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Apartheid in J. M. Coetzee's

Boyhood, Life & Times of Michael K and Disgrace

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Mestrado en Literatura, Cultura e Diversidade

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2015

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Summary

The aim of this essay is to analyse J. M. Coetzee's *Boyhood* (1997), *Life & Times of Michael K* (1983), and *Disgrace* (1999) from a socio-political point of view. This critical approach will prove useful in demonstrating the pervasive presence of apartheid within Coetzee's texts, as well as his criticism to this socio-political situation from its inception and evolution to its aftermaths in the "new South Africa." Thus, although *Boyhood* was written when the TRC hearings were coming to an end, its story is set around 50 years earlier, at the beginning of apartheid. The text reflects the palpable unbalanced social situation in the country as it rewrites the pastoral Afrikaner myth, describes the presence of prevalent violence in everyday life, and questions the racist categorisation of people promoted by the government. Next, in the analysis of *Life & Times of Michael K*, the thread of Coetzee's criticism is taken from the beginning of apartheid in *Boyhood* to its core. This section of the analysis focuses on recurrent themes like violence and categorisation, but it also highlights new ones such as the political power of silence. Finally, the study advances to the transition period after apartheid in *Disgrace*. By tracing the evolution of a mature protagonist, David, the essay analyses the novel's depiction of the violent inheritance of a racist social system and, more particularly, the prevalence of sexual offences against women.

Introduction

Only an author with Coetzee's qualities and skills could write such controversial stories as the ones included in this essay: *Boyhood*, *Life & Times of Michael K* and *Disgrace*. In the pages of these books he will introduce us to three male characters from different ages and social classes that have to carry on with their lives through consecutive stages of the recent history of South Africa. The aim of this work is to reveal the long shadow cast by apartheid over these three texts. This terrible era in South African history had promoted an unequal society based on racial prejudices survives and makes the post-apartheid period very complicated and violent. This analysis will highlight the inescapability of apartheid's categorizing social system through different periods.

Curiously enough, these texts were vastly analysed consider as given that they were set during apartheid but in fact, this historical context is never explicitly mentioned. *Boyhood* is the only one of these three texts that does offer specific references to dates that situate the story at the beginning of apartheid. Still, critics presume that these texts deal with apartheid and they focus their analyses on other subjects. For instance, some critics debate whether *Boyhood* is an autobiography or an *autrebiography* (Attridge, Lenta). They are concerned with the truthfulness of the story with regards to Coetzee's actual life rather than with the public exposition of the evils that led South Africa to one of the worst episodes in its history. Other critics, when dealing with *Disgrace*, offer a deep analysis of Lucy's gang rape (Marais, Coleman). As to *Life & Times of Michael K*, some studies have highlighted the importance of Michael's silence (VanZaten Gallagher, McColl Chesney), most of them omitting that he does talk, but he chooses whom to talk to. An astonishing amount of critics, as we will see later, make assumptions about the character's racial profile even though Coetzee deliberately makes no reference to his protagonist's skin colour. In order to see the significance of this aspect of the novel, and of the previously mentioned controversial subjects often discussed by

scholars, it is necessary to take into account history in general and apartheid in particular, as the context for the novels.

My intention, therefore, is to study these three texts from a socio-historical approach based on the New Historicism theory. As M.A.R. Habib has indicated, “(...) New Historicism variously recognizes the ability of literature to challenge social and political authority” (762). This critical perspective fits the analysis of Coetzee’s depiction of apartheid perfectly, as the influence of history in these stories is undeniable. Thus, it will help not only to prove the omnipresence of apartheid but also provide the historical context within which an interpretation of the main events that other critics have focused on is possible. Thus, New Historicism will generate a different analysis of the prejudices that lead readers to think that Melanie’s rape is not truly a crime, that Michael K’s physical condition indicates that he is disabled, or that we should not take John’s stories too seriously because he is a pre-teenage boy.

This essay, therefore, will analyse *Boyhood* as a criticism of the socio-political situation at the beginning of apartheid. To that end, the story and its structure will be studied as a confession depicting the times in which Coetzee writes his text and sets John’s story. Next, despite the absence of a specific time reference, this analysis will prove that Michael K is not only living in South Africa but also that “his times” correspond to the apartheid period. During Michael’s time period, the atmosphere in the country is so unstable that Coetzee decides that the way to portray reality it is by setting the story in a context of civil war. And finally, *Disgrace* will be examined by focusing on its internal structure and on how Coetzee describes South Africa’s recent history by highlighting the main processes that lead to the still violent and prejudiced new South Africa.

Boyhood

Boyhood (1997) was written in controversial times and its story is set in polemical times. Some critics put their efforts into the definition of *autrebiography* (Lenta) or they discuss about the veracity of the confession (Attridge) focusing their articles in the analysis of the third person narrator and the present tense. They agree in *Boyhood* being a good description of what it would have been for a child to grow up in the 1950s in South Africa (Viola). However, they pay less attention to the historical background within the book as they take for granted that this is an *autrebiography* and as such, it depicts historical facts regarding somebody's life, in this case J. M. Coetzee's. In this analysis of *Boyhood* I will not debate whether the facts are true or not in Coetzee's life. Furthermore, I will accept his assertion that "[*autrebiography*] is a kind of self-writing in which you are constrained to respect the facts of your history. But which facts? All the facts? No. All the facts are too many facts. You choose the facts insofar as they fit in with your evolving purpose" (qtd. in Attwell, *Doubling the Point* 18). If life is not just a specific series of events and a book is not enough to describe an entire boyhood, the conclusion follows that every episode within the text has a purpose. Coetzee chose different moments for the story, but these moments are not random, they have a specific purpose: to bear witness to the times, apartheid times. Regardless of whether these are events from his real life or not, he decided to include these episodes to picture the social situation in South Africa during apartheid.

Whether *Boyhood* portrays Coetzee's actual boyhood does not matter for the analysis of the historical events depicted within the text. He is describing something that actually happened; it is somebody's story but the background of this boyhood is a very real apartheid, an actual situation of inequality in South Africa. In this essay I will not be paying attention to the truthfulness of John's problems on his birthday; I will instead focus on the coloured boy outside the window (72). That situation was real due to race discrimination from the

beginning of apartheid: coloured people were forbidden entry in some places that white people could enjoy.

