

Transgressive Fathering in J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*

by

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Abstract

This thesis examines David Lurie's transgressive thoughts and behaviours in J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* (1999) and draws conclusions about their function. Using Michel Foucault's definition of transgression – which classifies it as a productive means to question tacit laws – the central argument maintains that David's predatory behaviours, paradoxical rationalizations, and unboundaried ideas about fatherhood are necessary efforts to question various social roles in the context of the post-apartheid period. I also contend that David's conflation of sexual desire and fatherly care in *Disgrace* points to one of Coetzee's larger projects: to dismantle glossy ideas about nuclear family structures and to expose the white patriarchal Afrikaner ideals that persist in South Africa even after the end of apartheid.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

“In an abstract way, I think that there ought to be bounds to what is licit, if only as a way of making it possible to be transgressive” (Coetzee, *Doubling the Point*, 298).

A *mésentendu* with a prostitute, a sexual harassment case, an exile to the countryside: this is David Lurie’s predicament in J.M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace* (1999). In the two decades since its publication, *Disgrace* has become Coetzee’s most celebrated and discussed novel. According to David Atwell, the novel has received “more media and scholarly attention than any other work of fiction in all of South Africa’s literary history” (Atwell, 192). In the vast and ever-expanding critical archive on *Disgrace*, critics chiefly agree that the novel is deeply concerned with hierarchies of power and that this concern seeps into its depictions of sex, politics, and race. In fact, many critics rightfully maintain that the novel offers a lens into the deep-rooted racial hatred that prevails in South Africa, even during the post-apartheid period (e.g. Derek Attridge, Roman Silvani). In his critical companion to *Disgrace*, Andrew van der Vlies underscores the importance of the novel’s cultural context:

Interpreting [*Disgrace*] as an examination of themes and dynamics of power that might be of broader – even universal – relevance (the resilience of the individual in the face of great historical turmoil, perhaps, or the damage wrought by unfettered sexual desire acted on as if by right) is likewise arguably to diminish the novel’s sophisticated engagement with a particular time and place, post-apartheid South Africa, and with a long history of oppression in the region. (17)

As the novel raises questions that are both universal and specific to post-apartheid South Africa, it has attracted various streams of interpretation. For instance, scholars including Sue Kossew, David Atwell, and Lucy Valerie Graham propose feminist readings of *Disgrace* and of its treatment of “the damage wrought by unfettered sexual desire acted on as if by right” (van de Vlies, 17). They suggest that Coetzee fosters female forms of resistance by bestowing agency on characters that are subjected to sexual violence and argue that *Disgrace* is a vindication of female protest; it is more than a mere depiction of “what women undergo at the hands of men” (Coetzee, *Disgrace*, 111). While these political, racial, and gendered readings of the novel are well-founded, their interpretations of David Lurie tend to be reductive in that they are quick to label him as a representation of “the all-too-typical white consciousness of his time” (Attridge, 317). I wish to fill the gap that has been created by critics who have pinned David Lurie merely as an embodiment of white-colonizer-rapists and have disregarded the significance of his paradoxical rationalizations and insecurities. Coetzee’s characterization of Lurie is a necessary effort to add ambivalence to patriarchal roles and to portray the internal turmoil that white fathers who are complicit in “particular systems of oppression” must navigate during the reinvention of the post-apartheid state (van der Vlies, 32). The “systems of oppression” under apartheid – including but not limited to patriarchy and white supremacy – are what have enabled “the continued flourishing of racist and sexist attitudes” (Attridge, 4). Coetzee is interested in the means through which these attitudes become naturalized and, conversely, are rebutted within the consciousness of a white heterosexual South African man of British descent. David is an English speaker, an intellectual, a man from an urban background. These are important details that, in the

South African context, position him as a proponent of anti-apartheid ideas¹ and affect the way that he navigates the social conditions of the post-apartheid state.

Critics and scholars have often marveled at the Kafka-esque allegories and Foucauldian commentary that Coetzee imbeds into his writings and have taken pleasure in uncovering the layered philosophical, ethical, and political insights that he delivers. As a scholar, Coetzee often “illuminates” aspects of his fiction in his own works of theory (Head, 10). In this spirit, I turn my attention to “The Harms of Pornography” – an essay from a collection entitled *Giving Offense* (1996) in which Coetzee meditates on sexual taboos. In the essay, he fervently rebuts the censorship of “visual pornography” and specifically calls for the legitimization of “print pornography,” that is, of pornographic narratives (Coetzee, 62). He claims that the impact “of the word” is less important than that of pornographic images because it is less immediate, and therefore, has a lesser “potential” to cause “harm” (Coetzee, *Giving Offense*, 62). To support his argument, Coetzee imagines the possibility of producing a text that features a “male pornographer-writer” (Coetzee, *Giving Offense*, 72) that isn’t labelled as “exploitative, distasteful, or pornographic” (van de Vlies, 97). Coetzee sees value in producing a pornographic narrative and, more specifically, having this narrative told through the perspective of a male pornographer-writer, as this allows the reader to imagine transgression, reconsider the “bounds to what is licit,” and arrive at a conclusion about the necessity of changing these bounds (Coetzee, *Doubling the Point*, 298). *Disgrace* is Coetzee’s closest attempt at producing an ambivalent “pornographer-writer” character. However, it is far from a

¹ David’s identity as a white South African of English descent is distinct from that of white South Africans of Dutch descent (Afrikaners). Coetzee has written extensively about the tensions between Britons and Afrikaners in South Africa, which date back to the Boer Wars and were intricately linked to the rise of right-wing Afrikaner nationalism that underpinned apartheid (Coetzee, *White Writing*, 6).

sensationalizing account of pornography and rape. The novel is ambiguous, disturbing, and concerned with the muddled socio-cultural landscape of post-apartheid South Africa – traits that are particularly evident in Coetzee’s characterization of David Lurie.

Coetzee successfully generates a morally ambiguous “pornographer-writer” character by allowing David Lurie to grow progressively more self-reflective and by giving him redemptive qualities. Initially, much of the narrative centers on David’s emotional delusions during his weekly meetings with a sex-worker named Soraya and on the excuses that he uses to justify his efforts to groom and, eventually, rape a young Coloured² student named Melanie Isaacs. However, David’s reflections become more complex in the second half of the novel, when he is forced to resign from his post at the university and retreats to a rural town in the Eastern Cape where his daughter Lucy owns a smallholding. There, he is subjected to life-altering events including a shocking episode during which three African men raid his daughter’s farmstead, set him on fire, and proceed to gang-rape Lucy. In the aftermath of the event, David is confronted with both his sexual history and role as Lucy’s father. Most interestingly, the event marks a shift in narration: David’s unruly thoughts and wayward desires are suddenly replaced with justified outrage and anger towards Lucy’s attackers and towards her complacent circle of friends (Atwell, 2008). In this section of the novel, David becomes the only character that adequately (and maybe even cathartically) expresses the horror and disgust that haunts the reader throughout the book. As David Atwell succinctly expresses in a book that cross-compares drafts from Coetzee’s manuscripts with his finalized, published novels, it

² In South Africa, “Coloured” is an umbrella term used to refer to a variety of racialized non-white ethnic groups that are considered to be distinct from “Blacks” (Coetzee, “Tales of Afrikaners,” SM19). While the term “Coloured” is not a slur, it is worth noting that Melanie’s race is a contributing factor to the eerie power dynamics that are on display in this interaction.

is “somewhat miraculous” that Coetzee is able to burn off the “palpable bitterness in the incendiary artistic language developed out of David Lurie’s wayward desires” by the time the novel reaches its end (208). Indeed, David’s transformation is not “miraculous” to the reader who is sensitive to his attempts to provide care to the women that he comes across. In fact, David has a disturbing propensity to conflate sexual desire and fatherly care, and he transgresses the boundaries of his role as Soraya’s client and as Melanie’s professor when he imagines himself as a father figure in their lives.

