

Muses, Temptresses, and Mothers:

Female Agency, Sexuality, and Transformation in the Works of J.M. Coetzee

At a glance, a survey of the works of J.M. Coetzee varies widely in narration, setting, and literary structure, but all share one notable driving force: the author's desire to fearlessly explore what it means to be human in an ever-changing and often cruelly unfair world. In works like *Life & Times of Michael K*, *Age of Iron*, *Foe*, and *Disgrace*, the protagonists vary in gender, age, and social circumstance, but through each character, Coetzee examines every angle of existence in a complex society, demonstrating a mastery of observation and boundless imagination that is unparalleled in contemporary literature. Indeed, Coetzee's ability to awaken the voice of fictional characters is so skillful that he convincingly offers female narration in *Foe*—through the fearless, bold, and entirely gender-conscious character of Susan Barton—and again in *Age of Iron* through the voice of the aging, cancer-stricken Elizabeth Curren, whose epistolary narrative to her daughter and own transformative illness presents a thorough comprehension of traditional maternal instincts and a woman's sometimes innate desire to provide care, even in the face of her own demise. Contrastingly, Coetzee's Booker Prize-winning *Life & Times of Michael K* depicts a maternal figure who is untraditional and independent, but whose own self-reliance and ability to stand alone shape her son into an unbreakable, strong-willed man of the most peculiar kind. Finally, in his widely-acclaimed novel *Disgrace*, Coetzee skillfully crafts a story of the power of female sexuality and male shame, which he conversely pairs with a counternarrative of male sexuality through aggressive gang rape and female shame, while still preserving the personal agency of the victim. In these works, J.M. Coetzee offers powerful, thought-provoking commentary on the effects, powers, and influences of females with varying levels of agency in

an often male-governed world, exploring the complexities and contradictions of the intersections between male and female sexuality and transformation.

In *Life & Times of Michael K*, Coetzee presents a mother character who is not wholly consumed by stereotypical maternal instincts. Coetzee describes Anna K the moment after her child's birth as “not like[ing] the mouth that would not close and the living pink flesh it bared to her. She shivered to think of what had been growing in her all these months” (*Life and Times of Michael K* 3). By presenting Anna K as a mother who is initially unsympathetic to her son's physical deformity, Coetzee creates a character who does not succumb to traditional expectations of new mothers. Anna K is disconnected from her son in a manner that is, traditionally speaking, entirely acceptable in a father figure, but often regarded as cold, unfeeling, and, above all, unfeminine in a mother. Coetzee does this with little apology, allowing Anna K to continue to live an independent life even after the birth of Michael K. In writing Anna K this way, Coetzee presents a path of female-inspired, quiet resistance that K will observe and eventually follow, and it is this example put forth by his mother that ultimately ensures his own survival.

Anna K's detachment from her son is enhanced by his physical deformity, as it prevents the bonding afforded by breastfeeding, but such detachment is neither cold nor unloving—it is merely unfeminine, which furthers Coetzee's representation of mothers as individuals who do not coo over their children by some biological impulse. There is, actually, a great deal of tenderness between mother and son, as Anna K “took the child with her to work and continued to take it when it was no longer a baby. Because their smiles and whispers hurt her, she kept it away from other children” (*Life and Times of Michael K* 3). So Anna K continues to work and tend to her responsibilities while Michael K is a child, suggesting that his presence offers little interference with her day-to-day life. Additionally, by describing the child as “it” through a

partial focalization through Anna K's perspective, Coetzee highlights the sense of stereotypically unfeminine detachment felt by Anna K. This is not to say that Anna K does not love her child, but rather, that he fits into her life with little inconvenience. Indeed, rather than Anna K adapting to life with a child, Michael K appears to acclimate to his mother's lifestyle. Presumably, Anna K's life resumes the course it had followed prior to the child's birth, with K "learning to be quiet" in the presence of others as his mother works (*Life and Times of Michael K* 4). This adjustment to his mother's responsibilities becomes one of the defining factors in the shaping of Michael K as a character, his quiet, contemplative nature going on to fascinate others as he moves through the world following his mother's death, demonstrating the influence that Anna K has had on him.

