

**J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*:**  
**At the Margins of the Human**

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## Sammendrag

I denne avhandlingen gjør jeg en lesning av J.M. Coetzee's roman *Disgrace* (1999), der jeg undersøker etiske aspekter ved romanen med et posthumanistisk rammeverk. *Disgrace* er i motsetning til Coetzee's tidligere publikasjoner, en tilsynelatende realistisk roman, der handlingen er lagt til samtidens postapartheid samfunn. Med vold og rasekonflikt sentralt i handlingen, ble romanen oppfattet som en pessimistisk og mørk representasjon av det nye samfunnet, noe som medførte tildels kraftig kritikk i hjemlandet. Romanens kompleksitet har likevel ført til et mangfold av ulike lesninger, både med henhold til form og innhold. Selv om handlingen på overflaten ser ut til å fokusere på utfordringer knyttet til sted og tid, argumenter jeg for at det er viktig å ikke stoppe lesningen der. I avhandlingen utforsker jeg hvordan Coetzee gjennom både formale grep og tematikk, utforsker subjektivitet, tid og mellommenneskelig interaksjon, såvel som interaksjon mellom mennesker og dyr. Ved hjelp av narratologiske verktøy har jeg forsøkt å vise hvordan Coetzee avdekker undertrykkende strukturer og diskurser og samtidig problematiserer og utfordrer den vestlige humanismens hegemoni. Videre har jeg forsøkt å vise hvordan en posthumanistisk etikk kommer tilsyne i romanen, både ved å se på formale aspekter og romanens sentrale hendelser og tematikk. En rekke posthumanistiske tekster danner det teoretiske rammeverket for avhandlingen; blant teoretikerne jeg støtter meg til finner man Rosi Braidotti, Karen Barad, Donna Haraway og Cary Wolfe. Felles for disse er at de problematiserer hva det vil si å være menneske, og bryter ned tradisjonelle hierarkier og dualismer som kropp/sinn, kultur/natur, menneske/dyr.

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**To Benedicte**

## **J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*: at the Margins of the Human**

### **Introduction**

J.M. Coetzee's novel *Disgrace* has generated a considerable amount of critical notice since its publication in 1999. The novel was awarded the Booker Prize in the year of its publication, and in 2003 Coetzee received the Nobel Prize in Literature. *Disgrace* was successfully transformed into film in 2008. However, the initial reception of the novel was profoundly negative, and it has been subject to heated debate in the years following its publication to the present day. *Disgrace* deals with a contemporary South African reality in ways that Coetzee's previous works were highly criticized for failing to do: under apartheid, Coetzee situated himself outside the contemporary South African literary sphere, writing allegorically, while the majority of prose writers wrote realistically. As a result, he was considered vague and criticized for avoiding scrutiny of the violations of human rights taking place under apartheid. His fiction refused to comply with expectations imposed upon the writer by hegemonic movements of oppositional literature, as represented by writers such as Nadine Gordimer and Andre Brink (Atwell 11). As literature in South Africa was subject at the time to strict censorship, some would perhaps suggest that Coetzee's writing style was an intentional approach to sidestep the censors. His novels were never banned under South African censorship, which could easily be taken as confirmation of a political evasiveness in his fiction. In his own essays on the subject, collected in *Giving Offense* (1996), he admits that his novels "have been too indirect in their approach, too rarefied, to be considered a threat to the order" (Atwell 299).

*Disgrace* confronts what Coetzee's previous works were criticized of avoiding. While his preceding novels had only alluded to events in the country, realism now seemed to have found its way into Coetzee's fiction: not only settings but themes and subjects resonate with central discussions concerning current events in the country. An important distinction is introduced by Gareth Cornwell, who, in his reading of *Disgrace*, contends that "it is safe to say that *Disgrace* has every *appearance* of being a realist text" (312, my emphasis). Cornwall supports this by referring not only to setting and time but also to tense; the novel is written in what he calls Coetzee's "trademark" tense: the present (312). When turning his attention to contemporary South Africa, however, Coetzee does so by problematizing a range of heated issues without offering solutions. The novel was published only four years after the end of apartheid, at a time when the South African people were recovering from and dealing with their violent history. As we will see, this created a specific cultural environment, marked by an air of hopefulness and enthusiasm in what Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu named the "Rainbow Nation". Coetzee, however, again took his fiction in a direction different from that of the cultural majority. Consequently, *Disgrace* was perceived as a critique of the new post-apartheid South Africa.

Through the lens of his protagonist, Coetzee addresses a complex range of themes and subjects. The narrative highlights a range of topical issues, including race, gender, violence, power dynamics, justice, law, and human/animal relations. As these thematic issues are difficult to separate from contextual concerns, the novel was interpreted as a highly pessimistic and dark image of contemporary South Africa. The novel was also subject to accusations of racism and of reproducing racial stereotypes. I will contend that such a reading of the novel is reductive and overlooks several aspects of the narrative that have far-reaching ethical implications. The novel questions humanist ideals and assumptions, particularly humanist essentialism, and how humanism position the human and non-human others. In this

thesis I want to argue that *Disgrace* not only offers a critique to humanist ideals, but furthermore proposes a posthuman ethics through its interrogation of formal and thematic concerns.

The ways in which Coetzee engages these questions offer new perspectives, which are not limited to the South African situation. Clearly, *Disgrace* reflects upon contemporary post-apartheid South Africa, and numerous readings of the novel interpret it as a novel deeply engaged with the specific South African context. However, my reading departs from this. Although place does have a certain relevance, the interrogations and juxtapositions that come to the surface in *Disgrace* explore and engage questions that reach beyond this context. This argument is in accord with David Attwell's view of Coetzee's fiction as both situated and simultaneously projecting itself beyond its situation (Attwell 113).

The negative reception of *Disgrace* in South Africa was later balanced by literary critics who uncovered different meanings in the text, perhaps influenced by its international success. Over time the politically motivated criticism of Coetzee's fiction was contested by arguments that found political value in his novels' self-conscious textuality (Barnett 149). Nonetheless, the novel is still considered highly controversial. Much of the critical response to *Disgrace* represents polarized views. These contrasting interpretations do more than simply demonstrate the complexity of the novel. The public discussion also raises questions about authorial responsibility, while strongly suggesting that context is highly relevant to the way a text is perceived by its readers. As the context and the critical reception of the novel form an important backdrop for the following discussion, my first chapter will provide some background on modern South African history. This will familiarize the reader with the issues treated in *Disgrace*. Also, since place remains important, the contextual content of the first chapter will provide the reader with a better understanding of the novel's reception in South Africa, as well as the debate surrounding the novel.

I will focus on the social and political complexities here, especially the lingering effects of decades of suppression. However, in contrast to the majority of criticism of *Disgrace*, which portrays it as pessimistic and bleak, I will suggest that the novel can be perceived as a work of hope. I will argue that *Disgrace* tunes in on posthumanism, reflecting on our existence in a material net within which there is no absolute “otherness”. Hence, the narrative can be read in more affirmative ways, despite the brutality and conflicts it depicts. The narrative opens up new possibilities and hope as it follows the protagonist through a process of change, whereby he ultimately responds to pain and his part in it: he is called to a sense of responsibility for the other, with whom he has gained a capacity to imaginatively identify.

The second chapter of my thesis presents my methodology, including the theories and texts I use in the reading of the novel. One of my initial questions in approaching *Disgrace* was why and how this text has invited such disparate readings. As pointed out, contextual issues and place are significant to the reader’s reception and interpretation. As my readings will show, this is significant to the textual poetics itself and to the grammar and linguistic choices in the text. In other words, place and context carry narratological weight, both in the reception of the narrative and in the shaping of it. Although the novel is generally considered realist, I will contend that it is also symbolic. In the following, we will see how Coetzee’s use of structure and form open possibilities, activating the receiver to engage in a broader discussion on ethics. Approaching these formal aspects, I make use of concepts and perspectives taken from narratological theories. An interrogation of subjectivity and agency in the narrative, raise existential questions, and open new perspectives on human existence: the character’s recognition of others as interconnected to the self suggests not only that Coetzee is closing in on a posthuman sensitivity with *Disgrace*. As argued, the novel also displays an ethical awareness. Moreover, this ethical awareness corresponds to posthumanist ideas and

arguments. Central to this claim is the protagonist's experience of material awareness as well as his experience of the entanglements of being as a result of his involvement with the animals. As theoretical framework, posthumanism may shed new light to many of the novels workings.

The methodological introduction in Chapter Two will be followed by analysis and close readings of the novel. In Chapter Three I will examine some aesthetic and narratological aspects. We will see that the choices Coetzee makes on a linguistic level ultimately have ethical implications. Following this formal analysis, I will concentrate on the themes and subjects relevant to the thesis in Chapter Four, focusing on storyworld events and their ethical implications. Firstly, I will look at how Coetzee represents violence and rape in the novel, and then broaden the discussion to rights and justice. Secondly, I will examine the novel's complex depictions of dogs and its inquiry into human-animal relationships. The narratives engagement with ethics will be central, which is fitting because, as we shall see, Coetzee's inquiry in the narrative is indeed an ethical inquiry.

## Chapter 1

### *Disgrace* in context and criticism

... what happened to me is a purely private matter. In another time, another place it might be held to be a public matter. But in this place, at this time, it is not. It is my business, mine alone.

This place being what?

This place being South Africa.

Coetzee (112)

*Disgrace* is set in South Africa during a period marked by the transition from apartheid to post-apartheid. Unlike Coetzee's previous novels, which were broadly allegorical, *Disgrace* is explicitly preoccupied with contemporary society in an apparently straightforward realist narrative. The novel is mimetic in the sense that there is a direct connection between the literary representations and their referents. However, as Gareth Cornwell contends: "One might say that in *Disgrace*, the allegorical or didactic plot is comprehensively disguised as a mimetic one, but that at certain moments the wig slips, the make-up runs" (Cornwell 308). What Cornwell asserts here is that the novel borrows both from realism and postmodern self-reflexivity. The novel's formal complexity and its thematic concerns engage a number of issues, not only as concerns the politics of writing itself but, as I will argue, also a discussion on ethics. It is interesting to see Coetzee's own take on the

concept of realism and antirealism, or *illusionism* and *anti-illusionism* as he calls them in an interview in *Doubling the Point*:

Illusionism is, of course, a word I use for what is usually called realism. The most accomplished illusionism yields the most convincing realist effects. Anti-illusionism displaying the tricks you are using instead of hiding them is a common ploy of postmodernism. But in the end there is only so much mileage to be got out of the ploy. Anti-illusionism is, I suspect, only a marking of time, a phase of recuperation, in the history of the novel. The question is, what next? (27)

Not only is Coetzee openly ambivalent towards realism, he is also dubious about the antirealism of postmodernity. As we shall see, *Disgrace* is anything but straightforward; in the following I will try to show how this novel works in different layers, carrying different meanings realized largely by formal concerns. I would agree with Cornwell in that the two modes, realism and the didactic (or allegorical) plot, materialize in a relationship of negotiation or mutual interrogation in *Disgrace* (320). This also correlates with Coetzee's own reflections as seen above. Before returning to these formal issues and their implications, an account of the novel's contextual issues will prove helpful.

The novel's explicit and implicit handling of contemporary South Africa on several levels calls for an introduction to the country's political and historical situation. Although South African contemporary history is too extensive for a thorough presentation here, an account of apartheid and its aftermath is necessary to understand the implications of place as well as the allegorical and symbolic concerns in *Disgrace*. Apartheid, which in Afrikaans means "apartness" or "separateness", refers to the system of racial discrimination and white political domination adopted by the National Party while it was in power from 1948 to 1994. (Beck 135). With the Dutch and English colonial exploitation over the previous 300 years,

racial segregation and attitudes of white supremacy had existed long before the National Party came to power. While discrimination and segregation had existed for centuries, the National Party made colonial segregation and discrimination more systematic, methodically implemented, and intensively policed (O'Malley). This system, which permitted human rights violations by law, saw politically motivated violence in many forms: the forceful resettlement of more than 3 million people in black "homelands", the Sharpville and Langa killings, the Soweto uprising, and the deaths in detention of activists such as Steve Biko (O'Malley). This system of brutality has few parallels in modern history, and those who suffered under this regime mostly suffered in silence.

The period of negotiations toward the first democratic election in 1994 involved questions of how to sustain a peaceful transition to democracy. Transitional issues primarily concerned how South Africans should react to the gross violations of human rights committed during the period of National Party rule. Trials, such as those held at Nuremberg following World War II, were discarded, as "[n]either side in the struggle (the state nor the liberation movements) had defeated the other and hence nobody was in a position to enforce so-called victor's justice" (O'Malley). The option of letting the past be forgotten was rejected "because such amnesia would have resulted in further victimization of victims by denying their awful experiences" (ibid.). Instead, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, known as TRC, was set up "... to investigate the nature and causes of apartheid, to make recommendations to government about reparations to the victims of apartheid, and to grant amnesty to perpetrators of gross human rights violations" (Le Roux 1). The TRC was central to how the national process of recovery played out in the public sphere. The Commission considered full and public acknowledgment of the victim's experiences as "central to the restoration of the dignity of victims" (O'Malley). Indeed, the public sphere was a distinctive feature of the TRC hearings, which were broadcast nationally between 1996 and 1998. The committee

could grant amnesty if provided with a full disclosure of all facts pertaining to the violation in question. Freedom was granted in exchange for truth, but public disclosure also meant public shaming. *Disgrace* has been read as a response to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and as we shall see, there are several parallels to the TRC hearings in the novel.

Between April 1996 and December 1997, some 21,300 people came forward to tell the Commission their stories. The public, official character of these committee hearings was unique: of the testimonies given, approximately 2000 were in public hearings of the Human Rights Violation Committee, while the rest were through recorded statements (Marsden and Geoffrey, 147). *The Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission* emphasizes that the stories told to the Commission were uniquely personal and not presented as arguments in a court of law. Rather, testifiers exposed truths; their stories in turn contributed towards creating a “narrative truth” and in uncovering parts of the national memory that had been suppressed:

By telling their stories, both victims and perpetrators gave meaning to the multi-layered experiences of the South African story. These personal truths were communicated to the broader public by the media. In the (South) African context, where value continues to be attached to oral tradition, the process of storytelling was particularly important. ... The Act explicitly recognized the healing potential of telling stories. (O’Malley)

The public storytelling was seen as a way to restore not only memory but also humanity, and in this way as contributing to the process of reconciliation. It also sought to validate the personal experiences of people who had previously been silenced. In establishing what they

called narrative truth, the Commission allowed the voices of those who had been voiceless to become a part of the public discourse.

During this period of transition, discussions of the arts within the new South Africa concerned the role of writers in contributing to “the construction of a new, non-racial, and democratic society ... what they should write about, how they should write, and where they should direct their energies” (Brutus 102). These questions, however, were an extension of intense public debate during the years of apartheid. Prior to receiving the 2003 Nobel Prize in Literature, Coetzee attracted more critical attention than any other South African author. The number of critical responses to his work have been numerous, including critical collections, individual pieces, and full-length works of criticism. In the 1970s and 80s the South African literary field saw a vigorous, often polemical debate between those dubbed “instrumental” or political critics and those of “artistic” persuasion. In this debate, the realist text was argued to convey political truth, while the symbolist text was guilty of social irresponsibility by distancing itself from events. As the realist novel was predominantly valued as best suited to tell the truth, this aesthetic was, therefore, considered better, more political, and closer to reality. In *J.M. Coetzee: South Africa and the Politics of Writing*, David Attwell convincingly argues that Coetzee’s novels, despite their deep concerns with language and textuality, are always political (12). However, Coetzee’s novels challenge the conventional expectations of both realist and symbolist genres (Chapman 104). Although there can be no doubt of Coetzee’s opposition to the policies of the National Party, or that an intensive engagement with the political and social history of South Africa has marked his writing, Coetzee’s novels did not take the form of the realist tradition of “resistance writing”.

Writing often in an allegorical form, not explicitly opposing the apartheid regime, Coetzee was accused of political weaknesses, especially in comparison to other contemporary South African writers, such as Nadine Gordimer, who directly addressed the contemporary

national question. During the 1970s and 80s, she and other resistance writers brought international attention to the political situation in South Africa. In contrast, critics argued that Coetzee's work failed to confront the political system of oppression in South Africa: Peter Knox-Shaw wrote of Coetzee's 1974 novel *Duskland* that "[i]t is regrettable that a writer of such considerable and varied talents should play down the political and economic aspects of history in favour of a psychopathology of Western life" (Huggan and Watson 118). Similarly, Michael Vaughan, in his essay on literature and politics, criticizes Coetzee for not addressing "material factors of oppression and struggle in contemporary South Africa" (137). Coetzee, who has been consistently reluctant to comment on his work throughout his authorship, did not enter this debate. He did, however, resist the reduction of his writing to political discourse, as we can see from the interview with Thorold and Wicksterd in 1987:

It seems to me that what you're trying to do is absorb certain novels, my novels, into a political discourse ... And it's perhaps a mark of all critical activity to try to swallow one kind of discourse into another kind of discourse ... And what I'm now resisting is the attempt to swallow my novels into a political discourse, because I'm not prepared to concede that the one kind of discourse is larger or more primary than the other ... I have to resist them because, frankly, my allegiances lie with the discourse of the novels and not with the discourse of politics. (quote Goddard in and Read)

Coetzee resists being categorized, and, as we shall see demonstrated in *Disgrace*, he works on multiple levels that both contradict and supplement each other. This resonates with those who refuted the image of Coetzee as politically irresponsible: David Attwell identified Coetzee's novels as "situational metafiction", claiming that the experimental style of modernism and postmodernism did not compromise the responsibility to ethical issues (Attwell 20). Other

critics defending Coetzee emphasized that literature can be both formally experimental and political at the same time.