The ambivalence of David’s characterization as a pornographer-writer lies in the blurred boundaries between his roles as sexual predator and concerned father. I argue that the overlap between David’s predatory behaviours and unboundaried ideas about fatherhood points to one of Coetzee’s larger projects, that is, to dismantle apartheid-era ideas about nuclear family structures. Coetzee’s interest in white Afrikaner ideals and, more specifically, in patriarchal family structures is longstanding. In fact, his collection of essays entitled *White Writing* (1988) is devoted to understanding how “European ideas” about patriarchy infiltrated South African Literature during the apartheid period and produced a genre of writing that romanticised the idea of having a white husband-farmer patriarch as the head of the household (Coetzee, 10). In *Disgrace*, Coetzee writes a self-contradictory and transgressive father character specifically with the intention of upsetting politically-suspect ideas about proscribed gender roles in the family unit. In the final chapters of the novel, it becomes increasingly clear that Coetzee uses David’s reflections on patriarchy and on Lucy’s alternative lifestyle to deliver a veiled critique of the patriarchal structure that was endorsed by white Afrikaner nationalists under apartheid (Coetzee, *White Writing*, 11). While Coetzee’s treatment of the patriarchy in

Disgrace is deeply entrenched in the socio-political context of post-apartheid South Africa, the unboundaried father is a trope that he explores in several of his novels. There is a sexually-perverse father figure in *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), which predates *Disgrace* by nearly two decades, and in the later novel *Slow Man* (2005), which is entirely unrelated to the South African context as it is set in Australia. As such, it is safe to assume that Coetzee is interested in complicating the idea of the patriarch specifically by weaving spiritual guidance, love, and care into otherwise violent, sexually perverse, and disjointed portrayals of fatherhood.

In *Disgrace*, Coetzee plays with the “bounds to what is licit” and contests the arbitrary parameters that are imposed within societal structures (Coetzee, *Doubling the Point*, 298). The need to question these “bounds” is tied to the social upheaval and political reinvention that South Africa was experiencing in the late 1990s when *Disgrace* was written. With this socio-political context in mind, David’s acts of transgression take on a new meaning, as they appear to be a response in part to shifting social expectations and fluctuating legal parameters. For this reason, I employ Michel Foucault’s understanding of transgression. Much like Coetzee, Foucault explains that transgression – the perpetual crossing of established boundaries – is a necessary and valuable exercise that allows thinkers to consider whether or not these boundaries are productive. In his essay entitled “A Preface to Transgression,” Foucault calls for the liberation of sexuality and argues that secular³ discourses on sex should be free of language that paints it as scandalous, sinful, or profane (Foucault, 30). Much like Coetzee in “The Harms of

³ While Foucault does not explicitly use the term secular, I employ this term as it captures a period that he loosely refers to as “after the death of God.” His argument centers on the effects of diminishing hegemonic religious power on everyday language.

Pornography,” Foucault explains that transgression – the crossing of limits (linguistic, legal and psychological) – is a positive means to re-evaluate the relevance of these limits within the secular world. Foucault notes that transgression “must be liberated from the scandalous or subversive, that is, from anything aroused by negative associations” (35). In doing so, he specifies that transgression is not inherently negative and that it should be understood as the crossing and pushing of boundaries good and bad. By using Foucault’s definition of transgression to understand Coetzee’s decision to produce a pornographer-writer character that conflates sexual desire and fatherly care, I demonstrate that Coetzee is interested in challenging the boundaries of fatherhood – the arbitrary rules and proscribed roles that emerge in patriarchal societies – through the context of David’s relationships with Soraya, Melanie, and Lucy.

Chapter 2: Soraya and the Strings Attached to Sex Work

David's wayward sexual desires and unboundaried ideas about fatherhood are neither covert nor implied; Coetzee imbeds them directly into the narrative by means of free indirect discourse. While *Disgrace* is focalized through David and his internal turmoil is a central concern of the novel, much of the narrative takes the limited third person perspective. By using a markedly more detached narrative voice than that of "first-person confessional narratives" and by giving the reader partial access to David's cogitations rather than exposing his thoughts in their entirety, Coetzee pushes the reader to think about the meta-qualities of David's thought process from the onset of the novel (Moffat, 405). In the opening sentence of the novel, Coetzee makes sure to emphasize the discrepancy between David's ideas and his actual condition: "For a man of his age, fifty-two, divorced, he has, to his mind, solved the problem of sex very well" (1). He underscores the fact that there is a distortion here by clarifying that David's beliefs are limited "to his mind." Andrew van de Vlies meditates on the opening sentence of the novel and claims that: "What we have here is a self-satisfied character who believes he has a solid grasp of his own existence, but whose delusions and insensitivities are revealed in his very vocabulary" (21). Coetzee uses this voice and vocabulary to signal unreliability to readers and to render them skeptical about David's understanding of his "existence" and, by extension, of his relationships. Coetzee wants to ensure that David's perception of his roles as Soraya's customer, Melanie's professor, and Lucy's father reads as unreliable, fickle, and, potentially, fallacious.

David's distorted thoughts and beliefs are not confined to his consciousness: they are acted upon and they bleed into various aspects of the plot. For instance, David does

not keep his delusions about Soraya to himself and, by the end of the first chapter, he goes so far as to hire a detective agency to track her down so that he can continue to pursue her even after she has called off their weekly meetings. Coetzee relies on the reader's understanding that the rapport between a sex worker and their client ought to be confined to the interior of the bedroom at Windsor Mansions, and the common knowledge that contact should cease once Soraya and David have crossed the room's threshold. However, David's inability to recognize the limits of Soraya's role as a sex-worker and his strange decision to employ an investigative team to find her are not yet likely enough evidence to unwaveringly pin him as a sexual predator in readers' minds. One of the ways that Coetzee complicates David's perverseness is by allowing him to develop an emotional attachment to Soraya. Throughout the opening chapter, David appears to misinterpret Soraya's intentions and proves unable to separate her performance of desire from her genuine feelings. In fact, he thinks that Soraya is "lucky to have found him" and believes that his affection for her is "reciprocated" (2). His zany, narcissistic thoughts don't improve the reader's view of him; they make him more impenetrable and perplexing. David's judgements also show that he refuses to see himself as a client in a transaction, a failed mutuality that "corresponds to the master's attitude in a master/slave relationship" (Silvani, 118). By giving Soraya gifts and asking her to reciprocate his affection, David uses his white male privilege to attach more strings to their relationship. Van der Vlies comments on Coetzee's inclination to write about vulnerable characters like Soraya and to generate imbalances in the various relationships that he portrays: "For Coetzee's protagonists [...], engaging with the marginalized heightens or foregrounds their culpability [...]. It requires of them acts of generosity that

cannot be reciprocated, acts that must be offered without thought of recompense or reward” (van der Vlies, 32). As David has financial leverage and privilege tied to hegemonic male power, Soraya finds herself in a vulnerable position, and he can easily establish this one-sided relationship. In doing so, he can continue to fuel a false narrative in which he is not a client in a transaction and is instead a beneficiary of Soraya’s affection. By the end of the first chapter, it is clear that Coetzee wants his readers to question how privilege permeates David’s various relationships, regardless of norms or common practices. David obliterates the implied limits to his relationship with a sex worker and then proves to be capable of further transgressions.