In this paper I am not going to focus on the veracity of the story and I will try to prove that the veracity of the story is not relevant to understand the veracity of history. I will aim to extract from the story and from the structure of *Boyhood* how Coetzee is able to bear witness to the very beginning of apartheid as well as how he portrays the controversial times in which he wrote his text. In order to achieve this twofold goal, Coetzee depicts the beginning of apartheid through John's story and criticises the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) hearings in 1997 when they were coming to an end through the structure of the book.

I aim to prove that history is important but in order to do so I have to take into account the way stories become history, and this is through writing. Julian Gitzen points out the importance of this process for Coetzee:

Repeatedly his novels focus on the processes by which history is made and recorded, emphasizing how history is registered in human consciousness through the medium of language. He remind us that without words history, whether individual or collective, cannot be publicly recorded and little can be known either of those who make history or, paradoxically, of those who are excluded from it. (3)

Coetzee wants to reproduce and to criticize the way history is recorded. He chooses a narrator that is an unknown subject; the readers do not know if it is the writer himself. What we do know is that the narrator is telling us: John's story. John is a white boy who speaks English and, in choosing this boy to be the protagonist of his story, Coetzee is making his first statement of how history is recorded.

Gitzen tells us that history is created as a result of recording important events through language. Therefore, it is important to notice who is using the language. In *Boyhood* it is a

white boy's story that is about to become history. Everything else is related to him, and it is John who decides who or what is going to be part of his story, so it can be deduced that John's story is about those who are included and those who are ignored, the same as history. Those in power, white male Afrikaner in apartheid, record history and by doing so they decide who is included and who is not. However, the choice of discriminating some people from the record does not mean that they do not exist. Moreover, by describing who is in history, they are describing too who is not. Following the example of the text, we know that John is a white male South African boy and with this piece of information we know that the story in the text is the story of a white male South African boy and not the story of a black female South African woman. We know that she exists however she is omitted from the story as it is not her story but John's. Coetzee criticises the process of how history is created from a limited point of view. A good example of this criticism is the circus episode: "Even the Coloured children go, after a fashion: they hang around outside the tent for hours, listening to the band, peering in through gaps" (*Boyhood* 47). In this passage John is being a part of the audience as a first class observer. He is sitting in the stands with his brother while his mother and all coloured children are outside. As the narrative voice only mentions coloureds, it ignores other people. This circus is a metaphor of the selection process of making history: only a few are going to write history (those inside the circus), others are going to be merely mentioned despite the fact that they are there too (women and coloured); and others are going to be completely omitted as they never been there (Natives). According to Susan VanZaten Gallagher "[historical] accounts that repeatedly contrast 'Christian' and 'heathen,' 'civilized' and 'uncivilized,' or 'Boer' and 'barbarian' establish a hierarchical binary opposition, in which the term associated with the black represents a negative, lower order of existence. Such hierarchical oppositions (...) invariably oppress and silence the Other" (28). This text reflects this reality as the one who tells the story is a white boy. Natives and coloured people, as well

as religions only appear when he (John) decides to tell stories in which they have a role. This means that they would not exist in the text if he did not decide to include them and, as a result, they would not be part of history.

In his attempt to depict the 1950s, Coetzee describes people as a matter of race, language, religion or gender to reflect how the world around him was divided into categories. Paradoxically, the readers can “classify” John in negative terms, that is, what he is not: “the child is forced to define himself by difference: not as an Afrikaans child, not a genuine member of the 'English' group, not a 'Christian' (...) but as an outsider to all groups” (Lenta 165). According to this, John is neither coloured nor native; he is neither Christian, nor Jew, nor Catholic; he is neither Afrikaner nor English. However he is something, either for choice (he chooses Roman Catholic because of ‘r’ sound) or for genetics (he is white and male) he is classified as well as everybody. Nevertheless he is not “normal”. Through the pages of *Boyhood*, the readers can read several times how John wants to be “normal” and how different his family is: “He comes from an unnatural and shameful family in which not only are children not beaten but older people are addressed by their first names and no one goes to church and shoes are worn every day” (*Boyhood* 6). Most likely these habits would not call our attention nowadays. However Coetzee uses them to define what is abnormal in 1950s society: equality, dignity and non-violence. He is talking about this family as equals, as people who have the same level, who are the same category of human beings. The fact that Coetzee uses the narrator to point out violence in the first place is not accidental. He insists in the routine violence into apartheid society even inside the families when the narrator says: “He wants his father to beat him and turn him into a normal boy” (13). According to the narrator, John’s father has the ability to turn them into a normal family because “[his] father is normal in every way” (8) and his father’s family is “much safer and more ordinary than his mother’s” (18). Furthermore, although his father speaks English, he is an Afrikaner lawyer

and he comes from an Afrikaner family. This way his father is included in the Afrikaner category and as a result, he is the only one in John's family who belongs to the category of "normal". By associating the terms "normal" and "Afrikaner" Coetzee illustrates how those in power at the beginning of apartheid establish the social classification that will last the entire period. They dictate what is normal and what is not because they have the power to do it. The same process is depicted in the text. By describing various instances in which people are classified (sometimes "wrongly" – as in John's consideration as a Roman Catholic), Coetzee criticises the method that Nationalist applied to demarcate who is in or out of any classification by abusing of their position of power. He reproduces the process not only to portrait apartheid's social classification but to criticize its arbitrariness.