While not the most overtly independent or self-sufficient character, Michael K's quiet resistance and perseverance form the driving force behind his survival, a spirit that we can largely credit to his mother for silently teaching K self-reliance by example. Anna K teaches Michael K to work quietly and dutifully and through this, he learns the fundamentals of basic self-preservation, which are enhanced through his planting of seeds and reciprocal relationship with the mother of all mothers, the Earth. The lives of Anna K as a housekeeper and Michael K as a gardener are by no means the most exciting of careers, but they do offer senses of identity and self-reliance that extend to their personalities. Moreover, Michael identifies as a gardener above all else and feels a deep and profound kinship with the earth. This kind of devotion and purpose in life is, perhaps, what allows K to persevere in the face of hardship, just as his mother taught him. By leading a simple life of survival, Anna K sets the frame for Michael K as he navigates through the world without her—a legacy that is apparent as K evades the dangers of war and imprisonment that have become commonplace at the time of Anna K's death.

As Michael K's journey through war-torn, semi-fictionalized South Africa comes to a close, he encounters a very different kind of woman on the beaches of Sea Point: the temptress in the form of a prostitute. Michael K observes a woman in “a tight white dress wearing a platinum blonde wig and carrying a pair of silver high-heeled shoes” who is accompanied by another “sister” with a baby and a male overseer, called December (*Life and Times of Michael K* 172). When K later asks if the man's name is truly December, the prostitute replies, “That is the name on his card. Tomorrow maybe he has a different name. A different card, a different name, for the police, so that they mix him up” (*Life and Times of Michael K* 178). The male overseer is intrigued by Michael K, whose epic journey is evident in his disheveled and starved appearance, and, after hearing K's story of survival, he seeks to soothe and even recruit him by utilizing the sedative effects of alcohol as one of his “sisters” seduces K. Though there are several ways to interpret this interaction and what message it might present with regard to the role of women in Coetzee's works, it is necessary to consider the agency of Michael K's seductress; she, like K, manages to survive and live off the grid in war-torn South Africa. In a world where people are captured for no apparent crime or are, in some cases, even murdered, this is no small feat. Moreover, the “sisters” and December actually appear happy: they have enough food to offer a stranger a portion with no reservations, and they drink, laugh and even evade the police. In this sense, a prostitute is as free as Michael K, although perhaps less able to navigate the streets without a male protector. The prostitute who seduces Michael K is as much a survivor as the protagonist himself: she uses the tools at her disposal, including her sexuality, to endure against the odds. Though the lives of Michael K and the prostitute on the beach are unglamorous and even pitiable in some ways, both are, inadvertently, rebelling against South African society and defying it by continuing to survive in a manner that evades war-torn society.

The love scene between the prostitute and Michael K, though brief, can be read as a retelling of the biblical story of Samson and Delilah, which demonstrates the power of female sexuality even when it is traded between males. After Michael K has been dazed by alcohol on the beach, the woman, guided by December, performs oral sex on K, presumably giving him his first sexual experience since we are told that “because of his face K did not have women friends” (*Life and Times of Michael K* 4). The woman on the beach, however, takes “his penis in her mouth,” and, though K has a moment of mental resistance, he allows “himself to be lost in the spinning inside his head and in the faraway wet warmth” (*Life and Times of Michael K* 179). Michael K's muted and often sheepish demeanor would likely prevent him from ever initiating sexual intercourse, so his interaction with the prostitute is the only way that K would ever experience sexual pleasure. Though this act is initiated by December, the prostitute spends more time with K than she might with an actual client, pleasuring K a second time. Despite K's facial deformity, the woman offers a smile and “leaning on an elbow she kissed him full on the mouth, her tongue cleaving his lips” (*Life and Times of Michael K* 179). Through her knowing smile, the prostitute is aware of December's desire to possess Michael K and the role that she plays in this recruitment. Like Delilah, who is sent by the Philistines to Samson to “lure him into showing you the secret of his great strength,” the prostitute's charge is to gain something from K, whose quiet perseverance entrances those he encounters (Judges 16). The woman uses her sexuality to momentarily ensnare Michael K, a man who is otherwise unable to be contained by non-physical barriers, demonstrating the power of female eroticism. Interestingly, Michael K, unlike Samson, does not relinquish the secret to his inner strength—his own will to live freely—and instead chooses to return to his mother's room on the Cote d'Azur. However, the experience with the

woman in white becomes the most transformative experience of K's life, highlighting the metamorphosing effect that only sexuality can have.