While one would expect that the dynamic between a sex-worker and a client might lead to physical violence, David’s transgression has to do with his strange desire to provide fatherly forms of affection. In fact, he first signals this when he notes that: “Technically, he is old enough to be [Soraya’s] father; but then, technically, one can be a father at twelve” (1). While this thought exercise is both perverse and problematic, it demonstrates that David is concerned about the “technical” boundaries between the roles of client and father. He shows concern for the socially accepted parameters that distinguish these two roles. Later on in the chapter, when David passes Soraya and her children on a busy street, the pair’s eyes meet. Van der Vlies offers a Levinasian reading of David’s encounter with Soraya and her two boys:

The novel’s first suggestion that David will have to engage with the gaze of others (in the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas, with which much recent discourse about responsibility to others has been concerned, it is this gaze that is of particular

importance), comes after he sees Soraya, and the children who accompany her and who he assumes are her sons, in Cape Town. (33)

While David has a Levinasian encounter with Soraya in the sense that he feels urged to take on the responsibility of caring for her children, his gaze is not ethical. In fact, David sees Soraya through a racialized lens. Sarah Bezan notes that David's interactions with Soraya have colonial implications: "Desiring domination rather than mutual sexual pleasure, David Lurie seeks out 'ethnic' females in an anxious attempt to re-enact the colonial legacy of racial and gendered oppression" (Bezan, 17). Bezan is not the only critic that reads David's perception of Soraya as an expression of South Africa's history of racial and gendered oppression. In fact, in her influential work of critical theory on South African literature entitled *State of Peril*, Lucy Valerie Graham explains that the notion of "white peril," which she defines as "the hidden exploitation of black women by white men," can be applied to David's obsession with Soraya (Graham, 144). David's exploitation and racialization of Soraya as well as his desire to infiltrate her life and to take on a role of which she has no need by offering to care for her sons are a natural extension of a paternalistic colonial dynamic between white man and non-white woman. David chooses to believe that Soraya and her two boys need him when, in fact, he is an intruder and is complicit in racial and paternalistic forms of oppression. Coetzee signals to readers that this is a component that must be factored into their understanding of the protagonist. His racializing perceptions are another aspect of his role as a Foucauldian transgressor: the figure of David calls social limits pertaining to race and gender into question in the way that Foucault suggests, that is, by transgressing them so as to show that they exist and to ask whether or not they are useful or necessary.

David's concern with the technical boundaries of his roles as client and father is especially apparent when he makes comments about Soraya's children. In fact, David has a particularly disturbing vision during which he imagines the two boys in the room at Windsor Mansions: "The two little boys become like presences between them, playing quiet as shadows in a corner of the room where their mother and the strange man couple. In Soraya's arms he becomes, fleetingly, their father: foster-father, step-father, shadow-father" (6). The precision of the titles "foster-father, step-father, shadow-father" are an integral part of boundary setting. By considering these titles and thinking about the most accurate label for the role that he would like to play, David recognizes that titles hold power and concretize limits. While David only seeks a partial sense of authority over the boys, the titles would nevertheless inch him closer to ruling over them like a patriarch.

David's fascination with Soraya is amplified when he realizes that she is able to break from the confines of her role as a mother and to lead a "double life" as a sex-worker (6). He admires Soraya's ability to lead a life "in compartments"; he respects her ability to segregate the different roles that she plays, yet shows an inability to do the same with his own life (6). The unreliability of David's narration and the blurring of his various roles push the reader to think about him from a meta-perspective and to consider his paradoxical qualities as indicative of the kind of "wrestling" that white men perform within the "changed political, social, and moral landscape" of the new South Africa (Silvani, 117). As such, David's inappropriate remarks and strange ideas are merely symptomatic of a changing "social and moral landscape" with new boundaries that beg to be transgressed and defined. In his depiction of David, Coetzee generates a character that is both a predator and father, a protector and transgressor, a giver of care and a

perpetrator of harm, and he wishes to demonstrate that these attributes are not necessarily mutually exclusive. The slippage between David's functions in this opening chapter of the novel serves as a preface to the two main roles that he tries to contest and re-define in the novel: his roles as professor to Melanie and as father to Lucy.

Chapter 3: Melanie and the Inefficacy of Institutional Sanctions

If we consider that the sexual and emotional delusions that David has in the first chapter of the novel are an extension of the internal turmoil that he faces as he navigates the new social climate of the post-apartheid state, we should also understand David's interactions with Melanie – the young student that he grooms and rapes – as an extension of this turmoil. In the chapters that follow this relationship, David's transgressive thoughts and rationalizations are on display. As in his relationship with Soraya, David considers the boundaries of his relationship with Melanie but, once again, he eventually transgresses these boundaries and imagines himself as an interim father. Initially, he demonstrates a degree of prudence and restraint as he immediately thinks about his responsibility towards Melanie as her professor and admits that “the girl he has brought home is not just thirty years his junior: she is a student, his student, under his tutelage” (12). By using the possessive pronoun to emphasize that Melanie is “his” student, David shows that he is aware of the responsibility that is tied to his role as her professor. This kind of thinking distinguishes David from other pornographer-writers – like Vladimir Nabokov's Humbert Humbert (Moffat, 405) and James Joyce's Stephen Daedalus (Dudley, 122) – because, unlike them, he is aware that his gaze is harmful, that his actions are unethical, and that he ought not to continue to prey on his victim. David is self-contradictory in that he thinks about his own sexual delusions with disdain, which makes it difficult for the reader to be entirely engrossed in them. For instance, he questions his actions when he thinks about Melanie's age: “*A child! He thinks: No more than a child! What am I doing?* Yet his heart lurches with desire” (20). The juxtaposition of David's scandalized objection to his own actions with his rash decision to succumb to

his “lurching heart’s desire” exposes the paradoxes that lie within his consciousness. Yet, David’s self-awareness does not change his behaviour; it is solely useful to the reader as it helps demonstrate how privileged men like David rationalize and justify their abuse of power when they exploit vulnerable others. At the same time, the reader is asked to consider the possibility that transgressors like David engage in the productive work of intently questioning and reflecting on the limits that they transgress.

Despite his immoral decisions, David does not solely come off as a malicious character. In some instances, he is able to build positive bonds with the women in his life and shows concern and care for them. For instance, after two meetings with David, Melanie chooses to visit him of her own accord. In this scene, he takes the opportunity to “make a bed for her in his daughter’s old bedroom, kiss her good night [...] ease off her shoes, cover her” (26). David performs a ritual of paternal care: he tucks Melanie into bed as if she were his own child and thinks about consoling her. However, he also ponders if he should ask her to “tell daddy what is wrong” - a question that is deeply unsettling, suggests incest, and reminds readers that David has predatory impulses (26). In this scene, Coetzee calls back to David’s previous earnestness and desire to provide care to Soraya’s children. When he performs his ritual of care, he not only transgresses the limits of his role as Melanie’s professor, but he also calls into question the limits of paternal care. Coetzee asks the reader to think about the fact that their age difference, David’s role as Melanie’s professor, and his racializing gaze are all factors that makes this kind of care exploitative. This puzzling scene effectively illustrates the slender margins between David’s various roles.