From the very beginning Coetzee highlights how important belonging to a group is, and more accurately, to the group in power or the "right" group. John did not choose "well" when he decided that he was Roman Catholic as clearly this is not the power classes' religion "What is your religion?" asks the teacher of each of them. He glances right and left. What is the right answer? What religions are there to *choose* from?" (18; emphasis added). The teachers (those in power) force John to be classified into a group. John might be an atheist, as he does not know which religion he believes in. At this moment Coetzee highlights the nonsense of the classification by making his protagonist *choose* a religion. Apparently, John does not profess any religion but the effort to classify people into pre-determined groups leads them to include him into a group he does not even know about, one he chooses because of something so trivial as the sound of the label, the r sound in Roman. All his classmates are going to see him as part of this group even when they are suspicious of the sincerity of his self-definition. Coetzee criticizes this specific classification by using the verb to choose. John does not really belong to Roman Catholic religion but he chooses to be part of it because the teachers put pressure on him to be classified. At this moment, John knows that groups and

classification are important for the social structure, and at the same time he also knows that it is even more important to belong to or “choose” (if given the choice) the right group. Nevertheless we must not forget that the main category which apartheid is based on - skin colour - is not something that one can choose. It is a matter of biology, genetics; there is no right or wrong choice. Classification based on skin colour establishes stereotypes and beliefs that lead to a discriminatory society in which “(...) not everyone who lives in South Africa is a South African, or not a proper South African” (18). As I mentioned before, to be “normal” is to belong to the right group and in this case, to be a “proper South African” means to be “normal”, to belong to the group in power: to be white. Everybody outside this white group is classified as “other”, as not proper South African and as a result, as a second-class citizen or not citizen at all.

Coetzee insists in criticizing the way some people were not considered South Africans during apartheid. In this passage we cannot know for sure that he is just talking about Germans as we can read it as a simile between South Africans and Germans:

His mother knows it is not a good idea to praise the Germans too openly, but sometimes, when he and his father gang up on her, will leave discretion behind. ‘The Germans are the best people in the world,’ she will say. ‘It was that terrible Hitler who led them into so much suffering.’

Her brother Norman disagrees. ‘Hitler gave the Germans pride in themselves,’ he says. (41)

In this fragment there are two points of view: John’s mother and John’s uncle. They have different ideas of what being a German/South African means (as we can interpret). From the very beginning the narrator makes clear that talking about this theme is controversial but at this moment they speak openly about what is in their minds. John’s mother expresses her ideas first. She thinks about Germans/South Africans as a nation, as people. For her

everybody is included, no exceptions. She points to the ruling class as the one to blame: they created the current situation in their countries as they are: unsafe, unequal and unfair. However, her brother has a different. He thinks that the ruling classes have given Germans/South Africans pride in themselves. Having said this her brother is justifying all the measures that ruling classes adopted to give them pride. Of course he is excluding a great amount of people in the concept of being German/South African that he defends. He is not taking into account Jews in the Nazi Germany, or coloured and natives in his concept of being South African. It is impossible for John's uncle to have included these groups in his definition of being South African and at the same time, for him to have asserted that they have pride in themselves thanks to the ruling classes. This is not possible in the unequal society that apartheid created in which most people were discriminated. So, according to John's uncle only Afrikaners/Aryans have pride in themselves. Anybody else outside these groups belongs to another lower category and they are forced to submit to the authority of the privileged groups.

Coetzee also criticises these man-made categories through John's sexual interest. John is described as feeling strong physical allure for children with tan thin legs and blonde hair. Quiet curiously, he feels desirability to these parts of the body precisely because of their colour. The mixture of colours in these boys draws John: they have blond hair like white people, and tan legs like black people. Of course, these characteristics are not exclusive of white and black people but when the narrator describes these children through John's eyes, it seems that they are out of norm, that the combination of colours is special. As children they embody the two colours that will divide them as adults. The narrator says, "Afrikaans children are almost like Coloured children, he finds, unspoiled and thoughtless, running wild, then suddenly, at a certain age, going bad, their beauty dying within them"(56). As children in apartheid they belong to these two groups: Afrikaans and coloured. John can see this division

but at the same time he cannot see any real difference. When he thinks about these children he highlights two characteristics, on the one hand he uses the adjective “unspoiled” which makes reference to a physical characteristic, and on the other hand he says that these children are “thoughtless” which makes reference to a mental one. He describes the outside and the inside in general terms. He is saying that, as children, they start from the same premise, this is, all of them are beautiful and their minds are not contaminated with any kind of discriminatory thought. However John foresees their future and he hates the adults these children become. He describes again a physical quality –beauty- and a mental one –madness. The children lose their minds in the process of becoming adults. They “go bad” so they are not thoughtless anymore and every action and decision that they make is not heedless anymore. They are fully aware of what they are doing for better or for worse. He also thinks that their beauty dies when they become adults because they do not have two colours in their bodies any more. John focuses on their hairy legs because the hair hides the colour of the skin. As a consequence, he cannot see the colour of their legs anymore. It does not matter if they are still tan because he cannot gaze at them. Thus they are not attractive for John and another strong feeling grows in him: hate, contempt. John understands the process of becoming an adult in negative terms, as a loss instead of an improvement because it is the world of the adults, which classifies people into groups.

As I have been repeating through my analysis, Coetzee criticizes the non-sense of the apartheid social division in many different ways. He even dismantles the pastoral Afrikaner myth to highlight that there is no place in South Africa without the influence of the categorical tendency of apartheid, not even the Afrikaner Eden. Jennifer Beningfield suggests that, in order to create and support the myth, “[the] image of the white pastoral was dependent on a forgetting of a past in which Boer and black lived in similar ways on the same land” (89). Thus, they based the myth on erasing similarities in order to create inequality. In

Boyhood John loves the farm, specifically his paternal family's farm, this is, an Afrikaner farm. As a child, John is curious about the world around him, and he is more interested in those things that he cannot understand or that he feels are out of normal. John asks questions about coloured people who work in the farm. He wonders about trivial things such as their pyjamas because they are treated differently and as a result, John thinks that they are different. He does not think about them as his equals because they are not treated and respected as such. He just does not think of them as people, for-if he did think that they were "not normal" people- this would make them, to him, his equals, not-normal people like himself. Coloured are inferior in the social order in apartheid South Africa and John thinks about them as "others". Naturally, his innate child curiosity makes him wonder about simple routine issues.

Attwell goes a step further in his analysis of the pastoral Afrikaner myth and his relationship with the protagonist. He states that even John himself experiences the feeling of being the other: "For a variety of reasons he ceases visiting the family farm, the place on earth he has defined, imagined, constructed, as his place of origin. All of this confirms his (quite accurate) sense of being outside a culture that at this moment in history is confidently setting about enforcing itself as the core culture of the land" (*Doubling the Point* 394).

