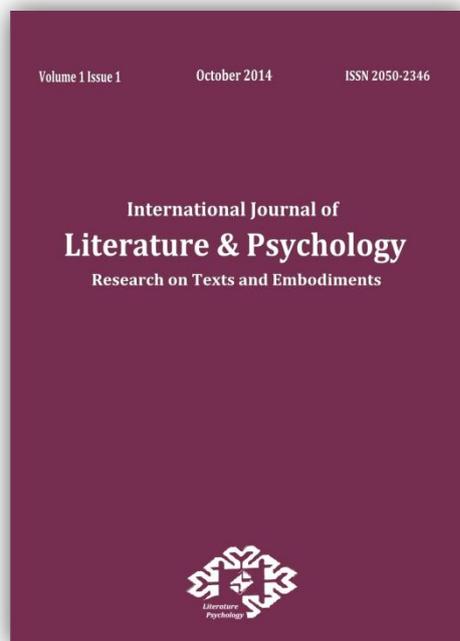


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## Paranoia, Pain, and the Hidden Etymology of Coetzee's *Disgrace* (1999)

Erik Grayson

### Abstract

Throughout Coetzee's oeuvre, "disgrace" often refers to "the state of being," in which one's bodily needs prevent the realization of, or conflict with, the demands in/of "the self." Taking into consideration, various mental states in relation to paranoia, pain, and the aging process, I read the hidden etymology of "disgrace" across several of Coetzee's writings including *Disgrace* (1999), demonstrating how his fiction presents the psycho-somatic interplay of conscious/unconscious, beauty/ugliness, and fear/shame, all in close correspondence with his conception of "dis/gracefulness". In clarifying Coetzee's repetitive pattern of employing certain terms such as "disgrace," I argue that "the Other" – both in observation and categorization – inflicts a certain type of painful fear on "the Self," which proves to be detrimental, in particular, during the process of aging, rendering the sufferer helpless in his/her attempts to redefine "grace." Looking into definitions of conscious/unconscious realization of the self and the other, specifically by means of the Sartrean ontology, I discuss thanatophobia and varieties of "disgrace" felt, composed, and verbalized in Coetzee's writings.

**Key Words:** Age, Coetzee, disgrace, fear, other, pain, paranoia, self, thanatophobia.

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Within the corpus of J. M. Coetzee's fiction, the term "disgrace" appears for the first time in "The Vietnam Project," the first of two novellas comprising *Dusklands* – the author's 1974 literary debut. When Eugene Dawn, the novella's troubled protagonist, speculates about his wife's infidelity, he employs the term to describe the post-coital sensation he imagines Marilyn experiences in the wake of her illicit trysts:

I cannot believe that the pleasure Marilyn gets from other men is real. She is by character a masturbator who needs steady mechanical friction to generate on the inner walls of her eyes those fantasies of enslavement which eventually squeeze a groan and shudder out of her. If she goes with strangers it can only be to escape the embarrassments of solitary meals or to prolong the wistful conviviality of sensitivity gatherings where ruined wooden boys touch fingertips trying to revive their dying fires. Casual sex means to Marilyn four cold feet, foreplay by rote, fingers among her dry wattles, blushes and charity in the dark, the familiar flood of disgrace. (19)

Significantly, where many readers might use "disgrace" to describe the state of cuckoldry, into which he has been placed by his wife's suspected infidelity, Dawn imagines that it is Marilyn who experiences disgrace – as a quasi-physical response to a physical activity. For Dawn, nearly everything traditionally viewed as romantic has been drained of emotional-social import. The language Dawn uses to describe his marriage, for instance, is painfully devoid of feeling and disarmingly clinical in tone:

[...] the bliss of which the books speak has eluded us. The fault is not mine. I do my duty. Whereas I cannot escape the suspicion that my wife is disengaged. Before the arrival of my seed her pouch yawns and falls back,

leaving my betrayed representative gripped at its base, flailing its head in vain inside an immense cavern [...] my seed drips like urine into the futile sewers of Marilyn's reproductive ducts. (8)

Shortly after this passage, Dawn reveals that he has been sending Marilyn "to San Diego for therapy and shopping" (11). Disturbingly, Eugene seems to be motivated solely by a desire to restore Marilyn to some physical semblance of the woman she once was:

I do not disapprove and gladly pay. If she will return to being a smiling honey-blonde with long brown legs, I do not mind by what unsound route she gets there. I am weary of this mental patient with hair in rats'-tails sprawling around my home, sighing, clasping her hands, sleeping round the clock. I pay my money and hope for results. At present, however, the Wednesday agony of coming to terms with herself deprives her of all appeal: the silent tears, the red nose, the cheesy flesh anesthetize my most powerful erections and leave me plying grimly at her with only the dimmest epidermal sheath. (11)