In addition to exhibiting disturbing behaviours and engaging in uncharacteristic acts of care, David also has strange reflections about the nature of his relationship to Melanie. In fact, he projects his own transgressions onto Melanie when he wonders: “Mistress? Daughter? What, in her heart, is she trying to be?” (27) These accusatory questions point to the severity of David’s delusion - he deflects his own questionable behaviours onto Melanie so as to avoid having to confront them. When David questions what Melanie “is trying to be,” he uses victim-blaming rhetoric and tries to dissipate his own strange efforts to treat her like an interim daughter. His deflection allows him to uphold and benefit from his position as a middle-class white man in a country that has historically “allowed some of the worst features of patriarchalism to survive, including the treatment of unattached (unowned) women as fair game, huntable creatures” (Coetzee, *Giving Offense*, 82). In fact, in “The Harms of Pornography,” Coetzee explicitly states that trying to find the root cause behind the violence that is perpetrated against women in South Africa is futile as it is a complex cultural phenomenon that is rooted in “the trauma of colonial conquest” (Coetzee, *Giving Offense*, 81). Therefore, the questions that David directs towards Melanie are also addressed to the reader – their inclusion underscores how complex racial and gendered imbalances manifest themselves in David’s distorted rationalizations. David’s treatment of Melanie and the prevailing patriarchal attitudes in post-apartheid South Africa are therefore not unrelated.

The connection between David’s transgressions in his encounters with Melanie and the novel’s critique of post-apartheid attitudes and structures of power is clear to the South African reader. In fact, this correlation comes into focus when Melanie files a sexual harassment report against David and he is called to testify in front of the

university's disciplinary tribunal. Lucy Valerie Graham explains that, in this scene, Coetzee "rewrites versions of the college novel" and exposes the structures of power and bureaucratic policies that fail to avert rape culture (Graham, "Reading the Unspeakable," 258). Therefore, the tribunal scene is rooted in real-world events and, at the same time, it functions as a Kafka-esque allegory. Critics also unanimously consider the tribunal as an allegory for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) – a committee that "sought, during the middle and late 1990s, to uncover the thousands of stories of human rights abuses committed under the apartheid regime, and to consider amnesty applications brought by perpetrators" (van der Vlies, 66). However, the members of the tribunal in *Disgrace* struggle to uncover the story behind David's transgressions because he is uncooperative and merely provides evasive details about his encounters with Melanie. Farodia Rassool, the chair of the university-wide committee on discrimination, calls David's opaqueness into question:

Yes, he says he is guilty; but when we try to get specificity, all of a sudden it is not abuse of a young woman he is confessing to, just an impulse he could not resist, with no mention of the pain he has caused, no mention of the long history of exploitation of which this is part. (53)

This statement proves that the tribunal is not just concerned about uncovering the truth about David's transgressions, but also how he is inherently a part of "a long history of exploitation." Rassool's complaint is also intensified because of her own status as a racialized woman; she treats Melanie's assault as both a historical and personal matter and interrogates David more intensely than her peers. As the charges that are brought against David have implications that are far-reaching and beyond the scope of his

offense, it is clear that part of the purpose of the trial is to protect the university's image as a progressive and reformed institution. In fact, the chair of the committee, Manas Mathabane, repeatedly tells David that he merely needs to sign-off on a pre-written apology that the university has issued and to signal his willingness to undergo counselling to get off scot-free. Mathabane also insists on telling David that the sincerity of the statement is less important than his preparedness to acknowledge his faults "in a public manner," which highlights the fact that tribunals of this kind are willing to accept and aid perpetrators like David despite their predatory behaviours (58). As a whole, the episode suggests that disciplinary tribunals and trials like those held by the TRC are somewhat performative in their efforts to restore justice. Coetzee asks his readers to think about the fact that individuals must take on the moral responsibility of upholding laws and ethical principles when regulatory bodies fail to enact justice.

In the scene, David is especially critical of the tribunal's "religious air"⁴ (van der Vlies, 66). He objects to the proposition that he should seek counselling from a "priest" and refuses to deliver anything other than a "secular" plea (49). However, most of David's derisive remarks and complaints about the tribunal's religiosity are directed at Farodia Rassool because she insists that he should deliver a kind of Augustinian confession (54). David explains that Rassool's point of contention is flawed because "repentance belongs to another world, to another universe of discourse" (58). David believes that relying on divine authority is not a legitimate practice in a secular liberal institution like the university. He rejects the tribunal's "religious air" because it indicates

⁴ It is worth noting that the hearings of the TRC were chaired by the Archbishop Desmond Tutu. As such, Coetzee underscores the irony of needing an Anglican Archbishop to legitimize and oversee a series of secular hearings. He makes a covert allusion to this by having Manas Mathabane, a Professor of Religious Studies, chair the inquiry.

that the procedures of the hearing are also influenced by practices that are drawn directly out of South Africa's "long history of exploitation," and more specifically, its fraught relationship to Christianity. Coetzee makes several allusions to the Christian ideals of the Dutch Reformed Church and to its complicity in "sanctifying [...] the apartheid system" and in legitimizing white-Afrikaner-nationalist rhetoric (Sparks, 32).

The defiant remarks that David directs towards the institution of the Church, specifically towards the ideas of the Dutch Reformed Church, are especially blatant. As van der Vlies notes, "Lurie is resolutely secular," and his anti-religious fervour is apparent because "he insists on maintaining the logic by which secular society deals with transgression" (van der Vlies, 67). David is steadfast in maintaining a secular logic and is critical of the fact that the language of the Church underpins the workings of the tribunal, but he also takes particular issue with Christians who relinquish their critical thinking abilities and arbitrarily follow the rules that are imposed onto them. For instance, he later expresses skepticism about the benevolent Bev Shaw, an animal-welfare volunteer, and states: "to me animal-welfare people are a bit like Christians of a certain kind. Everyone is so cheerful and well-intentioned that after a while you itch to go off and do some raping and pillaging" (73). David is suspicious of "Christians of a certain kind" that fail to question the principles that they follow and give the impression that they are dim-witted do-gooders. While the statement is ironic given David's sexual history, his spiteful jest towards Christians holds an underlying truth: David sees his own transgressive behaviour as the antithesis to the narrow thinking, unquestioned rules, and uninformed principles to which Christians abide.

David's skepticism towards the Church is especially apparent when he interacts with Melanie's father, Mr. Isaacs. Towards the end of the novel, David pays a visit to the Isaacs' family home in Georgetown to apologize for the damage caused by his actions. During this visit, he remarks that Mr. Isaacs could be "a deacon or a server," an impression that is soon confirmed when Mr. Isaacs begins to use biblical references to confront David about Melanie's sexual assault (166). Yet, before the conversation takes this heated turn, David makes additional observations about the Isaacs family's lifestyle. He is unnerved by their adherence to traditional patriarchal conventions and critiques their disconcertingly bourgeois suburban way of life:

They are teetotal, clearly. He should have thought of that. A tight little petit-bourgeois household, frugal, prudent. The car washed, the lawn mowed, savings in the bank. All their resources concentrated on launching the two jewel daughters into the future: clever Melanie, with her theatrical ambitions; Desiree, the beauty. (168)

David's suspicions about the Isaacs family are twofold: he is unnerved about their "prudence" and piety, but also about their alarmingly perfect adherence to the image of the nuclear family. The Isaacs family's pristine image and "*exemplary*" way of life contradict David's own personal history of transgressive behaviours; he is contemptuous of the Isaacs because he sees them as a threat (171). Part of the tasks and responsibilities that Mr. Isaacs appears to take on – providing a secure income and leading a petit-bourgeois lifestyle – are expectations that white Afrikaner men followed and "intransigently" upheld under apartheid and, more specifically, under the authority of the Dutch Reformed Church (Coetzee, *White Writing*, 11). David's contention with the Isaacs

family's religion and lifestyle is provocative considering that, early on in the novel, he remarks that the members of the Isaacs family are Coloured. In fact, just as David selects Soraya for her exotic features, he chooses Melanie on the basis of colour and qualifies her as "Meláni: the dark one" (18). Therefore, David struggles with the idea that the Isaacs family could become a nuclear family despite their race. While David does not necessarily envy Mr. Isaacs's bland, pious, conservative existence, he recognises that he is the embodiment of the threat that Black and Coloured South Africans pose to the white male hegemony in the context of post-apartheid South Africa.

