

# **The Narrative Technique in J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace***

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“For a man of his age, fifty-two, divorced, he has, to his mind, solved the problem of sex rather well”. The first sentence of J.M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace* directly sets the tone of the novel. The language used is controlled, precise and presents facts and figures like the age and marital status of the protagonist. The perfect and especially the present tense, used throughout the book, provide an impression of immediacy. The character is referred to in the third person. However, the narrative’s perspective seems to originate not from a narrator but from the character, indicated by “his mind”. Sex is defined as a problem that needs to be taken care of, indicating a lack of emotions and a rationalized view on things. This concise narrative style makes the novel very accessible, providing it with an apparent simplicity. We see everything through the main character’s eyes and follow his steps during what seems to be a few weeks. David Lurie, a university professor in literature at Cape Town University, is first rejected by the prostitute he buys sex from, then dismissed from his work after his affair with a student called Melanie Isaacs. He seeks refuge at his daughter Lucy’s house in the Eastern Cape where the climax of the story is reached: Lurie is attacked and Lucy is raped by three black men. The second half of the book describes the aftermaths of the attack. There are few flashbacks and the events are easy to follow with a clear effect of before and after Lucy was raped.

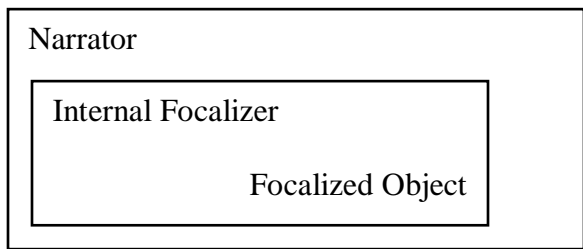
However, at the end of the book there seem to be more questions than answers, and it is somewhat confusing that a text so fluent and almost plain may actually be rather difficult to comprehend. On the back cover of the book, Paul Bailey from the *Independent* rightly calls *Disgrace* “a subtle, multilayered story”. One may wonder how the author succeeds in building these successive layers with such a consistent and apparently simple narrative technique. In order to find an answer to this question, this essay will first study what narrative technique is used by introducing the key concepts of internal focalization,

fallible filter and covert narration; it will thereafter show what consequences this technique may have on the reading of the text.

In any story, there is always a certain way to present things. The reader is confronted with a vision, composed by different elements. Defining these elements, and understanding the relation between them, will enable the reader to better understand the story and its themes. In Book III of the *Republic*, Plato already pointed out the difference between showing and telling a story, between *who sees* and *who speaks*, creating respectively the categories of mimesis (imitation) and diegesis (narration) to separate them and thus creating the basis of modern narratology. In *Disgrace*, the relation between the protagonist (who sees) and the narrator (who speaks) is not always obvious, leading to difficulties of interpretation and sometimes even to strong criticism. In the inflamed context of post apartheid South Africa, the African National Congress for instance held Coetzee responsible for maintaining the negative stereotype of black people in South Africa by focusing the story on the rape of a white woman by three black men (White Media). Feminist readers, such as Elleke Boehmer, have also reacted to the victimized role played by women in the novel. It is true that the perspective in *Disgrace* seems to be disturbingly limited to a white middle-aged man with all the representations it may imply, but I will argue that the narrative is in fact a subtle construction of layers, which requires the reader to personally challenge the perspective presented in the book.

In *Disgrace*, one could say that the events are presented from David Lurie's point of view. However, narrative theorists often prefer to talk about focalization rather than point of view or perspective because the latter terms "do not make an explicit distinction between, on the one hand, the vision through which the elements are presented and, on the other, the identity of the voice that is verbalizing that vision. To put it more simply: they do

not make a distinction between those who see and those who speak” (Bal 116). I will similarly use the notion of focalization which “is the relationship between the ‘vision’, the agent that sees and that which is seen” because it is important to show that “this relationship is a component of the story part, of the content of the narrative text: A says that B sees what C is doing” (118). To be more explicit, in *Disgrace*, the narrator says that David Lurie sees what the other characters are doing. Being a character inside the story, David Lurie is an internal focalizer as defined by Genette (189). In order to illustrate the different participants and levels, it is possible to use what is called a “Chinese box” (Jahn N1.7):



The term focalization seems particularly appropriate because it contains the notion of focus, which indicates the narrative choice to highlight a certain thing rather than another.