For Eugene, then, Marilyn's treatment matters only insofar as it erases from view the outward symptoms of her emotional pain. Eugene is oblivious to the underlying reasons for her misery, wanting only a physically satisfying and emotionally void sexual relationship. That is why it is hardly surprising, when Dawn identifies Marilyn as a "masturbator," requiring "steady mechanical friction" to achieve satisfaction. In an effort to bolster his claim that he does not believe "the pleasure Marilyn gets from other men is real," he admits that when he "convulse[s] [her] body with [his] little battery-driven probe ... [s]he cries,"<sup>1</sup> an act that both annoys Eugene and implies that the woman desires more from her relationship than the mere physical stimulation he seems to regard as his "duty" (10). This scene dramatizes the conflict at the heart of the Dawns' failed marriage: Eugene simply cannot understand the emotional side of sex.

Accordingly, we must take his language at face value, eschewing the temptation to give him the benefit of doubt, assuming that when he describes Marilyn's feeling of "disgrace" in physical terms – as a result of physical activity – he genuinely does not use it to refer to the emotional-social state of "being," with which most people associate. "Disgrace," for Dawn, is first and foremost an aspect of corporeality, a sensation rooted in physicality and the result of bodily activity.

While Dawn's facile understanding of "disgrace" is undeniably limited in scope, the fact that he regards it as intrinsically physical in nature provides us with a key to understanding Coetzee's more nuanced use of the term. Returning, for a moment, to the passage where "disgrace" appears, we can see that Coetzee has also set an early precedent of using the term to describe a specific physical tendency: the sensation one experiences when one's self (and the self's desires) and one's body (and the body's actions) are not in accord with one another. Here, "disgrace" may be read as the result of seeking emotional satisfaction via physical means. As already noted, Marilyn Dawn lives a pitiful existence, one in which her very natural desire to feel love is thoroughly irrelevant to her profoundly affectless spouse. In Eugene's speculations,<sup>2</sup> Marilyn engages in "foreplay by rote," suggesting that she goes through the motions with her theoretical partners, as emotionlessly, as Dawn himself does with her.

The difference, of course, is that while Eugene does not seem to attach any emotional significance to the physical act of love, Marilyn quite clearly craves both physical and emotional satisfaction. Indeed, if – in Dawn's mind – her casual encounters exist so that she can "escape the embarrassments of solitary meals," and if "[s]he is by nature a masturbator"

(presumably not requiring a partner for sexual satisfaction), then Marilyn’s affairs are futile attempts corresponding to other similar examples in Coetzee’s narratives. Her endeavour to extract love from a purely physical encounter, specifically, plays in much the same way David Lurie attempts to “solve the problem of sex” with his weekly appointments with Soraya in *Disgrace* (1). Therefore, the “disgrace” Marilyn experiences – in Eugene’s suppositional musings – likely refers to the sensation she feels upon recognizing a discrepancy between what she wants inwardly and what she has sought out physically.

Coetzee’s next use of “disgrace” appears in *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), when the Magistrate claims that he “can’t appear in front of the Colonel in clothes that smell like this,” because “[i]t will only bring disgrace upon my warders” (87). Although the Magistrate rames his concern for the guards, their duty is to imprison him rather than as a request to preserve his own dignity in the eyes of a superior officer in the Empire. However, he does eventually concede that he is, in fact, “sinking further and further into disgrace” himself (93). While “disgrace,” here, refers to both the “state of being” in which the magistrate lives as well as the potential loss of face, his warders risk by allowing him to meet with Colonel Joll – without having performed the most basic of ablutions. In both, the root is the Magistrate’s physical condition. In fact, the Magistrate takes pains to describe how his bodily existence has essentially taken over his entire being:

The flow of events in the outside world, the moral dimension of my plight, if that is what it is, a plight, even the prospect of defending myself in court, have lost all interest under the pressure of appetite and physical functions and the boredom of living one hour after another. I have caught a cold; my whole being is preoccupied in sniffing and sneezing in the misery of being simply a body that feels itself sick and wants to be well. (86)

The Magistrate’s ego has been so thoroughly subsumed by his physical needs that he ceases to identify himself as anything more than a body. The brand of disgrace in which the Magistrate finds himself, then, may be interpreted as the “state of being,” wherein one’s bodily needs have so dehumanized the individual that s/he loses a sense of self; becoming, for all intents and purposes, a physical object or, at least, an animal of a lower intellectual order than humans. Likewise, the Magistrate suggests that his warders will experience “disgrace” if they allow him to stand before the Colonel in the dirty rags, bearing the visual and olfactory remnants of his illness. If their duty consists of “attending to the animal needs of another man” (87), as the Magistrate claims, it is their failure to prevent the bodily symptoms of those needs from appearing that will result in their ignominy. Allowing the body of an individual in one’s care to sink into pure animality, then, is as disgraceful as undergoing such a transformation oneself.