*Disgrace*, with its setting in the physical and socio-political landscape of post-apartheid South Africa, explicitly deals with a contemporary situation in ways that Coetzee's previous novels had not. In the story, protagonist David Lurie experiences what he perceives to be several degrading events. As a professor at the Cape Technical University, he feels increasingly out of place in the "new times". He is "rationalized" from his position in Modern Languages and Romantic Poetry to an adjunct for Communications. In his personal life he is working on an opera about Byron, a work that changes direction during the novel and is in many ways reflective of his own life. He struggles with aging: the changes in his body and his appearance, and solving "the problem of sex" (2). This results in his unfortunate pursuit into the private sphere of the prostitute he is seeing, and finally culminates in his disastrous affair with one of his students, 21-year-old Melanie Isaacs. This affair, which assumedly involves rape, leads to accusations of sexual misconduct. Refusing to perform the kind of contrition demanded in the disciplinary hearing following this scandal, he leaves the university. David seeks refuge at his daughter Lucy's smallholding in the Eastern Cape. Besides selling flowers and vegetables grown on her farm, Lucy also runs a kennel on the farm and is involved in animal welfare. To please her, David volunteers at an animal clinic. A brutal attack by three black men at Lucy's farm is a turning point in the narration. Lucy is gang-raped, David is beaten up and set on fire, and the dogs are shot. Following this attack, Lucy refuses to press charges or leave the farm. Pregnant by one of her rapists, she accepts an arrangement with her former farm manager, Petrus, giving him ownership of the land in return for protection. David devotes himself to volunteering at the animal clinic euthanizing diseased and unwanted dogs, through which he gains a redeeming sense of compassion.

Unsurprisingly, *Disgrace* has invited different readings, and few would argue for a

single interpretation. The novel opens up for possibilities rather than closing down on conclusions. However, the criticism levelled at *Disgrace* for drawing a negative picture of the new South Africa mirrors the debate of the time about literary responsibility and commitment in South Africa. As literature had been part of the freedom struggle, it was also considered important for the nation-building to follow. After the long struggle against repression, a process of redefining South Africa began. As activist Albie Sachs wrote shortly before the liberation: “We all know where South Africa is, but we do not know what it is” (187). In the new South Africa, the making of new stories was intended to define and unite the nation. National symbols of unity and metaphors such as the “Rainbow Nation” represented national unity and a common South African identity in the diverse South African society. Throughout its narrative, *Disgrace* distorts such metaphors, and was, therefore, attacked for hindering the national effort of reconciliation and regeneration.

Particular events depicted in the novel were met with anger. Especially the representation of Lucy’s rape, and her choices in its aftermath, caused outrage, as exemplified by South African playwright Athol Fugard’s response in the London *Sunday Times*: “... to accept the rape of a white woman as a gesture to all of the evil that we did in the past ... [is] a load of bloody bullshit” (cited in Hayes 198). Fugard was not alone in finding the novel regressive. The African National Congress (ANC) rejected *Disgrace* as racist: in its submission to the Human Rights Commission’s investigation into racism in the media, the ANC claimed that the novel exploits racist stereotypes (Poyner 149). The ANC reacted in particular to the scene in which Lucy and David are attacked and the fallout of this event, when Lucy responds to David: “Yes, I agree, it is humiliating. But perhaps that is a good point to start from again. With nothing. No cards, no weapons, no property, no rights, no dignity” (205). Particularly the typecast of black characters in the novel was criticized by the ANC, whose statement reads:

In the novel, J.M Coetzee represents as brutally as he can, the white people's perception of the post-apartheid black man... It is suggested that in these circumstances, it might be better that our white compatriots should emigrate because to be in post-apartheid South Africa is to be in 'their territory', as a consequence of which the whites will lose their cards, their weapons, their property, their rights, their dignity. The white women will have to sleep with the barbaric white men. Accordingly, the alleged white 'brain drain' must be reported regularly and given the necessary prominence. J.M Coetzee makes the point that, five years after our liberation, white South African society continues to believe in a particular stereotype of the African. (ibid.)

This argument implicates the novel in the very matter it seeks to criticize: Exposing race stereotypes does not equal reproducing them, on the contrary, I would argue that to expose stereotyping and its performative character, makes an interrogation and critique possible. ANC's argument seems to build on the idea that the views of the white characters in *Disgrace* are representative of those of white South Africans in general, overlooking the way in which the plot is carried and the perspective through which it is told.

The condemnation of *Disgrace* by the ANC did not go unnoticed on the South African public scene nor did it stand in isolation. In his review of *Disgrace*, Salman Rushdie exclaimed that the novel "merely becomes a part of the darkness it describes" (Rushdie 40). He continues:

To act on impulses whose source one claims not to understand, to justify one's plunges at women by one's 'rights of desire', is to make a virtue of one's psychological and moral lacunae. For a character to justify himself by claiming not to understand his motives is one thing; for the novelist to collude in that justification is quite another. ... [If] a writer's created beings lack understanding, it becomes the writer's task to provide

the reader with the insight lacked by the characters (39-40)

In line with the other critics who were provoked by what they regarded as a bleak image of the new South Africa, Rushdie seems to overlook important aspects of the narrative.

Moreover, Rushdie seems to invoke a sense of authorial responsibility for the text as a whole.

As the ideological polarization that had prevailed in the time of apartheid and the transition period gradually diminished, so did the call for artists to “speak out” and directly address politics. However, as late as in 2006, in an interview that ran in the *New York Times*, Nadine Gordimer claimed that Coetzee perpetuates stereotypical representations:

...in *Disgrace* there is not one black person who is a real human being. . . . I find it difficult to believe, indeed more than difficult, having lived here all my life and being part of everything that has happened here, that the black family protects the rapist because he’s one of them. . . . If that’s the only truth he could find in the post-apartheid South Africa, I regretted this very much for him. (Donadio)

Similarly to most attacks on the novel, the controversy here seems to lie in the rape scene and its implications. Gordimer, like many other critics, seems to overlook the difference between what the narrator says and what the text says and to have difficulty separating the text from its historical author. As we have seen, the public debate surrounding literature in South Africa largely concerned the writer’s role and obligations. However, it is not sufficient to engage with *Disgrace* as simply a realistic representation of conditions in post-apartheid South Africa or as a critique of these conditions.

After the novel appeared on the Booker Prize shortlist, reviews started taking on a number of issues, such as the representations of rape, race, and gender. The large body of academic writing generated by the novel and the enormous scope of possible reinterpretation

mirror its complexity. Some of these complexities are inextricably connected to the way in which the narrative is written: While Lurie has spent much of his life teaching his students the “perfect tense”, *Disgrace* is written in the present tense, leaving the action and events in the story world unconcluded. Furthermore, the narration’s consistent focalization through Lurie creates a counterfocalization that activates the reader and opens up possibilities. I will contend that this specific way in which the story is narrated reveals an ethical awareness and links aesthetics with ethics in the novel. Furthermore, an ethical investment appears in the preoccupation with language within the story world, as well as in the interrogation of human existence and human co-existence with non-human animals.

As we have seen, attention had already been brought to the novel’s ethical concerns. Only a year after its publication, Derek Attridge emphasized the ethical and political issues raised by the fictional events in *Disgrace* (2000). In more recent literary criticism, philosophical approaches come hand-in-hand with an interest in ethical concerns, like Mike Marais’ *Secretary of the Invisible: The Idea of Hospitality in the Fiction of J. M. Coetzee* (2009) and Elisabeth S. Anker’s “Human Rights, Social Justice, and J. M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace*” (2008). I find these readings extremely useful as they pay careful attention to some of the less obvious traits of the novel. However, in my view the ethical awareness in *Disgrace* is invested in more than the characters’ ethical obligations or an ethical case for animal rights. *Disgrace* demonstrates that the treatment of other humans as “brutes” is the result of a Western history in which supposedly less valuable persons were associated with animality. With allusions to racist and colonialist practices in South Africa, *Disgrace* demonstrates how aspects of the humanistic tradition provide a cognitive foundation not only for racist practices but also for justifying abuse. In *Disgrace* this abuse is particularly directed towards women and non-human animals.

As the analysis will show, the text breaks down taxonomies and categories associated with humanism, and I will argue that this reflects a posthuman turn. Confronted with changes in society and culture, David has to confront and question the contingency of his Western cultural values. Through David's ethical rethinking and interrogation of his existence, Coetzee examines the integrities and identities of the human as well as of the non-human animals. In this way, the text not only raises ethical questions about human-animal relations, but also questions what it is to be human. By breaking down and interrogating the humanistic hegemony, *Disgrace* does not take part in the enthusiasm or the declaration of a new human bond that would somehow be the answer to the great conflict and contradiction of the South African situation. Post-apartheid did not equal post-violence, post-power, post-class, post-gender, or post-domination. These questions are confronted in *Disgrace*; I will argue that the reflection on ethics in the narrative suggests that the humanistic idea is not enough. Posthumanist theory addresses the question of how to live together, and includes the non-human animal. Its rejection of human exceptionalism and its ethics of entanglement entail both responsibilities and opportunities. These claims call for an explanation of what posthumanism is and how it will be employed in the thesis. The second chapter will, therefore, offer an introduction to the theoretical framework and, more specifically, the theoretical texts I will employ and how they are relevant to my discussion.

## Chapter 2

### Matters of entanglement: a posthuman ethics

It matters what matters we use to think other matters with  
it matters what stories we tell to tell other stories with  
it matters what knots knot knots, what thoughts think thoughts, what ties tie ties.

It matters what stories make worlds, what worlds make stories.

Donna Haraway

Posthumanism became part of contemporary critical discourse during the latter decades of the 20th century and is still an emerging field within the humanities and social sciences. Posthumanist thought has come to designate a variety of movements, including recent cultural studies, animal studies, ecocriticism, critical disability studies, new materialisms, and different subcultures such as cyberpunk. Strongly promoting a shift within the humanistic paradigm, its change of perspectives, often referred to as the posthuman turn, is also, I will argue, an ethical turn. We will return to this, but first, a clarification of the terms will prove helpful. The terms *posthuman* and *posthumanism* are often used interchangeably. Posthuman is used as an umbrella term for a broad field of studies, including those mentioned above, referring not only to critical, cultural, or philosophical posthumanism, but also to transhumanism (Ferrando 2013). Although posthumanism and transhumanism are related, they should not be confused. While both movements share the notion of technology as a trait

of the human outfit, they represent different perspectives and traditions. One of the principal posthumanist theorists, Cary Wolfe, emphasizes this in his book *What is Posthumanism*, stating that his "... sense of posthumanism is the *opposite* of transhumanism" (Wolfe xv, my emphasis). Importantly, the transhuman perspective is collateral to the ideals of anthropocentric humanism, promoting a form of super-humanism. Placing science and technology as essential to the future evolution of the human, transhumanist theorists refer to the posthuman as an era, or a condition, that will follow as a result of these impacts during our current transhuman phase (Ferrando 168-172).

Posthumanism, on the contrary, refers to the posthuman as a current condition, and further, as one that has always been accessible since we have never actually been human. As Francesca Ferrando puts it: "'human' is a human concept, based on humanistic and anthropocentric premises" (ibid). Similarly, Rosi Braidotti writes in her book *Posthumanism*, that "not all of us can say, with any degree of certainty, that we have always been human, or that we are only that" (1). As these statements indicate, posthumanism represents a deconstruction of humanism.

What, then, is humanism? A Google search of humanism provides more than eight million hits, while, in comparison, a search of posthumanism gives approximately 300,000 results. These figures demonstrate the hegemonic position of humanism, of which the OED offers the following definition:

Any system of thought or ideology which places humans, or humanity as a whole, at its centre, *esp.* one which is predominantly concerned with human interests and welfare, and stresses the inherent value and potential of human life. (OED)

Furthermore, humanism is an ethical category, which is emphasized in the definition offered in Wolfe's book on posthumanism:

Humanism is a broad category of ethical philosophies that affirm the dignity and worth of all people, based on the ability to determine right and wrong by appeal to universal human qualities—particularly rationality. (xi)

These short definitions clearly do not do justice to the complexity of the field. However, a core principle in humanism, namely the idea of *one* humanity and human exceptionalism, is made clear. Definitions of posthumanism are arguably even harder to pin down. A defining trait is that posthumanism diverges from the humanist tradition by decentering the human and opening its inquiry to non-human experience. By criticizing anthropocentric humanism in different ways, posthumanism offers a radical reflection of its philosophical and ethical concerns. I will not enter the debate surrounding the contents and meanings of posthumanism, definitions of which not only have different focuses but are often incompatible. In the following, I will clarify my use of the term and present the texts and studies relevant to the thesis.

In the following I will employ the term *posthumanism* as the post-anthropocentric approach of philosophical, cultural, and critical posthumanism. *Post* in this understanding refers to something that does not necessarily come *after* humanism. Post refers, rather, to a break with traditional binaries and historical notions of human subjectivity and embodiment, emphasizing material agency and connections across species. In other words, post refers to post-dualisms and to a post-centralization of the human. As we shall see, this renewed understanding of the subject, including non-human subjectivities, also has ethical implications. This employment of posthumanism is strongly inspired by Braidotti, one of the

most influential theorists writing in the field of posthumanism. In her book *The Posthuman*, she maps the diverse significations of the posthuman shift. She draws attention to how humanist ideals are models based on universalization and homogenization through examples such as the myth of progress and rationality in the Enlightenment and the bodily perfection of the Vitruvian man. Showing how by implication this ideal defines the subject as male and white, she points out how “difference spells inferiority” (15), causing “others” to be excluded. In Braidotti’s posthumanism, difference is the kernel: the human is not one, but many. Furthermore, humans are not defined in a dichotomy against a non-human other. To distinguish these ideas, Braidotti coined the term *New Materialism* to name a branch of posthumanism that opposes the dualist traditions of nature and culture, and matter and mind. This materialist thinking has similarities with the work of feminist and theoretical physicist Karen Barad, which I will discuss shortly.

Leaning on posthumanist thinkers such as Cary Wolfe, Rosi Braidotti, and Karen Barad, as well as others, I will contend that posthumanism aims to rehumanise the human. This becomes highly relevant in the juxtaposition of David’s and Lucy’s characters in *Disgrace*. By rejecting simplistic polarizations and traditional binaries like self and other, mind and body, subject and object, posthumanism affirms interaction, inter-dependency, and co-existence. This consequently encompasses environmentalism and speciesism with their inherent ethics. While humanism emphasizes that *we are in this together*, referring to the human race, posthumanism emphasizes that *we* (i.e., the human race) cannot be considered in isolation from our surroundings: *we are in this together* does not exclude non-human animals, the environment, matter, or machines. As stated, in this understanding posthumanism is not something that comes after, but rather an extension or reinvention of humanism, and shares similar values. As Wolfe explains:

the point is not to reject humanism *tout court*—indeed, there are many values and aspirations to admire in humanism—but rather to show how those aspirations are undercut by the philosophical and ethical frameworks used to conceptualize them.

(xvi)

Wolfe’s point here is that posthumanism is also about problematizing and revealing the shortcomings or misuses of humanism. Central to his argument is that the frameworks offered by humanism in fact enable reproduction of the very challenges they try to confront; the idea of one humanity in juxtaposition to nonhuman others, for instance, entails the idea of an essential human nature. This essentialism, however, also causes distinctions within the “human category”. People are positioned differently in relation to what is perceived as essential human qualities, causing a gradation within each category historically related to gender, race, class, and culture.

This is in line with Braidotti’s thinking. Posthumanism is about rejecting essentialism and affirming difference, and represents a critical approach to humanistic hierarchical values. Critique of humanism is not new; in *The Posthuman*, Braidotti points out how the post-1968 generation contributed to a radical revision of humanist ideas of “human nature”:

The Vitruvian ideal of Man as the standard of both perfection and perfectibility was literally pulled down from his pedestal and deconstructed. It turned out that this Man, far from being the canon of perfect proportions, spelling out a universalistic ideal that by now had reached the status of a natural law, was in fact a historical construct and as such contingent as to values and locations. (23)

Here Braidotti is tracing the origin of posthuman thinking back to the 1960s and the radical deconstruction of the “human” on political grounds. From this starting point, she draws a line

between posthumanism and post-structuralism and the anti-universalism of feminism, as well as to post-colonialism's break from Eurocentric universal, rational subjectivity. Drawing from a rich cartography, Braidotti shows how thinkers like Foucault, Barthes, Lacan, Lyotard, Derrida, and Said, among others, take part in a "current of thought", contending that "[w]hat they have in common is a sustained commitment to work out the implications of posthumanism for renewing our shared understandings of the human subject and of humanity as a whole" (9).