To choose a character as an internal focalizer has several implications for the understanding of the story. Most of all it limits our *champs de vision* because as much as we can perceive the thoughts and feelings of the character who acts as a focalizer, we never get to know the thoughts and feelings of the other characters ‘from the inside’. It also makes it very believable because this is how we all perceive the world: I know what I am thinking but can only guess what others have in mind. The consistent use of the present tense in *Disgrace* increases this impression of verisimilitude because the story unfolds itself in front of Lurie, like in ‘real life’. As Manfred Jahn says: “Because the text is so strictly aligned with a character’s spatio-temporal co-ordinates of perception, the reader is

drawn into the story and invited to co-experience what it is like to be a participant - one particular participant - in the unfolding events” (N1.17.). It leads to a natural identification with the character. To understand what other consequences the choice of internal focalization may have on the reading of the text, it is, following Bal, interesting to look into the following questions (120, 121):

1. What does the character focalize: what is the focalization aimed at?
2. How does the character do this; with what attitude does he or she view things?
3. Who focalizes the character: whose focalized object is he or she?

In *Disgrace*, David Lurie focalizes on time in a very specific way. Unlike other internal focalizers, for example Steven in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* by James Joyce, Lurie does not dwell on his childhood memories. We learn matter-of-factly that:

His childhood was spent in a family of women. As mother, aunts, sisters fell away, they were replaced in due course by mistresses, wives, a daughter. The company of women made him a lover of women and, to an extent, a womanizer. (7)

His thoughts only gloss over childhood in order to quickly return to consider his past sexual encounters. This choice of focus emphasizes the lack of innocence and grace usually represented by childhood and by opposition pinpoints Lurie’s emotionless desire.

Moreover, it makes Lurie seem disconnected from his past. This impression is reinforced by the recurrent references to time as a grammatical construction. Mark Sanders, in a special edition of *Interventions*, points out that for instance “Burned-burnt-burnt up” appears in three places in the book (368). It is as if Lurie fails to find a sense of continuity between events; his reaction is to analyze them grammatically and by doing so he separates them even more. Sanders shows the insistence on aspect and the difficulty to come to terms with the past. The novel “denies itself and its readers the capacity to say: these acts and

events are over” (371). It is as if nothing is ever completed. One may draw a parallel to the apartheid and post-apartheid periods in South Africa. The apartheid system is not just over and everything is fine. South Africa is in a transition period in which it is difficult to both break free from the past and, at the same time, find a sense of continuity.

The reader’s perception of space is also limited to what Lurie sees around him. The internal focalization makes it impossible to show a panoramic view. If the character-focalizer is inside a locked room, only the room will be represented (Rimmon 77, 78). A perfect example of this in *Disgrace* is the moment when Lucy is raped. The attackers lock Lurie into the bathroom and this room is the only thing he sees. As Bev Shaw later says: “you weren’t there” (140). Making this the only moment in the novel when Lurie is not physically present is clearly a narrative choice. It highlights the rape and makes it live only through Lurie’s imagination and assumptions. Moreover, this absence of vision seems to reflect Coetzee’s concerns about how and if to represent violence, expressed in other books, like *Waiting for the Barbarians* or *Elizabeth Costello*.

