

The Indeterminant Characterization of David Lurie in Coetzee's *Disgrace* through Reader-Response Criticism

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Abstract

The current article tries to probe into reader-response criticism, which “focuses on readers’ responses to literary texts” (Tyson, 2006, p. 169). The paper alludes to John Maxwell Coetzee whose artistic works are being published globally and multilingually, and they have been read or interpreted in starkly different ways based on opposing perspectives that range from being African to European, local to global, black to white, and relevant to “beside the point” (Beckett as cited in Hayes, 2010, p. 46). Out of Coetzee’s oeuvre, the researcher has selected his novel *Disgrace*, for it contains an indeterminate characterization of the White protagonist living in the big city or even surviving among the Black majority in the countryside of post-apartheid South Africa. Consequently, different readers would have different attitudes towards the same character. The analysis of the novel is further fortified by referring to acclaimed reader-response theorists as Gerwel, Justman, Rosenblatt, Pike, Marais, and Hayes. The main conclusion drawn from the studied reader-response concepts, the critical and creative pens of Coetzee, the viewpoints of the novel critics, and their discussion by the current researcher is that the reading of the same text have different interpretations by different readers, and sometimes even by the same reader between two periods of time. However, this needs to be considered as an enrichment for the text and its levels of significance.

Keywords: Reader-response criticism, reader(s), interpretation, characterization; indeterminacy; post-apartheid; colonialism; projection; literary critical theory; binarism

Introduction

For a White¹ or an Afrikaner citizen, living in post-apartheid South Africa among a Black majority has become a challenge due to many racial, sociopolitical, and economic factors. Historically speaking, “[p]erhaps one of the most catastrophic binary systems perpetuated by imperialism is the invention of the concept of race” (Ashcroft et al., 2007, p. 20). Unfortunately, the residual “binarism of white/non-white” is de facto persistent in South Africa today (Ashcroft et al., 2007, p. 20). The suspicion about, pre-judgement or marginalization of citizens of European origin is a counteractive repercussion of colonization. In fact, the Black population overgeneralize their negative attitude towards their White compatriots, considering them active colonizers and imperial inheritors. This argument is not intended to sanctify the White minority nor to desecrate the Black majority who are residing in South Africa, for “[t]o err is human, to forgive is divine.” The current researcher’s thought framework underpins the universal principle that every individual, regardless of their ethnicity or background, is a bundle of contradictions, or in other words, has both good and evil inclinations and motives that inevitably translate into actions. Hence, as humans, we are neither saints nor satans².

The aforementioned universal, the South African, and the individual perspectives within modern times, which are still haunted by the ghosts of the colonial past, are intertwined in John Maxwell Coetzee’s novel *Disgrace* (1999). To discuss individual identity within the bigger contexts of the African country and the world at large, the current article focuses on the characterization of the protagonist David Lurie in Coetzee’s previously mentioned novel. Within the social shift in post-apartheid South Africa, the native “Professor Jakes Gerwel ... praised Coetzee as a faithful chronicler of ‘the dislocation of the white-in-Africa’” (Hayes, 2010, p. 197). Thus, the White citizens have begun to lose some of their power due to the competitiveness from the natives on the political and economic levels due to the equal suffrage and redistribution of land properties. This has changed the central status of the ex-settlers from being social elites to an egalitarian status with the native populace of South Africa. Things get worse for the Whites, for they are threatened by the natives in persistent attempts to force them to

¹ The current researcher uses the adjectives ‘White’ and ‘Black’ to differentiate objectively between races for study purposes and not for derogation.