With its radical reflection of normative ethics, a posthuman approach allows new possibilities. This thesis argues for a reading of *Disgrace* as a novel that sets out a posthumanist perspective, not only in content but also at the formal level. A posthuman inquiry is to be found in the novel's aesthetic presentation in several ways. In the realm of language, posthumanism can be traced both within the semantics and the syntax: specifically, in relation to voice and the subject's agency. The novel's content is similarly akin to posthumanism; in addition to disturbing binaries between human and animal, the narrative also questions the notion of the subject as equal to reason and agency. In making the body and matter consequential, *Disgrace*, furthermore, entails an ethics. But it is not only the novel's content that carries an ethical force. With *Disgrace*, Coetzee addresses inhuman(e) aspects of life, showing that "human" is a situated concept, stressing that in the apartheid south Africa, not all human beings were considered as such. This is emphasized repeatedly by the way in which humans are referred to as dogs in the novel. However, as we shall return to, the dogs also become figures of profound importance in staging ethical issues, and through them Coetzee expand the field of ethical consideration. Ethical import is also to be found in the aesthetic realm through the way in which Coetzee writes; the linguistic, as we shall see, also has ethical ramifications.

As noted several critics have discovered an ethical awareness in *Disgrace*. In Mike

Mariais's study of the novel, its ethical stance is read in light of Emmanuel Levinas's ethical philosophy: an ethic that is grounded in sympathetic sentience and respect and responsibility for the other (2009, 118-119). Although Marais does not look to posthumanism, I would argue that there are significant similarities here. Like the posthuman theorists, Levinas rejects the humanist philosophical tradition, stating that "European humanism always tried to incorporate the other into the same, differences into universal models, in totalizing and unethical ways" (Blaagaard and van der Tuin 59). In accordance with posthumanist thinking, Levinas considers the humanistic idea as not sufficient to access humane practices of responsibility and concern. With his face-to-face ethics, Levinas also places emphasis on the body: "The I responds as a body to the corporality of the other being" (Marais 2001, 4). Similarly, although with a different approach and methodology, posthumanism gives particular attention to the body, incorporating the body as agential materiality. I will argue that this emphasis on bodies resonates in *Disgrace*. David struggles to come to terms with his body as well as with the life-changing encounters with the dogs. As mentioned, the dogs play an important part in relation to the novel's ethical development. These claims call for a closer look at how ethics comes to play within the posthumanistic field.

Animal theorist Kari Weil argues that the posthuman ethical turn is an attempt to recognize the other, and that these attempts emerge as "efforts to respect and meet well with, even extend care to, others while acknowledging that we may not know the other and what the best kind of care would be" (13). In other words, she affirms difference, and in line with Levinas's ideas, she stresses that responding to the other is not about recognition, but about acknowledging this difference. In *What is Posthumanism?* Wolfe argues that humans have "coevolved with various forms of technicity and materiality, forms that are radically 'not-human' and yet have nevertheless made the human what it is" (xxv). Furthermore, he argues that this interconnection carries profound ethical implications for humans' relations to other

living beings (xxvi). Wolfe's contemplation of dependency and coevolution corresponds with how Donna Haraway considers the relationship between human and dog in *The Companion Species Manifesto*, where she advocates an ethics of communication between humans and non-human animals.

Haraway is a key figure within cultural studies and contemporary feminist theory. In correspondence with posthumanism's interdisciplinary approach and practice, Haraway draws from a variety of sources in her writing, such as philosophy, feminist theory, history, biology, science studies, and animal training. It should be noted, though, that, whereas many posthumanists turn to Haraway, she does not to my knowledge place herself within the posthumanist tradition. In her own words, *The Companion Species Manifesto* is about "the implosion of nature and culture in the relentlessly historically specific, joint lives of dogs and people, who are bonded in significant otherness" (16). Also, it is about "co-habitation, co-evolution, and embodied cross-species sociality" (16). In other words, "companion species" refers to a multiplicity of human and non-human animal relationships marked by coevolution. The book follows in the steps of her iconic "A manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, technology, and socialist feminism in the 1980s", an article that has had impact beyond being a groundbreaking feminist work, moving beyond prevailing feminist discourse and its concerns. It has also been acclaimed as a posthuman text that promotes the cyborg, a hybrid used as a figure to clarify "the complexity of feminists' positions within discourses of truth and identity" (Smith and Watson, 185). The cyborg not only works to destabilize boundaries between gender, but to tear down traditional Western dualisms in general.

In *The Companion Species Manifesto*, Haraway revisits the cyborg, explaining that cyborgs and companion species are not polar opposites, however, she "ha[s] come to see

cyborgs as junior siblings in the much bigger, queer family of companion species” (11); cyborgs and companion species share the same function:

...each bring together the human and non human, the organic and technological, carbon and silicon, freedom and structure, history and myth, the rich and the poor, the state and the subject, diversity and depletion, modernity and postmodernity, and nature and culture in unexpected ways. (4)

Here, she is saying that companion species, like cyborgs, work to disturb binaries, particularly showing the inadequacy of the nature/culture dualism. Also, she emphasizes how nature and culture are not separate entities by using the term *naturecultures* (3). Haraway claims that profound insights can be made by taking the relationship between dogs and people seriously. She proposes “an ethics and politics committed to the flourishing of significant otherness” (1) and argues that dogs and humans are mutually implicated in an ethical relationship (5). However, while the cyborg functions as a metaphor, she makes explicit that the dogs do not: “Dogs are not an alibi for other themes. ... Dogs are not surrogates for theory; they are not here just to think with. They are here to live with” (5). Nevertheless, Haraway's argument—namely that humans and dogs are “companion species” who have coevolved in an intertwined evolution—places emphasis on interdependence, cross-species relationship, and significant otherness. She defines this as the “cobbl[ing] together” of “non-harmonious agencies and ways of living that are accountable both to their disparate inherited histories and to their barely possible but absolutely necessary joint futures” (7). To summarize, Haraway’s theories supplement Wolfe's appeal for responsibility and an ethics.

A similar take on ethical responsibility and human agency is found in the work of feminist and particle physicist Karen Barad. Not only are Barad’s and Haraway’s objectives to ethical inquiry strongly affiliated, both transform the question of difference and

differentiality with emphasis on entanglements. Using the insights of quantum mechanics, Barad offers new perspectives on the relations between lives, under the presumption that matter and meaning are entangled, indeed, that the very nature of materiality itself is an entanglement. Her rational ontology is based on the physical phenomenon of diffraction (Thiele 21-22). In Haraway we also find the term diffraction, although in use as a metaphor to shift the ideas of difference from oppositional to differential, as a way of rethinking binary oppositions. Correspondingly, for Barad differentiating is “not about othering or separating but on the contrary about making connections and commitments” (Barad 384). In Barad’s work however, diffraction refers to the quantum physical phenomenon. Diffraction illuminates “the complexity of the always/already entangled processes of dis/continuous becomings that make up what we are used to calling ‘world’” (Thiele 3). Barad’s theories are best known through her work *Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter* (2003) and in *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (2007). Here she coins the term *agential realism*, as in “a theory that ultimately undermines not just the substance of matter as we know it, but also the dichotomies between nature and culture, animal and human, female and male, even problematizing the social practice of science and the nature of ethics” (Kleinmann).

In Barad’s agential realist ontology: “Ontology and epistemology become inter-/intra-laced as onto-epistemology” (Thiele 202-216). Barad argues that because “specific practices of mattering have ethical consequences, excluding other kinds of mattering, onto-epistemological practices are always in turn onto-ethico-epistemological” (Kleinmann). In other words, epistemology, ontology, and ethics are inextricably intertwined. Following this, ethics is not a set of human values assigned to the ontology of the world, but an intrinsic part of the patterns of worlding; the very nature of matter requires an exposure to the other. Barad

argues that ethics is something that was there to begin with:

[E]thics is not simply about the subsequent consequences of our ways of interacting with the world, as if effect followed cause in a linear chain of events. Ethics is about mattering, about taking account of the entangled materializations of which we are part, including new configurations, new subjectivities, new possibilities—even the smallest cuts matter. (Barad Meeting the universe halfway 384)

What Barad takes on here is that relations precede identities: Things or objects do not precede their interaction, but emerge through intra-actions. Instead of the traditional understanding of interaction, which assumes agents that preexist their acting upon one another, intra-action by contrast, queers the idea of causality, where the agent(s) precedes and produces an effect. An implication of this argument is that the metaphysics of individualism are disturbed (Kleinmann). Furthermore, this entails that all bodies, including but not limited to human bodies, come to matter through intra-activity, and this also have ethical implications: “Ethics then is no longer relegated to a second order that comes after the facts, this makes for a world that is always already an ethical matter” (Thiele 2).

Barad further explains how an ethic is at work by emphasizing responsibility and by reminding us that we are part of the entangled materializations that make up the world. Ethics, for Barad, is about “responsibility and accountability for the lively relationalities of becoming, of which we are a part” (Dolphijn and van der Tuin). Responsibility, in turn, is linked to the ability to respond: “Listening for the response of the other and an obligation to be responsive to the other, who is not entirely separate from what we call the self” (Kleinmann). As we shall see, in *Disgrace*, we find this response to the other in David’s relation to the dogs. Notably, this response to the other does not occur as a result of rational

thinking, or even as a conscious choice. On the contrary, in a Baradian sense, since this response, or ethic, is something that is there already, it is materialized in the exposure to the other. Barad explains responsibility as "... not an obligation that the subject chooses but rather an incarnate relation that precedes the intentionality of consciousness" (Kuntz 88). This brings Marais's ethical reading of *Disgrace* to mind: Marais stresses that David has no wish to change. By contrast, David maintains that he is too old for his temperament to change. When Lucy asks him to help at the animal welfare clinic, he reiterates this: "I'll do it. But as long as I don't have to become a better person. I am not prepared to be reformed" (Coetzee 77). David does not wish to change, and this is made explicit. However, he does change, and he is at a loss to explain it: "he does not understand what is happening to him" (ibid. 143). Importantly, David does not *choose* to feel responsible for the dogs. As Marais point out, "...it happens despite of himself" (2006, 78) as a result of the encounter with the others' otherness. In other words, the change that takes place in David is a result of his encounter with the other, not based on rational thinking or subjective agency.

In this chapter, I have touched upon some of the most influential theorists within posthumanism, trying to give an account of the overall ideas of each. However, as their respective frameworks make complex and intricate arguments, illuminating their theories accurately would require a different format. Nonetheless, their ideas as outlined in this chapter touch upon several of the themes and subjects in *Disgrace*, and are highly relevant to the following discussion. In the next chapter I will look more closely at how a posthuman ethics comes into play on the aesthetic level. Moreover, I will consider the meaning of the animals, who play a significant and complex role in *Disgrace*. The use of animals, particularly dogs, as metaphors and metonyms connects the mistreatment of humans to South African history, and, as argued, to the ideological premises for this mistreatment. Dogs are also powerfully explored both as agents and as objects of representation in the inquiry of

human-animal relationship in *Disgrace*. This human-animal relationship makes a posthumanist approach highly relevant, as it allows analysis of the relationship between the human and the non-human animal, environment, nature, and cultures, or, after Haraway, naturecultures.

## Chapter 3

### Matters of tense, time, and aesthetics

The present contains nothing more than the past,  
and what is found in the effect was already in the cause

Henri Bergson

With its unique formal properties, literature can contain ethical ideas in several ways. Following David Atwell, literature in its singularity is ethical by its very nature: “In doing justice to a literary work, we encounter the singular demands of the other. Coetzee’s works both stage, and are, irruptions of otherness into our familiar worlds, and they pose the question: what is our responsibility toward the other?” (xii). In the following, Atwell’s statement will prove pertinent in an examination of the different ways in which formal elements in *Disgrace* contribute to unveiling a posthuman ethics. In addition, we will see how a reading of form as inherently ethical is positioned in the field of criticism of Coetzee’s works in general and *Disgrace* in particular. Coetzee touches on several sensitive issues in *Disgrace*, and the diverse criticism and controversy surrounding the novel demonstrate its complexity, giving room for different interpretations. As we have seen, readers and critics have highlighted different elements in the text and approached it from a variety of critical angles. Among the most obvious are preoccupations with the novel’s representations of

gender, race, and violence in the socio-political context of South Africa—the same issues that caused outrage among the majority of the novel’s South African readers. However, while politics and history were dominant themes in the early criticism, with few exceptions, critical discussion has gradually shifted from the political to the philosophical. As shown previously, the idea of an ethical awareness in *Disgrace* has been brought to public attention, often by placing Coetzee’s preoccupation with animals in the narrative as central. One example, already mentioned, is Mike Marais’s “J.M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace* and the Task of the Imagination” (2006), which places the novel within the philosophical framework of Emmanuel Levinas. Other notable in-depth studies are Patrick Hayes’s *J.M. Coetzee and the Novel* (2010), which argues for the political importance of *Disgrace*, focusing on its portrayal of animal life, and *J.M. Coetzee and Ethics* (2010), by Anton Leist and Peter Singer, which explores ethical theory and philosophy in Coetzee’s work.

An explanation as to why *Disgrace* has received such opposing interpretations may also lie in the way in which the novel is written and how it challenges the act of literary interpretation through its experiments in narrative fiction. As I will argue in this chapter, Coetzee’s linguistic choices have ethical consequences that correspond to a posthuman ethics. Despite the critical turn towards matters of the literary and the philosophical in the criticisms of Coetzee’s writings, less detailed attention has been given to matters of form, structure, and narrative strategies. Despite the controversy surrounding the novel, Coetzee himself has remained silent, notwithstanding the apparent link between these experiments and his own academic background in the field of linguistics. However, he generally does not wish to comment or explain his work, as he states in an interview with David Atwell: “If there were a better, clearer, shorter way of saying what the fiction says, then why not scrap the fiction” (Atwell and Coetzee). Taking this as a cue, confining the novel to a singular meaning would be highly reductive. The novel touches upon several themes in a way that problematizes and

opens up inquiry rather than closing down on conclusions.

Although Coetzee does not answer to the discussion surrounding his novels, it can still be helpful to look to other parts of his work. His preoccupation with language, not only in his fiction but also in his substantial critical writing, points towards the formal elements that this chapter will explore. Coetzee's earliest writing about literature includes a doctoral dissertation on Samuel Beckett, along with substantial work on topics ranging from grammar and linguistics to classical rhetoric (reference- footnote). Literary form and stylistics have also been a focal issue in his later nonfiction, which includes *White Writing* (1988), a collection of articles on South African literature and culture, as well as his collection of literary essays in *Stranger Shores* (2001). His preoccupation with language and linguistics is also central in the essays and interviews with David Attwell in *Doubling the Point* (1992). Considering Coetzee's sustained studies of language in his nonfiction, there can be no doubt about his awareness regarding form or the seriousness with which he investigates these issues. Consequently, the formalistic elements need to be seen together with the content in *Disgrace*. As I will argue, the grammar in the work is what makes the ethical investigation possible in the first place.

Although there are fewer critical contributions to the aesthetic inquiry of the novel, one notable exception is Carrol Clarkson's *J.M. Coetzee: Countervoices* (2009), which is the first linguistic account of Coetzee's novels. Clarkson demonstrates that "linguistic questions are at the core of his ethical enquiries by 'tracking a path back to his studies in the linguistic sciences'" (16). In other words, to understand Coetzee's fiction and how he writes, Clarkson looks back to his nonfiction. Clarkson argues for a link between "Coetzee's explicit preoccupation with language from the perspective of the linguistic sciences on the one hand, and the ethical force of his work, from a literary-philosophical perspective, on the other" (2). In line with her argument, I will contend that the meanings and the aesthetic of *Disgrace*

cannot be separated. In the novel, the “ethical” content of his style is just as important as the “ethical” weight of the content. *Disgrace* is of short length, but still, despite its sparseness, comprises a substantial range of themes. Focusing attention on Coetzee’s aesthetics does not, however, mean neglecting the contents and contexts; these are inseparable when considering a posthuman ethics in the novel. Nevertheless, what is being told is integral to *how* it is told, namely its aesthetics. When considering the formal elements, it is logical to apply narratological concepts, as narrative theory builds on the belief that “narratives need to be understood in terms of a formal relation between story and discourse, between what they narrate and how they narrate it” (Puckett 1).

As narratological concepts will prove helpful tools for the following analysis, a clarification of these terms is required. Narratology is a broad field with numerous branches, offering several models addressing questions about the type of information given in narratives. Likewise, there is a wealth of terms in the narratological lexicon, some of which are applied in different ways by different theorists. For the purpose of this thesis, however, formal analysis is based primarily on the perspectives of Gerard Genette. Genette can be placed within what we call the classical phase of narratology, along with other influential theorists such as Julien Greimas, Tzvetan Todorov, and Roland Barthes, all associated with French structuralism. Although narrative research has extended its scope beyond structuralism’s focus on the narrative, to include ideas ranging from gender theories to philosophical ethics and cognitive science, the tools offered by structuralism remain helpful. It should be noted here that my aim is not to map all the particular relations and elements in the narrative, but to identify how basic formal choices, together with content, produce meaning. Consequently, the narratological framework in the following has been limited for the purposes of this thesis.

In the following, I will examine the primary formal elements in *Disgrace*, namely tense, focalization, and agency, and the effects and relevance of these formal issues. Firstly, Genette distinguishes between the levels of narration, where events presented in the primary narrative are called *intradiegetic* or *diegetic*. A narrative act external to any diegesis is called *extradiegetic*, and narrative embedded within the diegetic level is called *metadiegetic* (228-229). In *Disgrace*, the third person narrator exists on an extradiegetic level; we also find metadiegetic elements in the novel, such as the Opera on Byron. The events in the novel are presented from David's perspective, in other words, they are focalized through him. The term *focalization*, defines a distinction between "those who see and those who speak" (Bal 116). To be more explicit: in *Disgrace*, the narrator tells what David sees. Thus, in Genette's terms, we have a heterodiegetic narrator—a third person narrator who does not exist within the story world. David, being a character inside the story, is an internal focalizer (189). With Genette, focalization also has a defining effect on the narrative, as its focus is determined by the knowledge made available by the focalization (161-211). Consequently, focalizing the narrative through David not only serves as a narrative tool for representing events, it enables Coetzee to expose attitudes and ideologies. As we will see, focalization allows the reader to access David's mind through a technique referred to as free indirect discourse. By Genette's definition, in free indirect discourse "the narrator takes on the speech of the character, or if one prefers, the character speaks through the voice of the narrator, and the two instances are then *merged*; in immediate speech, the narrator is obliterated and the character substitutes for him" (174, emphasis in original). In other words, it is a mode of presenting thoughts and statements in a work, and of blending third-person narration with first-person point of view.