Even when Lurie is present, his perception of space deceives him. When he arrives at Lucy’s house and sees “how she makes a living: from the kennels, and from selling flowers and garden produce”, his first reflection is that “[n]othing could be more simple” (61). Indeed, he wants life to be simple: “Country life in all its idiot simplicity. How he wishes it could be true! He is tired of shadows, of complications, of complicated people” (170). However, it is soon clear that it is all but simple. Lurie ends the description of his daughter’s property by mentioning “the front boundary [which] is marked by a wire fence and clumps of nasturtiums and geraniums” (59). In the middle of the idyllic picture, there are fences and boundaries. Lurie’s movements on the farm create a feeling of confinement: he falls asleep in the dogs’ cage and just before the attack, we follow him and Lucy as they

walk the dogs to “the plantation boundary and turn back” (91). Meanwhile, Petrus, working for Lucy on the farm, is laying pipes across her land and building his new house, progressively reducing Lucy’s living space. Lurie’s perception of space subtly bring out the complex importance of land, borders, and the shift in power taking place in post-apartheid South Africa.

Lurie also sees and responds to the people surrounding him, but, by giving no insight in other characters’ thoughts, the internal focalization increases the impression of alienation and otherness. Women are foremost reduced to their looks: Bev Shaw, working at the dog shelter is “a dumpy, bustling little woman with black freckles, close-cropped, wiry hair, and no neck” (72), whereas Melanie’s “body is clear, simple, in its way perfect” (19). Although David Lurie’s life evolves around women, he does not seem to understand them. For instance, after having made love to Melanie he thinks that “if he does not sense in her a fully sexual appetite, that is only because she is still young” (29). It would be more difficult for him to admit that he might not be the best one to awake her “sexual appetite”. Nevertheless, Lurie sometimes genuinely tries to understand others. He really wants to know why Lucy does not report the rape to the police, why she wants to stay on the farm. Father and daughter both try to communicate even if it is difficult. When Lurie is unable to ask questions directly, the only thing he can do is guess, like when he questions Petrus’s motivations: “He has his own suspicions of what Petrus is up to, in the longer run” (117). The internal focalization here increases the suspense as the reader tries to validate the protagonist’s hypotheses.

The reader’s questioning is justified because David Lurie is not easy to like. Early in the story he shows a clear disrespect towards both Soraya, the prostitute, and Melanie. He is repeatedly attracted to very young girls, and his main focus always remains himself.

As mentioned earlier, the reader would like to sympathize with the protagonist because, watching through a character's eyes tends to make the reader identify with him and generally be sympathetic towards him. According to Bal, "there usually is never a doubt in our minds which character should receive most attention and sympathy" (119). Yet, there is ambivalence in Lurie's case: on the one hand, the reader tends to dislike his egocentrism and how he treats people; on the other, Lurie is still, for many, easy to identify with. The way he has been pushed aside to become a teacher of communication instead of literature to fit the new times, the way he scrutinizes his ageing body, the way he tries to make sense of everything around him sound familiar and therefore believable. This disturbing identification creates a strong dynamic in the text, and rocks the balance of what things "should be like".

Similarly, instability of meaning occurs when one looks into *how* the character reacts to his surroundings, with what attitude, because the protagonist himself interprets everything he is seeing. Seymour Chatman uses the term "filter" to "captur[e] something of the mediating function of a character's consciousness - perception, cognition, emotion, reverie - as events are experienced from a space within the story world". What she likes about the term filter is "that it catches the nuance of the *choice* made by the implied author about which among the character's imaginable experiences would best enhance the narration – which areas of the story world the implied author wants to illuminate and which to keep obscure", noting that "this is a nuance often missed by 'point of view', 'focalization' and other metaphors" (Coming to Terms 144). Even though filter is an excellent term to describe how a character perceives the world, I believe it is important to keep both the notion of focalization (what is perceived) and the notion of filter (how it is perceived) to combine them and thus create overlapping layers of interpretation.



David Lurie filters everything through the eyes of a white middle-aged male. The reader rightly wonders whether to trust this character: is he reliable? Instead of using the term “unreliable” Chatman introduces the concept of “fallible filter” because

fallible seems a good term for a filter character’s inaccurate, misled, or self-serving perception of events, situations, and other characters, for it attributes less culpability to the character than does ‘unreliable’. (Coming to terms 150)

Indeed, the character has not “asked” to be in the story, “[he] cannot misrepresent it, because [he] is not attempting to represent it; rather [he] is living it” (ibid.). In *Disgrace*, David Lurie, as we will see in the following subsections, maintains several layers of fallible filters. These filters enable him to view the world on his terms, but the interesting question is to which degree he is aware of them and whether an increased awareness affects him. Lurie’s character seems to change throughout the story but it is very difficult to pinpoint what the change really is. Understanding the filters may lead to an answer.