The value of sexual experience as a catalyst for transformation is evident through Michael K's epiphany of self-discovery, which comes directly after his encounter with the woman on the beach. K flees from the beach and finds refuge in his mother's old room, again highlighting Anna K as a guiding frame in Michael K's life, where he contemplates the fear of becoming an "object of charity" not only because of his appearance but also because of his life's story, which he fears, if revealed, would mean that "women would have taken me into their beds and mothered me in the dark" (*Life and Times of Michael K* 181). Michael K recognizes the unique kind of companionship that he will be offered in life because of what he appears to be and ultimately decides that lust based on charity or transaction is not worth the feelings of shame it later inspires. Michael K is ultimately able to verbalize and claim ownership of "the truth, the truth" about himself, and finally finds confidence in his own identity, which was forged by his mother's influence, as an eccentric gardener who is invested in his relationship with Mother Earth—a revelation that also would not have been possible without the life-altering experience of sexual awakening.

Similarly, Coetzee's *Age of Iron* confronts the themes of motherhood, female agency, and transformation, but against the stark backdrop of Cape Town, South Africa in the midst of apartheid. The epistolary novel's narrator and protagonist, the cancer-stricken Elizabeth Curren, is a retired professor of Classics, writing to her daughter, who has abandoned South Africa and the suffocating environment caused by racial intolerance and violence. Instead of telling her daughter of her imminent death, Curren writes to her daughter in the hope that her extended letter will be delivered safely after her death by Mr. Vercueil, her homeless confidante and

unlikely companion in her final days. The epistolary style alone presents a strong sense of intimate, nurturing, maternal instinct, and Curren herself is a guardian to all in the text, sometimes even reluctantly. While she does not have the opportunity to mother her adult child in the final stage of her life, she watches over the family of her housekeeper, Florence, as well as the homeless man, Vercueil, who serendipitously arrives on her doorstep the day that she receives the fateful news of her rapidly approaching death. Using a traditionally feminine tone of protectiveness, Coetzee's offers depictions of Curren's attempts to safeguard her systematically abused black loved ones and of the relationship between Curren's internal disease and the external destruction of South Africa in the time of apartheid. With these tools, Coetzee offers valuable insight into the internalized feelings of guilt that a maternal white woman might experience in the face of extreme violence against those labeled as "others."

From the very day of her final diagnosis, Mrs. Curren begins to fill her home with victims of the oppressive social structures of apartheid, from the homeless Vercueil to Florence's children, and even to Bheki's aggressively defiant friend, later called John. Indeed, Curren's maternal instinct is the driving force behind the novel, her illness propelling her forward, perhaps, with the desire to atone for the sins of her white counterparts. Accordingly, during a heavy night's rain, Curren invites Vercueil into her home to rest on her sofa, and as he sleeps, Curren remembers waking her own daughter from sleep, recalling, "stroke after stroke, my fingertips alive with love, while you clung to the last body of sleep...my hand on your head... the current of love coursing through it" (*Age of Iron* 57). Curren's own rapidly approaching death awakens her nurturing qualities, which she feels most strongly in the memory of her daughter as well as in the black people in her life who are far more vulnerable than she is as an educated, upper-middle-class white woman. Indeed, even as her body is devoured from within by terminal

cancer, Curren still lives out the full circle of life, in contrast to the young lives being taken in the name of war and revolution.

Although Mrs. Curren's feminine instincts are drawn out by her looming death and her desire to connect with her daughter, the vulnerable people around her also stir her sense of protectiveness, suggesting that victims of violence are, in a sense, orphaned and in need of shelter, even if such security ultimately fails against greater forces of evil. As Vercueil shelters himself from the rain, Curren writes that her daughter's "sleepy, comfortable murmur [is] reborn in the throat of this man!" (*Age of Iron* 57). Though Curren is undoubtedly an inherently kind, liberal person, it is unlikely that, were she living in a world without apartheid, she would have a homeless stranger sleeping on her sofa. The circumstance that allows for this sense of kinship with Vercueil is the deadly practice of apartheid: Curren is faced with her own death, and only when her own demise is close in sight is she able to meditate on her guilt at not only being white but also being politically inactive during her life. This sense of maternal responsibility to her fellow humans is magnified, leading her to intervene on behalf of Florence's son, Bheki, and his friend, John, both of whom Curren views as, above all else, children.