John loved the farm and he decided it was his place of origin. The pastoral Afrikaner myth is so deeply rooted that John feels that it is true even when he does not feel as part of the Afrikaner community. John feels love for the farm and he cannot explain why (*Boyhood* 96). Probably it is because of the pressure of the Afrikaner culture over the other cultures. However, he stops visiting the farm for no reason. As Attwell suggests, at some point he might feel like an outsider (*Doubling the Point* 394). John is growing up and he realizes that the oppressing culture that claims to be the "core culture of the land" is not his culture. He

cannot identify with Afrikaner culture; therefore, he abandons Afrikaner myths, and he stops visiting the farm.

Boyhood not only reflects some of the injustices and inequalities of apartheid in the 1950s, when the story takes place; it is also a witness of the times when the text was published in 1997. At this time the Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings were coming to their end. Those in charge of the TRC decided to put an end to the confessions and by doing so they decided to silence all the voices that had not had the chance to tell their truth out loud. As Attridge states in his article “J. M. Coetzee’s *Boyhood* Confessions and Truth” when he says that “the termination of hearings - a winding-up which was postponed more than once – was more a matter of expediency than an indication that all the stories had been told, all the voices heard” (81). In the same time that the TRC took this decision, Coetzee wrote a text in which a child confesses to a public audience his truth about his own story. He defies the TRC resolution to finish hearings by making his own confession in accordance to TRC rules. He gives voice to a child who witnesses one of the most terrifying facts during the apartheid period: the beginning of apartheid itself.

In general terms, the TRC offered amnesty to those who confessed publicly all acts perpetrated during apartheid times. They were supposed to expose their truths to the audience and get to the bottom of all terrible and wrongful events in their lives that took place during apartheid. In order to achieve amnesty they did not need to prove repentance or contrition. They needed to tell the truth, at least their truth. Attridge adds that “although overt repentance was not required by the Commission, implicit in its demand for accounts of their deeds by perpetrators was both identification of person (...) and distance in time (...)” (82). As was mentioned earlier *Boyhood* has a third person narrator, one who is not the protagonist or any character within the text: and extradiegetic narrator (Herman and Vervaeck 81). And it is also written in present tense. Consequently, Coetzee’s text does not meet the requirements to be a

valid TRC confession in Attridge's terms. However, re-examining the role of the third-person narrator may lead us to a different conclusion. This narrator could be anyone, even the main character himself a few years in the future. The narrative voice knows John very well as sometimes it is inside his head, knows his thoughts and his more intimate feelings. In any case, there is no way to know who it is, but this is not important because the narrator is a witness of John's story, of John's truth. John is confessing through the narrator, and it does not make his story less true. Additionally, the narrative voice is using the present tense and, in doing, so it is breaking the rule of "distance in time" that Attridge mentions, but this does not make the story less true either. Coetzee highlights that all the facts in John's story are happening also in 1997 by using present tense instead of past tense. He wants the audience to bear in mind that this is not history yet, that these events are not yet in the past of South Africa, that they are still current. That is what TRC hearings do too: they are bringing the past to the present and, in doing so, they turn past into present. Indeed, it is quite impossible for human beings to remember some terrible past event or injustice without reliving the pain, suffering and helplessness. In doing so, we are feeling those feelings again as we were feeling them for the first time. We are feeling the past in the present. This effect of reliving the past (its pain, suffering, helplessness) is what Coetzee wanted to capture by using the present tense for John's confession. He did not want to lose the closeness of the story. He wanted for the audience to be aware that this is not a story that happened 70 years earlier and that it stayed in the past. This is a story without closure and as such it is suitable to be relived.

It is worthwhile noticing also that *Boyhood* is a secular confession, and due to its condition as secular, it is also public. As Attridge pointed out before, unlike in religious confessions, the TRC did not demand repentance from its confessors, so *Boyhood* does not show any. It only wants to tell a story (John's story) that has not been heard/read until this moment and expose it to the audience. Furthermore, it brings the private to the public as the

TRC hearings did. *Boyhood* is John's memoirs, this is, the account of a private life. It is also a book, a publication, which means that it is targeting an audience. This way, it brings the private life of a regular boy to a public audience thanks to the communication process of book publication. Likewise, the TRC brought private affairs to the public trials in which an audience were witnesses of their truths. However it is a secular confession and as such it is not looking for forgiveness, just to tell the story. Neither in *Boyhood* nor in the TRC does the opinion of the audience matter: both tell stories that bear truth in them and the result of these confessions is nothing but the release of bringing them out. After these stories there will be no punishment or penance, just oblivion. Having said that, Coetzee also uses his text to criticize oblivion. In this way, the story stays in time longer and it can be read over and over again by the audience. Many people can know about it, the audience is much bigger than the audience from the TRC and it will last more in time. Coetzee explains this durability within *Boyhood* when he mentions Balthazar du Biel's novel, *Deur 'n gevaarlike krankheid tot ewige genesing*. Balthazar du Biel is Aunt Annie's father. He wrote this story about his childhood in Germany and he did it by narrating "short bits about himself" (118). The similarities are undeniable: Coetzee's *Boyhood* is about a boy's childhood in South Africa and he narrates his story in small short events. Within the text he also points out the long-lasting virtue of books when John's mother says, "[at] least you can be proud to have someone in your family who did something with his life, who left something behind him"(119). At this point, it does not matter that Balthazar du Biel was a flawed man or a terrible father what it is important is that he wrote a novel and it is going to live on after its author has passed away. Even the narrator says that John knows a few things about him: Baltathar's family and a story in which he beats his daughter Annie because she talks to a stranger when they are in America. "These are the few facts he [John] knows about Baltathar, plus what is contained in the clumsy red book of which there are many more copies in the world than the world wants" (120). Coetzee suggests

this way that even a boring nonsensical book like Baltazar du Biel's is destined to last in time and, in so doing, his story is going to endure whether the audience wants it or not.