Lurie is very much a scholar and is used to filter the world through the words of Romantic poets, like Byron and Wordsworth. As Michael Holland points out in his essay *Plink-Plunk*, the use of literary reference is disturbing, because although it may appeal to the reader, it is “constantly in the service of a life governed by sexual obsession with women” (397). Lurie even uses this literary view of the world to justify his affair with Melanie in front of the University’s hearing. “I was not myself. I was no longer a fifty-year-old divorcé at a loose end. I became a servant of Eros” (52). Using academic quotes to define the world surrounding him eventually shields him from it and from the consequences of his actions. Explaining his affair with Melanie to Lucy, he once again hides behind a quote: “Do you remember Blake? He says. ‘Sooner murder an infant in its cradle than nurse unacted desires’?” (69). Lucy rejects his explanation. Similarly, his

students are indifferent to his class on *The Prelude* by Wordsworth (22). He fails to reach them as he himself fails to connect the poem to his own life. It is interesting because what he wants to teach actually reflects his life and therefore the book itself:

Yes, we cannot live our daily lives in a realm of pure ideas, cocooned from sense-experience. The question is not, How can we keep the imagination pure, protected from the onslaughts of reality? The question has to be, Can we find a way for the two to coexist? (22)

Instead of using this insight to better understand his own actions, he quickly diverts his attention to Melanie and “how to bring [the students] to him? How to bring her?” (ibid.).

However, after Lucy has been raped, Lurie seems able to use his knowledge of the Romantic poets to translate and understand his own anguish. His project to turn Byron’s life into an opera changes perspective. Instead of concentrating on Byron, Lurie sets the focus on Theresa, Byron’s mistress, when she begs Byron: “*come to me, love me!*”, long after Byron’s death (185). This shift indicates that it may be possible for Lurie to use the old European masters in order to understand a changing world, seeing it from a female perspective and using a local banjo instead of a piano for example. Nevertheless, Theresa, like most women in Lurie’s life, remains a victim. Lurie’s attitude towards women is also a filter, which prevents him from truly understanding the implications of his actions.

Another important filter is language. David Lurie seems to be constantly confronted with the inadequacy of language to represent the world around him. It is a barrier he is acutely aware of. While he is locked up in the lavatory, he reflects that “[h]e speaks Italian, he speaks French, but Italian and French will not save him here in darkest Africa” (95). There are numerous italicized foreign words in the novel, as if to point out the impossibility for one language, in this case English, to represent things. By the end of the book Lurie is

moving away from language and closer to onomatopoeic sounds, reflecting basic emotions, like the ‘plink-plunk’ of the banjo: “More and more he is convinced that English is an unfit medium for the truth of South Africa”, inadequate to tell Petrus’ story (117). However, according to Sanders, “English is transformed by its speakers”, which implies “a change of ownership” (372). As a matter of fact, Petrus uses the English language like an instrument; he adapts it, plays with it and savors words, like “farm manager” or “dog-man”. What is a problem for David Lurie might not be a problem for others.

So far we have been focusing on the protagonist David Lurie, on what he sees and how he sees it, but we can also begin to sense that there are also other perspectives to take into consideration, other voices. According to Bal, we need to ask ourselves who focalizes on the focalizing character. Returning to Plato’s categories of who sees and who speaks, it is now time to consider who speaks in *Disgrace*. The story is told in the third person so there is consequently a narrator separated from the focalizing character. However, this narrator is undefined, almost hidden. The reader knows nothing about him or her.

According to Chatman, this type of narration is covert: “In covert narration we hear a voice speaking of events, characters and setting, but its owner remains hidden in the discursive shadows” (Story and Discourse 197). Further describing a covert narrator, Manfred Jahn sees him/her as someone who “will avoid the first-person pronoun, will also avoid a loud or striking voice, and will also avoid any [...] pragmatic or expressivity markers [...]. One can also hide behind something; if all else fails, one can hide behind someone” (N 1.9).