As Mrs. Curren witnesses the violence inflicted upon Bheki and John, she is forced to confront the harsh reality of police brutality while also struggling to comprehend the depths of her own strength as a protector of the vulnerable. After seeing the police push Bheki and John into a moving car, which causes severe injury to both boys, Curren's first thought is, "This country! Thank God she is out!" (*Age of Iron* 60). Curren's mind reflexively connects the violence against the boys to her own child, demonstrating her instinctive habit of mothering those around her. Curren reaches Bheki before Florence does, helping to pull John's mangled body off of his and soothingly telling him that, "Everything is alright... The ambulance is on its

way” (*Age of Iron* 61). Significantly, up until this point in the text, Florence, Bheki, and John have all regarded Curren with thinly veiled judgment; to them, she is the fussy old woman, only partially condemning apartheid without ever having to face its horrors. However, in this moment of brutality, Bheki gazes back at Curren curiously and with “peaceful eyes” (*Age of Iron* 60). Bheki is both a child and a warrior, ready to face death if it means standing up for what he believes in. It is the child in Bheki that, by her very instinct, Curren seeks to protect. Additionally, these feelings of motherly care extend to Bheki's friend, who has received a massive wound to the head. As Mrs. Curren asks the plumber to move aside so that she can personally tend to John's wound, she explains her intervention by stating that “blood is one: a pool of life dispersed among us in separate existences, but belonging by nature together: lent: not given: held in common, in trust, to be preserved” (*Age of Iron* 64). Though this statement can, at a glance, be read as contemplative but general, it demonstrates the value that Curren places on human life, especially the blood of children who, much to her dismay, are turned into warriors in South Africa.

As Mrs. Curren's perspective continues to broaden through a series of deeply rattling events, including Bheki's death and Curren's own contemplation of suicide by fire, she tries to will her daughter to come to her and even attempts to save John from the police, further highlighting her role as a maternal caregiver. Curren recalls the day that her daughter left South Africa and writes that her extended letter “is a call into the night, into the northwest, for you to come back to me...I cannot live without a child. I cannot die without a child” (*Age of Iron* 139). As much as Mrs. Curren admires her daughter's resolve to remove herself from South Africa until apartheid ends, she is also heartbroken, filled with lingering feelings of abandonment that are enhanced by her deteriorating health. This demonstrates the great need of a maternally

inclined woman like Curren to nurture those around her; in the absence of her daughter, she nurtures and fiercely protects those who are most vulnerable. Indeed, when John returns to her home and is soon after murdered by the police, the cancer-stricken Mrs. Curren tries to insert herself between John and the police, writing that she “ached to embrace him, to protect him” (*Age of Iron* 152). Curren knows that she cannot save John from his executioners, and even when it is too late, she bellows at the police, “I am watching you...I am watching everything you do. I tell you, he is just a child!” (*Age of Iron* 153). Mrs. Curren is many things – scholar, estranged mother, believer in nonviolence—but, above all else, she is a caretaker, a personification of maternal instinct. Although her desire to protect is drawn out at the time of her death and in the face of apartheid, it represents a belief in hope even in the direst of circumstances.

Mrs. Curren herself seems unaware of her own maternal impulse and the strength that nurturing can hold, which, in itself, demonstrates the value of compassion, especially in times of war. As Curren describes her daughter to Vercueil, she says that “she is like iron” (*Age of Iron* 75). Mr. Vercueil, the unlikeliest of companions, replies that she, too, is like iron. To this, Curren says that his words broke her and “If I were made of iron, surely I would not break so easily” (*Age of Iron* 75). Vercueil, the vulnerable derelict, truly sees Curren and recognizes the iron-like power that she, as a maternal figure to so many, wields. Her capacity to love, nurture, and protect is rewarded with the friendship of Vercueil who, instead of taking from her, guides Curren down the path to death and shares her final moments. Moreover, Mrs. Curren's letter is a final act of giving, releasing her daughter from her final tie to South Africa. Her legacy is one of eccentric kindness and generosity, of maternal love, feminine compassion, and the ability to transform one's life for the greater good, even when death is imminent.