² The use of religious terms is meant only for clarification and does not indicate that the article is theological, but it is a literary critical paper based on moral clarity.

leave for the homeland of their European forefathers. When it comes to the future of the relationships between the two races, Gerwel “found himself dismayed by ... [the novel’s] apparent ‘exclusion of the possibility of civilised reconciliation’” between the Whites and Blacks of South Africa (Hayes, 2010, p. 197). In fact, Gerwel’s negative attitude is not exceptional towards the novel, for “the conversation it has inspired since its publication has been dominated by readers’ suspicions. Issues of race, and more specifically, accusations of racist writing, have dictated discussion of *Disgrace*” (Chou, 2009, Abstract). To comment, some readers suspect that the novelist himself is a “racist” who just produces “white writing” (Coetzee as cited by Hayes, 2010, p. 53). If there is “white writing,” then as a binary opposite there is black writing; alternatively, the first would be received and discussed positively by white reading, and the second would be received and discussed positively by black reading as Gerwel’s and vice versa. However, Coetzee’s work goes beyond this presumably clear categorization, and its ambivalence and indeterminacy open it to a wide range of interpretations and uncover its nuances and levels of meaning. Probably, one of the themes that this work rouses is the ambivalence and blurriness of real life itself, beginning from individual identity to collective outlooks.

Aesthetically speaking, Coetzee makes use of the realistic novel genre to depict a part of the biography of the controversial White Professor in post-apartheid South Africa as appears in the following quote:

David Lurie himself was regarded as an especially dismaying character, most pointedly because, as Gerwel perceived, the genre of the novel typically enjoins us to treat its hero as in some way representative: ‘That such racists exist, is no surprise; that the nation can be typified³ thereby, is a question’ (Hayes, 2010, pp. 197-198).

To comment, Gerwel’s reading of David Lurie is very negative; for him, the protagonist is horrifyingly racist, and what alarms Professor Gerwel is that the novel makes “*the educated reader* [sic]” –as himself- deal with this “hero” as typical (Tyson, 2006, p. 187). In fact, the type of reader mentioned in the previous statement is one of the variants used by reader-response critics. Analogously, in the space of the current article, the researcher is going to envision and express the indeterminate experience of a hypothetical reader in projecting themselves psychologically and ideologically⁴ onto the controversial character David Lurie in Coetzee’s

³ The novel’s typification meant here is “‘almost barbaric post-colonial claims of black Africans’; its representation of ‘mixed-race characters’ as ‘whores, seducers, complainers, conceited abusers’” (Gerwel as cited in Hayes, 2010, p.197).

⁴ The ideological aspect meant here is the “ethical systems, humanism ... [which] are ... ideologies” (Tyson, 2006, p. 56).

novel *Disgrace*, applying the affective stylistics approach of reader-response literary theory.

Body

Before delving into the novel under study and its critique, it is plausible to give a brief introduction about Coetzee and then introduce reader-response criticism.

To begin with, when it comes to his biography, “J. M. Coetzee was born in Cape Town, South Africa, in 1940 and educated in South Africa and the United States” (Coetzee, 1982, Introduction); thus, he has a mixed vantage point of a former apartheid-era country and a present-day, neo-colonial power, witnessing both the rise and fall of the White Europeans in South Africa. Jane Poyner includes the following statement about Coetzee’s literary achievements in her book *J. M. Coetzee and the Paradox of Postcolonial Authorship*:

That he was the 2003 Nobel Laureate in Literature and the first novelist to win the Booker Prize twice, with *Life & Times of Michael K* in 1983 and *Disgrace* in 1999, as well as having the gamut of major South African and international literary prizes conferred upon him, has guaranteed J. M. Coetzee’s reputation as one of the most important writers living today (Poyner, 2009, p. 1).

Hence, he is a living literary legend on both creative and critical levels. When it comes to Coetzee’s contributions in the debate between the Whites and Blacks of post-apartheid South Africa, Poyner states that:

His fiction and critical essays have generated a plethora of scholarly research both in South Africa and abroad and have challenged readers globally, not least for the contentious interventions the oeuvre makes through Coetzee’s singular, modernist mode into South African politico-cultural discourse and the field of postcolonial studies (Poyner, 2009, p. 1).