While not expressly used to describe physical weakness and humiliation, or a discordance between mind and body in *Age of Iron*, the concept of “disgrace” in Coetzee’s 1990 novel does, somehow, hinge on an appreciation of physical suffering. Unlike *Waiting for the Barbarians* and “The Vietnam Project,” *Age of Iron* depicts “disgrace” less as a purely corporeal state than as a political and social condition comparable, in degree of humiliation, with the sort of physical condition in which the Magistrate finds himself. In one passage, for instance, Elizabeth Curren describes contemporary South Africa as a “pit of disgrace,” seemingly drawing upon the more conventional use of the term, to describe a state of affairs brought about by dishonourable behaviour due to racial tension and violence emerging out of the unjust social order of apartheid (117). Considerably, however, given the symbolic significance of the elderly woman’s aging with rapidly deteriorating body – discussed in the first chapter of this study – Elizabeth cannot help but to mention her physical condition as an

impediment to her attempts at shaking herself free of the “disgrace” smothering her generation of white South Africans. She cries out, “But why should I bear the blame? Why should I be expected to rise above my times? Is it my doing that my times have been so shameful? Why should it be left to me, old and sick and full of pain, to lift myself unaided out of this pit of disgrace?” (116-117).

On a symbolic level, then, old age and bodily infirmity may be read as factors that amplify one’s pre-existing “disgrace,” an observation that seems to inform many of David Lurie’s musings in *Disgrace*, wherein he wonders whether he would have been treated differently by his colleagues, had he not been notably older than Melanie Isaacs. Moreover, while Elizabeth Curren’s use of “disgrace,” in this instance, is undeniably closer to the meaning of the term in its more traditional etymology, Coetzee gives the word a decidedly visceral connotation. This happens when the elderly woman compares the feelings of “disgrace,” Vercueil and herself experience while watching news coverage of the National Party, with the sort of humiliation one associates with urolagnia, asserting,

The curtains behind me were open. At a certain moment I became aware of him, the man whose name I do not know, watching over my shoulder through the glass. So I turned up the sound, enough for, if not the words, then the cadences to reach him, the slow, truculent Afrikaans rhythms with their deadening closes, like a hammer beating a post into the ground. Together, blow after blow, we listened. The disgrace of the life one lives under them: to open a newspaper, to switch on the television, like kneeling and being urinated on: under their meaty bellies, their full bladders (10).

This metaphoric description, of course, likens “disgrace” to a distinctly physical form of humiliation; the sort of scatological debasement the Magistrate experiences in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, while “blow after blow” clearly evokes images of battered bodies and the cringing helplessness of the pummelled individual. Evocatively, this is precisely the sort of condition in which David Lurie finds himself, being locked in the lavatory of Lucy’s farmhouse, the situation Lurie regards as “his disgrace” (109). Coetzee’s use of “disgrace” to identify the sense of humiliation one experiences, when bodily infirmity adversely affects one’s sense of dignity, also appears in the author’s next novel, *The Master of Petersburg* (1994), though in a decidedly less metaphoric way. At one point early in the text, for instance, Coetzee’s fictionalized Dostoevsky faints while he skulks about the corridors of his late stepson’s boarding house. When he awakes, after several hours of oblivion, Dostoevsky refers to his condition in terms which have, by now, become familiar to readers of Coetzee’s fiction:

He tries to move an arm but the arm is trapped under his body. Stupidly he tries to tug it free. There is a bad smell, his clothes are damp. Like ice forming in water, memories begin to coagulate: who he is, where he is: and together with memory and urgent desire to get away from this place before he is discovered in all his disgrace (70).

Here, Dostoevsky’s “disgrace” is quite clearly the result of his syncope: it is the failure of his consciousness to persist while his physical body addresses its own needs. As we have seen in both “The Vietnam Project” and *Waiting for the Barbarians*, “disgrace,” in Coetzee’s fiction, frequently refers to conditions such as Dostoevsky’s, in which one’s ego is subsumed, elated, or ignored by one’s “animal needs.” Furthermore, the “bad smell” that the damp,<sup>3</sup> detected by Dostoevsky, suggests that, unable to control his “animal needs” while unconscious, the writer

has soiled himself, thereby imbuing “disgrace” with the same scatological connotations it bears in *Age of Iron*.