In contrast, themes of female agency and sexuality dominate in Coetzee's *Foe*, which offers a dramatic retelling of *Robinson Crusoe* in which the castaway is actually a woman: Susan Barton, who, having escaped the island with Friday and a now deceased Cruso, seeks the help of Mr. Foe in retelling her story. The text is narrated by Susan Barton, who begins her tale lost at sea after searching for her long-lost daughter, then inhabits Cruso's island, and finally returns to England. There, she seeks a male author, because Barton, being very aware of the restrictive gender codes of her time, recognizes that a story told by a woman will never find success. In her behavior with her male counterparts, Susan Barton (along with the tongueless Friday) represents the voiceless, marginalized groups that suffer under patriarchal societies, denied representation in both literature and history. However, she still manages to exercise personal agency in the face of life-threatening obstacles, even using her sexuality as a tool to help influence her circumstances with both Cruso and Foe.

Despite being portrayed as having been stripped of her voice in the canonical *Robinson Crusoe*, Susan Barton's voice within the text is perseverant, curious, and aware of the prejudice that labels women as inferior to men. However, Barton demands and wields the little power that she does possess, telling the controlling Cruso that she is “a castaway, not a prisoner” when he angrily scolds her for exploring the island on her own (*Foe* 20). Barton's eagerness to defend herself and the personal agency she exerts against the males in the text is symbolic of her strength as a woman living in a patriarchal society, and though she is aware that her story must be told through the lens of male authorship, she insists on her story retaining its authenticity, as that, she believes, is the limit of her power as a woman. Barton tells Captain Smith, of the merchant ship the *John Hobart*, “I would rather be the author of my own story than have lies told about me... If I cannot come forward, as author, and swear to the truth of my tale, what will

be the worth of it?" (*Foe* 40). Barton recognizes that the patriarchal society in which she lives does not look beyond the canon of male authorship, but she insists on maintaining the integrity of her story, even if it must pass into the hands of a man. Still, Barton's confidence in her own story and the sense of self-worth that she draws from her knowledge of being man's muse infuses the text with a sense of feminine courage and the ethical desire to preserve the authenticity of one's story, which is, after all, one's only true possession. As Barton confidently tells Foe, "I am a figure of fortune ... I am the good fortune we are always hoping for" (*Foe* 48). Barton's belief in her own value as a muse, if not an author, and in the significance of her story is the driving force behind her steadfast desire to have the story of Cruso, the island, and herself—as the first female castaway—told for the sake of authenticity and for the survival of herself and Friday.

Moreover, Susan Barton claims ownership of her sexuality, using it as a tool as she navigates her way through male-dominated societies and tries to inspire the writer of her story by invoking, and even embodying, the spirit of the muse. When Barton first succumbs to Cruso's advances on the island, she is well-aware that she can overpower him, but stops herself as she decides that after not having "known a woman for fifteen years, why should he not have his desire?" (*Foe* 30). Barton recognizes the power of female sexuality and uses it to satiate Cruso's desire, as he never again pursues her sexually during their time on the island. Later, when Cruso becomes deathly ill aboard the *John Hobart*, Barton nurses and pleasures him, assuming the dominant role of seductress as she whispers, "I am swimming in you, my Cruso" and confidently declares that "this is our coupling: this swimming, this clambering, this whispering" (*Foe* 44). Barton is a highly sexual character, self-assuredly taking sexual control and describing herself as being "in" Cruso as the penetrating force rather than identifying as the body being infiltrated. This dominant position is echoed during her sexual encounter with Foe when Barton

“coaxe[s] him to lay beneath [her]...and straddle[s] him (which he did not seem easy with, in a woman). 'This is the manner of the Muse when she visits her poets'” (*Foe* 139). Susan Barton exudes a seductive confidence which she uses to alter or inspire circumstances in her favor; she is sexually dominant and happy to embody the muse if it means that her story will be told in a manner that ensures her own survival. Barton is, therefore, the muse and mistress of her own story as the preserver of its authenticity, and she is also a sexually free being who uses her sensuality to aid in her one pursuit: to give a voice to herself and the voiceless Friday by ensuring their survival through literary success and subsequent monetary gain.