To explain, whether through a novel or literary critical essay, Coetzee has always managed to challenge his local as well as international readers. He tackles colonialism and its aftermath, which have always been a political issue, and what makes them controversial are the double narratives and varied readings of the colonizers and the colonized. The firsts claim it has developed indigenous cultures, while the seconds believe that it has destroyed their cultures. In the novel under study, Coetzee shows a multileveled characterization of David Lurie that comprises society, politics, economics, morals, and intellect.

Secondly, Tyson (2006) states that “reader-response criticism focuses on readers’ responses to literary texts”; these “responses” range from

separating themselves from the novel or poem they are reading to identifying themselves, projecting their life happenings and principles onto the work's characters, events, or themes respectively (p. 169). The reader-response criticism theorists give the readers the most important role as contrasted to both the writer and the text; Stewart Justman goes as far as believing that "[t]he reader co-authors the literary text" (as cited in Spirovska, 2019, p. 23). This quote implies that when the reader and the writer are not on the same page, i.e., when they have opposite perspectives, preferences, purposes, intentions, and foci, the reader even rewrites the literary work. Broadly speaking, reader-response theory tries to answer the following pair of interrelated questions: "How do readers make meaning as they read the text, and what is the relationship between the meaning they make and the text?" (Tyson, 2006, p. 451). In the case of the main character in *Disgrace*, the current researcher answers how the hypothetical reader interprets the saying and doing of David Lurie, and the connection between the significance of this character to them and the textual characterization.

There are many approaches under the reader-response literary critical theory, but the current researcher has chosen the affective stylistics one, for the novel's element of characterization lends itself to this approach. The following quote gives a foundational definition of the affective stylistics approach:

Affective stylistics is derived from analyzing further the notion that a literary text is an event that occurs in time-that comes into being as it is read-rather than an object that exists in space. The text is examined closely, often line by line or even word by word, in order to understand *how* (stylistics) it *affects* (affective) the reader in the process of reading [sic] (Tyson, 2006, p. 175).

To analyze, reading literary prose or poetry is a temporal inward or outward activity-silent or loud-that creates the read work. A novel, for instance, is not a static thing found within a certain place, and it is read closely, interactively, and analytically for the purpose of comprehending how it influences the reader as they read. To link, the current researcher supposes that a hypothetical reader is reading *Disgrace* closely and meticulously while she or he is trying to grasp the literal and connotative meaning of every sentence, and to understand fully the implications of thematic words that are highlighted or repeated by Coetzee to underpin "the functions" performed by the character David Lurie "in relation to the narrative as a whole" (Tyson, 2006, p. 209). In the current researcher's disambiguation of the readers' meaning making and his underscoring what is significant in the novel to them, the process is thought to be influenced by the sex of the reader. For instance, a male reader may think of raping a

young woman as a bad act and sympathize with her, but it feels a distant event that is detached from himself or his imaginative body, however, a female reader may think of this same act as not only a bad one, but she could even feel its closeness to her imaginative body; in other words, she could identify herself with the female victim to the extent of feeling similar psychological distress and humiliation. In the male reader's case, the projection is partial, while in the female reader's case, it is holistic. Roughly speaking, two young women are raped in the novel, namely, David Lurie's native student Melanie by him and his own daughter Lucy by three native African thugs.

Difference in sex is not the only factor that leads to indefiniteness in reading, but there are many other factors, including ethnic, cultural, religious, social, and even individual ones. According to Louise Rosenblatt, "*indeterminate meaning*, or *indeterminacy*, refers to 'gaps' in the text-such as actions that are not clearly explained or that seem to have multiple explanations-which allow or even invite readers to create their own interpretations [sic]" (Tyson, 2006, p. 174). Thus, a reader fills in these textual "gaps" with subjective or individual "interpretations" when he or she is faced with unclear or controversial actions by characters. Going back to the action of the native Africans who rape Lucy in *Disgrace*, the White citizen and descendant of European colonizers, a modern European reader would surely condemn this action as being a sexual crime, whereas a native African reader may consider it, as Lucy herself accepts it, as a price justly paid for the colonization's violence and its historic perpetrations in South Africa. This is clear in the following quote by Lucy:

What if . . . what if that is the price one has to pay for staying on? 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 should I be allowed to live here without paying? Perhaps that is what they tell themselves (Coetzee, 1999, p. 67).