Elsewhere in the novel, Dostoevsky describes his sexual pursuit of the unwilling Anna Sergeyevna as a potentially disgraceful endeavour:

He takes her by the arm. It is dark, she is carrying a basket, she cannot free herself. He presses himself against her, drawing in the walnut scent of her hair. He tries to kiss her, but she turns away and his lips brush her ear. Nothing in the pressure of her body answers to him. Disgrace, he thinks: this is how one enters disgrace.

He stands aside, but on the stairway catches up with her again. ‘One word more,’ he says: ‘Why?’

She turns toward him. ‘Isn’t it obvious? Must I spell it out?’

‘What is obvious? Nothing is obvious.’

‘You were suffering. You were pleading.’

He recoils. ‘That is not the truth!’

‘You were in need. It is nothing to be ashamed of. But now it is finished. It will do you no good to go on, and it does me no good either to be used in this way.’ (60)

On the most basic level, this scene may be read as one in which Dostoevsky concludes, quite reasonably, that sexually pursuing and attempting to coerce a clearly uninterested woman into bed is disgraceful. Indeed, given Coetzee’s tendency to describe situations in which a disjuncture between an individual’s physical behaviour, and his/ her more rational self, occurs as disgraceful; the state, into which Dostoevsky imagines he will descend, is quite consistent with the concept’s rather unique etymology in the body of the author’s fiction. Where the exchange between Dostoevsky and Pavel’s former landlady is most significant, however, is in its use of “disgrace,” to describe a specifically sexual situation for the first time since “The Vietnam Project.” Crucially, the passage suggests that the degree of “disgrace” into which Dostoevsky risks falling would be amplified by the discrepancy in the ages and, accordingly, physical attractiveness<sup>4</sup> of the partners.

The earlier episode to which Anna Sergeyevna refers is the scene where the relatively youthful widow sleeps with the seemingly distraught older man, in an effort to calm him and alleviate his grieving. Significantly, Anna locates the genesis of this tryst in the aging man’s “suffering,” implying that she does not find him attractive and that she simply overcomes her distaste in a spirit of charity. As already explained, a tremendous amount of the malaise Dostoevsky experiences, in *The Master of Petersburg*, is the result of his anxiety of finitude. His attraction to Anna can be interpreted, at least in part, as a manifestation of his desire to evade the limiting effects of the aging process on his sex life. Dostoevsky’s conflicted emotions, as he considers Anna Sergeyevna’s disinclination to sleep with him a second time, then, indicate that he is aware that he runs a great risk. This process is concerned with “enter[ing] disgrace” by transgressing what David Lurie refers to as an unspoken “ban on intimacy across the generations,” which is, unaccountably, among the least discussed forms of “disgrace” among critics of Coetzee’s subsequent novel (*Master* 60; *Disgrace* 52).

One final, though crucial, development in the etymology of “disgrace” within Coetzee’s oeuvre can be found in the autobiographical<sup>5</sup> *Boyhood: Scenes from Provincial Life* (1997). Here, the young John Coetzee identifies “disgrace” as the “state of being,” an individual experiences when his/her involuntary bodily behaviour projects a self that is radically different from that which the ego desires to present to other people. For instance, in a passage recalling the terror he and his classmates felt when threatened with a disciplinary caning,

John describes the breakdown of boyish machismo as disgraceful, emphasizing the physical aspect of such a collapse:

Among the canes it is not Miss Oosthuizen's that leaves the deepest impression on him. The most fearsome cane is that of Mr Lategan the woodwork teacher. Mr Lategan's cane is not long and springy in the style most of the teachers prefer. Instead it is short and thick and stubby, more like a stick or a baton than a switch. It is rumoured that Mr Lategan uses it only on the older boys, that it will be too much for a younger boy. It is rumoured that with his cane Mr Lategan has made even Matric boys blubber and plead for mercy and urinate in their pants and disgrace themselves (8).

In this instance, the infinitive “to disgrace” refers specifically to the action of revealing oneself as weaker than one wishes to be seen. Consistent with what is identified elsewhere in Coetzee's writing, this process of “disgrace” involves visible evidence (in this case, crying, self-abasement, and soiling one's trousers) of a self, quite at odds with that which the innermost self wishes to project (here, a tough guy persona capable of stoically accepting physical punishment). This schism within the individual and the ways in which the figure of “the Other” exacerbate the sense of disgrace one experiences at such times, recalls Sartre's discussion of the dynamic of shame in *Being and Nothingness*. Indeed, Sartrean ontology provides significant insight into the variety of “disgrace” Coetzee depicts in *Boyhood* and, as we shall see, sets the groundwork for much of our discussion of *Disgrace*.