One of the first things that is striking about the novel's form, is its consistent use of the present tense. Although the primary function of tense is to express time, it can be much more than merely a grammatical feature describing time reference. By the same token,

Coetzee himself clearly has his own outlook on time and narrative tenses, as demonstrated by his preoccupation with the present tense in his essay “Time, Tense and Aspect in Kafka’s “The Burrow”” (Atwell 210-232). As we will see, the use of present tense in *Disgrace* is paramount: it allows for a range of possibilities and is closely connected with the use of focalization and of free indirect discourse. For illustration, Theo Damsteeg argues in his article “The Present Tense and Internal Focalization of Awareness” that the present tense may influence internal focalization as the present tense provides a seemingly unmediated link with a character’s mind. Damsteeg coins the term *internal focalization of awareness* (IFA), which is used to express the character’s awareness of the action being performed: “a form of internal focalization which expresses that a character is vaguely aware of performing one or more specific phenomenal or mental actions, which are the object of focalization by that character” (Damsteeg 63). When it comes to narratology, the study of present-tense narration is marked by differences and incongruities (Miyahara 242-43). However, there is consensus that present-tense narration contributes to vividness of description. The present tense is also used in expressing habits, general truths, repeated actions, immediacy, and so on; as we will see, it can mean many things.

The present tense is not the most conventional way of writing literary fiction. As Dorrit Cohn notes, retrospective narration—“live now, tell later”—is the norm (96). Retrospective narration distinguishes story from discourse, and the experiencing from the narrating. In addition, as Jean-Paul Sartre contends, “narratives in the past tense tend to place events in a neat order of a cause and effect, at too great a remove from the chaos of the present moment” (Harvey 74). Present-tense narration, then, presents a challenge to common accounts of narrative and the act of literary interpretation. Nevertheless, an increasing number of novels written in the present tense have been published during the last quarter century, and it seems that use of the present tense is becoming a more acknowledged practice (Miyahara

242-243). The importance of tense to narrative, according to Monika Fludernik in “Chronology, Time, Tense and Experientiality in Narrative”, comes from the significance of time: “[T]ime is a constitutive component of narrative both on the level of story and that of discourse; time, or the progression of time, axiomatically defines narrative in many definitions of narrativity, i.e., that which constitutes a narrative” (Quoted in Binnick 5). Although Fludernik focuses on temporality and time here, we must keep in mind that, while tense is a grammatical category, time is a universal, extralinguistic concept: “Tense refers to the grammatical changes made to the form of a verb, as opposed to time, which refers to the semantic functions such changes signal” (Finch 113). In other words, tense is not always consistent with time.

With this in mind, we will look at Genette’s model for time on the discourse level. Genette distinguishes between four types of “narrating time”: the first type, *subsequent*, is “the classical position of the past-tense narrative”; the second, *prior*, is a “predictive narrative, generally in the future tense”; the third, *simultaneous*, is a “narrative in the present contemporaneous with the action”; and the last, *interpolated*, is included “between the moments of the action” (217). Genette not only distinguishes between types of narrating time, his taxonomy also contains categories to describe time in story–discourse relations, employing the terms *order*, *duration* (not to be mistaken with Bergsonian duration), and *frequency*. Order distinguishes between *prolepsis* (flash-forward) and *analepsis* (flash-back), both of which are deviations between story and discourse called *anachronies*. Similarly, a deformation of duration is called *anisochrony* (Genette: 86). In *Disgrace* we see two types of anisochrony, namely: *summary* (for example, “He clears out the refrigerator, locks up the house, and at noon is on the freeway” (59); and *ellipsis*, which is perhaps best demonstrated in the scene of the attack, where an ellipsis in time omits parts of the action. The effects and implications of this will be discussed further in the next chapter. The final category,

frequency, outlines the relationship between the number of occurrences in the story and the number of occurrences narrated.

The present tense has, as we have seen, become more common in the last 20-30 years. However, its dominant use is *historical* present-tense narration, where the present tense is used to narrate events that took place in the past. Moreover, the present tense is usually combined with a first-person narrator. *Disgrace* is narrated in the more unusual *simultaneous* present tense. As seen, simultaneous present-tense narration employs a narrator who tells of events as they occur. The reason why this type of narration is so rare could be that it eliminates the time between experience and narration, making retrospective analysis and evaluation of events impossible. Another interesting feature of the simultaneous present-tense narration, is that the story is not prior to the telling: telling generates the story in the first place. Furthermore, as narration and acting are simultaneous, the fictionality, the act of storytelling, is foregrounded. As we will see, this is closely linked to thematic issues, such as discourse and language, which are juxtaposed with the non-verbal world in the narrative, with attention to the problem of speaking for the other, the limitations of language, and the rhetoric of rights and justice. Another related feature with simultaneous present-tense narration is that the location of narration is the same as the location of experiencing, and as a result shifts throughout the narration. There is no distinction between the location of action and the location of narration; the narration necessarily occurs *where* David is having his experiences. In *Disgrace*, this foregrounds the importance of place.

Clearly, having looked at some established ideas about the present-tense narrative and identified *Disgrace* as a simultaneous present-tense narration, a single theory cannot account for the various uses of the present tense in this novel. Given that tense can have several meanings and that there are different uses of present-tense narration at work in the novel, let

us start by looking at the opening sentence:

For a man of his age, fifty-two, divorced, he has, to his mind, solved the problem of sex rather well. On Thursday afternoons he drives to Green Point. Punctually at two p.m. he presses the buzzer at the entrance to Windsor Mansions, speaks his name, and enters. (1)

The use of the pronoun he—“He has... to his mind...”—reveals that the story is narrated by a third-person narrator. The opening sentence gives information about the protagonist: his age, his marital status, and his self-aware, ironical distancing from emotion. This type of information, however, is considered to be “timeless” and is generally articulated in the present tense. The use of the present tense here is intended to describe a habit or act of repetition. In the following passage, however, the present tense can be described as a stream of events, placing the reader close to the focalizing character as the events unfold:

Waiting for him at the door of No. 113 is Soraya. He goes straight through to the bedroom, which is pleasant-smelling and softly lit, and undresses. Soraya emerges from the bathroom, drops her robe, slides into bed beside him.

'Have you missed me?' she asks. 'I miss you all the time,' he replies. (1)

This type of simultaneous present-tense narration, presenting the action as a stream of events, is characteristic of the narrative as a whole. Another example comes from the following passage, during the scene in which David first takes Melanie Isaacs to his house:

He unlocks the security gate, unlocks the door, ushers the girl in. He switches on lights, takes her bag. There are raindrops on her hair. He stares, frankly ravished. She lowers her eyes, offering the same evasive and perhaps even coquettish little smile as

before. (12)

Here the action is clearly set in the here-and-now. The attention to detail reinforces the simultaneity of telling and acting and emphasizes immediacy. In addition, the present tense allows for a moment-to-moment exposure of the focalizing character's mind, namely the mode of presenting consciousness known as *stream of consciousness*.

Although the novel is often ascribed to a closely related mode, namely free indirect discourse, as mentioned earlier, I will apply the term stream of consciousness. Stream of consciousness is a technique usually associated with modernist writers such as James Joyce and Virginia Woolf, who both represented consciousness as fragmented and incoherent sensory impressions. In *Disgrace*, however, stream of consciousness takes the form of a descriptive and reportorial third-person narration, a variant also referred to as *psychonarration* (Murfin and Ray 488), as exemplified by the following quote:

It surprises him that ninety minutes a week of a woman's company are enough to make him happy, who used to think he needed a wife, a home, a marriage. His needs turn out to be quite light, after all, light and fleeting, like those of a butterfly. (5)

Here we see how the narration, focalized through David, gives the reader access to his mind in a stream of consciousness. The quote also exemplifies what Damsteg calls internal focalization of awareness; David seems to be both aware of and able to evaluate his needs as "light and fleeting". This self-awareness is an important feature in the characterization of David, and is emphasized not only by the logical and rational presentation of his thoughts but also in another distinct feature, namely his irony. In effect the focalization contributes to an element of comedy in the novel, a feature often overlooked. Then again, the irony is not always humorous; at times David appears to be ironic in his seriousness and serious in his

irony.

Another recurring feature accommodated by the stream of consciousness and internal focalizing of awareness lies in the characterization of David as a conscious, dedicated editor of language. As a professor of literature and communication, he emphasizes as well as ironizes his own discourse, as seen in his fixation with the perfective. This recurs not only through David's inner monologue, but also in the classroom setting where he emphasizes the perfective in his lectures: "usurp upon means to intrude or encroach upon. Usurp, to take over entirely, is the perfective of usurp upon; usurping completes the act of usurping upon" (21). The juxtaposition of the "completed" perfective and the "open" present tense can hardly be missed here.

Similarly, David is persistently searching for the right word, shown by his hesitant verbalization: "a moderate bliss, a moderated bliss" (6), "A ready learner, compliant, pliant" (5), "this daughter, this woman" (62), "to pass him tools—to be his handlanger in fact" (136), "Her hips and breasts are now (he searches for the best word) ample" (59). Likewise, the following is a good illustration of the elements discussed here:

He thinks of Emma Bovary, coming home sated, glazen-eyed, from an afternoon of reckless fucking. So this is bliss!, says Emma, marvelling at herself in the mirror. So this is the bliss the poets speak of! Well, if poor ghostly Emma were ever to find her way to Cape Town, he would bring her along one Thursday afternoon to show her what bliss can be: a moderate bliss, a moderated bliss. (5-6)

Here, in this stream of consciousness, we see yet another example of David's preoccupation with tense, not to mention his sense of comedy. The reference to Flaubert's classic, *Madame Bovary*, known to be the first novel written in the mode of free indirect discourse, is just one

of many literary references in *Disgrace*. Critics have paid substantial attention to this intertextuality, which includes references to Wordsworth, Byron, Hardy, Greek mythology, and the Bible, all seamlessly woven into the narrative.

The present-tense narration, focalized through David, obliterates the past and blurs the notions of past, present, and future. However, the narrative is also sprinkled with passages of retrospective narration. Sentences such as: “He waits a few days, then telephones the agency” (8) clearly imply that the narration and the narrated events do not take place simultaneously. This particular sentence shows inconsistency between the story events and the time it takes to narrate them. Similarly, the information about David’s earlier life in the following lines is narrated in the past tense:

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 of him a lover of women and, to an extent, a womanizer. With his height, his good bones, his olive skin, his flowing hair, he could always count on a degree of magnetism. If he looked at a woman in a certain way, with certain intent, she would return his look, he could rely on that. That was how he lived; for years, for decades, that was the backbone of his life. (7)

This retrospection is, however, closely connected to the focalization, and to the free indirect discourse that allows access to David’s mind. Consciousness has its own time: it does not necessarily follow continuity, but is able to move in time. In *Disgrace*, these instances of retrospection however, does not interfere with the overall sense that narration takes place at the present moment.

The short instances of retrospection are woven naturally into the stream of consciousness. This is an effect of the focalization: the two instances, the narrator and the

character, seem to merge. As result, these rare instances of seamless tense-switching do not constitute a break with the logic of the narrative, but serve to blur the difference between past and present. This brings the argument to another important feature of the simultaneous present tense: its effect on the understanding of time. One of the main effects of the present tense in *Disgrace*, I will argue, is not the time reference in a traditional understanding, but how it foregrounds time in relation to causality, reflecting central themes.

Firstly, the present tense provides a presentness to the narration. The use of the present tense places David in the “chaos of the present moment” as described by Sartre, narrating his “present reality”, making it hard to find a sense of continuity. At the same time, it also sets up a presentness of the past. This function of the present tense in *Disgrace* is more than a stylistic choice. As we shall see, use of the present tense draws attention to the contemporary situation in South Africa and to the transition from apartheid to a post-apartheid society, showing that the apartheid system is lingering. This, in effect, blurs the lines between past, present, and future, in turn affecting the idea of causality and creating a disturbance in the conventional understanding of cause and effect. For a better understanding of this connection, it is helpful to look at notions of time as presented by Henri Bergson, one of the most influential French philosophers of the late 19th century-early 20th century. In his book *The Creative Mind* (1934), Bergson presents two images of time: one representing the continuous flow and movement through a life-span; the other representing the continuous growth of consciousness, which he refers to as *memory*.

To Bergson, no successive moments can be identical, as every moment contains the memory of the previous moment. He further asserts that life is a continuous stream of experience rather than a linear movement of time (1946: 190-192). This correlates to the narrative stream of consciousness that we find in *Disgrace*. For Bergson, time signifies the

constant presentness of the moments, and not past or future. Keeping in mind that Bergson coins consciousness as memory, he explains:

The truth is that memory does not consist in a regression from the present to the past, but, on the contrary, in a progress from the past to the present. It is in the past that we place ourselves at a stroke. We start from a ‘virtual state’ which we lead onwards, step by step, through a series of different planes of consciousness, up to the goal where it is materialized in an actual perception: that is to say, up to the point where it becomes a present active state ... (1950:319)

Here Bergson gives an account of consciousness and perception, contending that past recollections are perceived within the present situation. Bergson sees recollection and perception as elements of consciousness, both organized by a system of connections where the past and the present collectively comprise consciousness. This is connected to duration, which is a basic category of Bergsonian time.

To Bergson, duration is the real experience of time. We find ourselves in a “duration in which the past, always moving on, is swelling unceasingly with a present that is absolutely new” (quoted in Cunningham 526-527). Bergson writes about duration in *Time and Free Will*, which has been seen as an attack on Kant, who perceives human action as being determined by natural causality. In Bergson’s response, the immediate data of consciousness are defined as temporal; duration is to experience emotions and states in which previous and present sensations are not separated. Past sensations are not replaced by present ones, but joined in a process in which the sensation of each state is maintained and combined to form one whole. Tellingly, no succeeding moments are identical, as one will always comprise the memory left by the previous. Consequently, duration is seen as heterogeneous moments, where events are separated from the whole “which at every moment puts on a new form and which

communicates to them something of its novelty” (Bergson 1911, 361).

In conclusion, while past-tense narratives follow the traditional, scientific notion of time as linear perception, the simultaneous present tense is compatible with Bergson’s notion of duration. Bergsonian time enables a simultaneous narration of an event at the moment of occurrence, analogous to the narration we encounter in *Disgrace*. The anachrony or discrepancy between the pace of telling on the discourse level and experience in the story world, also correlates with Bergson’s notion of time: because time is mobile and incomplete, it may speed up or slow down for the individual. Tellingly, past, present, and future are highlighted in several different ways in *Disgrace*. For instance, in the following quote, David is showing Melanie an old film: “It is a film he first saw a quarter of a century ago but is still captivated by: the instant of the present and the past of that instant, evanescent, caught in the same space.” (15) Here David articulates Bergsonian time.

Other ways of referring to time and history are found on the lexical level, as in the following which takes place shortly after David’s arrival at Lucy’s farm:

“Dogs and a gun; bread in the oven and a crop in the earth. Curious that he and her 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.” (60-61)

Here, we see several references to the past; the word “settler”, for instance, has clear connotations of colonialism. According to the OED the word describes: “one who settles in a new country; a colonist” (OED). “Throwback” carries similar connotations, as it describes a person with characteristics of earlier times. The word “sturdy”, although primarily perceived in this context as “brave” or perhaps “rebellious”, is also a word associated with colonialism:

According to the OED, sturdy can also mean “recklessly violent”, “furious”, “ruthless”, “cruel”, and is often applied in the context of battle and combat (OED). This certainly draws lines of connections to South Africa’s history of violence. Similarly, “dogs and a gun” carries added resonance: after the attack, David, looking at one of the dogs brutally killed by the attackers, thinks about how dogs in South Africa “are bred to snarl at the mere smell of a black man” (110). Finally, the word “history” emphasizes these connotations.

However, these colonial images are not applicable to Lucy’s character. On the contrary, they are in sharp opposition to what Lucy represents in the narrative. Interestingly, Petrus's contention that “[s]he is a forward-looking lady, not backward-looking” (136), seems more correct. Engaged in animal welfare, making her living from running kennels and producing and selling garden produce, her lifestyle is in sharp opposition to David’s, whose worldview and lifestyle are shaped by the history of colonialism and apartheid. His position as professor of literature not only gives David cultural authority, it places him in an arena of European philosophical thought that can be associated with colonial ideological views. This is also true of his exploitation of women for his own benefit, as well as his stereotypical attitude towards people, as revealed when he learns an attacker’s name: “Not Mncedisi? Not Nqabayakhe? Nothing unpronounceable, just Pollux?” (200). David’s self-awareness does not escape this: “His mind has become a refuge for old thoughts, idle, indigent, with nowhere else to go” (72).