The friction that exists between David and Mr. Isaacs is mostly tied to Melanie's rape, but is amplified by the two men's differing world views. In fact, Mr. Isaacs does not fully accept David's apology for raping his daughter – he expresses doubts about David's sincerity and questions his faith: "The question is, what does God want from you, besides being very sorry? Have you any ideas, Mr. Lurie?" (172). This interaction emphasizes the fact that the two men are segregated because of their differing relationships to Christianity. Unlike the members of the university tribunal, Mr. Isaacs tests David: he presses him about the importance of remorse and repentance – two points that have a particular significance in a country like South Africa. Despite Mr. Isaacs's efforts, David's apology remains unconvincing. David is displeased about being lectured and counselled by a religious Coloured man. In fact, Mr. Isaacs recalls David's earlier description of "Christians of a certain kind": he is the kind of Christian that is saturated with judgement and that comes off as condescending in his preaching efforts (73). Nora Hämäläinen comments on the dissonance between David and Mr. Isaacs's relationship to faith and notes that Coetzee's writing appeals to secular readers: "it is to be understood in

terms of a world where characters, author, and readers are not Christian. (The implied reader is more like David than like Mr. Isaacs)” (Hämäläinen, 247). If we consider that Coetzee writes to a secular audience, then readers should understand the pedagogical aspects of Mr. Isaacs’s religious fervor as details that cheapen what is otherwise a thought-provoking confrontation. Mr. Isaacs’s preaching efforts also sour the generosity that he demonstrates when he invites David into his home. Readers are left to consider the fact that David can neither be held accountable by the university nor by people of faith and they are left to grapple with David’s pattern of unchecked transgressive behaviours. By producing this perplexing scene, Coetzee demonstrates that the moral authority in the new South Africa falls almost entirely on the individual and that the transgressions that David engages in are a means through which he processes this new responsibility. In his essay, Foucault specifically asks his reader to consider the fact that transgression is most effective when individuals no longer have a positive relationship to forms of authority when he wonders: “Profanation in a world which no longer recognizes any positive meaning in the sacred – is this not more or less what we may call transgression?” (Foucault, 30). Foucault specifies that transgression is especially constructive in secular societies that exist in the wake of God’s “absence” and are no longer regimented by “God’s...boundaries” (Foucault, 31). The religious commentary that Coetzee delivers in his novel is tied to this Foucauldian idea that transgression is neither good nor bad, it is a productive means through which individuals can evaluate religious limits and ideals like the petit bourgeois family and determine whether or not they service and promote morally sound principles.

While it is apparent that David and Mr. Isaacs have differing religious beliefs, they relate on the simple principle that they are both fathers. David tries to establish a connection with Mr. Isaacs on this front when he declares, “I have a daughter myself, you’ll be interested to hear” (166). The comment backfires and adds iciness to their already unfriendly rapport, but most importantly, it draws the reader’s attention to the two men’s differing attitudes about their daughters. In fact, throughout the scene, it is clear that David is caught off guard by the commands and orders that Mr. Isaacs directs towards his daughter and wife. Soon after, David is lectured by Mr. Isaacs’ and instructed to apologize to his wife and daughter. In this scene, David becomes another of Mr. Isaacs’ subordinates. In this sense, Mr. Isaacs proves to be more than a deacon with a pristine lawn – he is the head of a patriarchal family unit, actively exerts his authority and control over the women in his life as well as anyone who enters his home, and supports traditional gender roles. This is apparent when David enters the room to deliver his apology to Melanie’s mother and her younger sister, Desiree:

Sitting on the bed are Desiree and her mother, doing something with a skein of wool. Astonished at the sight of him, they fall silent. With careful ceremony, he gets to his knees and touches his forehead to the floor. Is it enough, he thinks. Will that do? If not, what more? He raises his head. The two of them are still sitting there, frozen. He meets the mother’s eyes, then the daughter’s, and again the current leaps, the current of desire. (173)

Instead of delivering a verbal apology to the Isaacs women, David takes an oddly “ceremonial” approach, and bows down as if to show his reverence for them. This odd religious bow suggests a kind of worship or prayer and cements the fact that David’s

remorse is somewhat performative and that he is more interested in virtue signalling than engaging in real forms of repentance. Coetzee incorporates shifts in registers and imbeds religious observances like David's bow within the narrative to unsettle the reader and call into question the frivolous and performative rites that are tied to Christianity. By juxtaposing David's apology for Melanie's rape with the confession that he has a "current of desire" for Desiree, Coetzee undermines readings of this scene that might understand David's apology as sincere and ensures that the reader sees Mr. Isaacs' religious speech as inconsequential. The immediacy of David's return to his predatory impulses confirms that Coetzee tries to generate shock, disgust, and astonishment in the reader. Coetzee juxtaposes Mr. Isaacs' sermon with David's sexual impulses so as to show that transgression is, in part, a response to religious control. Andrew van der Vlies is one of the very few scholars who has studied this scene and attempted to decipher the meaning behind David's gesture of atonement: "He does attempt his own gesture of atonement, as if attempting to think himself into this alien discursive order: he prostrates himself awkwardly in front of Melanie's mother and her sister, apparently enacting bodily an expression of abnegation" (van der Vlies, 68). David continues to find himself in an "alien discursive order" when he sees that Melanie's mother and Desiree are "doing something with a skein of wool." This kind of domestic and traditionally feminine work invokes a kind of power structure that limits women and implies that they play submissive roles. David's own "expression of abnegation" implies that he supports the women's willingness to submit and accept traditional gender roles. The scene feels archaic – two women spin wool and a man bows in prostration – and appears awkward and odd. While this interaction is perplexing, it helps Coetzee tie the loose ends of

Melanie's plotline all the while leaving the reader with the disturbing feeling that David's sexual impulses are bound to persist. As a white man in South Africa with no religious faith, David has no means through which to be held accountable for his actions. Despite the fact that he continues to engage in sexual indiscretions, and despite the fact that his apology is performative, David no longer has the smugness that he had during his liaisons with Soraya nor the self-assuredness that he had when he refused to abide by the tribunal's demands. In producing this blurry and complex trajectory, Coetzee delivers an inquiry into the colonial attitudes that continue to prevail in the post-apartheid period, while in no way attempting to salve the wounds that continue to be generated by white colonizers like David.