Coetzee builds his criticism about apartheid with great skill not only through the story line and characters but also with the structure of the book itself. As Poyner says "[it] is clear that the public sphere shapes and defines our private identities, but post-apartheid fiction reveals that the private can serve productively as a corrective to the public" ("Writing Under Pressure" 103). In *Boyhood*, Coetzee portrays the private life of a boy and he addresses a public audience in order to criticize apartheid and the TRC. With this structure and purpose, *Boyhood* becomes a confession in which Coetzee is admitting that he and his social setting were witnesses and, as a consequence –when not fighting the system- accomplices, of what was going on in South Africa at that time. Something was so terribly wrong that even a 10 year-old boy noticed. Nonetheless, *Boyhood* is a text and Coetzee's confession is between its pages. It is not an oral confession like those required in the TRC. Furthermore, it is not just a story but also something physical, tangible. It is something that is going to last through time, and neither did the means of the confession make circumstance less severe than they actually were, nor were the aftermaths of those confessions different. During TRC hearings, after the confessions there were no consequences, no punishments. They did not compensate the pain and injustice; it did not matter how terrible the act was. When the readers finish *Boyhood*, they can have an opinion but they cannot do anything, John's confession is hopeless because nothing is going to be done. Nobody is going to do justice for what happened. The audience is going to listen/read the story that is it.

Coetzee remind us, to the very end of the text of the importance of every story and of remembering. In the last lines the narrator says, "[how] will he [John] keep them all in his head, all the books, all the people, all the stories? And if he does not remember them, who will?" (*Boyhood* 166). With these few words Coetzee reminds us that every single story is

important, and we cannot forget that *Boyhood* is a story too one like many others during apartheid. Unfortunately many will remain untold because the TRC does not continue with the hearings and as such, they do not have the opportunity to tell. He also highlights the importance of remembering. People should remember their stories so they do not forget their past; it prevents them to make the same mistakes in the future. Still, remembering is not easy for future generations if the stories are not recorded, and all stories should be included. This is the process how stories should become history, by listening and recording every single story. This is also the way that John is going to “keep them all in his head”. He will remember them by writing their stories and making them live on forever within the pages of his books.

Life & Times of Michael K

The title of a book is always important because it is the first encounter that the readers have with the story. *Life & Times of Michael K* (from this point forward *LTMK*) advances a story about a man, Michael K, and a description of his life at the time in which the narrative unfolds. However, as the readers progress through the novel, they realise that it is a very curious description of Michael’s life. It is undeniable that Coetzee places Michael’s story in South Africa. The novel is full of references to actual places. However, there is no explicit mention of a specific time. It is not only that the readers cannot place a year; it is also difficult to know how much time passes throughout the story. Coetzee describes Michael’s birth and life until he is 31 years old in a few pages. The rest of the novel is barely two years in his life (according to the protagonist’s words), so his life actually seems to last but a few years. The open ending is also confusing, as it does not state the protagonist’s death. In contrast with other parts of the novel in which Michael is close to death, he is apparently healthy and the readers cannot foresee his death in the short term. As a result, the end of the novel is not the end of his life but the story. Coetzee also omits any reference to a specific date in the whole novel. He does not even make a reference to any real historical event that could help the

readers place the story in time. Furthermore, as we could see later on, sometimes he uses historical elements to misguide us on the time. Regardless any of this, critics frame their analysis within an apartheid context (Head; Attwell, "Writing in the Cauldron"; Neimneh and Muhaidat; Bohm; O'Connel). Why? *LTMK* was published in 1983, during apartheid, and a few years after some particularly terrible repressive actions such as the Soweto Uprising (1976). The palpitating tensions of those years are portrayed in *LTMK* as a civil war. The fight is not against an outsider invader but against their neighbours within the limits of their own country. It is a repressive state in which people are imprisoned in camps and a minority white power class has control over population. In this frame Coetzee creates a very complex protagonist that would be useful to criticise different social aspects of apartheid. He does not describe any character's race, not even the protagonist's, in order to highlight the apartheid obsession for categorisation and the inescapability of it. He describes Michael as a person that sometimes refuses to talk (mostly to people strongly related to institutions) to remind us how history is recorded and also the power classes' indifference to listen to the other. Michael tries to avoid social classification, and by doing so, Coetzee points out the importance of categorization in Michael's society. And finally, Michael and his mother are protagonists in Coetzee's new version of Afrikaner myths that provides him with an excuse to criticize the nonsense of the original ones. I will go through all these themes to demonstrate that Coetzee describes and criticizes the political and social situation of South Africa during apartheid within a novel that is set at a timeless context. I will prove that Michael's times are actually apartheid times.

As Coetzee did in *Boyhood*, he resists the temptation of describing characters' skin colour in order to criticise apartheid's obsession for categorising people in relation with their race. There is no mention to the characters' skin colour, not even the protagonist's. In my analysis of skin colour I am going to focus on Michael's. The only hint that the readers may

have about Michael's race is in his charge sheet when he arrives at Jakkalsdrif camp. The sheet says "Michael Visagie – CM – 40 – NFA – Unemployed" (*LTMK* 70). There is no precise explanation to these acronyms within the novel. However, if we read them within an apartheid context, and knowing that apartheid identity documentation had data such as name, race, age and address, we can read the charge sheet as Jane Poyner poses: "Michael Visagie – Coloured Male – 40 – No Fixed Abode – Unemployed" ("Cultivating the Margins" 69). We know that it is an inaccurate description of Michael—at least with regards to two of the four data given. He is not Michael Visagie, but Michael K, and he is not 40 years old but 31. We could say that Michael does not have a "Fixed Abode" as he was traveling and living in different places and houses, never one of his own at least none that he feels like his home. Following this thread, we should doubt the accuracy of the other datum, the one identifying race. Arnd Bohm (2) or Julian Gitzen (7) have stated that Michael is black, and they try to prove their points by showing that he is discriminated against because his colour. However, in an apartheid context Michael would be discriminated against just for being non-white. Maybe his race cannot be known for sure, but Michael can be concluded to be a non-white character, and not just because other characters discriminate him. If we accept that race is the only datum in the form that may be guessed via visual classification whoever completed the charge sheet may be closer to the truth in this case than in the rest of the information recorded. Thus we can say that Michael is non-white but we cannot state his race.