The contrast between Lucy and David particularly surfaces in their dialogues, as in the following, when Lucy responds to David:

You think I ought to be painting still lives or teaching myself Russian. You don’t approve of friends like Bev and Bill Shaw because they are not going to lead me to a higher life. But it is true. They are not going to lead me to a higher life, and the reason

is, there is no higher life. This is the only life there is. Which we share with animals.

(74)

Lucy's viewpoint here clearly sets her apart from the ideology of both classical humanism and the ideologies that shape David. Consequently, David's description of Lucy on his arrival at her smallholding does not serve to characterize Lucy. What it does, on the contrary, is to characterize the place and highlight the importance of location in the narrative. Coetzee clearly sets the Eastern Cape apart from Cape Town, ascribing to it a different connotation. The Eastern Cape is not just a rural district, it is historically associated with the South African frontier wars and was later a scene of conflict and strife. It was also the location of two of the Apartheid government's biggest homelands. As this example shows, place carries narratological weight and vice versa.

Another way in which history and time are addressed in the novel is through David's obsession with the present perfect: "Two weeks ago he was in a classroom explaining to the bored youth of the country the distinction between drink and drink up, burned and burnt. The perfective, signifying an action carried through to its conclusion. How far away it all seems! I live, I have lived, I lived." (71). As we have already seen, this can mean several things, and the juxtaposition with the simultaneous present tense foregrounds the concept of time. As stated, time and tense in *Disgrace* have different functions, with an overall disturbance of linear causality similar to Bergsonian time. This is closely connected to posthumanism as we can see from Karen Barad's takes on time, causality, and ethics. In an interview in "New Materialism: Interviews & Cartographies", Barad talks about what she has learned from her engagement in science, particularly concerning the diffraction pattern:

We assume that time is a given externality, just a parameter that marches forward, and that the past already happened and the present, that moment “now” just slipped away into the past, and that the future is yet to come. But if we examine this carefully, ... what we can see is that what is going on actually is *the making of temporality* ... and that there is a certain way in which what we take to be the ‘past’ and what we take to be the ‘present’ and the ‘future’ are entangled with one another. (Dolphijn and van der Tuin)

Here, Barad is rethinking causality as intra-activity instead of as cause followed by effect. Ethics is at the core of philosophic posthumanism, and, in a broader sense, this notion of time and causality has ethical ramifications.

As shown above, one of the effects of the simultaneous present-tense narration in *Disgrace* is that it creates a disruption of causality in which the past, like the future, is not closed. About this openness, Barad explains:

In an important sense, the past is open to change. It can be redeemed, productively reconfigured in an iterative unfolding of spacetime-matter. But its sedimenting effects, its trace, cannot be erased. The memory of its materializing effects is written into the world. So changing the past is never without costs, or responsibility. (Dolphijn and van der Tuin)

Although undoing moments in time is not possible, possibilities for reparation do exist. As the next chapter will show, Coetzee’s narrative techniques and his juxtaposition of ideals and attitudes, create an interrogation that allows for new possibilities and hope. This makes it possible to read the novel as affirmative, rather than, as the majority of its critics perceived it,

a bleak and pessimistic narration. The opening of the present, the past, and the future to one another brings with it responsibility; this responsibility is to the other and to listen for response of the other. David's mindset and modes of thought up until the last part of the novel demonstrate a complete lack of this sense of responsibility, an issue we will return to in the next chapter.

Responsibility towards the other is investigated in various ways in the novel. The narrative structure only allows the reader access to what David sees and perceives. This limited access is mirrored in the storyworld in David's inability to access or interfere as he is barred from events and situations. This is best exemplified in the scene of the brutal attack on David and Lucy. David is present as the events take place but barred from the events. The simultaneous present tense, as we have seen, has an immediacy that positions the reader close to the action, but nevertheless outside it. In effect, this distancing invites the reader to share the frustration that David experiences when Lucy is in the hands of her rapists. Beaten and locked up in the lavatory at the time of the event, David, and consequently the reader, is barred from what is happening to Lucy: "Lucy!" he shouts. 'Are you here?' A vision comes to him of Lucy struggling with the two in the blue overalls, struggling against them" (97). Given these points, in this simultaneous present tense narration, focalized through David, the reader, placed outside of the story, is confined to what David sees and thinks. Confining the reader along with David, according to Gayatri Spivak in "Ethics and Politics in Tagore, Coetzee, and Certain Scenes of Teaching", is a "rhetorical signal to the active reader, to counterfocalize" (22). In other words, to take the position, as reader, of the character that is deprived of focalization.

Similarly, the scene of the attack shows how narrating simultaneously with experiencing prevents the focalizing character from interpreting and evaluating the action as it unfolds. As a result, counterfocalization is further imposed as these functions are left with the

reader. After the attack, David is again unable to interfere: Lucy refuses to speak with David about what happened, leaving David utterly incapable of understanding her choices. This provokes the active reader to counterfocalize. This provocation is sparked by Lucy's refusal to offer explanations. For instance, when David asks, "Like a dog?", Lucy simply agrees, "Yes, like a dog" (205). As we have seen, the limited access offered by the focalization through David and the "limits" of simultaneous present-tense narration, facilitate counterfocalization. Likewise, the other characters—Lucy, Melanie, Petrus—are denied focalization, and this lack of perspective invites the reader to take their positions. Neither the novel nor David attempt to speak for the other. On the contrary, the impossibility to do so is highlighted. At the same time, the reader is invited to actively sympathize with the other, who is not the same; this is the ethical responsibility that Barad and other posthumanists speak for. Ignoring this invitation to counterfocalize and allowing the novel to be focalized entirely by David can make for a quite reductive reading, as the allegations of racism aimed at Coetzee after publication of *Disgrace* prove.

In the preceding paragraphs, I have addressed what I believe to be an important key in understanding *Disgrace*, namely counterfocalization. In his acceptance speech for the Jerusalem Prize, Coetzee exclaims that "in South Africa we must write our way out of a situation" (*Doubling the Point* 98), and that "[i]n South Africa there is now too much truth for art to hold, truth by the bucketful, truth that overwhelms and swamps every act of the imagination" (*Doubling the Point* 98-99). In other words, art and language do not contain enough "material" in themselves. Instead of trying to speak for the other, Coetzee applies linguistic and literary strategies to activate responses in the reader instead. In *J.M. Coetzee: Countervoices*, Clarkson writes about countervoices, which should not be confused with counterfocalization; although related, *countervoice* concerns the position of the writer rather than the reader. For Coetzee "there is a true sense in which writing is dialogic: a matter of

awakening the countervoices in oneself and embarking upon speech” (1992, 65). As Clarkson stresses: “Coetzee’s concept of countervoices is not intellectual spice added to his fiction in the form of staged dilemmas, but a matter of intellectual involvement” (Clarkson 8). This involvement is reflected in the following discussion of Coetzee’s linguistics in *Disgrace*.

Having discussed present tense and focalization, we will now look more closely at another formal issue, namely voice, specifically in relation to questions of subjective agency. In the following I will look at how the use of active or passive voice creates meaning in the narrative. Coetzee himself addresses the issue of active and passive constructions in *Doubling the Point*: “In the hands of writers who use the passive in a complex and systematic way, what can it be made to do?” (159). As has been noted, modes of narration are inextricably knit together with history and place in *Disgrace*. As Clarkson puts it: “Coetzee’s seemingly opposite preoccupations with history and postcolonial themes on the one hand, and with self-reflexive postmodern strategies on the other, are inextricably connected” (155). She explains this further by pointing to the juxtaposition of European language and classical culture and contemporary South Africa: “Insistently in *Disgrace*, the socio-political aftermath of colonialism is indexed in the anachronistic disjuncture between a European language and intellectual literary heritage on the one hand, and the Africa it attempts to address, or represent, on the other” (157).

At the outset of the novel David is characterized as a veritable representative of European Romanticism, out of place in the new South Africa, and unable to sympathetically identify with other beings. During the novel he goes through changes that ultimately make him able to respond to the other. In *J.M. Coetzee: Countervoices*, Clarkson pays particular attention to David’s development in relation to agency. The use of active or passive voice has an impact on the subject’s position in the sentence, hence, affects the subjective agency in that sentence. The most common sentence structure in English—subject, verb, object, in active

voice—provides a subjective agency. What we see in Coetzee is that this structure is often changed with the semantic context. As Clarkson observes: agentless sentences, or sentences with ambiguous agency, are often used when the characters experience an ethical bond with other creatures (117). When David experiences what we may call a sensibility towards the other, he seems unable to rationally account for what is happening or why it happens. In Coetzee’s writing, this confusion is emphasized in voice. The syntactic structure of the following lines, exemplifies this: “A bond seems to have come into existence between himself and the two Persians, he does not know how. . . . Nevertheless, suddenly and without reason, their lot has become important to him” (126). We see that in the first sentence here, the word “seems” functions as a dummy subject). Consequently, the sentence is in the passive voice, which in turn complicates the question of subjective agency. Similarly, in the next sentence, “to him” is in the dative case (indirect object), which means there is no apparent agent, leaving a sentence in the passive voice.

In like manner, this ambiguity of agency appears as David is overwhelmed by what happens at the clinic where he helps with the euthanization of unwanted dogs. Not able to grasp or rationalize his emotions in words, his reaction is expressed physically:

One Sunday evening, driving home in Lucy's kombi, he actually has to stop at the roadside to recover himself. Tears flow down his face that he cannot stop; his hands shake. *He does not understand what is happening to him. . . . His whole being is gripped by what happens in the theatre.* (142-143 my emphasis)

In the syntactic structures emphasized here, we again see passive constructions and a lack of subjective agency. The semantic context here is important, as this structure highlights David’s inability to understand and rationally account for his compassionate response towards the

dogs and this sense of being “gripped”. The presumed priority of subjective agency and rational thinking in the workings of ethical response to the other is disturbed. Equally, these passages draw attention to the limits of language, its incapacity to express certain emotions, and, as the above example illustrates, the body begins to matter.

Given these points, how do these formal issues carry ethical meaning? Clarkson draws attention to the ethics involved in Coetzee’s writing, claiming that “linguistic questions are at the core of his [Coetzee’s] ethical enquiries” (16). I want to build on Clarkson’s view, placing Coetzee’s strategies within the posthuman field. Posthumanism interrogates what it means to be human through a breakdown of humanist hierarchies and binaries, where subjective agency is also questioned. The agentless sentences emphasize on the syntactic level what is expressed at the semantic level—namely that the sense of compassion and responsibility David experiences here is not something that grows out of a rational logic: “He does not understand what is happening to him” (143). Responsiveness to otherness is essentially ethical and, as we will return to in the next chapter, not limited to humans. The posthuman understandings of ethics, as argued by Barad and Haraway among others, is of something that is already threaded through the world, something that is already there through “intra-actions” and entanglements. This is in sharp contrast to the view inherited from humanist traditions that ethics is the result of human rationalization and reasonable evaluation. The capacity for rational argument, which is thought of as a marker of human identity, is dislocated from ethics in *Disgrace*. The agentless sentences and lack of subjective agency contribute to this interrogation of ethics, and, even more, of what it means to be human.

I have already mentioned Attridge as a critic who takes Coetzee’s ethics seriously. In *J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*, he writes about the singularity of the literary work as distinguished “by the new possibilities for thought and feeling it opens up in its creative transformation of familiar norms and habits: singularity is thus inseparable from

*inventiveness*” (11). To Attridge, singularity, which is further characterized by its unpredictability and resistance to being reduced to banal discourse, is at the core of Coetzee’s fiction (6). He also argues that this singularity is intrinsically ethical: “In doing justice to a literary work, we encounter the singular demands of the other. Coetzee’s works both stage, and are, irruptions of otherness into our familiar worlds, and they pose the question: what is our responsibility toward the other?” (xii). Here Attridge argues that both the formal issues and the subject matter are matters of interrogation in Coetzee’s work. In this chapter I have tried to unveil how this applies to the form, paying particular attention to the way in which the novel is written and the ethical dimension of choices made at the linguistic level. However, these formal elements do not work alone and need to be considered together.

As we have seen, the use of simultaneous present-tense narration does more than denote time reference: It has consequences for characterization and reflects major themes. And, it is important for the structuring of the novel as a whole, as it carries the reader through a stream of events. In *Disgrace*, the present tense emphasizes a presentness and in this way actualizes the story. However, the tense does more than allude to a continuing condition, it also sets up an interrogation of the notion of time and causality, ultimately suggesting that there is no determinate relationship between past, present, and future. In turn, this openness towards the past and the future, along with ethical implications of response and responsibilities that follow, corresponds to posthuman ideas.

This chapter has also discussed different effects of focalization, which need to be considered together with the mode of narration. Firstly, the focalization through David makes the reader familiar with his worldview, passions, and discourse, the latter placing him as a representative of a distant time and culture. This is shown particularly in his preoccupation with language, for example, his persistent searching for the right word or his reference to European languages, such as: “A peasant, a *paysan*, a man of the country” (117) or “Modern

English friend from old English *freond*, from *freon*, to love” (102). The foregrounding of language, however, also conveys its limitations. Locked in the bathroom during the attack, David thinks, “He speaks Italian, he speaks French, but Italian and French will not save him here in darkest Africa” (95). Moreover, the focus on discourse emphasizes fictionality, as the mode of narrating creates distance. The sense of frustration at being barred from events invites counterfocalization. In *Doubling the Point*, Attwell compares Coetzee’s protagonists with the people in the Platonic cave: “The voices that Coetzee realizes in his fiction—voices of characters like Lurie—all speak from the limited and fallable perspective of prisoners in the cave” (190). This, in turn, invites the reader to see the other possible perspectives, to counterfocalize. Finally, the use of passive constructions interrogates the subjective agency and ethical accountability. The many formalistic elements at work here contribute to a posthuman ethical awareness.

The sense in which Coetzee himself understands ethical practice is as “a way of life that provides the means for interrogating our existence” (Attwell and Coetzee). *Disgrace* opens for many questions, and as argued, ethics is at the core here. By way of concluding this chapter and providing a transition to the next, which will concern thematic issues, it is appropriate to site Barad’s thoughts on ethics:

Ethics is therefore not about right responses to a radically exteriorized other, but about responsibility and accountability for the lively relationalities of becoming, of which we are a part. Ethics is about mattering, about taking account of the entangled materializations of which we are part, including new configurations, new subjectivities, new possibilities. Even the smallest cuts matter. Responsibility, then, is a matter of the ability to respond. Listening for the response of the other and an

obligation to be responsive to the other, who is not entirely separate from what we call the self. (Dolphijn and van der Tuin)

## Chapter 4

### The right to speak the right to be silent: justice, human and non-human relations in

#### *Disgrace*

If one could possess, grasp, and know the other,

it would not be other.

Emmanuel Levinas

As soon as there is language,

generality has entered the scene

Jacques Derrida

In the following we will look at how posthuman ethics recognized on the formal level come to play on the thematic level. As should be quite clear by now, the novel contains a wide range of issues, and it will not be possible to explore all of them in the present format. *Disgrace* has several layers of narration. The main story follows David from his life in Cape Town where we first encounter him with Soroya. Stories within this main story are coupled with other characters, and form important complementary functions. The most important of these is Lucy's story; her life in the Eastern Cape informs a large part of the narration. Similarly, there are several layers of narration in *Disgrace*; one of these is David's opera, which offers an interesting parallel to the development of his character. The many allusions to literature, which have been only briefly mentioned in the previous chapters, serve a similar function. For

this thesis, however, I will not go into a further discussion on these issues, but focus on the main story. As a starting point, I will examine the episode that caused the most outrage and largely contributed to the perception of the novel as a bleak image of the new South Africa, namely the attack on David and Lucy at her smallholding in Salem. This episode is interesting in itself, but, as we will see, it also sets up most of the themes for the discussion, as the remaining part of the book evolves around the aftermath of this event.

In his review of *Disgrace*, Salman Rushdie writes that the novel hauntingly creates a dystopic world, and criticizes it for failing to illuminate that world. In his view, *Disgrace* reflects contemporary events in its account of violence and rape, but does not “shed enough new light on the news” (340). Rushdie’s perception of the book is not without substance. *Disgrace* does indeed depict issues connected with a South African history of violence, racism, and rape, and invokes mythologies that are deeply rooted in this history. South Africa had at the time (and still does today) one of the highest per capita number of police-reported rapes in the world. Figures show that rape was widespread: 52,000 reported to police in 1998 with a similar figure in 1999, many of which were thought to be gang rapes (Beinart 333). *Disgrace*'s discussion of violence and rape on a micro level reflects the South African reality on a macro level, consequently leading to its reputation as a reductive and pessimistic report on contemporary post-apartheid society. Not only was rape a contemporary issue, its racialized presentation in *Disgrace* also alluded to the apartheid ideology, and the legislation that prohibited mixed marriages and prohibited “colored” people from living in certain areas (Landis). These laws were highly influenced by a symbolic significance of rape in South Africa, namely the colonial myth of white women as victims of black rapists. This myth goes back to the 1800s, as Pamela Scully asserts in “Rape, Race, and Colonial Culture: The Sexual Politics of Identity in the Nineteenth-Century Cape Colony, South Africa” (1995), where she explores different ways in which sexuality was as a key site for colonial anxieties throughout

the British Empire and Commonwealth (338-39). Picturing interracial rape then has particular implications in South Africa.