Chapter 4: Lucy, Patriarchy, and Bastard Legacies

The depiction of old-fashioned practices that Coetzee generates in the scene at the Isaacs' family home is not out of character for the author. Coetzee delivers a similar subtext when he describes David's exile to the countryside and uneasy adaptation to Lucy's rural and antiquated lifestyle. Lucy, whose mother is Dutch and thus has a connection to the Dutch colonization of the region, is transgressive in the way that she leads her life. In the chapters that unfold at Lucy's smallholding in the Eastern Cape, Coetzee reimagines the *plaasroman* (Afrikaner Farm Novel) and deconstructs the "simple" lifestyle that Afrikaners led during the early colonization of South Africa, beginning in the mid-seventeenth century (Coetzee, *White Writing*, 10). It is worth noting that Coetzee does not adhere to all of the standards of the *plaasroman*; he produces an anti-pastoral novel that "breaks with colonial mappings of the female body and land, [and] depict[s] instead feudal systems of claiming and reclaiming where there is contempt for women as owners of property and land" (Graham, "Reading the Unspeakable," 259). In fact, Coetzee breaks the patriarchal structure that is characteristic of the *plaasroman* and appoints Lucy as the head of her household. During his stay at Lucy's smallholding, David struggles to come to terms with the idea that his daughter leads a life that, despite being unconventional, is rooted in Afrikaner traditions and he discloses that he finds it "curious that he and [Lucy's] mother, cityfolk, intellectuals, should have produced this throwback, this sturdy young settler. But perhaps it was not they who produced her: perhaps history had the larger share" (61). By framing his disconnection from Lucy as the result of "history," David suggests that she has been persuaded to accept the conservative, unsophisticated, feudal values that are tied to life on the Eastern Cape in the

wake of the political transformations after the end of apartheid. It is as though he fails to recognize that his daughter voluntarily lived in a “commune,” momentarily had a same-sex partner, and continues to lead an alternative lifestyle; she has no interest in reproducing the patriarchal family values of traditional Afrikanerdom. He feels as though she actively renounces his liberal, English, intellectual roots and he takes issue with the fact that Lucy is a lesbian. According to David, Lucy’s lifestyle reinforces the fact that he has little influence in his role as her father and he is unable to raise a daughter in his own image.

David’s doubts about his loss of influence and authority as a father are not unfounded, as Lucy has reservations about her father: she questions his intentions and often highlights the inconsistencies in his claims by bringing his sexual history into their conversations. In fact, during a heated discussion, Lucy confronts David and tells him that he ought to know how rapists think: “Maybe, for men, hating the woman makes sex more exciting. You are a man, you ought to know. When you have sex with someone strange [...] doesn’t it feel like murder, like getting away with murder?” (158). By likening rape to killing, Lucy shames David, but most importantly, she draws attention to the fact that he is unable to understand the connection between his assault of Melanie and her gang-rape. Instead of taking accountability for his sexual history, David fixates on the tone that Lucy uses to deliver her reproach and thinks: “Does one speak to one’s father like that?” (159) David proves to be primarily concerned about his dwindling respectability and authority in his role as a father. His concern about Lucy’s tone of voice is not an isolated event as, earlier in the novel, he notices that “for the second time in a day she has spoken to him as if to a child – a child or an old man” (104). David takes

issue with Lucy's attitude because it suggests that the roles of parent and child have been reversed and that his authority has been completely overturned. David is initially characterized as liberal and progressive, but it becomes apparent that he clings to parts of the patriarchal structure that work to his advantage. He is deeply paradoxical in that he hopes that his daughter conforms to specific expectations (i.e. respectful language, heterosexuality) all the while himself being the ultimate transgressor.

In their co-authored article on subjection and survival in *Disgrace*, Maryam Beyad and Hossein Keramatfar describe David's desire to play the role of patriarch when he visits his daughter as a white colonial response to post-apartheid policies. They read David's persistent desire to "dominate" his daughter as "another outlet" that he uses to express the resentment that he feels towards his loss of this authority:

Yet, with his position of social dominance, as a university professor, gone, Lurie, in need of new relations, can only turn to his daughter where he, as a father, may well be able to cater to his sadistic tendencies, since a father is *naturally* supposed to love and to have his daughter under his control. (Beyad and Keramatfar, 160)

Coetzee generates a character that is adamant about holding onto his "natural" entitlement to power in his position as a father because he feels as though it cannot be regulated by institutions (governmental, religious, or other) that he finds unreliable and untrustworthy. As Jeffrey Cass notes, David eventually "realizes that he can no longer be a paternal guide, if he ever was, because the norms governing parental advice have shifted" (Cass, 41). David's transgressive behaviours and his fixation with paternal authority prove to be two differing methods that he employs to determine the "norms

governing parental advice.” He consistently questions how these norms affect the way that his fatherly authority is enacted, restricted, and preserved.

David’s paradoxical reflections about his role as a father are intensified after Lucy’s rape. This is apparent when he apologizes to Lucy and admits that he has not been a great parent: “Forgive me Lucy [...] for being one of the two mortal beings assigned to usher you into the world and not turning out to be a better guide” (79). David speaks of his parenting as if it were a transcendental calling rather than an elected decision. Sonia Li explains that the “pseudo-religious language” that David employs helps him understand the boundaries and sanctions that he faces “on an abstract, religious level (salvation, expiation, suffering) instead of on a personal, emotional level” (Li, 96). While the “pseudo-religious language” that David employs contradicts his aforementioned rejection of the church, he employs religious terms as they prove to be an effective way for him to navigate and understand the “abstract business” of being a father (63). The benefits and necessity of preserving specific religious terms is an idea that Foucault also considers in his essay on transgression. While he rejects the religious terms that give sex a negative connotation, he notes that these terms cannot be completely eliminated from everyday language. He explains that, even after the secular turn, religion “continues tracing indefinitely its great skeletal outline” (32). In *Disgrace*, Coetzee takes this Foucauldian idea and applies it to the end of apartheid. David’s use of religious language and his paradoxical desire to preserve certain patriarchal ideas demonstrate that apartheid ideas infiltrate the very language used by South Africans. David is riddled with contradictory thoughts because he, perhaps unknowingly, clings to notions that best serve what he is trying to convey: in this scene, he uses religious language to justify his poor

parenting. His contradictions serve his self-interest much like the rules of apartheid served the Afrikaners' self-interests. This also explains why Coetzee invites his reader to perpetually reconsider and question David's moral praxis because, despite his position as a white South African of British descent⁵, his ideas are tainted by apartheid ideals.

As with his relationships with Melanie and Soraya, David engages in transgressive behaviours and has unboundaried ideas about his own daughter. For instance, when he thinks about the "unstinting love" that he has for his daughter, he quickly wonders if she might have given his affection a "darker reading" (76). David's transgressive ideas about their relationship, and concern that his daughter might have perceived his love for her in a sexual manner, confirm that David is less able to empathize and understand different perspectives than he claims to be. The narrative voice allows readers to consistently witness David's endless conflation of sexual desire and care. For instance, when he moves to Lucy's farmstead, he notes that: "as a father grows older he turns more and more – it cannot be helped – toward his daughter. She becomes the bride of his youth reborn" (86). Coetzee emphasizes the fact that David thinks that his impulses "cannot be helped" to demonstrate how simple mantras can easily justify wayward ideas. He continues to have transgressive ideas about his relationship with his daughter after the attack and imagines that: "Step by step, as inexorably as if they were man and wife, he and she are being driven apart, and there is nothing he can do about it. Their very quarrels have become like the bickerings of a married couple, trapped together with nowhere to go" (134). David transgresses the limits of his role as a father by again

⁵ See footnote 1 for more on the distinction between white Afrikaners and white South Africans of British descent.

implying that his daughter is like a wife and that the connection that they had prior to their falling out was like a marriage. The passage is unsettling because it implies incest, but also because it suggests that David is a puppet to “inexorable” forces. He continuously identifies South Africa’s tempestuous social climate as the cause of his strange parenting choices, and notes that it has pushed him to become a more transgressive parent: “Lucy has not led a protected life. Why should they not be open with each other, why should they draw lines, in times when no one else does?” (76) This is one of many rhetorical questions that Coetzee focalizes through David but, ultimately, addresses to the reader. The question underscores the fact that David is unable to “draw lines” in his various relationships, but it also highlights how the instability of South Africa’s socio-political climate pervades personal relationships and has effect at the level of the individual.