As he did in *Boyhood*, Coetzee criticizes the compulsion of categorizing people into groups. Since Michael is a child he realises the importance of classification in his society. Coetzee recreates the apartheid classification system and makes Michael try to unsuccessfully avoid it. All his attempts are useless and disclose an unalterable system that is only profitable for a minority:

They want me to open my heart and tell them the story of a life lived in cages. They want to hear about all the cages I have lived in, as if I were a budgie or a white mouse or a monkey. And if I had learned storytelling at Huis Norenius instead of potato-peeling and sums, (...) I would have told the story of a life passed in prisons where I stood day after day, year after year with my forehead pressed to the wire, gazing into the distance, dreaming of experiences I would never have, and where the guards called me names and kicked my backside and sent me off to scrub the floor. (*LTMK* 181)

The Medical Officer describes Michael as “above and beneath classification” (151) but we know that it is not possible. Michael knows it too and, in this part of the novel, he describes a classification based on difference of species: budgie, mouse, and monkey. He senses that classification is a fixed system in which everybody is trapped. He is locked inside a system that he does not understand or agree with. He knows that outside the cages are those who have the power to keep them trapped in groups, but they cannot escape classification either because they belong to the system too. When Michael is traveling or living alone or escaping, he makes his attempt to live outside those “cages” but soon enough the ruling class makes him go back into the system. They do not care if they do not know exactly which one Michael’s “cage” is. They will allocate him wherever they think he should be, and they will categorise him whether he wants it or not.

In his aim for criticising the social structure and the situation of voiceless of the other during apartheid, Coetzee resorts to the narrators too. The novel is divided into three sections: the first and the third one have an unknown third-person narrator, while the second one has a first-person narrator, a Medical Officer at Kenilworth camp, therefore a character in the novel. The third person narrative voice tells Michael’s story from an external point of view. It does not narrate from Michael’s perspective and we doubt how deeply it might know Michael. The

first person narrator is not much different. We know more about him because he is a character and he narrates the second section of the novel from his point of view. He tells his story as a journal and by doing so he evokes more veracity in his account than the other narrator does. He includes Michael as long as he crosses his way and becomes part of his life, as a secondary character. Both narrators talk about Michael but he is not telling his own story, they do. He only can talk and use his own voice when they introduce a dialogue in the narration. Both start Michael's description with a physical description in a hospital-like milieu. And both finish their narration by depicting a hypothetical situation. Their perspectives are quite similar, thus, the story does not change too much. Michael is not different under the spotlight of the different narrator. We recognise him in their words. So, why would Coetzee change the narrator if he was so close to the end of the novel and the narrator's perspective is so similar? The answer is quite simple. The readers forgot completely about the narrator. We do not realise the perspective of the narrator until the second section of the novel, close to the end. In this section, the narrator is a Medical Officer. We can translate this information as a position of power in a high category within a categorising system. As there is no much difference in the point of view when the narrative voice changes, this means that the other, third-person narrative voice, is probably telling the story from the same hierarchical position, or at least that it shares the doctor's perspective towards Michael. Coetzee reminds us that those in power records history and also that their points of view is biased. We cannot trust that the story they narrate about Michael is actually his story. The doctor admits that he does not know Michael's story and that he invents it and "tries to speak for him" (McColl 316). This, as a result, makes the story "a third-person narrative in which the extent of the narrator's knowledge about Michael K's story is unclear" (Head "Gardening as Resistance" 99).

How accurate the record of Michael's story is with respect to his real story may be compared to how accurate the depiction of apartheid in the novel is. People in power decided and chose whom and what was included in history, even if the resulting narrative is not complete. In order to highlight this lack of information about others, Coetzee makes Michael refuse to talk. Sometimes he declines to tell his own story. He refuses to talk to people involved in institutions. He would rather be considered retarded or insane. When in Kenilworth camp he refuses to talk, the doctor says to the officer that Michael "should have been shut away in an institution with high walls, stuffing cushions or watering the flowerbeds" (*LTMK* 141). However, the lack of information does not stop them from completing the story by inventing or manipulating it to fill in the gaps or even by recording what they think they know. When Michael is at Kenilworth camp, before the doctor wants to know his story "[he] says his name is not Michaels but Michael" (131), but they call him Michaels anyway "[come] on, Michaels,' I said, 'we haven't got all day, there is a war on!'" (138). Michael resists their manipulation and does not say what they ask him to: "'Tell us about your friends who come in the middle of the night and burn down farms and kill women and children,' said Noël, 'That's what I want to hear'" (139). Obviously Michael does not say a word; that is not his story. It is not true, just like "Michaels" is not his identity. These are the identity and stories that officers create for him based on prejudices. Thus, Michael decides to remain silent when he faces institutions or their representatives. Michael tells his story to some characters but he refuses to tell it to those in a position of power in the hierarchy of institutions. As a result, the record of his history is inaccurate and manipulated because those in power are the ones who write it.

In his criticism to apartheid and especially to the white Afrikaner position in society, Coetzee attacks relevant basis of Afrikaner culture: their myths. Susan VanZaten Gallagher points out that Coetzee retells three Afrikaner myths in this novel: "the Afrikaner's heroic

independence and alienation from modernity, the tragic suffering endured in the concentration camps of the Anglo-Boer War, and the pastoral return to the land” (151). Paul Franssen adds one more to the list: the myth of the Promised Land. In Coetzee’s version of the myths, they have the following three characteristics: the protagonists are non-white non-Afrikaner characters, they live the myth and eventually they lose and fail. In the first myth, the pastoral return to the land and the farm as a place of origin has Anna K and Michael as protagonists “Anna K had been born on a farm in the district of Prince Albert. Her father was not steady; there was a problem with dinking; and in her early years they had moved from one farm to another” (*LTMK* 7-8). In contrast to what would be expected of a traditional version of the myth in which the farm is the place of origin and also a source of happiness, Anna was born in a farm but her childhood was not happy. She was not living at a particular farm but at several and she does not even remember the name or the exact place where the farm was located. She distorts reality and focuses her memories on just one farm where she thinks she was happy. She wants to go back to that idyllic place and she pass her wish on her son. Since the moment they decide to leave the city and start their journey to the farm, Michael embraces the myth and it will become his particular obsession to get there with his mother. In his eagerness to find his mother’s farm, Michael will adopt Visagie’s farm as the farm he is looking for, even when there are several doubts that it is the right one: “Was this where his mother has been born, amid a garden of prickly pear?” (57). Michael wonders if he is right but at the same time he does not care because he is now living the myth. It does not matter anymore if the farm is his mother’s farm because now it is Michael’s farm, where he belongs. Nevertheless his mother was not happy at the farm and he is not happy either. Every time he attempt living there, cultivating or building a home, invaders interrupt his way of living. The first invader is the owner’s heir, the Visagie’s grandson. Despite he wants to live with Michael “quietly till they make peace everywhere” (64) Michael refuses and abandons him.