Rape myths, however, are not only connected to South Africa but also to Western culture since antiquity, as alluded to in *Disgrace*. After the attack, David finds a painting of Nicolas Poussin's "The Rape of the Sabine Women" in an artbook and thinks to himself, "What did all this attitudinizing have to do with what he expected rape to be: the lying of a man on top of a woman and pushing himself into her?" (160). His thoughts go to Byron: "Among the legions of countesses and kitchenmaids Byron pushed himself into there were no doubt those who called it rape" (160). Here David recognizes the lack of ethical responsibility; the actual horrific act of rape is veiled in its representations and justified within the framework of Romanticism. However, whereas rape-myths are a part of both European and South African culture, they have a different connotation in South Africa. As Elisabeth Anker explains, in South Africa "[w]hite women's sexuality is a kind of symbolic frontier post between the races" (Anker).

In the context of rape-mythologies, history, and contemporary reality, the rape of Lucy is more likely to be read as a symbol, or even an allegory, than as experience. This largely explains why Coetzee has been so heavily criticized for placing a gang-rape of a white woman at the center of the narration. Nevertheless, in opposition to what Rushdie claims, I will contend that the novel does indeed shed light on the events. Although the narration is focalized entirely through David, we have seen that the mode of narration invites the reader to counterfocalize—to take the positions and the perspectives of the other characters who are denied focalization. Furthermore, as we will see in this chapter, the novel does a lot more than reflect contemporary events. Instead of representing the status quo, Coetzee exposes established ideas and relations, juxtaposes them, interrogates them, and in effect opens for new possibilities by offering a posthuman ethics.

As noted, Gordimer's reading of *Disgrace* is similar to that of Rushdie. She finds it difficult to accept the novel's presentation of South Africa, stating that "[i]f that's the only truth [Coetzee] could find in the post-apartheid South Africa, I regretted this very much for him" (Donadio). I will contend that the novel is not trying to tell the "truth" of South Africa, neither is it trying to tell the history of South Africa. In the previous chapter, we have seen that there are no clear distinctions between history and the present in the novel. There is no absolute past; on the contrary, the grammar of the novel reflects an openness to both past and future, leaving the narrative more investigative than conclusive. Similarly, in *J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*, Attridge argues against the allegorical readings of Coetzee's work. In a discussion on *Waiting for The Barbarians*, Attridge contends that the work should be valued "for itself, and not because it pointed to some truths about the world in general or South Africa in the 1970s in particular" (*Ethics* 45). This could also be said of *Disgrace*. Despite the context drawn out here, I will argue that reading *Disgrace* as a "true story of South Africa" would be highly reductive; the rape scene is hardly an attempt to tell either the history or the present situation of South Africa.

In fact, Coetzee himself has criticized what he calls "Liberal Funk Novels", namely South African novels that allude to the colonial nightmare of attacks against white farmers, such as Breyten Breytenbach's *Dog Heart* and André Brink's *The Rights of Desire*. About Breytenbach's *Dog Heart*, Coetzee writes the following:

The crime statistics are distressing. South Africa is . . . a violent country. Nevertheless, criminal violence is by no means directed against whites alone, while the circulation of horror stories is the very mechanism that drives white paranoia. (*Stranger Shores* 256)

Placing this myth at the centrepiece of *Disgrace* then, can hardly be something Coetzee is

unaware of. Certainly, the context is informed by post-apartheid South African society, and the narration alludes to history at several points. The themes, however, are not equal to the subjects, and both the mode of narration and Lucy's refusal to speak or to press charges are significant in this respect. In the discussion of the scene, the aftermath plays a significant part. The events of this scene and its brutality are a decisive turning point in the story: afterwards nothing is the same.

The episode takes place in the middle of the novel, as David begins to find his place at Lucy's smallholding. There is no warning until very close to the attack. The morning begins peacefully. David wakes to find Lucy watching three wild geese on the dam. She tells him that they return every year; "I feel so lucky to be visited" (88), she says. After breakfast, they take two of the dogs for a walk. While they are walking, suspense builds as three men pass them on the path: "Should we be nervous?" (91) David asks. The simultaneous present tense is effectively building tension here. "As they near the house they hear the caged dogs in an uproar... The three are there, waiting for them" (92). The men explain that they need to borrow a telephone, and Lucy eventually enters the house with one of them. A second after, when one of the other men follows, David begins to understand the danger of the situation: "Something is wrong, he knows at once" (93). Trying to enter the house, David receives a blow to his head, and is aware of being dragged across the floor:

Then he blacks out. He is lying facedown on cold tiles. 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. He sits down on the toilet seat and tries to recover. The house is still; the dogs are barking, but more in duty, it seems, than in frenzy. 'Lucy!' he croaks, and then, louder: 'Lucy!' He tries to kick at the door, but he is not himself, and the space

too cramped anyway, the door too old and solid. So it has come, the day of testing.

Without warning, without fanfare, it is here, and he is in the middle of it. In his chest his heart hammers so hard that it too, in its dumb way, must know. How will they stand up to the testing, he and his heart? (94)

This dramatic turn of events comes without warning not only to David but also to the reader. As the narration is entirely focalized through David, the reader has no knowledge of how long he is unconscious or what takes place during this time. In this scene the narrative mode with the ellipsis in time and the focalization through David, not only bars him, but also the reader, from the events. The reader is locked in the bathroom with David, sharing his anxiety and claustrophobic feeling. This feeling is heightened by the awareness to bodily reactions: “In his chest his heart hammers so hard” (94). This recurs in the narration; when David is overwhelmed by emotion, we notice that the body is foregrounded, as if words and reason are not enough. The body “takes over”; it is something that is out of his control. In a sense, David illustrates an idea of separation between body and mind here: “How will they stand up to the testing, he and his heart?” (94).

As David is shouting and battering at the door, one of the men enters the bathroom demanding David’s car keys and then leaves him again. David remains locked up, while trying to make sense of what is happening outside. From the window he witnesses the massacre of the dogs: “There is a heavy report; blood and brains splatter the cage” (95). Suddenly, the men are back again, David is splashed with methylated spirits: “The scrape of a match, and at once he is bathed in cool blue flame” (96). At this point, David (and the reader) is still unaware of what is happening to Lucy, and is terrified: “He can burn, he can die; and if he can die, then so can Lucy, above all Lucy!” (96). He is able to stop the flames, and,

eventually, the door is unlocked by Lucy. By this time, the men are gone. Neither the reader nor David learns what happened to Lucy while he was locked up in the bathroom. That she was raped is not confirmed until much later in the narration.

Although the rape is never actually recounted, it remains the subject of vehement reactions among readers and critics. The reason for this is twofold: Firstly, it evokes myths as described earlier. Consequently, instead of reading the episode as a personal experience, readers are likely to immediately interpret the event in light of historical myths, racial stereotypes, and the “reality” of the present. Secondly, what has caused confusion and outrage is not just what happened to Lucy, but also her response it: Lucy refuses to press charges against the rapists. She even protects one of them when she discovers his identity as Petrus’s relative. When she finds out that she is pregnant as result of the rape, she not only decides to stay on the farm, she agrees to marry Petrus for protection, a decision that involves giving up her land to him. I will contend that Lucy’s decisions most significantly challenge standardized approaches not only to rape and violence, but also to normative attitudes towards law and justice. Furthermore, the scene offers an opportunity to examine these themes and interrogate related issues, particularly hierarchies and dichotomies like femininity and masculinity, human and animal, body and mind, which are set up and then dissolved in keeping with the posthuman theories that inform this reading. Posthumanism comes with an inherent ethics, which Barad assigns to the responsibility to *listen for the response of the other*. By exposing myths, attitudes, and stereotypes, all with strong affiliations with classical humanism, the narrative opposes them, and instead listens for the response of the other, while never at any point attempting to *speak* for the other.

The narrative omission of the rape is central. As noted in the previous chapter, Coetzee foregrounds textuality, language, and discourse in *Disgrace*. With regard to Lucy’s rape, however, there is silence. This implies not only the difficulty of writing about trauma

but that certain types of experience surpass literary representation. Elisabeth Anker further asserts that a description of the violation would risk literary obscenity and a legitimization of what is described (241). The silence activates the imagination of the reader, making the narrative treatment of the rape even more powerful. As Patricia Dunckan asserts in her examination of reading and writing in *Writing on the Wall*, “Silence does not necessarily mean absence; silence is not necessarily consent. A text shudders in its silences” (169). Hence, the omission makes the event even more powerful as interpretation is left to the reader’s imagination. By not describing the rape, Coetzee emphasizes its gravity. Together with the narrative ellipsis, the focalization bars the reader from what happens to Lucy during the attack, inviting active reading and evoking an ethical response. As what happens to Lucy is not described, an active, responding reader is encouraged not only to “fill in the gaps” and counterfocalize but also to identify the mechanisms at work in reading literary fiction. As much as confronting a myth with this scene, Coetzee questions its validity and exposes the deeply rooted racism attached to it. Reading the attack as a personal experience requires a break from a past that seems to be inscribing itself in everything and that reproduces itself in the representation of racial stereotypes and racial conflicts.

As we have learned, Coetzee was accused of racism precisely for the reproduction of racial stereotypes in *Disgrace*. Yet, these accusations seem to be based on a confusion of author and protagonist: racist attitudes in the narrative are, like the attitudes toward women, a result of the focalization. Furthermore, exposing racist mechanisms embedded in discourse and attitudes does not equal promoting them. I will contend that what Coetzee does is the exact opposite. By revealing these mechanisms, Coetzee brings them to the center of critical examination; however, this requires an active reader. Paul Ricoeur’s theories are in line with those of another literary theorist, Wolfgang Iser, and what is known as *reception-theory*. This theory is placed within the domain of a phenomenological approach to reading, which takes

account of the actions involved in responding to a text. He stresses the dynamic nature of literature and claims that a literary text should “be conceived in such a way that it will engage the reader’s imagination in the task of working things out for himself” (296). These ideas seem highly applicable to *Disgrace*, a novel that offers no answers but is invested in raising questions and exposing and interrogating issues rather than commenting on them and offering solutions. As we have seen, *Disgrace* does not offer any conclusions or answers and does not ask us to stop our interpretation. On the contrary, Coetzee encourages the reader’s ethical engagement. A different but somewhat related approach to Coetzee’s fiction can be found in Jan Wilm’s *The Slow Philosophy of J.M. Coetzee* (2016). Wilm aims to show how the philosophical and the literary interact in the experience of slow reading. His argument maintains that Coetzee’s aesthetic style slows down the reading process in order to activate the reader’s response and to counteract simple conclusions or simple ideas about life and ethics.

As much as the attack itself caused outrage, Lucy’s response to the attack left readers puzzled and provoked. Lucy does not reveal anything to David, and before going to the police, she tells him:

‘David, when people ask, would you mind keeping to your own story, to what happened to you?’ He does not understand. ‘You tell what happened to you, I tell what happened to me,’ she repeats. ‘You’re making a mistake,’ he says in a voice that is fast descending to a croak. ‘No I’m not,’ she says. ‘My child, my child!’ he says, holding out his arms to her. When she does not come, he puts aside his blanket, stands up, and takes her in his arms. In his embrace she is stiff as a pole, yielding nothing. (99)

From David’s response, claiming she is making a mistake, we understand that he assumes that she has been raped. However, the words are not articulated. Her response when David tries to

hold her, and she is “stiff as a pole, yielding nothing” (99), is also a clue: Although not explicitly expressed, this reaction signifies the trauma. The most important clue, however, comes earlier, when she unlocks the door to let David out of the lavatory. When David sees her, she has already turned her back and is walking away, “wearing a bathrobe, her feet are bare, her hair wet” (97). This recalls an incident between David and Melanie in the first part of the novel. After their third meeting in private, which results in an assault on Melanie, David sits in his car:

He is overtaken with such dejection, such dullness, that he sits slumped at the wheel unable to move. A mistake, a huge mistake. At this moment, he has no doubt, she, Melanie, is trying to cleanse herself of it, of him. He sees her running a bath, stepping into the water, eyes closed like a sleepwalker's. (25)

The rape of Lucy sheds new light on this event: we recognize a parallel between Melanie, trying to “cleanse herself” after David has left, and Lucy appearing in her bathrobe with wet hair, after the attack, suggesting that she has tried to wash off the remains of what has been done to her. Although the focalization through David denies the reader Melanie’s point of view here, David’s ethical vexation is apparent. As in other places where David experiences emotional responses that he cannot (or in this case perhaps *will* not) rationally explain, he is overcome by a physical reaction. Here, he is unable to move, “overtaken” by dejection and dullness. What becomes clearer is that the narration is illustrating two different types of rape, differently motivated, although both episodes visualize gendered power dynamics.

Leading up to this event David has been alone with Melanie twice, the second time involving a sexual encounter. Although in his mind, David makes Melanie complicit, he acts with complete lack of concern for her: In his romantic posturing, he sees himself as a seducer, a “servant of Eros” (52) driven by desire and impulse, claiming that “a woman’s beauty does

not belong to her alone. It is part of the bounty she brings into the world. She has a duty to share it” (16). The day of the assault, he shows up at her apartment:

He has given her no warning; she is too surprised to resist the intruder who thrusts himself upon her. When he takes her in his arms, her limbs crumple like a marionette’s. Words heavy as clubs thud into the delicate whorl of her ear. ‘No, not now!’ she says, struggling. (24)

Lucy’s rape reveals the trauma of this incident, which is not given much attention and importance in the novel. David never considers the effect his actions could have on Melanie, and seems to lack any sense of responsibility or emotional involvement in their relation.

When it is over, David thinks:

Not rape, not quite that, but undesired nevertheless, undesired to the core. As though she had decided to go slack, die within herself for the duration, like a rabbit when the jaws of the fox close on its neck. So that everything done to her might be done, as it were, far away. (25)

The parallel between the rape of Melanie and Lucy offers a ground for interpreting what happens to Lucy. Similarly, the trauma Lucy experiences in the aftermath of the attack sheds light on the more implicit trauma of the “seduction” of Melanie by David. The experience through their perspectives is not included in the narrative, but the effect is similar in outcome. The little we learn of Melanie indicates that she has become secluded and depressed, while Lucy is greatly traumatized by the rape.

As David was barred from the events as they took place, so is he kept out in the aftermath. In a conversation with Bev he asserts, “I know what Lucy has been through. I was there” (140), and is outraged by her answer: “But you weren't there David. She told me. You

weren't"(140). David's lack of access to the experience offers an interrogation of his ability to imaginatively sympathize. He thinks that he knows what happened to Lucy, but realizes how difficult it is for him to put himself in her place. Despite his inability to see a connection between his rape of Melanie and the rape of Lucy, David manages to identify with the rapists: "he can, if he concentrates, if he loses himself, be there, be the men, inhabit them, fill them with the ghost of himself. The question is, does he have it in him to be the woman?" (114). To "be the woman" would entail empathy with the position he put Melanie in and fully comprehending the scope of his behavior.

David strongly opposes Lucy's refusal to verbalize her story. He keeps raising the subject, and Lucy finally tries to explain her choice to keep silent:

You want to know why I have not laid a particular charge with the police. I will tell you, as long as you agree not to raise the subject again. The reason is that, as far as I am concerned, what happened to me is a purely private matter. In another time, in another place it might be held to be a public matter. But in this place, at this time, it is not. It is my business, mine alone. 'This place being what?' 'This place being South Africa.' (112)

David strongly disagrees with Lucy. To him, her explanation is an admission of feelings of guilt for white oppression, and he argues that she cannot expiate the crimes of the past. Lucy denies that that is what she is trying to do: "Guilt and salvation are abstractions. I don't act in terms of abstractions" (112). Lucy ends the discussion without further explanation for her choice. Then again, bearing the conceptualization of rape in the South African context in mind, her choice to remain silent prevents placing the crime in a larger racialized or gendered narrative. In effect, Lucy is refusing to be placed within the traditional symbolic order, just as she refuses to play a part in the system of police questioning and courts of law.

David, on the other hand, is concerned that Lucy's silence will let the rapist "own" the story: "Not her story to spread but theirs: they are its owners. How they put her in her place, how they showed her what a woman was for" (115). He also regrets that she will be perceived as too ashamed to speak: "it will dawn on them that over the body of the woman silence is being drawn like a blanket. ... [I]s Lucy prepared to concede them that victory?" (110). What David does not realize is that he is unable to take on her perspectives. Instead, he is positioning Lucy within his own story. Lucy, on the other hand, is aware:

You behave as if everything I do is part of the story of your life. You are the main character, I am a minor character who doesn't make an appearance until halfway through. Well, contrary to what you think, people are not divided into major and minor. I am not minor. I have a life of my own, just as important to me as yours is to you, and in my life I am the one who makes the decisions (198).

Lucy's statement alludes to an important element within the narration as a whole and mirrors what seems to be overlooked by many of its readers; although the narrative is focalized through David in a novel where he plays the main character, Lucy's story is equally important. Moreover, *Lucy* is equally important, as are, correspondingly, the minor characters; "people are not divided into major and minor". The statement reflects the textuality here, underlining the effect of the focalization, consequently working against it. In addition, the posthuman ethics intertwined in the fabric of the themes are highlighted: David's hierarchical values are dismissed; emphasis is placed on the equal value of humans. What also becomes apparent here is that by refusing to take part in politically charged narrative Lucy claims agency over her own experience. As Lucy resists being cast as a character in David's story, she also refuses to let her story carry symbolic meaning defined by racial politics. As stated

earlier, the focalization through David implies a challenge to the reader, and the controversy of Lucy's decisions similarly leads to many questions. However, contrary to what David claims, the story does belong to her. When Lucy says "You keep misreading me" (113), this could be addressed to the reader as much as to David.