In one of the most frequently discussed passages in *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre asks us to “imagine that moved by jealousy, curiosity, or vice I have just glued my ear to the door and looked through the keyhole” at whatever scene lies hidden on the other side of the portal (347). Since the spectacle beyond the door thoroughly engrosses him, Sartre continues,

My consciousness sticks to my acts, it is my acts; and my acts are commanded only by the ends to be attained and by the instruments to be employed. My attitude, for example, has no “outside”; it is a pure process of relating to the instrument (the keyhole) to the end to be attained (the spectacle to be seen), a pure mode of losing myself in the world, to be drunk in by things as ink is by a blotter... (348)

In other words, Sartre loses himself in the act of spying and becomes “a pure consciousness of things,” declaring:

I am alone and on the level of a non-thetic consciousness. This means first of all that there is no self to inhabit my consciousness, nothing therefore to which I can refer my acts in order to qualify them. They are no way known; I am my acts and hence they carry in themselves their whole justification... (347)

Here, having exchanged his reflective consciousness for the unreflective consciousness of the voyeur, Sartre becomes his “own nothingness,” leaving himself vulnerable to the gaze of “the Other” (349). He continues, insisting that “[s]o long as we considered the for-itself in its isolation, we were able to maintain that the unreflective consciousness cannot be inhabited by a self; the self was given in the form of an object and only for the reflective consciousness” (349). With the appearance of the Other, however, “the self comes to haunt the unreflective consciousness” by perceiving itself as an object for the Other (349). As Sartre explains,

[...] the reflective consciousness is a consciousness of the world. Therefore, for the unreflective consciousness, the self exists on the level of objects in the world; this role while devolved only on the reflective consciousness – the making-present of the self – belongs now to the unreflective consciousness. Only the reflective consciousness has the self directly for an object. The unreflective consciousness does not apprehend the person directly or as its object; the person is presented to consciousness in so far as the person is an object for the Other. This means that all of a sudden I am conscious of myself as escaping myself, not in that I am the foundation of my own nothingness but in that I have my foundation outside myself. I am for myself only as I am a pure reference to the Other. (349)

Put differently, when “the Other” appears on the scene, s/he jars the previously unreflective Sartre into reflective consciousness, revealing the philosopher to himself as “the Other” receives him, namely as voyeur. Sartre, understandably, begins to feel shame. He has, after all, been caught in a position unbecoming of a respected scholar. Shame, as Sartre tells us, “is by nature recognition,” so the sensation he experiences is the result of his realization that “I am as the Other sees me,” that he is, in fact, a voyeur (302). “Thus,” Sartre emphasizes, “shame is shame of oneself before the Other” (303). Returning to the scene of schoolhouse discipline in *Boyhood*, then, we are able to see that the disgrace the boys experience when flogged in front of their classmates operates in a similar fashion to the dynamic of shame as Sartre describes in *Being and Nothingness*.

When the boys “blubber” and “plead” in full view of those boys they had hoped to impress with their antics, they reveal to themselves the fact that they are blubberers and pleaders rather than the cocksure toughs they wish to be. It is noteworthy that the behaviour in itself is not what leads the boys to disgrace themselves, but rather the fact that acting in such a way in view of “the Other” forces the children to acknowledge an element of their characters that they would otherwise have denied. Likewise, when John, rather melodramatically, concludes that his life would not be worth living if he were to act like a baby, he reveals that he is less concerned with being immature than being immature before “the Other:”

If the worst were to happen, he thinks now, facing the worst, if the Catholic priest were to visit his mother and ask why he never comes to catechism, or—the other nightmare—if the school principal were to announce that all boys with Afrikaans names were to be transferred to Afrikaans classes—if nightmare were to turn to reality and he were left with no recourse but to retreat into petulant shouting and storming and crying, into the baby behaviour that he knows is still inside him, coiled like a spring—if, after that tempest, he were as a last, desperate step to throw himself upon his mother's protection, refusing to go back to school, pleading with her to save him—if he were in this way to disgrace himself utterly and finally, revealing what only he in his way and his mother in her way and perhaps his father in his own scornful way to know, namely that he is still a baby and will never grow up—if all the stories that have been built up around him, built by himself, built by years of normal behavior, at least in public, were to collapse, and the ugly, black, crying, babyish core of him were to emerge for all to see and laugh at, would there be any way in which he could go on living? Would he not have become as bad as one of those deformed, stunted, mongol children with hoarse voices and slaverling lips that might as well be given sleeping pills or strangled? (111-112).