To comment, she mentions the "debt," which is nothing more nothing less than the historic colonial debt. Similarly, this is the natives' perspective and their collective memory and not only the three perpetrators' opinion.

Correspondingly, in his definition of the reader-response theory, the reader-response critic Mark Pike, mentions the critical concept of textual "gaps" by saying:

The transaction is one where the shape of the gap or entrance in the text is determined by the shape of the reader who enters as well as the text being entered. Essentially, different readers cause the gap to adopt different shapes. Further, what is

indeterminate for one reader may not be indeterminate for another (Spirovska, 2019, p. 23).

Thus, the interactions between the readers and the same text are widely varied, for one reader may explain a character's action in a denotative or determinate way, i.e., as a fact taken at its face value, but another reader may not be convinced with the surface phenomenon of the action and would delve deep for the "indeterminate meaning," which lies in implication or connotation. The aforementioned sexual assault is for one reader a crime in principle that cannot be justified, yet for another it is a reaction for past, innumerable crimes and can be justified.

At this point, it is plausible to elaborate on the analysis of the controversial characterization of Professor David Lurie, aged "fifty-two" (Coetzee, 1999, p. 2). At the heart of his behavioral chronology, there is his sexual intercourse with his "[t]wenty"-year-old student Melanie, which marks his falling from grace on different levels (Coetzee, 1999, p. 20). David Lurie speaks about this downfall in his last lecture:

'Lucifer,' he says. 'The angel hurled out of heaven.' ... 'Good or bad, he just does it. He doesn't act on principle but on impulse, and the source of his impulses is dark to him. Read a few lines further: 'His madness was not of the head, but heart' (Coetzee, 1999, p. 15).

Like Satan, who loses paradise, David Lurie is expelled from his university, for a disciplinary committee there accuses him of abusing his student sexually. For one reader, especially a native female, he is "bad" for being a perpetrator who is not ruled by common sense, ethics, or wisdom, and he imposes himself on his student, abuses his authority, and acts without thinking of consequences. In other words, he embarrasses his reluctant student to sleep with him. For another reader, especially a Western male, he is "good" for he follows his "heart", impulsiveness, and sensibility, and he practices love with his student. There is no physical harm after his sexual relationship with her. Does not Nike's motto say, "Just do it"?

Interestingly enough, the novel's narrator and a literary critic have different attitudes towards David Lurie's relationship with his student. The first portrays "David's violation of his young student ... as something altogether human, something almost lyrical and even vaguely romantic. [Johann Lodewyk] Marais has pointed out how the rape of Lucy is a 'structural parallel' of Lurie's rape of Melanie Isaacs" (Smith, 2007, p. 207). Hence, the imaginative or narrative voice does not condemn David Lurie, but the authentic or critical one condemns this character. For the former, David Lurie is a "romantic" hero or a type of 'CASANOVA [sic]', which is written ironically on "[a] pamphlet ... slipped under his door" after his sex scandal (Coetzee, 1999, p. 19). For the latter, he is a rapist and his action is as

hideous as the sexual assault on his daughter by the three African thugs. Hence, there are multiple readings for the same unclear action, but a reader logically needs to justify or strengthen their interpretation by referring to the text or at least to a critic who has read or studied the text. The current researcher prefers that for a reader to have a solid, close, or deep reading of a certain novel, they have to triangulate their reading or studying as follows: first, they need to read the work comprehensively, then, they need to access a body of critique on it, next, they need to discuss the work with other readers, subsequently, they need to project themselves onto the work, and finally, they need to jot down the resulting interpretation and inference.

Back to David Lurie's characterization, there is a bright side that is read or seen in his parental care. The following dialogue with Lucy-after the incident of sexual aggression of the three natives against her-shows his fatherly pity towards her:

'Are you telling me you are going to have the child?'

'Yes.'