The second invader is the army. When he comes back to the farm and builds his burrow they capture him and take him to the camp (70). The army will put an end to the myth by making it physically impossible for anyone to go back to the farm, as the soldiers bury mines in the land (125-6). As we will know later on, the soldiers have an Afrikaner officer, so ultimately it is an Afrikaner who destroys the myth for everybody.

Closely related to the myth of pastoral return to the land is the Promised Land myth. In the original Afrikaner myth, the Afrikaner people abandoned Cape because of the British domination. They leave their homes to venture into the unknown and find a place to establish. In their way, they have to “[face] countless dangers” (Van den Berghe 28). In the novel, Anna K and Michael have to defy the ruling class and abandon their land to find their Promised Land (the farm). They refuse to wait for the permits to travel and they commence their pilgrimage to the farm. They abandon their homes in the city and they lose everything in their way. Michael even loses his mother, the person who promised a land of happiness. Michael is the only one who is going to see and step into the Promised Land. However, it must be taken into account that what Michael really wants is a land that belongs to nobody, a land without owner, a free land and that he is not going to conquer it. The land would never be his; he does not complete the myth. Somebody from a higher position in the social scale frustrate Michael’s completion of his destiny. It could be argued that Michael and his mother want to travel to an “imaginary homeland” (Rushdie 9), a place that only exists in his mother’s mind, a place that at some point was real but it does not exist anymore. Still they want to go because they are pursuing their Promised Land. But as Franssen points out, in order to achieve the land, they have to conquer it and Michael does not want to fight. He gives up on the land easily when somebody confronts him.

The third myth in discussion is the Afrikaner’s heroic independence and alienation from modernity. When his mother dies, Michael arrives finally to the farm of his mother’s

childhood (51). As the farm is abandoned, he lives alone cultivating his own food. However, he leaves when one of the former owners comes back to the farm and he is no longer alone. He flees to the mountains to live in solitude and to be alone again. He wants to live eating grubs and flowers and drinking from the streams (68) but he is close to die and has to abandon his life of solitude and go back to the town (69). Michael attempts to live again far from town and from other men when he escapes from Jakkalsdrif camp. He goes back to Visagie's farm and lives a hermit-like life (112). Again, when he is close to die, somebody has to save him (120). Coetzee criticises the myth and portrays it as a complete failure. Michael is able to accomplish it twice for an extremely short time and it almost at expenses of his life. He survives the myth because he abandons it.

The last myth, the suffering in concentration camps during war, is mentioned twice as there are two camps in the novel. In the original version it narrates the suffering of Afrikaner in the British concentration camp after Anglo-Boer War. Within the novel these two camps are the result of the civil war that is taking place in the country. The first one is a work camp where detainees have to work in slave-like conditions but are still expected to be thankful. Michael interprets it as a prison: it is fenced and guarded to avoid the inmates' escaping. The supervisors brainwash them and try to make them believe it is not a prison. They even suggest that Michael is "asleep" and he cannot see reality, but he is the only one who seems to feel trapped, and that the only solution is escaping. However, he knows that if he is caught they will send him to a worse camp (78). The second camp is a rehabilitation camp, in which Michael does not have much of a choice either. The staff want to heal him so he can work for them, but as Michael refuses to eat he is not recovering and they cannot use him. Again, he has to escape in order not be subdue to army's commands, and as result have to do what they impose him. Michael spends some time in both camps, and when he first arrives there he is much less healthy than when he escapes. These camps are concentration camps under a

different name, and Afrikaners rule them, which is very significant as we can barely find Afrikaner references within the story. As those in power at these camps are responsible for overpowering others who belong to lower classes and for making them accept their rules. No choice or negotiation allowed. As I will prove later it is not a coincidence that Afrikaners rule both camps.

The next step in criticism the social system is precisely by copying the same structure in the novel as in apartheid times. As I mentioned before, Afrikaners are in high positions inside the camps. Although they are not explicitly said to be the ruling class in the society depicted in the novel, this is not necessary to realise that Michael K is living in a society with the same social distribution and power relationship as those developed during apartheid. Within *LTMK* there is no specific mention of the government but there are several references to institutions and official processes. All these institutions contribute to classifying people into groups and into first or second-class citizens of South Africa. The first such institution is Huis Norenius. After failing at school, Michael is “protected” in this place ruled by the government until he is fifteen years old in the “company of other variously afflicted and unfortunate children” (4). It is a place where Michael might be quiet and obedient, and the conditions would be so extreme that the doctor-narrator matches it to the camps: “[at] first I thought he was referring to another camp, but it turned out that he meant the godforsaken institution where he spent his childhood. (...) ‘The music was to keep you calm,’ I explained. ‘Otherwise you might have beaten each other’s faces in and thrown chairs through the windows. The music was to soothe your savage breast’” (132). This state institution is depicted as a place of oppression and discrimination. The children were “afflicted” and “unfortunate” and we know that the reason for Michael to be there is “[because] of his disfigurement and because his mind was not quick” (4) not because he had a challenging behaviour. Still they were treated like animals. They most likely were disabled children but they were addressed as savage beasts that needed

to be tamed. The discrimination comes not only from the institution but also from the Medical Officer. He can completely understand (perhaps even empathize with) the reason why they played the music, and these are his words describing the need to keep the children calm.

