuilding his relationship with Lucy.

Personally, I did not like *Disgrace* when I read it for the first time in school. Lurie as the main character seemed dry and austere, I skipped the passages about poetry and opera and Lucy frankly just irritated me to the point of not wanting to read on. Reading it for the second time five years later, it had a different effect on me. I started to question the motives behind Lucy’s “unthinkable” behavior, and realized the complex background which maybe calls for exactly such an approach. As Derek Attridge put it, “*Disgrace* is disturbing in many ways, and among the things it disturbs is any simple faith in the political efficacy of literature – a faith upon some styles of postcolonial criticism are built” (Attridge 2002, 320).

To those who like clear answers, the social criticism in *Disgrace* may appear unsatisfactory. Coetzee offers no pragmatic solutions and does not lend himself to an ideological reading. But one could not have expected more from an

¹⁵ According to a survey of UNICEF, in 2005 the estimated adult HIV prevalence rate was 18.8, the percentage of prevention among young people only 5% (male) and 15% (female) (Unicef.com 2005).

author who has made a name for himself for offering almost no information about his private life. His personal stance on these matters is beyond us, we can only speculate about his intentions with the help of the characters and stories he created. Maybe his travels can serve as a hint. In 2002, Coetzee has left South Africa, emigrating to the home country of his new partner, Australia (Biography 2004). Can this emigration be seen as final criticism of 'New' South Africa?

Knowing Coetzee, there is no easy answer.

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