Finally, it is through *Disgrace* that Coetzee masterfully dissects gender and rape culture, contrasting the young, indecisive Melanie against the practical, confident Lucy: victims of two very different kinds of rape. The novel is focalized through the character of David Lurie—a fallen professor, father to Lucy, and aggressive lover of Melanie, for whom he loses his job after the news of their affair breaks, and Melanie offers a diluted version of the events that have transpired between them. While the novel plainly explores themes of male sexuality, it is necessary to examine the underlying female sexuality that shapes the course of the text and raises questions regarding varying levels of consent in cases of rape, a woman’s right to choose the manner in which the story of her sexual violation is told (or withheld), and the need for personal agency to govern the course of a woman’s life after such sexual violence occurs.

In David Lurie's sexual relationship with his student, Melanie Isaacs, Coetzee explores the concept of sex that is neither desired nor stopped by the female, suggesting that differing levels of consent complicate the issue of rape while still allowing the female to choose the consequences that her perpetrator will face. David Lurie first encounters his student, Melanie, alone in the college gardens, where he invites her to his home for dinner. The two then partake in

“wine and music: a ritual that men and women play out with each other...to ease the awkward passages” (*Disgrace* 12). Throughout the evening, Melanie confidently explores Lurie's home, expressing a muted interest in Lurie that never peaks due to his inability to seduce her verbally. Lurie, however, is consumed with passion for Melanie and begins to aggressively pursue her, which culminates in his having sex with her in an encounter that is “passive” on Melanie's part (*Disgrace* 19). Although it is instinctual to read Melanie's passivity as Lurie having taken advantage of his situation as her superior, it is also necessary to consider the fact that Melanie has a boyfriend and that her indifference to the sex itself might stem from guilt in her own infidelity and disinterest in David Lurie's mediocre attempt at seduction. He is, after all, older, emotionally inarticulate, and more accustomed to sex with prostitutes, with whom there is no necessary act of foreplay. All of these factors contribute to Melanie's sexual reaction to David Lurie, who, despite being aggressive, is not an outright rapist. Additionally, the text is made all the more complex by the fact that Coetzee presents only Lurie's perspective and interpretation of such sexual encounters, further demonstrating Coetzee's ability to create multidimensional characters and intellectually demanding plots that force readers to grapple with their own code of ethics.

After another sexual encounter that again borders the line of consent, Melanie exerts her power over Lurie by asking if she can stay at his home, further complicating her character as both the victim of unwanted sexuality and the author of her circumstances. Lurie notes that Melanie “seems thoroughly at home” with him, “helping herself to toast and honey and drinking tea” (*Disgrace* 27). Lurie recognizes that he has stepped into dangerous territory, as Melanie is “learning to exploit him ... but if she is behaving badly, he has behaved worse” (*Disgrace* 28). Coetzee explores the complicated nature of male authority and a female's assumed innocence as

well as the power structure between teacher and student that complicates the affair. Though Lurie readily admits that he has acted poorly and abused his position of superiority, he recognizes that Melanie is not without power in this situation, and quickly realizes that she, too, is aware of this. Indeed, as the affair unfolds, Lurie is disgraced, and the community, led by Melanie's boyfriend, rallies around her, something that, in reality, would be an unlikely outcome. The relationship between Lurie and Melanie, though inappropriate, can never be categorized as clear rape because Melanie's response was not non-consensual; Lurie's sex might have been undesired, but a number of circumstances may have contributed to Melanie's indifference, and Lurie never uses physical force. In this sense, the moral punishment inflicted upon Lurie does not match the crime he has committed, demonstrating the power of females who have experienced sex that is, for any reason, undesired. This power, particularly in crying "rape," must be wielded with caution, as it is so severe a charge that it has the ability to ruin the lives of men who, in *some* cases, are not guilty of rape in its most brutal sense. Again, Coetzee asks readers to question gender relations, and while the cultural norm is to align oneself with the female victim, the text's focalization through Lurie complicates these encounters as readers are confronted with varying levels of consent and enjoyment.