The questions surrounding the necessity of preserving specific aspects of the patriarchal social order in South Africa are most blatantly raised through Petrus’s narrative arc. Petrus, who is introduced halfway through the novel, initially serves as a background character that simply performs menial labour on Lucy’s land. Eventually, he becomes a central figure of patriarchal authority who acquires the sole possession of the smallholding. While Lucy introduces Petrus as her “assistant,” she quickly clarifies that he is already climbing the farmstead’s social ladder as he is transitioning into his role as her “co-proprietor” (62). The reader comes to understand that Petrus is more than a co-proprietor and that he slowly tries to undermine Lucy’s position as the head of the farmstead. Much like his hostility towards Mr. Isaacs, David perceives Petrus’s gradual encroachment onto Lucy’s land and his rising power as threats to his own authority, and

also voices concerns over the fact that his daughter lives with an “African” (171). While Petrus is an elusive character who is, at first, self-described as “the dog-man” because he helps take care of the dogs that Lucy boards in her kennels (64) and later referred to as “the dig-man, the carry-man, the water-man” (151) because of various tasks that he performs on the farmstead, there are several details that indicate that he does not wish to keep any of these titles nor to become Lucy’s co-proprietor. As Graham notes in *State of Peril*, “Petrus, the farm laborer, describes himself as ‘the dog-man,’ but Petrus’s rise in the world corresponds, inversely, with the protagonist’s fall ‘into a state of disgrace’ such that David Lurie becomes ‘a dog-man’” (155). David and Petrus’ inverted trajectories are part of the anti-*plaasroman* tropes that Coetzee tries to generate in this novel. By having David meditate on his new, pitiable identity as a volunteer labourer in a defunded animal welfare program, Coetzee metaphorically dramatizes and explains how white men internalize and process the fall of white hegemony. At the same time, he portrays Petrus as the kind of Black man who knows the tacit laws of the land and intends to use his wits to gain full control over the smallholding and to serve as its patriarch and sole proprietor.

Petrus is able to have an upward trajectory because he has something that no one else can offer: the ability to protect Lucy specifically from the African men that live in their region. As Graham rightfully notes, “*Disgrace* points to a context where women are regarded as property, and are liable for protection only insofar as they belong to men. As a lesbian, Lucy would be regarded as ‘unowned’ and therefore ‘hutable’, and there is even a suggestion that her sexuality may have provoked her attackers” (Graham, “Reading the Unspeakable,” 260). While Lucy is resolute about keeping quiet after the attack, she understands the vulnerability of her position, which explains why she decides

to “creep in under Petrus’s wing” (203). Lucy’s reasoning is quite telling about the status of the patriarchal social order in the Eastern Cape, as she notes, “Objectively I am a woman alone. I have no brothers. I have a father, but he is far away and anyhow powerless in the terms that matter here. To whom can I turn for protection, for patronage?” (204). Lucy’s use of the term “patronage” adds a layer of complexity to Petrus’s function as a blanket of security as it implies that she also accepts being indoctrinated or guarded by him. As the institutional structures in *Disgrace* are unable to uphold any kind of moral code – the university tribunal proves to be more of a symbolic performance than a legitimate inquiry into the events surrounding a sexual assault; the police are unable to track down Lucy’s attackers; and Mr. Isaacs’s preaching efforts are unfruitful - moral responsibility falls on Coetzee’s characters.

Lucy accepts Petrus’s proposition, turns her land over to him, and agrees to become his wife because she recognizes that her status as the smallholding’s owner holds little weight on its own and that her identity as a woman makes her a target. Mary Leblanc explains why Lucy makes practical decisions to protect herself and voluntarily gives up her land: “She shows that titles are irrelevant to her— concubine, byowner—so long as the house itself, her way of life, remains hers alone. She sees reconciliation on her own terms, indifferent to how her relationship with Petrus, her life, and her connection to the house are perceived from an objective standpoint or via socially recognized titles” (Leblanc, 165). Lucy’s indifference towards “socially recognized titles” is meant to come off as unnerving to the reader who has entertained David’s persistent and inexorable concerns about his own titles. As Leblanc states, Lucy also differs from her father in that she has no problem seeing “reconciliation on her own terms” and has none of David’s

insecurities towards the post-apartheid state and towards the social upheaval that it has generated. Despite their differing attitudes, Lucy recognizes that titles are of primordial importance to David. She knows that David takes his family's public image to heart and asks him if he is offended that she has chosen to marry Petrus: "‘Were you offended?’ ‘Offended at the prospect of becoming Petrus's father-in-law? No. I was taken aback, astonished, dumbfounded, but no, not offended, give me credit for that’" (203). Lucy understands that her father is concerned about his status as father, professor, and now father-in-law, and that he uses titles to concretize his power and to navigate the new social order. However, she feels no need to hold onto her titles and instead focuses on building and preserving her rural life on the Eastern Cape.

Coetzee continues to raise questions about the importance of titles until the very end of the novel. In fact, a question regarding the legitimizing power of patriarchal titles is considered once more when David learns that Lucy is pregnant as a result of her rape. In fact, David considers that his new title as a grandfather necessitates a complete transformation of his identity:

A grandfather. A Joseph. Who would have thought it! What pretty girl can he expect to be wooed into bed with a grandfather? [...] What will it entail, being a grandfather? As a father he has not been much of a success, despite trying harder than most. As a grandfather he will probably score lower than average too. He lacks the virtues of the old: equanimity, kindness, patience. (217)

As David's narcissistic thoughts and wayward desires take their final lap around Coetzee's deranged racetrack, the reader is invited to think about his legacy. David's sexual fantasies are paired with accurate and well-articulated thoughts about the virtues

of grandfathering (equanimity, kindness, patience). David continues to think about wooing “pretty girls” and the reader is expected to take this as evidence that a complete transformation of his character is out of the question.