David's and Lucy's polarized views after the attack bring an ethical criticism of humanism to the surface. As we know, the idea of *one* humanity where everybody is equally important is a core principle of humanism. Nevertheless, as we have seen, this ideal is based on universalization and homogenisation. These shortcomings of humanism are exposed in the narration, and to a large extent interrogated through the juxtaposition of David's and Lucy's characters. The narrative repeatedly reminds the reader of the gendered position of Lucy, as, for instance, when Bev refuses to answer David's questions regarding Lucy after the attack:

Menstruation, childbirth, violation and its aftermath: blood-matters; a woman's burden, women's preserve. Not for the first time, he wonders whether women would not be happier living in communities of women, accepting visits from men only when they choose. (104)

While in David's focalization, categories and oppositions of universal humanism are retained, Lucy represents an affirmative approach towards difference: without affinity to one or the other group, she is able to coexist with others in a way that seems unattainable to David. Lucy's attitudes resonate with posthumanism, foregrounding difference as the kernel; the human is not one, but many. In the rainbow nation where only the white minority had been granted the privilege of human rights under apartheid, Lucy proposes a change of perspective in line with the posthuman ethical turn.

The characterization of David from our first encounter with him in Cape Town exposes

his white middle-class subjectivity and his ideologies as tied to a colonial culture. He is also largely portrayed as out of place, not only in the changing society but also in his changing body. The many references to the body and to aging call to mind Braidotti's recollection of the Vitruvian man; although this humanistic ideal was male and white, like David, he was not aging. Removing himself from this ideal perhaps contributes to his feeling of inferiority. David feels more and more out of place in his aging body; his almost desperate pursuit of first Soroya and later Melanie, seems an attempt to regain a sense of power that vanished simultaneously with his loss of physical appeal, and has been replaced with a growing sense of alienation. His difficulties of reconciling with his age are visible through thoughts such as, "Perhaps it is the right of the young to be protected from the sight of their elders in the throes of passion. That is what whores are for, after all: to put up with the ecstasies of the unlovely" (44).

The characterization of David reveals values and ideologies associated with humanism. His lack of responsibility towards anyone but himself, coupled with the alienation he experiences towards his body, consequently point at deficiencies of Western humanism. The affair with Melanie and the subsequent rape also play an important part in the characterization of David, showing not only his inability to empathize but also how he justifies his actions with reference to human rights—as he tells Lucy: "My case rests on the rights of desire" (89). Again, the narrative is structured with doublings, and David's own commodification of women's bodies is recalled under the attack at the farm. Locked in the lavatory, he thinks to himself: "Too many people, too few things. What there is must go into circulation, so that everyone can have a chance to be happy for a day. ... Cars, shoes; women too" (98). The semicolon here separates "women" from the things, augmenting the attention drawn to sexual violence and commodification of women. Similarly, the comment he makes about animal-rights advocates—"Everyone is so cheerful and well-intentioned that after a

while you itch to go off and do some raping and pillaging. Or to kick a cat” (73)—becomes more than a sarcastic remark considering his history with Melanie. This lack of self-conception clearly shows his incapacity for understanding the gravity of his actions and places him closer to the rapists than he is ready to admit.

The male-centered discourse of gender that follows the characterization of David is a discourse that reproduces the divisions connected to the colonial history, which relied on dichotomies such as civilized and primitive, white and black, masculine and feminine. Consequently, preoccupations with the socio-political contexts, race relations, and gender issues are intertwined in the juxtaposition between David and Lucy. Although we see Lucy’s character through the lens of David, her character refutes any stereotyping. We learn from David that she had moved to the smallholding as part of a commune and had “fallen in love with the place” (60). As we have seen, she is described as a “frontier farmer” (62) by David, but also as a domestic, “solid countrywoman” (60). Contrastingly, she is portrayed by David as a “confident, modern young woman” (115) and, as we recall, by Petrus as forward-looking. Ascribed with qualities that are considered both feminine and masculine as well as being homosexual, the categories of gender and binaries of masculinity and femininity are disrupted in Lucy’s character.

Lucy’s connection to the animals and her attitudes towards both people and animals are in sharp contrast to David’s and draw attention to what can be called the novel’s ecological importance. Through Lucy, environments, plants, and animals and their interaction become significant. Lucy resists adapting to any particular culture, but she can communicate in Xhosa, and in many ways represents a break with traditional binaries and their historical notions of human subjectivity and embodiment. Although landscape and environment are not given much place in the novel, attention is brought to the natural environment through Lucy and the farm:

He strolls with her past the mud-walled dam, where a family of ducks coasts serenely, past the beehives, and through the garden: flowerbeds and winter vegetables—cauliflowers, potatoes, beetroot, chard, onions. They visit the pump and storage dam on the edge of the property. Rains for the past two years have been good, the water table has risen. She talks easily about these matters. (62)

There is an ecological awareness in the descriptions of the farm and the landscape coupled with the characterization of Lucy: “Now here she is, flowered dress, bare feet and all” (60), “Lucy's bare toes grip the red earth, leaving clear prints. A solid woman, embedded in her new life” (62). Lucy’s bare feet symbolize her connection to the land, to the soil, and make the reader perceive her as “grounded”, in juxtaposition to David, who seems out of place both in Cape Town and in the Eastern Cape.

Lucy’s values and ideals are revealed in her involvement in animal welfare and her views on the land: “Stop calling it the farm, David. This is not a farm, it's just a piece of land where I grow things” (page). This connection to the place and her lifestyle, which is built on a closeness to nature, I see as deeply connected to posthumanism. While David’s attitudes serve to reproduce the division between culture and nature, Lucy represents the exact opposite from anthropocentric humanism, emphasizing connections instead of dualisms and implicitly questioning historical notions of human subjectivity. The nature/culture divide is apparent not only through the juxtaposition of Lucy and David, but is emphasized by place: Eastern Cape and Lucy’s farm stand in sharp contrast to Cape Town and the University. The juxtaposition between place and characters exposes the inherent ethics in the narration: while humanism emphasizes that *we are in this together*, referring to the human race, posthumanism emphasizes that we humans cannot be considered in isolation from our surroundings. Lucy

seems to consider both non-human animals and environment as equally important, as she says to David: “This is the only life there is. Which we share with animals” (page). By rejecting simplistic polarizations and traditional dualisms like self and other, mind and body, nature and culture, Lucy seems to advocate a posthuman ethics.

Through the narrative, Coetzee exposes how the workings of history affect attitudes and opinions. Although David seems unaware that his thinking reflects misogynies and racism, the juxtaposition to Lucy calls this to the attention of the reader. Despite the fact that David is in many ways an unsympathetic narrator, often ironically presented, he is also complex. In his relationship with Lucy his capacity for love is apparent, despite their polarized views. Once again, Coetzee does not offer simple answers or easy solutions. The inconclusiveness and lack of closure seen in the analysis of the formal elements is just as striking when it comes to thematic concerns. The juxtaposition between David and Lucy that is emphasized and utterly polarized after the attack brings ethical discussions containing complex implications to the surface. Most evidently, their discussions invoke rights and law, justice and forgiveness.

David argues within the reference to the politics of human rights and finds it hard to accept that the rapists’ story is circulating rather than Lucy’s. Lucy on the other hand seems to think of David’s concerns as abstractions. She refuses to speak within a rights framework, and rejects being reduced to a symbol. David’s and Lucy’s different positions as articulated in the discussions about the rape, raise a discussion of rights and law, justice and forgiveness. However, questions of human rights, law and the legal system have been brought up earlier in the narration with the hearing that follows David’s affair with Melanie. The hearing is not a trial, but an inquiry. Nevertheless, its discourse is that of the law, and the scene bears strong resemblance to a trial in a court of law. This scene is often read as a comment on the Truth and Reconciliation hearings (TRC). The link to the TRC is not explicit, but the incident

clearly echoes the TRC hearings as an important intertext: David is similar to the typical perpetrator who would come before the TRC with regard to gender, race, and age. The academic committee attempts to define Melanie's rights against David's wrongs and is willing to recommend amnesty for David in return for his confession, provided it is given in "a spirit of repentance" (58). As one of the committee members, Hakim, says during the hearing: "We would like to help you, David, to find a way out of what must be a nightmare" (52).

The echoing of the TRC hearings is one of several doublings in the novel; as we have seen, both the two rapes and, consequently, David and the rapists, reflect one another. These doublings and juxtapositions form a structural effect that exposes issues otherwise veiled as a result of the focalization through David. For instance, it becomes clear that despite David's concern that Lucy's attackers are allowed to own her story, he does not recognize that his "confession" about his relationship with Melanie, made before the committee, is a continuation of his dominance over her. At no point during the hearing does David show remorse or responsibility. Placed in front of the committee, David is charged with two accusations: of keeping false student records, as he had credited Melanie for work she had not done; and of his relationship with Melanie. We never learn the content of Melanie's statement or the exact nature of her charge, except that it is "lodged against him under article 3.1 of the University's Code of Conduct" and that it "addresses victimization or harassment of students by teachers" (38-39). Melanie's voice is omitted, as is her story, which is mediated through David.

Although the hearing does not constitute a legal proceeding, it works within the discourse of the law. David pleads guilty, but his words are obviously without substance and serve only to ridicule the committee. For instance, David starts by stating "I am sure the members of this committee have better things to do with their time than rehash a story over

which there can be no dispute. I plead guilty to both charges. Pass the sentence and let us get on with our lives” (48). Correspondingly, he keeps taking them in circles, creating discomfort and annoyance among the committee members. The members of the committee on the other hand, want to see expressions of contrition and regret, and keep pushing for an admission that that he was wrong, insisting on the difference between pleading guilty to a charge and admitting mistakes. David, however, ridicules the process, eventually offering his “confession”:

[V]ery well, let me confess. The story begins one evening, I forget the date, but not long past. I was walking through the old college gardens and so, it happened, was the young girl in question, Ms Isaacs. Our paths crossed. Words passed between us, and at that moment something happened which I will not try to describe. Suffice to say that Eros entered. After that I was not the same. (52)

In the following discussion, one of the committee members, Farodia Rassool, intervenes:

“...when we try to get specific, 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 a part” (53). What Rassool states here is recurring although not explicit: the history of South Africa is inscribing itself in the present. Just as the rape of Lucy, as we have seen, is connected to the colonial myth, David’s rape of Melanie becomes an extension of a history of exploitation, showing that representations of rape in South Africa do not come without implications of power, race, and gender complications.

Both because of the timing—*Disgrace* was released the year after the TRC procedures ended—and because of the clear similarities, the fictional hearing has been read as a critique

or satire of the TRC hearings. One such point is made by Jayne Poyner, who in “Truth and reconciliation in JM Coetzee's *Disgrace*” claims that the novel “through the portrayal of the ‘trial’ of its protagonist, Professor David Lurie, represents an allegory of the troubled Truth and Reconciliation Commission within the context of a nation in transition” (67). However, I maintain that *Disgrace*'s discussion of rights and justice is complex and should not be reduced to an allegory. Again, the reader needs to be aware that attitudes represented are a product of the focalization through David. The scene does draw attention to difficult issues with no easy answers. Given that the TRC failed in bringing rape and gendered violence to the light—only nine of the 9000 testimonies brought before the TRC hearings involved rape (Vold 48)—bringing up rape in a setting similar to the TRC is hardly a coincidence. The scene also shows that legal justice does not equal forgiveness or confession. As David’s “confession” shows, this legal discourse is far from an admission of guilt, nor does it express an understanding of the victim’s side.

The trial also differs from the TRC procedures in a fundamental way. In the TRC hearings, the victims were able to relate their experiences and confront their perpetrators while at the hearing at the University, Melanie is absent. Her story is never heard; on the contrary, the committee listens for David’s story. Thus, the hearing does not mirror the TRC hearings. I would argue that the purpose of the scene is not to condemn the hearings, but bring certain features to light, such as the omission of rape narratives, the potentially complicit nature of language, the impact of history, gender, and race (as articulated by Rassool) in narrations of sexual abuse in South Africa. Furthermore, the scene offers possible perspectives towards understanding Lucy’s choices. In David’s and Lucy’s refusals to deliver truth and reconciliation stories, a humanist approach to justice is interrupted and, instead, the nature of justice is interrogated. The novel interrogates the possibility of attaining justice through law, a discussion that echoes the debate that took place in South Africa concerning

solutions to the uncountable, massive violations of human rights that took place under apartheid.

These elements brought to light in the scene of the University hearing can shed light on Lucy's choice not to report the rape. That such a miniscule part of the TRC testimonies contained stories of rape alludes to the private character of these crimes, and how often rape leads to a sense of shame on the victim's part. The hearing demonstrates that the story, as presented in a trial, does not necessarily belong to the victim. We see how David is still controlling Melanie's story even after she has provided her testimony to the committee. Furthermore, this scene demonstrates that discourse and language are signs that do not necessarily contain any real substance and that do not offer relief from trauma. Ironically, David claims that he is standing up for "Freedom of speech. Freedom to remain silent." (188) in the hearing. That clearly does not work in a system based on confessions of truth, but when Lucy as a victim claims her right to remain silent, David neither accepts her choice nor seems to realize the relation between these instances. After the attack, David states, "I am Lucy's father. I want those men to be caught and brought before the law and punished" (119). In his individualist logic, David now sees law as an important element of justice, and despite his attitudes in his own trial, realizes that the law holds at least the possibility for justice.

Lucy's notion of justice seems to be informed by the African philosophy of 'ubuntu'. In "Xhosa Practises of *Ubuntu* for South Africa", Masina Nomonde describes this as a philosophy that "embraces both the spiritual and the material elements of human existence" (page). With ubuntu, she explains, "human existence is seen as unified, interconnected, and integrated. This view recognizes the dialectics in any given system (union of opposites - i.e., the good *and* the bad)" (169). Accordingly, ubuntu refrains from thinking social relations as dualistic oppositions, in a manner that is similar to posthumanism. This ideology was an

important foundation for the TRC, which in the final report states “the need for understanding but not for vengeance, a need for reparation but not retaliation, a need for *ubuntu* but not for victimisation.” Lucy’s view on justice can be understood in similar terms.

However, the fact that she is responding to trauma should not be overlooked. This is revealed when she speaks to David about her experience:

“It was so personal”, she says. “It was done with so much hatred. That was what stunned me more than anything. The rest was... expected. But why did they hate me so? I had never set eyes on them.” (156)

The emphasis on the *personal* points not only towards the rapists, but also towards the private character of the rape on Lucy’s part. Somewhat contradictory to her earlier statement that David was misreading her, that “guilt and salvations are abstractions” (page 112), she goes on to say:

“Perhaps that is how they look at it; perhaps that is how I should look at it too. They see me as owing something. They see themselves as debt collectors, tax collectors. Why would I be allowed to live here without paying?” (158)

Her statement is immediately seen in the light of the history of oppression and apartheid. However, she never brings “race” into the discussion, and both gender, and her position as landowner and farmer are possible referents to her argument. Although the reader is prevented insight to Lucy’s choices, the text alludes to several possibilities, but without offering a single or simple solution. Her choice to stay, however, unlike David’s pattern of escaping difficult situations, signals a persistence to come to terms with the past and reach out to a new future.

The focus on rights brought to attention by the discourse of justice and law in

*Disgrace*, also brings attention to those deprived of rights, namely the animals. As Lucy says, “On the list of the nation’s priorities, animals come nowhere” (73). The novel’s preoccupation with animals has been approached in different ways by critics. The subject is often addressed with deeply philosophical concerns, like Paul Patton’s “Becoming-Animal and Pure Life in Coetzee’s *Disgrace*”, and Steven Mulhall’s in *The Wounded Animal: J. M. Coetzee and the Difficulty of Reality in Literature and Philosophy*. Other critics have also formed interesting discussions, like Tonje Vold’s reading in *At the Heart of Disgrace*, which places the animal in relation to the TRC and its discussion on “humanness” and “humanity”. However, my reading departs from these, as I see the animals in *Disgrace* primarily as an extension of the novel’s problematizing of the nature of ethics. As we have seen in the previous, the juxtaposition of David and Lucy, suggests the inadequacy of the nature/culture divide, and problematizes the dichotomies between nature and culture, animal and human, female and male. Insisting that there is no higher life than that which we share with animals, Lucy brings the inseparability of life-forms to the surface. This emphasis on entanglements is consistent with posthumanism, and furthermore, a posthuman ethical awareness that comes fully into focus in Coetzee’s engagement with animals in *Disgrace*. Especially dogs are explored both as agents and as objects of representation in the narrative, and David’s encounters with these, eventually becomes a site where he is able to imaginatively identify with others, both human and non-human.

The human-animal divide is one of the pillars on which humanism is based, and this separation between human and animal is interrogated in several ways in the narration. For instance, animal tropes recur throughout the narration; David compares himself and Soroya together with “the copulation of snakes”, in his sexual encounter with Melanie, she is described to be “like a rabbit when the jaws of the fox close on its neck”, and after his hearing, the crowd that awaits him at the university, are pictured to “circle around him like

hunters who have cornered a strange beast and do not know how to finish it off" (page).

However, the animals, particularly dogs, gain another significance in the narration as David arrives at Lucy's farm. Here he is involved in episodes that haunt the human/animal divide, and consequently expand his capacity for ethical consideration. The dogs become affiliated both with love and suffering in the narration. However, they also function as important symbolism in the text, as in the troping of humans as animals which occurs several times:

David envisions the rapists like dogs when imagining Lucy's rape "*Call your dogs!* they said to her. *Go on, call your dogs! No dogs? Then let us show you dogs!* (160).