This last remark seems particularly relevant for *Disgrace*: it is as if the narrator is hiding behind David Lurie, letting him do the introductions. Reflecting on his charm on women, Lurie describes himself in the first chapter: “With his height, his good bones his olive skin, his flowing hair, he could always count on a degree of magnetism” (7).

Similarly, the protagonist's name appears only in the third chapter, where Lurie introduces himself on the phone:

'I'll call her. Who is speaking?'

'Tell her, David Lurie.' (18)

Until then, he was only mentioned by the pronoun "he". According to Jahn, "this is usually indicative of a narrator's covertness, his/her relinquishing of exposition and conative solicitude" (N3.3.10.).

Actually, the narrator could easily be confounded with the main character. They share the same time, the same space and the same language. Indeed, the use of the present tense makes it feel like the narrator is in the story, in the same place, almost as if he or she is sitting on the protagonist's shoulder. There is no other time period from where the story is told, no other space, meaning that there is also no time to reflect and comment upon what has happened. Moreover the narrator does not really use a language distinct from the protagonist's words even though the narrator's language seems more neutral, less inflected by academic references or judgmental comments. Eventually, the story could have been written in the first person and sometimes one almost expects to read "I" instead of "he". It is as if the narrator is not focalizing on the character; he is him. One may then wonder what the purpose of the covert third person narration is, and why the author does not choose a first person narrative instead.

In fact, the narrative choice of a covert third person narrator contributes to the layering of the novel. The main purpose of an internal focalization, combined with a covert narration, is to attract the attention away from the narrator's mediation and closer to the focalizing character. The use of a third person narration implies nevertheless that there is always a possibility for an external authorial commentary, but due to the narrator's

indistinctiveness, there is often instability of meaning. For example, Lucy Graham, in her interesting essay *Reading the Unspeakable* brings up the key passage when Lurie forces Melanie to have sex, described as “Not rape, not quite that, but undesired nevertheless, undesired to the core” (Coetzee 25). Graham claims that “the reader’s perspective is destabilized, such that the distance between narrative voice and ‘focaliser’ collapses” (443). One may indeed wonder whether the protagonist really is aware of the consequences of his actions, knowing the filters he puts up to protect himself, or if he once more deludes himself by refusing to admit that undesired sex actually is rape. There are no certainties in the novel, which creates a dialectical energy between the reader and the text.

The use of “free indirect discourse” or FID reinforces this ambivalence about whether the thoughts come from the narrator or the protagonist. Free indirect discourse, which is situated between direct discourse (I made a mistake) and indirect discourse (he said he made a mistake), renders the thought or the speech of a character without using quotation marks and without directly referring to the identity of the speaker (Jahn N1.23.). As an example it is interesting to return to the sentence “Not rape, not quite that, but undesired nevertheless, undesired to the core” (25). We have seen earlier that it is not really clear who is expressing this opinion, the narrator or David Lurie. This ambiguity is emphasized by the use of FID before and after this specific passage. Just before the sexual act, we recognize Lurie’s predilection for academic references: “Strange love! Yet from the quiver of Aphrodite, goddess of the foaming waves, no doubt about that.” After Lurie has forced himself on Melanie, he realizes his mistake: “A mistake, a huge mistake” but directly afterwards he notices that “A woman with chunky legs and no-nonsense business suit passes by and enters the apartment block”. Just as he seemed to comprehend the wrong he had done, he still feels the urge to make a derogatory comment on Melanie’s room-mate.

In the middle of these sentences of free indirect discourse, marked by Lurie's internal focalization, there is the more neutral "Not rape, not quite that". In my opinion, it feels like it is still Lurie who needs to convince himself that it was not a rape but, as Graham implied, it could also be coming from the narrator without passing by Lurie's mind. To be able to make sense of the text, the reader needs to assign thoughts or attitudes either to the narrator or the character. However, doubt often remains. When it is difficult to attribute segments to "identifiable speakers", "FID enhances the bivocality or polyvocality of the text by bringing into play a plurality of speakers and attitudes" (qtd. in Rimmon 113).