The final disgraceful plotline in the novel has to do with Pollux. David learns that Pollux, one of Lucy’s rapists, happens to also be Petrus’s “relative” (201). David is rightfully livid at the prospect that his grandchild will be related to “the gang of three. Three fathers in one” and he is furious with Petrus for sheltering Pollux (199). When Lucy and David discuss Petrus and Pollux’s ties, she tries to justify why she would agree to let one of her rapists live on her property: “Anyway, Pollux turns out to be a brother of Petrus’s wife’s. Whether that means a real brother I don’t know. But Petrus has obligations towards him, family obligations” (200). The idea that Lucy would allow her rapist to live on her property and to receive protection from Petrus is horrifying to David. To the reader, it becomes evident that he is not only concerned about his daughter’s safety, he is also angry that his daughter respects and recognizes Petrus’s wish to sustain his “family obligations,” especially since she does not enact this recognition when it comes to her own father. As David perpetually worries about losing his own authority as Lucy’s father, her decision to disregard his earlier warnings and to live with Petrus and Pollux is devastating. In fact, David’s worries about Lucy’s safety are validated when he notices that Pollux looks at Lucy’s breasts “unashamedly” (207). The persistence of Pollux’s sexual impulses coincides with David’s own wayward desires. He chooses instead to fixate on Lucy’s prompt dismissal of Pollux’s behaviours when she merely responds: “He is disturbed. A disturbed child” (208). Mike Marais comments on the connections between two characters:

The implication is fairly obvious: Coetzee's use of the child metaphor in his depiction of this relationship creates a parallel between Lurie's relationship with Pollux and Lurie's violation of Melanie Isaacs, who is also depicted as a child (20), a parallel which reminds one that the protagonist is himself guilty of the violence for which he berates Pollux and that, in striking him, he repeats this original violence. (Marais, "J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* and the Task of the Imagination," 80)

The cyclical resurgence of sexual impulses and of violence in the novel show that Coetzee is interested in the ways that limits and taboos (e.g. incest, pedophilia, rape) are preserved and enforced by the rhetoric that people employ to discuss the events. Coetzee flags dismissive and trivializing responses like "he is a disturbed child" as erroneous, and encourages the reader to think about the consequences of and complicated motivations behind the transgressions.

Coetzee uses the final chapters of *Disgrace* to envision a new social order: one in which David completely loses his authority, credibility, and influence as a father and is replaced by Petrus - the newly established patriarch. Most importantly, he asks the reader to consider how the complicated dynamics between David, Lucy, Petrus, and Pollux rest on their transgression of various boundaries. Coetzee does not construct elaborate explanations for each character's motivations, and instead, treats Petrus's encroachment onto Lucy's land, his protection of Pollux, and David's fall into disgrace as a series of consequences that occur after a boundary has been transgressed. Coetzee elaborates this unconventional extended family to upset rigid ideas about family structures and to show how the parameters of each role in the family unit have little influence on the way that

characters inhabit these roles. The reader is left to think about the fact that there “ought to be bounds to what is licit” (Coetzee, *Doubling the Point*, 298) and that, more specifically, there ought to be limits to paternal authority so as to ensure that the “worst features of patriarchy” do not survive in the new post-apartheid state (Coetzee, *Giving Offense*, 82). The transgressions that the characters engage in are therefore neither entirely good nor bad, but Coetzee integrates them into the narrative in the hopes that his readers will question the tacit laws that thwart Petrus in his efforts to be a landowner, prevent Lucy from raising her child on her own; and, earlier in the novel, protect David from facing more severe repercussions for his sexual harassment of a Coloured student. David’s downward spiral and trajectory towards destitution, in and of itself, shows how tacit laws and social bounds are sometimes more effective at delivering justice than regulatory bodies (i.e. disciplinary tribunals and the police). Coetzee continues to stress the social value of transgression because it interrogates limits, but also because it exposes how the complex issues that arise during the post-apartheid period necessitate “bounds” that fall outside of traditional forms of authority.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

David Lurie's arc is not linear: the man who thinks he has "solved the problem of sex rather well" (1) at the beginning of the novel becomes progressively more insecure and self-contradictory as he sinks deeper "into a state of disgrace" (172). Yet, David's humiliation is not entirely sobering because he continues to serve as a pornographer-writer until the very end of the novel. In "The Harms of Pornography," Coetzee sets out to create a work of written pornography that "sees (but also does not see), in its own desire to know its desire, that which it can never know about itself" (72). In other words, he wishes to produce a pornographic text that delivers a philosophical argument. He achieves this in *Disgrace*, by focalizing his text through his pornographer, David, and using his paradoxical rationalizations as the basis for complex allegory about societal tensions in post-apartheid South Africa. By the end of the novel, David defines himself as "not a bad man but not good either" and wonders "will that be the verdict on him, the verdict of the universe and its all-seeing eye?" (195). Coetzee writes these rhetorical questions into the fabric of the novel to make readers reconsider their apprehensions about David and to understand that his transgressions are not only reflections of his individual morality but also an expression of broader social turmoil. In his deliberate effort to generate an ambiguous pornographer-writer, Coetzee invites the reader to consider both how David's actions, and more specifically, his disturbing propensity to conflate sexual desire and fatherly care, are tied to his individual moral praxis but also to broader biases and antiquated ideas (i.e. white peril, heterosexuality, patriarchy) that he holds onto despite his liberal beliefs.

In *Disgrace*, Coetzee focalizes the narrative through the consciousness of a white man of English descent not only to demonstrate how he processes and reacts to the fluctuating social climate of post-apartheid South Africa, but also to demonstrate how his reactions continue to be shaped by apartheid. While David's liberal political beliefs are made evident, most of his reflections are paradoxical because he looks backward and forward: he clings to the antiquated principles that are advantageous for him (i.e. the natural authority that he has over his daughter and female student), yet, transgresses boundaries that sometimes bring about harsh consequences (e.g. retributions after his entanglement with Melanie). Coetzee captures the phenomenological experiences of a white father as he faces the complex task of reorienting himself within a social order that draws unclear lines (because of the instability of the social, political, and cultural context of post-apartheid South Africa) and according to principles that do not fully align with his moral compass.

To understand the limits of his role in his various relationships within the post-apartheid context, David transgresses boundaries. Coetzee follows the Foucauldian idea that transgression is neither good nor bad, it is simply "a form of thought in which the interrogation of the limit replaces the search for totality" (Foucault, 50). When David transgresses the limits of his relationships with Soraya, Melanie, and Lucy, he seeks to uncover the technical boundaries of his roles and admits that his actions are sometimes harmful. In the opening chapter of the novel, David wonders about the distinctions between the roles of foster-father, step-father, and biological father, a specific question that leads the reader to understand that the protagonist does not understand the limits that exist in a transactional relationship. In the chapters that follow David's relationship with

Melanie, the effects of his blatantly harmful transgression are drawn out to deliver derisive commentary on regulatory bodies like the Church and the university, and to explain how these structures of power impose limits that are tainted by the history of colonialism and apartheid. However, Coetzee's commentary on the blurred boundaries of fatherhood and the need for a new moral safety net are most poignant when David tries to transgress the boundaries of his role as Lucy's father. In the final chapters, David, the transgressor, finds himself in the position of the transgressed. Coetzee uses this role reversal to disorient the reader and to highlight the intricacies and ambiguity that lie within patriarchal family units.

Coetzee continuously develops complex characters with emotional poignancy. While the sexually unboundaried father trope is one that Coetzee returns to in several works of fiction, David Lurie proves to be a remarkable character in that his ambivalent reflections, rationalizations, and ideas about fatherhood and sexual desire generate productive puzzlement. While the love and care that he provides do not offset his wayward desires, they allow the reader to understand how his thoughts and transgressions are actively shaped by a society that is also in flux. Coetzee progressively adds impermeability to his most porous character to demonstrate how the gradual understanding of tacit laws solidifies one's place within a social hierarchy. The ambiguity of David's role as a father not only makes the experience of reading *Disgrace* markedly more harrowing, but also helps blur the boundaries of fatherhood and the limits of care. In *Disgrace*, Coetzee produces an accessible and poignant pornographer-writer character through which readers can imagine transgression and consider the tacit laws of South

Africa. In doing so, he invites his readers to think about how moral responsibility plays out on an individual level.

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