'A child from one of those men?'

'Yes.'

'Why?'

'Why? I am a woman, David. Do you think I hate children? Should I choose against the child because of who its father is?'

'It has been known. When are you expecting it?'

'May. The end of May.'

'And your mind is made up?'

'Yes.'

'Very well. This has come as a shock to me, I confess, but I will stand by you, whatever you decide. There is no question about that' (Coetzee, 1999, p. 84).

Thus, respecting his daughter's personal decision to keep the child, David Lurie promises to support her though he does not agree with her. A conservative reader would be of David Lurie's mind, but a feminist one would agree with Lucy's decision. In fact, the dialogue between the father and the daughter uncovers the male's and female's conflicting perspectives, respectively. Ontologically speaking, men see the world differently than women do; at least the former are interested in the overall concepts and prefer intellectual intelligence, while the latter are interested in the details and prefer emotional intelligence.

In fact, the reconciliation of David Lurie and his daughter towards the end of the novel confirms their deep acceptance of each other's differences. On the one hand, David justifies his call for abortion by knowledge about the child's raping parent. On the other hand, Lucy justifies

her keeping of the child for both its innocence and her love for children. Still they agree to stay together at Lucy's farmhouse, waiting for the coming child and for a new hope. Critically speaking, "[w]hile it was quite apparent that David and Lucy occupied opposite sides of the ideological divide, they had a tolerance of each other, and neither took their differences too seriously" (Hayes, 2010, p. 206).

Conclusion

In conclusion, there are universal meanings, significances, and themes in Coetzee's *Disgrace*, which intersect in the likely assumption that there is no single valid truth or absolute judgement of an individual, a community, a nation, a thing, or an idea that can be expressed in writing. This is probably linked to the realistic philosophy or insight that coherence in this world whether in day-to-day or aesthetic experiences is rare or even nonexistent, but it is only a product of our deliberate thinking and consciousness. Even when it comes to individual identity, it cannot have only one description or categorization, instead it is a mixture of contradictory or ambivalent feelings and ideas; it is a mosaic of differences as everything else from Coetzee's writing to readers' construing as appears in the following quote:

... the disorienting serio-comic movement of Coetzee's prose style attempts to create a space of difference and deferral that plays with the different 'rules' readers bring to the text, and that tests the limits of what those rules have defined as, to use Beckett's phrase, 'beside the point' (Hayes, 2010, p. 131).

Thus, the meaning or characterization is meant to create differences among readers, and Coetzee's writing even makes readers finish a work as *Disgrace* with more questions than answers. One may go as far as questioning whether there is really truth, coherence, "rules," or even meaning in this life; it is not only thinking out of the box, but it is also thinking that there may not be a box at all! What all this argument funnels into is that relativity is paramount in our objective, subjective, and cognitive experiences. To link, a given reader would heartily or convincingly condemn David Lurie as a sexual abuser upon having sex with his student, but the same reader would surely appreciate David Lurie's parental support for his daughter or his empathy towards dogs. At the veterinary clinic, "[t]he animals [he and Bev Shaw] care for at the clinic are mainly dogs" (Coetzee, 1999, p. 60). This resonates with the following lines from David Lurie's last lecture about the devil –and indirectly about himself-, which tell his students and Coetzee's readers alike that they "are not asked to condemn this being ... [and they] are invited to understand and sympathize. ... [yet] it will not be possible to love him" (Coetzee, 1999, p. 15). This quote confirms

indeterminacy in writing, characterization, belief, individuality, and reading. As mentioned earlier, *Disgrace* leaves its readers with more questions than answers, including: Is Coetzee himself a racist or an aesthetic historicist? Is *Disgrace* an extension of colonial discourse or an authentic depiction of the sociopolitical scene in post-apartheid South Africa? Is David Lurie a racist or a tolerant person? Are South African natives immoral or helpful? Can there be a reconciliation between the natives and the descendants of Europeans there or not? Lastly, neither does the author, nor does the text answer these questions, but the reader does.

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