Leaving the narrator indistinct also gives the impression that everything is shown like in a movie, that there is almost no narration. Gareth Cornwell, in his essay *Realism, Rape and J.M. Coetzee's Disgrace*, categorizes the novel's plot as "mimetic rather than didactic". Nevertheless, Genette has showed that

no narrative can "show" or "imitate" the story it tells. All it can do is tell it in a manner which is detailed, precise, "alive", and in that way give more or less the illusion of mimesis - which is the only narrative mimesis, for this single and sufficient reason: that narration, oral or written, is a fact of language, and language signifies without imitating. (164)

Following Rimmon, "the crucial distinction, therefore is not between telling and showing, but between different degrees and kinds of telling" (108). In *Disgrace*, the covert narration and the FID contribute to the illusion of mimesis. It creates a very dynamic and dramatic text because, instead of being told directly what happens, the reader is in charge of inferring it. For instance, when Lurie is locked into the lavatory, we are told how he experiences the situation:

He tries to stand up but his legs are somehow blocked from moving. He closes his eyes again. He is in the lavatory, the lavatory of Lucy's House. Dizzily he gets to his feet.

The door is locked, the key is gone. (94)

The repetition of the word lavatory, the details of his actions describe very well how it may feel to wake up from a black out and try to realize where one is. An illusion of mimesis is created because there is a maximum of information and a minimum of the informer (narrator) (Genette 166). In such a dramatic narrative, Rimmon "reduces the narrator's role to that of a 'camera' " (108), and indeed the illusion of mimesis in the novel seems very visual. However, one must not lose track of the narrator's importance. Although hidden, the narrator is still the one who chooses what to tell. It is striking, for instance, how after the rape scene, everything is still narrowed down to Lurie. Instead of worrying for his daughter, Lurie's first reaction is to wonder: "How will they stand up to the testing, he and his heart?" (94).

The reader, being locked into the protagonist's focalization and with apparently no guidance from the narrator, has finally no other choice than looking for alternative perspectives, and it is quite natural to turn to the other characters in the novel to create meaning. The voices of Melanie and Lucy are mostly hidden from the reader. Melanie never personally appears at the time of Lurie's hearing at the university and, even though Lucy tries to explain her choices to her father, she never presses charges against the men who raped her. Lucy chooses silence to keep the peace and tells Lurie that rape could be "the prize one has to pay for staying on" (158), which reveals all the complexities of post apartheid South Africa. Both women show the difficult position of the victim and how Lurie fails to understand them, due to the various filters he uses to delude himself. Throughout the novel, there are other characters who judge Lurie's actions, like his

colleagues at the university or Melanie's father. However, they never seem to really reach him, probably once again because of the fallible filters. The one character that might enlighten the reader on Lurie's character is his ex-wife Rosalind. She appears to be well acquainted with his weaknesses and judges his actions quite severely. She also introduces external elements which bring a new light on Lurie's affair with Melanie. For example, she informs David that Melanie took sleeping pills which would imply that Melanie was far more affected than Lurie thought (45). By hearsay, Rosalind also knows all the details about Lurie's 'trial' and how badly he came across. However, at the end, everything comes as usual back to David Lurie: "There is a silence while they contemplate, from their respective angles, the story of his life" (189). There is eventually no common understanding between them as they will always keep different perspectives. Lurie's awareness of others' needs and sufferings remains throughout the novel an open question.