Here, as in the earlier schoolhouse scene, “disgrace” refers, specifically, to the sense of shame one experiences when physical signs of weakness reveal one’s true self to “the Other.” Essentially, this passage also highlights the centrality of “the Other” in producing the anxiety of disgracing oneself. One gets the impression that while John already perceives himself as “babyish,” he is not especially perturbed by the presence of this attribute within his temperament. Rather, he is terrified by the prospect of his immaturity bringing about the collapse of the constructed self he projects to “the Other.” This threatening potential endows the Other’s gaze with tremendous power and, in *Boyhood*, causes John to experience an almost unbearable anxiety. “Disgrace,” then, may be read as the realization of one’s innermost anxieties in the presence of “the Other,” the “state of being” one enters when the presence of “the Other” forces him or her to acknowledge the physical facticity of an undesired or feared aspect of his/her being. Indeed, it is David Lurie’s dread of age-related physical decline that ultimately brings about the state of “disgrace,” from which Coetzee’s novel takes its name.

Interestingly, the word “disgrace” only appears a handful of times in *Disgrace*, but the shadow of the novel’s title is so massive that, at every mention of “dis/grace” in the book, we pause to consider its meaning, even if it requires a somewhat more elastic approach to semantics than one might otherwise adopt. Thus, whether we agree with Charles Sarvan, who insists that “disgrace” is no more the opposite of “grace” than disappoint is of appoint” (27), or Ariella Azoulay, who suggests “disgrace is not a word of independent standing - it is the partner and opposite of grace” (39), Coetzee seems to hint at the meaning of the novel’s title. This happens quite early in the book when, contemplating an unsatisfying office romance, David Lurie sardonically considers castration:

He ought to give up, retire from the game. At what age, he wonders, did Origen castrate himself? Not the most graceful of solutions, but then ageing is not a graceful business. A clearing of the decks, at least, so that one can turn one’s mind to the proper business of the old: preparing to die... A man on a chair, snipping away at himself: an ugly sight, but no more ugly, from a certain point of view, than the same man exercising himself on the body of a woman. (9)

Here, Lurie’s repetition of the word “graceful,” preceded in both instances by the negating adverb not, forces the reader to think of the opposite of “grace” which, as Azoulay suggests, is “disgrace.” Thus, in one important sense, the aging process may be considered a disgraceful affair. Significantly, Lurie also connects sexuality to the presumably disgraceful business of aging, going as far as to misread Origen’s gesture of Christian piety as both self-inflicted and age-related,<sup>6</sup> suggesting that Coetzee’s protagonist may view his own sexual desire as something he should terminate by a certain age. Furthermore, in using the term “ugly” to describe an older man in the throes of sexual passion, Lurie’s word-choice anticipates the language Rosalind uses, when during her condemnation of her ex-husband’s “[s]tupid ... and ugly” affair with Melanie Isaacs (44), the word “disgrace” appears for the first time in Coetzee’s novel:

I don’t know what you do about sex and I don’t want to know, but this is not the way to go about it. You’re what - fifty-two? Do you think a young girl finds any pleasure in going to bed with a man of that age? Do you think she finds it good to watch you in the middle of your ... ? Do you ever think about that?

[...] You should have known, David. You are too old to be meddling with other people's children. You should have expected the worst. Anyway, it's all very demeaning. Really.... The whole thing is disgraceful from beginning to end. Disgraceful and vulgar too. (45)

In this passage, Rosalind unambiguously uses “disgrace” to describe both the physical act of love between partners of significantly disparate ages, as well as the aftermath of such interaction. Not surprisingly, many critics seem to agree with Rosalind, interpreting the novel's title as a commentary on the social and vocational consequences of David Lurie's reckless pursuit of Melanie Isaacs at the outset of the narrative. Indeed, during an awkward discussion of the secular and sacred understandings of repentance between the atheistic former professor and Melanie's devoutly religious father at the latter's home in George, Lurie specifically refers to his “state of being” following the affair as one of “disgrace:”

In my own terms, I am being punished for what happened between myself and your daughter. I am sunk into a state of disgrace from which it will not be easy to lift myself. It is not a punishment I have refused. I do not murmur against it. On the contrary, I am living it out from day to day, trying to accept disgrace as my state of being. Is it enough for God, do you think, that I live in disgrace without term? (172)

Here, “disgrace” clearly refers to the ontological impact of Lurie's affair with Melanie on his life. In this instance, then, Lurie's use of “disgrace” supports the popular contention among the novel's commentators that the concept to which the book title alludes (and, consequently, the narrative's central theme) is the state of shame, into which David Lurie falls following the public condemnation of his sexual relationship with the young student. Two additional appearances of the term in the novel, however, suggest that this “disgrace” is only a small part of the much larger narrative of *Disgrace*.