Contrastingly, Davie Lurie's own daughter, Lucy, is the victim of violent gang rape when she and her father are ambushed by three young males on her farm, where Lurie has retreated after being fired and disgraced following his affair with Melanie. Though Lurie does not witness Lucy's rape firsthand, he is insistent that Lucy follow-up with the police and tries to persuade her to pursue her attackers by invoking the law and then leaving the farm. This urging is quelled by Lucy, who declares: "what 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” (*Disgrace* 133). Ironically, Lucy's explanation echoes Lurie's claims during his own trial, in which he reserved the right of not having to justify himself after pleading guilty. Through this passage, Coetzee plays with a woman's right to choose, above all else, the course that her sexual violation will take, whether that means pursuing it or pushing it out of mind.

Indeed, Lucy appeals to her right to own her situation, however dire, and to choose the manner in which it is dealt with, calling to mind questions of gender and a victim's right to anonymity. Lucy's unwillingness to allow her pain to be shared by anyone else is powerful in itself; despite the devastation of her rape, she is still sure of herself and of her own ability to steer herself through her circumstances, refusing to depend upon anyone else. By contrasting Lucy's glaring rape with Melanie's ambiguous one, Coetzee opens the debate for the ethics of rape culture and the ways that it affects the women who claim rape, whether fairly or not, and the men who suffer or escape freely. But Coetzee reminds readers that, in the end, charging a man with rape is a woman's choice. While this work was met with considerable controversy, it is necessary to at least consider the idea that, in some cases, men are not guilty of rape. Through the powerful juxtaposition of a student/teacher relationship that is, without a doubt, inappropriate and the brutal gang rape (and subsequent impregnation) of Lucy, Coetzee seeks to open lines of communication in a cultural arena that is emotionally charged and highly controversial, demonstrating his willingness to explore all aspects of human nature and gender relations, no matter how ugly.

The works of J.M. Coetzee depict women, and thus gender relations, in a variety of ways—as the women exercise different levels of agency and varying approaches to motherhood and sexuality—but all of Coetzee's female characters and the men they influence are undeniably

powerful in their own rights. Coetzee's fearless approach to his female characters presents a spectrum of women that is realistic in its diversity, demonstrating his willingness to explore every aspect of femininity in the hope of gaining a better understanding of the female, and human, mind and body. Indeed, the themes of female sexuality, motherhood, and agency are also visited in works like *Elizabeth Costello*, which presents an aging scholar as she preaches the evils of factory-farming in a quest to save her soul and influence those around her to do the same, as well as in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, which, much like *Disgrace*, explores male sexuality, as it transforms with age, and the women who share this erotic journey. Coetzee's autobiographical novel, *Boyhood*, also confronts the theme of young male sexuality and the desire of females, but primarily focuses on Coetzee's own mother, who, like Mrs. Curren, is a maternal force to be reckoned with, though sometimes stifling in her relentless love.

Through his thorough, uncensored exploration of what it means to be either female or influenced by femininity and complex gender relations, he presents readers with an all-encompassing array of feminine voices and perspectives, which he crafts and then allows readers to mull over long after his stories have ended. Indeed, a survey of Coetzee's works allows readers to explore motherhood, sexual agency, and, perhaps most importantly, autonomy in the face of rape from a variety of feminine perspectives. And although this range of voices inevitably leads to cultural controversy and even public outcry, it facilitates important discussions about what it means to be female in a male-dominated world. Further, this debate allows us to explore gender relations and examine the ways in which we are culturally coded to view rape, as we are often taught that there is no grey area with regard to unwanted sex. By exploring this theme, Coetzee asks us to reassess gender codes in some respects, as a truly fair society should potentially acknowledge the fact that, while many instances of sexual violence go unreported or unpunished,

there is certainly room for the possibility that some sexual accusations are exaggerated. Through this willingness to grapple with the often uncomfortable realities of human nature, Coetzee exhibits his mastery of language, observation, and perception by presenting women who are powerful because they are, above all, realistic in their diversity.

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