*Disgrace* has given rise to strong and diversified reader responses, especially in South Africa. It is probably the fluidity of Coetzee's style combined with a constant layering and an intriguing instability of meaning that have made *Disgrace* an acclaimed and at the same time very controversial novel. Not only did it receive the Booker Prize, but was also awarded the '[b]est book award in the African round of the Commonwealth Writers Prize and the pan-Commonwealth prize in 2000 (Attridge 315, 316). It became a best-seller both internationally and in South Africa. It has also spurred enormous amounts of comments from critics "attempting to write – something on *Disgrace*", as Derek Attridge puts it in his introduction of the edition of the magazine *Interventions*, dedicated entirely to Coetzee's *Disgrace* (316). This special edition was probably partly written to respond to the severe attacks on the novel coming from the African National Congress (ANC) and from feminist readers. Hereafter, we will investigate these attacks more in



detail; see how they are due to the novel's narrative technique, and how it may be possible to answer them.

The ANC did not directly accuse Coetzee of racism but they did submit *Disgrace* to the Human Rights Commission to illustrate the still lingering racism in post-apartheid South Africa. This criticism led the Democratic Alliance (an opposition party in Parliament) to require a public excuse from the ANC. Finally President Mbeki asked his compatriots to celebrate Coetzee as a laureate of the Nobel Prize in 2003 (Poyner). It seems amazing that a novel was discussed with such heat in the South African Parliament but it also gives an indication of its power to unsettle its readers, as well as the sensitivity of the South African public in a difficult transition period. It is certainly true that the novel may be unsettling for black readers. Black people in *Disgrace* are portrayed as rapists and thieves and the black neighbor Petrus worsens the picture by protecting one of the rapists as a member of his family. Influenced by the internal focalization of a white middle-aged protagonist and a very covert narrator, the reader feels almost forced to condemn most of the black characters in the novel. There are however exceptions. David Atwell attracts our attention to Manas Mathabane, and the other members of the university hearing, where Lurie explains himself. Most of them are black but they are all but stereotyped and display instead a true sense of justice and forgiveness (Atwell 335). These characters tend to be overlooked, mostly because they do not stand out when presented through Lurie's eyes. They are however symptomatic of the narrative balance of *Disgrace*. Indeed, each action in the novel seems to have its opposite, which requires a very careful reading in order not to generalize and see only one side of the story. It becomes the reader's responsibility to see through the internal focalization and the various filters to grasp the whole picture.

Similarly, readers with a feminist perspective have felt uncomfortable reading *Disgrace* because “the novel features a hero who notoriously refuses to say sorry for an abuse of power” against women and takes no responsibility for his actions (Boehmer 343). The abuse of power that Lurie, the white male, perpetrates on Melanie, “the dark one” (18), is mirrored by the gang-rape by the black men in the second part of the novel but eventually women are always the victims. Elleke Boehmer shows that “in both halves of the narrative, therefore, a highly conventional patriarchal and colonial prerogative of possession over the silent ‘body of the woman’ is exercised” (344). Lucy Graham is more indulgent than Boehmer when she considers *Disgrace* to be “a subversion of ‘black peril’ narrative”, referring to the fact that Lurie is as much a rapist as the black men who raped his daughter (433). The two parallel rapes certainly create a balance but, in my opinion, one can not only weigh the white on black rape against the black on white one. It is necessary to consider, whether Lurie is aware of his faults towards the women in the book, and whether he makes the connections between the two rapes, or if he continues to use filters to delude himself. The covert narrative technique of the novel makes it difficult to ever know the answer to this question. Lurie apologizes to the Isaacs family, which would prove that he is to some extent aware of his actions, but he is still attracted to Melanie’s younger sister. By the end of the book, after going to see Melanie perform on stage and being insulted by her boy-friend, the first thing Lurie tells us is that he seeks out a prostitute even younger than Melanie. It is as if he wants to revalidate the filter which keeps women in a position of inferiority. Therefore, his attitude towards women does not seem to change.