Of all the instances in which “disgrace” appears in Coetzee's novel, none is so central to understanding the book as Lurie's use of the term in conjunction with the attack on Lucy's smallholding. It is here, in reference to the novel's “pivotal moment,” that “disgrace” in *Disgrace* takes on the meaning Coetzee has been suggesting in his fiction since the publication of *Dusklands* in 1974 (Holland 403). For Lurie, “his disgrace” becomes painfully apparent when he does not (and cannot) contradict the abridged version of the attack Lucy provides to the investigating police officers:

He does not interrupt. A matter of indifference: he barely listens as Lucy goes through her story. Words are beginning to take shape that have been hovering since last night at the edges of memory. Two old ladies locked in the lavatory / They were there from Monday to Saturday / Nobody knew they were there. Locked in the lavatory while his daughter was used. A chant from his childhood come back to point a jeering finger. Oh dear, what can the matter be? Lucy's secret; his disgrace. (109)

Here, Lurie equates his “disgrace” with his daughter's secret, suggesting that the brutal gang-rape Lucy refuses to report to the police has somehow brought “disgrace” upon him. Although Lurie's statement initially appears to be yet another example of the man's disturbingly self-centred attitude towards the world, it is in fact, both a moment of recognition and a confession. The key to understanding Lurie's comment actually lies in the italicized segments of the passage, directly preceding the remark. His reference to a

bastardized version of “Oh Dear, What Can the Matter Be?”<sup>7</sup> clearly recalls the circumstances of Lurie’s confinement at the time of his daughter’s rape. Furthermore, in referencing a coarse variation of this popular East Suffolk folk-ballad, in which “old women” are trapped in the washroom, Lurie draws the reader’s attention to his age. Lurie regards Lucy’s bowdlerized story as “a matter of indifference,” a phrase redolent of his earlier musings on the attack, where he also reflects on his age, recalling,

The events of yesterday have shocked him to the depths ... For the first time he has a taste of what it will be like to be an old man, tired to the bone, without hopes, without desires, indifferent to the future ... Lucy’s future, his future, the future of the land as a whole - it is all a matter of indifference, he wants to say; let it all go to the dogs, I do not care ... His pleasure in living has been snuffed out ... he has begun to float toward his end. He sees it quite clearly, and it fills him with (the word will not go away) despair. The blood of life is leaving his body and despair is taking its place, despair that is like a gas, odourless, tasteless, without nourishment. You breathe it in, your limbs relax, you cease to care, even at the moment when the steel touches your throat.  
(107-108)

The indifference, Lurie seems to imply, is a natural component of the aging process. The nearer one gets to his or her own death, Lurie suggests, the greater the amount of despair one experiences and the more pervasive the sense of indifference he or she feels towards what life he or she has left. Thus, when Lurie refers to Lucy’s story as a “matter of indifference,” he reveals the extent of his despair. Clearly, given the number of times he attempts to convince Lucy to report the rape, Lurie cares about his daughter’s well-being and the veracity of the report she provides to the police, so his indifference is less a mark of genuine disinterestedness than of Lurie’s having accepted defeat. Lurie cannot change Lucy’s mind and, in a fit of despair upon recognizing his powerlessness in the matter, appears utterly dejected. His despair, it should be noted, stems directly from David’s sense of inadequacy as a protective father, which he eventually expresses to Lucy on their drive home from New Brighton:

‘ ... You were raped. Multiply. By three men.’  
‘And?’  
‘You were in fear of your life. You were afraid that after you had been used you would be killed. Disposed of. Because you were nothing to them.’  
‘And?’ Her voice is now a whisper.  
‘And I did nothing. I did not save you.’  
That is his own confession. (157)

Significantly, Lurie’s “confession” is preceded by a scene where his response to his daughter’s crying is one of “listlessness, indifference” (156). Still, despite his indifference, Lurie “lays a protective hand on Lucy’s shoulder” and “thinks; my dearest daughter. Whom it has fallen to me to guide,” indicating that, for Lurie, the role of protective parent is one he regards as his duty (156). For Lucy, however, David “cannot be a father forever” and she tells him that, although he wishes to take care of her after the attack, “[he is] not the guide [she] need[s], not at this time,” because she “cannot be a child forever” (161). In other words, Lucy has understandably grown up and matured into an adult, leaving David without the sense of purpose child-rearing provides. David associates the end of parenting with old age, as he sardonically muses upon first arriving at Lucy’s home:

He has stayed with his daughter only for brief periods before. Now he is sharing her house, her life. He has to be careful not to allow old habits to creep back, the habits of a parent: putting the toilet roll on the spool, switching off the lights, chasing the cat off the sofa. Practise for old age, he admonishes himself. Practise fitting in. Practise for the old folks’ home. (86)

Here, Lurie presents old age as the stage in life following child-rearing. In other words, for David, Lucy’s rejection of his parental overtures following the attack on the farm may be read as inaugurating his old age. Likewise, since David’s first “taste of what it will be like to be an old man” is the direct result of his inability to protect his daughter from the three rapists – “Lucy’s secret; his disgrace” – and, furthermore, since the indifference he experiences each time reminds him of the attack, it is also indicative of old age, Lurie’s “disgrace” may be interpreted as synonymous with growing old.

As we have seen throughout Coetzee’s oeuvre, “disgrace” often refers to “the state of being,” in which one’s bodily needs prevent the realization of or conflict with those of “the self.” Old age, then, with its attendant physical manifestations – Lurie identifies “trembling,” “weakness,” and feelings of being “bruised, abused ... tired to the bone,” among others – is clearly consistent with the sort of conditions Coetzee has long associated with states of disgrace (107). Not surprisingly, one of the lessons David Lurie learns, while assisting Bev Shaw at the Animal Welfare League clinic, is that in the animal world at least, old age is as catastrophic an affliction as the most painful and humiliating physical ailments. Thus, when David reflects on the dogs he and Bev Shaw euthanize, he includes agedness as simply one justifying factor among many for the “lösung” of the doomed canines: “[t]he dogs that are brought in suffer from distempers, from broken limbs, from infected bites, from mange, from neglect, benign or malign, from old age, from malnutrition, from intestinal parasites ...” (142). It is among the condemned dogs at the clinic that the novel’s final mention of “disgrace” appears and infuses the title with additional meaning. While David “holds the dog[s] still as the needle finds the vein and the drug hits the heart and the legs buckle and the eyes dim,” the former professor witnesses what he calls “the disgrace of dying” (142-3). “Dying,” of course, must not be conflated with “death”. Lurie specifically regards dying, the physical process by which a living being becomes a dead object, as “disgraceful,” implying that whatever factor initiates this process is, by its nature, a disgraceful affair. Thus, by grouping old age among primarily bodily ailments likely to hasten the death of a living being, Lurie suggests that aging is as disgraceful a “state of being,” for humiliating physical conditions to which “disgrace” refers throughout Coetzee’s fiction. The novel’s title, then, suggests that David Lurie’s awareness of his aging body and the thanatophobia he experiences, as a result of this consciousness, is central to understanding both *Disgrace* and “disgrace” .

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Marilyn’s weeping, it should be noted, may be also interpreted as the result of her recognition that she has catered to her physical appetites, while ignoring her emotional needs.

<sup>2</sup> It is important to remember that, while the scenario is merely Eugene’s imagination, it does not change the way in which he uses the term “disgrace.”

<sup>3</sup> Barring the extremely unlikely possibility that the man has somehow been drenched with water on a rainless evening inside a building without plumbing, the most generous interpretation of Dostoevsky’s damp clothing is that the man has sweat while unconscious, though it is considerably more likely that he has awakened to discover that he has lost control of his bladder and/or bowels.

<sup>4</sup> Dostoevsky “is conscious of his age” and aware that, in his advances, there is “no trace of the erotic edge that women would once upon a time respond to” (55).

<sup>5</sup> Critics continue to struggle with the liminal nature of the narratives in *Boyhood*, *Youth* (2001), and *Summertime* (2009). Though marketed as “memoir,” each volume of Coetzee’s autobiography is written in the third person and contains elements of fiction. Thus, some readers are uncomfortable describing the books as either memoir or autobiography, opting instead for “autre-biography.” See, for example, Margaret Lenta’s “Autrebiography.”

<sup>6</sup> Origen’s youth and religious devotion are well-documented. In his comprehensive study of celibacy, historian Peter Robert Lamont Brown tells us that “as a young man of about twenty,” Origen “had discreetly gone to a doctor to have himself castrated” (168).

<sup>7</sup> Lurie seems to be referring to one of the bawdier barroom parodies of the traditional British folk ballad in which a series of elderly women are trapped in a lavatory in ways that emphasize their feebleness and highlighting, among other things, the urinary difficulties older individuals often face as they age. See, for instance, Cohen (56-57).

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