Similarly, Lucy and David use the simile "like a dog". When she tells David that she will marry Petrus for protection, giving up her land to him, David is horrified that she even contemplates it.:

'How humiliating,' he says finally. 'Such high hopes, and to end like this.' 'Yes, I agree, it is humiliating. But perhaps that is a good point to start from again. 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).

Here, humiliation is equated with being like a dog, and as most places where animal imagery is applied, the connotations are negative, linked with suffering or violence.

Lucy's notion of justice seems to be informed by the African philosophy of *ubuntu*. In "Xhosa Practises of *Ubuntu* for South Africa", Masina Nomonde describes ubuntu as a philosophy that "embraces both the spiritual and the material elements of human existence" (169). Within ubuntu, she explains, "human existence is seen as unified, interconnected, and integrated. This view recognizes the dialectics in any given system (union

of opposites, i.e., the good *and* the bad)”. Accordingly, social relations are not seen as dualistic oppositions within Ubuntu, which has clear resemblances to posthumanism. This ideology was an important foundation for the TRC, which in its final report states that the deliberations were guided by “the need for understanding but not for vengeance, a need for reparation but not retaliation, a need for *ubuntu* but not for victimisation” in similar terms.

The fact that Lucy is responding to trauma should not be overlooked. This is revealed when she speaks to David about her experience:

‘It was so personal,’ she says. ‘It was done with so much hatred. That was what stunned me more than anything. The rest was... expected. But why did they hate me so? I had never set eyes on them.’ (156)

The emphasis on the *personal* points not only towards the rapists’ hate but also towards the private character of the rape on Lucy’s part. Somewhat contradictory to her earlier accusation that David was misreading her, that “guilt and salvations are abstractions” (112), she goes on to say:

‘Perhaps that is how they look at it; perhaps that is how I should look at it too. They see me as owing something. They see themselves as debt collectors, tax collectors. Why would I be allowed to live here without paying?’ (158)

Her statement is immediately seen in the light of the history of oppression through apartheid. However, she never brings race into the discussion, leaving both gender and her position as landowner and farmer as possible referents to her argument. Although the reader is prevented insight to Lucy’s choices, the text alludes to several possibilities without offering a single or simple solution.

Finally, another crucial aspect of *Disgrace*'s posthumanist ethics is conveyed through the narrative emphasis on animals, particularly dogs. The focus on rights through the discourse of justice and law in *Disgrace* also focuses attention on those deprived of rights, namely the animals. The novel's preoccupation with animals has been approached in different ways by literary critics. Some recognize deeply philosophical concerns in the novel's representation of animals, as do, for example, Paul Patton in "Becoming-Animal and Pure Life in Coetzee's *Disgrace*" and Steven Mulhall in *The Wounded Animal: J. M. Coetzee and the Difficulty of Reality in Literature and Philosophy*. Another approach, exemplified by Tonje Vold's *At the Heart of Disgrace*, places the animal in relation to the TRC and its discussion of "humanness" and "humanity". My reading diverges from these as I see the animals in *Disgrace* primarily as an extension of the novel's problematizing of the nature of ethics. As we have seen in the previous discussion, the juxtaposition of David and Lucy highlights the inadequacy of the nature/culture divide and problematizes the dichotomies between nature and culture, animal and human, female and male. Insisting that there is no higher life than that which we share with animals, Lucy brings the inseparability of life-forms to the fore. The emphasis on entanglements is consistent with posthumanism as well as a posthuman ethical awareness that comes fully into focus in Coetzee's attention to animals in *Disgrace*. Dogs, especially, are considered both as agents and as objects of representation in the narrative, and David's encounters with the dogs eventually become a site where he is able to imaginatively identify with others, both human and non-human.

Animal tropes recur throughout the narration: David refers to his sexual relationship with Soroya as "the copulation of snakes"; in his sexual encounter with Melanie, she is described as "a rabbit when the jaws of the fox close on its neck"; and, after his hearing, the crowd that awaits him at the university "circle[s] around him like hunters who have cornered a strange beast and do not know how to finish it off" (56). Animals, particularly dogs, gain

another significance in the narration when David arrives at Lucy's farm. Here he is faced with episodes that haunt the human/animal divide and that consequently expand his capacity for ethical consideration. The dogs become affiliated both with love and suffering in the novel. They also function as important symbolism in the text, as in, for example, the troping of humans as animals, which occurs several times: David envisions the rapists as dogs when imagining Lucy's rape: "*Call your dogs!* they said to her. *Go on, call your dogs! No dogs? Then let us show you dogs!*" (160).

Similarly, Lucy and David use the simile "like a dog" when she tells David that she will marry Petrus for protection and give up her land to him, David is horrified that she even contemplates this action:

'How humiliating,' he says finally. 'Such high hopes, and to end like this.' 'Yes, I agree, it is humiliating. But perhaps that is a good point to start from again. 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)

Here, humiliation is equated with being like a dog, and, as in most places where animal imagery is applied, the connotations are negative and linked with suffering or violence. To "start with nothing" can also be understood with regard to history: as we have seen in the previous chapter, the notions of past and future are interrupted as attention is drawn to the constant presentness of the moment. Although history cannot be erased, it should not have a determining effect on the present. To start from nothing, then, alludes to a start from ground zero without the inscriptions of history or predefined positions.

David and Petrus are also referred to as dog-men. When David first meets Petrus, Petrus introduces himself as “the gardener and the dog-man” (64). Later in the novel this is coupled in David’s thinking as he reflects on his care for the dogs; he thinks: “A dog-man, Petrus once called himself. Well, now he has become a dog-man: a dog undertaker; a dog psychopomp; a harijan. Curious that a man as selfish as he should be offering himself to the service of dead dogs” (146). Here there is a radical change in David’s sentiment towards animals. The word “dog-man” does not have the same negative connotation as before; instead he uses the word *curious* to describe a situation for which he has no rational explanation. In other situations, though, the dogs signify abuse and violence.

During the attack, the dogs in Lucy’s kennel are killed. While the violation of Lucy is not described, the brutal killing of the caged dogs is described at length. Staging these violations of the body together, Coetzee is linking human and animal suffering, drawing attention to a shared vulnerability. Afterwards, when David buries the dogs, he reflects on how it must have been for the men: “Like shooting fish in a barrel, he thinks. Contemptible, yet exhilarating, probably, in a country where dogs are bred to snarl at the mere smell of a black man. A satisfying afternoon’s work, heady, like all revenge” (110). With this, attention is again brought to the history of racism and oppression in South Africa, since dogs, as David asserts, are associated with the apartheid regime. This troping on animals points to how the human/animal divide maintains the possibility of placing humans in a hierarchy: in the apartheid society, those considered less valuable were commonly conjoined with animals.

At the outset of the novel, David has little concern for animals. When Lucy contends that the dogs “are part of the furniture, part of the alarm system. They do us the honour of treating us like gods, and we respond by treating them like things” (78), David counters by saying that dogs have no “proper souls” (*ibid.*). However, to please Lucy, he agrees to help out at the clinic, assisting Bev in what turns out to be her main occupation: the killing of

unwanted dogs. After the attack, David gradually begins to develop a sense of engagement with the animals. For instance, he begins to feel a bond with the two sheep Petrus has tethered on the bare ground beside the stable, and asks Petrus to tie them somewhere where they can graze (123). David also considers buying the sheep, even while he asserts to Lucy that he has not changed his ideas: “I still don't believe that animals have properly individual lives. Which among them get to live, which get to die, is not, as far as I am concerned, worth agonizing over. Nevertheless . . .’ ‘Nevertheless?’ ‘Nevertheless, in this case I am disturbed. I can't say why’” (126-27). For the first time David seems able to imaginatively sympathize. In “The ‘Dog-Man’: Race, Sex, Species, and Lineage in Coetzee's *Disgrace*”, Deirdre Coleman argues that David experiences “a shared emotional life with animals” (599), which may describe his sense of sympathy and care. Furthermore, Coleman maintains that David finally perceives “the evolutionary and emotional continuity between human and nonhuman species” (613). I agree with Coleman’s observations here. Although he has no logic or rational explanation for his feelings, the interaction with the animals at the clinic seems to have awakened a sense of interconnectedness and ethical bond.

David’s growing sensibility towards animal life is reflected in how he eventually begins to think of animals as having souls: “The business of dog-killing is over for the day, the black bags are piled at the door, each with a body and a soul inside” (161). In the last chapter this reference to the soul is made again when David is at the clinic, imagining what “his” dog expects when entering the room:

... the smell of expiration, the soft, short smell of the released soul. ... Something happens in this room, something unmentionable: here the soul is yanked out of the body; briefly it hangs about in the air, twisting and contorting; then it is sucked away and is gone. (219)

David now seems to recognize embodiment as a common feature of animals as well as for humans, and his attention to the soul suggests that David now contemplates animals' lives as embodied souls. However, the soul should be understood in a secular meaning and functions as an image for the sense of connection that David has come to experience with the animals. To attribute the animals with having a soul signifies an interrelation to humans that works against the idea of human essentialism and humanist categorization. As mentioned earlier, David is unable to explain the bond that he feels with the animals. Instead, he seems to relate to animals in terms of sensation rather than reason, with a capacity for imaginative identification that supersedes rational knowledge. This break with the mind/body dualism can also be traced in the many references to the body, particularly in situations of distress: "His heart hammers so hard that it too, in its dumb way, must know" (94); "Tears flow down his face that he cannot stop" (143); "The trembling seems to have spread to his whole body" (101). The narrative's attention to the body, coupled with the emphasis on David's inability to rationally explain what is at work in his relationship with the animals, further breaks down the traditional, normative idea of human subjectivity, which relies on a clear distinction of body and mind. In a Baradian sense, matter comes to matter here.

The nature of David's tasks at the clinic underlines the extent of the change that is taking place in him and, in a broader sense, establishes a link to posthuman ethics. From being self-centered, and, as he himself points out, selfish, David has now taken on a job for which he is not rewarded: neither by Bev nor the dead dogs. He brings the bags with the dead dogs to the incinerator, and he himself loads them on to the feeder trolley, a job he took on after seeing the incinerator crew beating the bags with the backs of their shovels to break the rigid limbs before loading them. He reflects on the uselessness of his task: "The dogs are dead; and what do dogs know of honour and dishonour anyway?" (146). While David realizes

that he is not doing this for anyone else, he feels a responsibility: “The dogs are brought to the clinic because they are unwanted: because we are too menny [*sic*]. That is where he enters their lives. He may not be their savior, the one for whom they are not too many, but he is prepared to take care of them once they are unable, utterly unable, to take care of themselves” (146). Karen Barad’s argument comes to mind here: *even the smallest cuts matter. Matter comes to matter*: Barad regards the body as agential materiality, and her particular attention to the body, I will argue, resonates in *Disgrace* through the rejection of the polarization of mind and body, subject and object. The relevance of posthumanism’s efforts to rehumanise the human, is reflected in David’s thoughts that he has taken on this job “[f]or his idea of the world, a world in which men do not use shovels to beat corpses into a more convenient shape for processing” (146).

As this growing sense of responsibility and entanglement towards animal life emerges in David, his relationship with Lucy improves simultaneously. Thus, the changes taking place in him should not be considered simply as a call for animal rights, but rather as a change of ethical significance that alter his previous conceptions and worldview. The posthuman ethical turn is described by Weil in “A Report on the Animal Turn” as something that “emerge[s] as [an] effort to respect and meet well with, even extend care to, others while acknowledging that we may not know the other and what the best kind of care would be” (13). Such an effort seems to guide David’s attitude towards Lucy as he begins to acknowledge that, although he cannot understand her choices, she is in charge of her own life. As David visits Lucy in the final chapter, the imagery reflects David’s changing perspectives: “The flowerbeds are solid blocks of colour: magenta, carnelian, ash-blue. A season of blooming. The bees must be in their seventh heaven” (216). He observes Lucy working in the field with Kathy, the bulldog, by her side, neither aware of him: “As for the watchdog, the watchdog appears to be snoozing” (217). “Watchdog”, a word affiliated with apartheid and associated with

aggression, is contrasted with the calm and innocent word “snoozing”, suggesting a turn towards a new beginning, both in David and in the larger scope of the narration. Similarly, in this scene, Lucy, who has been described as being in a state of apathy after the attack, defeated, is now described as “the picture of health” (218). She invites him in for tea, as if he were a visitor. David avows: “Good. Visitorship, visitation: a new footing, a new start” (218). This recalls Lucy’s idea of a new start from their earlier conversation.

At the end, the inconclusiveness seen in both the formal elements of the narrative, as well as in the thematic discussion, remains. David is at work at the clinic with Bev: “He has learned by now, from her, to concentrate all his attention on the animal they are killing, giving it what he no longer has difficulty in calling by its proper name: love” (219). They are finishing their work, and only one dog remains, Driepoot, the young dog that likes music, the one that David “has come to feel a particular fondness for” (214-215):

He can save the young dog, if he wishes, for another week. But a time must come, it cannot be evaded, when he will have to bring him to Bev Shaw in her operating room (perhaps he will carry him in his arms, perhaps he will do that for him) and caress him and brush back the fur so that the needle can find the vein, and whisper to him and support him in the moment when, bewilderingly, his legs buckle; and then, when the soul is out, fold him up and pack him away in his bag, and the next day wheel the bag into the flames and see that it is burnt, burnt up. He will do all that for him when his time comes. It will be little enough, less than little: nothing. He crosses the surgery. 'Was that the last?' asks Bev Shaw. 'One more.' He opens the cage door. 'Come,' he says, bends, opens his arms. The dog wags its crippled rear, sniffs his face, licks his cheeks, his lips, his ears. He does nothing to stop it. 'Come.' Bearing him in his arms like a lamb, he re-enters the surgery. 'I thought you would

save him for another week,' says Bev Shaw. 'Are you giving him up?' 'Yes, I am giving him up.' (219-220)

The sensibility in which the passage is written clearly reflects David's sentiments of deep concern and compassion, demonstrating what he for the first time is able to name a few lines earlier: *love*. Once again, the style and syntax of the narration are as important as the events of the story. Jan Wilm's argument that Coetzee's aesthetic style slows down the reading process to engage the reader seems highly relevant here. Repetition and prolepsis provide the reader with a vivid description, without actually narrating the killing of the dog. Furthermore, Coetzee's attention to detail, I would argue, slows down the reading process and places strong emphasis on the degree of David's care for the dog. The juxtaposition of the killing, which by nature is brutal, and wording like "he will carry him in his arms"; "caress him and brush back the fur"; "whisper to him and support him", and similarly the description of the young dog that "sniffs his face, licks his cheeks, his lips, his ears" (219) have a powerful effect. This final paragraph of the novel comprises, on both a textual and a semantic level, significant ethical implications with an emphasis on interdependence, cross-species relationship, and compassion.

## Conclusion

For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you

— Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*

Through a narration that challenges its readers in several ways, Coetzee raises a number of concerns. In contrast to many of the readings that place *Disgrace* within a particular South African frame, I have tried to show that, despite being an apparently realist narrative, the novel addresses issues of universal relevance. Narrative techniques such as tense, focalization/counterfocalization and juxtaposition, serve to connect aesthetics and ethics in the novel. *Disgrace* exposes and subverts humanist concepts, ideologies, and discourses through its interrogation of human existence and human co-existence with animals. The thematic concerns I have discussed in my analysis, such as trauma, rights and justice and the human/animal relationship, similarly interrogate these issues and taken-for-granted modes of human subjectivity, shifting the emphasis on to interconnectedness. In effect, this constitutes a rethinking of the hegemonic ideologies informed by humanism, including human exceptionalism and its adherent essentialism. The juxtaposition of perspectives through David and Lucy unveils the humanistic idea as inadequate in preventing oppression of both human and nonhuman others.

Cary Wolfe articulates the shortcomings of humanism when he asserts that “the humanist concept of subjectivity is inseparable from the discourse and *institution* of speciesism . . . not only of animals, but other humans as well by marking *them* as animal” (43,

emphasis in original). Wolfe's assertion here resonates with several of the topics in my discussion of *Disgrace*, particularly the narrative's preoccupation with animals both as metaphors and agents. As my reading reveals, posthuman theories offer a relevant vantage point from which to understand the novel. As we have seen, Lucy's character reflects some central posthumanist ideas. However, it is in David's development that an ethics of entanglement comes fully to the surface. David insists that he does not want to become a better person. "I am not prepared to be reformed" (Coetzee 77). Nevertheless, as he experiences a shared vulnerability and connection with other beings, he does change. He gains a capacity to imaginatively identify with others, a change that not only reflects on animals but also his sense of the self as much as of other humans.

The interrogations on the textual level as well as the diegetic level in *Disgrace* propose a posthuman ethic that entails both responsibilities and opportunities. In the novel, David contends that the "more things change the more they remain the same. History repeating itself, though in a more modest vein" (62). Taking this phrase out of context, one might suggest that, in order to prevent history from repeating itself, new perspectives and ideas are necessary.

As my reading concludes, the way in which a posthuman ethics comes into play in *Disgrace* may not reflect the air of hopefulness that prevailed on the cultural scene in post-apartheid South Africa. Although the ending of the novel remains inconclusive, I maintain that the novel constitutes a work of hope: the posthuman ethic it promotes is both sustainable and affirmative in its consideration of all life-forms.

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