Eventually, the reader naturally turns to the end of the book in a last attempt to understand if and how the protagonist has changed. By the end, Lurie has become a caretaker at the dog shelter, a *dog-man*. Interestingly, his increasing loss of power brings

him closer to other powerless beings, like the dogs he is helping. By giving up the one dog who loves him, he is in a certain way giving up on himself and it is as if he accepts his own mortality. With no other power than to be the man who helps unwanted dogs to die, he is reduced to mere 'being' and is free to leave the abstractions of his life behind him in order to explore new paths. It echoes Lucy's earlier comment on her situation:

'Perhaps that is what I must learn to accept. To start at ground level. With nothing. Not with nothing but. With nothing. No cards, no weapons, no property, no rights, no dignity'. 'Like a dog'. 'Yes like a dog'. (205)

In a way, it seems easier for Lurie to feel empathy for dogs than for humans. His concern for them may be the first step towards a more meaningful life; perhaps a sign that some of his own filters start to break down. In any case, Lurie's insight on what his life has become remains very personal and self-centered. In a certain way, it also confirms Attridge's claim that *Disgrace* should be read "as a literary work, not as historical reportage, political prescription, or allegorical scheme" (319).

However, it here seems important to introduce one last caution. Despite the fact that *Disgrace* is a brilliant literary work focusing on one character, it is also true that Coetzee chose to locate the events of the book in a very specific time and place; and this naturally leads the reader to perform a 'reality check'. Following Rabinowitz in his essay on *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad, it is important and necessary to keep this link to context. *Disgrace* and *Heart of Darkness* bear several interesting similarities: they are both critically acclaimed and controversial works in which a central character seeks a better understanding of himself in a world marked by racism and colonialism. Rabinowitz claims that, regarding *Heart of Darkness*, critics have had a tendency to "minimize the importance of such issues as race and imperialism by treating them, generally implicitly, as 'less

important' than such issues as the journey within and primal desires" (143). His advice is that we should still seek "coherence in the texts we read" and even "seek that coherence in thematic abstractions" but not without keeping in mind the political dimension of the work and "some self-reflection about what we are doing" (144). This advice also feels very valid for *Disgrace*. Nor can the readers limit themselves to consider the political aspects of the novel, nor can they only consider the main character independently of the context. Interpreting the text is a constant balancing act which engages the responsibility of the reader.

To conclude, reading *Disgrace* is definitely a journey within the protagonist David Lurie's mind, and an exploration of how he perceives the world. Nevertheless, despite the internal focalization and Lurie's various filters, the novel also allows us to sense some of the challenges post apartheid South Africa is facing: how to find a sense of continuity between the past and the future, for instance, or the difficulty to democratically carry out a shift of power. We have seen that David Lurie rejects this changing society and finds it difficult to accept black people or women in a situation of power. Instead he chooses to care for abandoned dogs. Lurie's response is finally very personal, tainted by the filters he has constructed for himself as a white middle-aged male. Similarly, every South African will respond differently to the current transition period, depending on age, race, gender and past experiences. South African readers of *Disgrace* have as a matter of fact interpreted the novel very differently, and have felt unsettled by different things.

It is true that the narration focuses on disturbing events and on a highly disturbing protagonist, but the difficulty to interpret the text also comes from *how* it is narrated, more specifically from the covert narration. Indeed, receiving very little input from the narrator, the readers are themselves in charge of reflecting over and commenting the text, thus

creating meaning. Coetzee's fluid style actually complicates things because the novel does not seem complicated; it is easy to read the text and one therefore expects to understand all its implications. However, it becomes increasingly clear that it is necessary to challenge the text and how it is presented to fully understand it. There is no distance in time or space in the story, for instance, and it implies that the reader needs to create this distance, a space for reflection in order to see the total picture, in order to become an 'informed reader'. There are also parallel stories throughout the book: black people defending students' rights at Lurie's hearing versus black thieves and rapists. Similarly, one can argue that there is a white-on-black rape and a black-on-white rape. These parallel events complement each other, creating different perspectives. They require the reader to think twice before judging a particular character in the book, especially as the focalization and the filters of the protagonist often favour one side of the story.

Finally, one can understand why *Disgrace* has awoken mixed feelings in South Africa. During the apartheid, Coetzee's books were acclaimed by the opposition because they clearly condemned the totalitarian regime. With *Disgrace*, the situation is different. Apartheid is over but Coetzee's picture of South Africa is still bleak and worrying. It would indeed be easier if everything was simple, like Lurie would like it to be, but somehow it rarely is.

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