As was just mentioned, one of the reasons that Michael was at Huis Norenius was his hare lip. Against Derek Attridge's opinion that "K's hare lip is less an allegorical indicator of the handicaps suffered by certain sectors of the South African population" (59), I believe that Coetzee created Michael with a physical imperfection to point out the absurdity of racism. Michael's harelip is a mere mark on his body. It is something that allows people to establish a difference between them. Thus, Coetzee does not need to describe Michael's race because he is basing Michael's distinction from other people on his physical peculiarity, as social system did during apartheid. In an attempt to pass as non-different, to blend in, he grows a moustache to disguise his lip. The Medical Officer thinks that with a minor surgery Michael "could talk like everyone else" (*LTMK* 131). However, he does not explain what that means. Michael can talk like everybody else because he is able to have a proper verbal communication with the rest of the characters in the novel. What the doctor does not say is that the operation would change Michael's outward appearance, and by doing so, it would erase Michael's main difference from others, according to the story. The next institution addressed in the novel is the hospital. The readers know about two hospitals; the two of them are closely related to Anna K. She rings his son from Somerset Hospital and dies in a hospital in Stellenbosch. In both hospitals there are signs of war: overcrowded sites where people are lying in corridors or in rooms with four beds and not space between them. In the first one, Anna is "neglected by nurses" (5) that do not have time to help her. They prioritize and choose not to help an old woman that they can save, and instead they prefer to help young men that are "dying spectacular deaths all about" (5). They would rather help dead men than a feeble old woman. They do not even help her to meet her basic needs and bodily functions. Anna senses the

hospital as a “purgatory” (5). In the second hospital in Stellenbosch, Anna dies. Although it is a different hospital the manners are alike. She is poorly when she gets into the hospital but they put her in a trolley where she lies unconscious surrounded by dozens of patients. Michael has a collision with a nurse when he thinks that his mother is not breathing. In this scene we can see the importance of his mother for the hospital, none. When Anna is unconscious and barely breathing the only thing that the nurse does is checking her pulse. She realises that Anna is not dead so she goes mad and rebukes Michael (28). The nurses neglect her again and put others before Anna. They do not realise she is not eating or drinking; only Michael is by her side. When she dies they say “[we] did what we could to keep her, but she was very weak” (30) This is an excuse because at no time were they taking care of her; they only gave some sedatives to put her to sleep, maybe without her authorisation, as she was unresponsive and unable to swallow. They made her weak with drugs, as they did not want to take care of her. If we use these hospitals as illustrations of what was going on in South Africa during the times of Michael K, it may be concluded that it is an unequal society in which the ones in power (nurses) decide about others in a matter of power relationship (whites before non-whites). The nurses decide to whom they give priority in care and they rather take care of a high-class white man that is doomed to die than a non-white woman that can be healed. Men in the hospitals with gunshot wounds can be assumed to be members of the army. The hospitals depend on the government so it is more likely that these men belong to the army than to the resistance.

Finally, Michael meets the third institution: an Afrikaner army. As far as we know from the text, Michael is living times of war, or at least he is living a state of siege. In any case the army belongs to the upper classes. They are the closest class to the government and as such, it is easily deduced who is in power in South Africa during the unspecific times of Michael K: Afrikaners. As I mentioned before, Michael has to coexist with army when he had to live in

the camps. There is an apartheid system within the camps. Those in power are Afrikaners and they rule the others with dictatorial regulations. At Jakkalsdrif camp the narrator dwells on the khaki colour of the uniforms (74) and mentions that there are Free Corps guards watching the gate (96). The Free Corps were Afrikaner volunteers that joined forces with Germans in their fight against South African Union forces. At Kenilworth camp there is an Afrikaner Major that controls the camp. His name is Noël and is powerful enough to change Michael's name and to invent a new whole story about him, as we say earlier. He talks Afrikaans and describes Michael as "Opgaarder" (137), this means hoarder. The camp that he rules has an orange, white and blue flag and they play "Uit die blou" (the first words of the national anthem) with the cornet (132). Both elements are closely related to Afrikaners during apartheid and they could give us a most accurate idea about Michael's times but they do not. While the Free Corps disappeared in 1915, the national anthem was sung publicly for the first time in 1928. Both events are not contemporary, but they contribute to providing the information of Afrikaner presence in the higher classes in Michael's world. Furthermore, Coetzee specifies through Noël's speech the reason for the war "We are fighting this war (...) so that minorities will have a say in their destinies" (157). As we know, white people were and are a minority in South Africa. Within the novel this is further evidence of apartheid power distribution in which a white minority take control over non-white population in an oppressive relation. This is the reality that not even the characters overlook. Robert, a man from Jakkalsdrif camp, talks about a fire, as it "was the excuse they were looking for. Now they are going to do what they always wanted-lock us up and wait for us to die" (94). He is aware that they are being oppressed and also that those in power wanted an excuse to prove their right to treat them in a discriminatory way.

Coetzee writes his novel as a criticism to social system during apartheid, but also as a criticism of how history is recorded. In my opinion history is not "the driving concern" as

Head points out (“*Life & Times of Michael K*” 55), but it is a relevant issue including for the characters. They realise the significance of a single individual in relation with history. They are aware of the protagonist’s conflictive relationship with it too. The medical officer says that Michael is “untouched by history” (*LTMK* 151) and the Major thinks that Michael is “too absorbed to listen to the wheels of history” (159). Also some critics address this issue and conclude that Michael is successful in his attempt to “ignore history” (Gordimer) or to “[sever] himself from history” (Poyner, “Cultivating the Margins” 80). However it is not Michael’s decision to be inside or outside of history not even in his own story. He is not recording it. He is living it and as such he is not in control over what is said just like he is not in control about his position vis-a-vis history. Gert Buelens and Dominiek Hoens’ are correct when they assert that “[if] the exception is always an exception to the rule, how can it exists otherwise than by virtue of that rule? How can it be more than just the rule’s negative? But if the exception radically breaks away from the rule, then how is it possible for that rule to identify the exception and recognize it as such?” (3). This means that history is inescapable for Michael. He may attempt to run away from it but in order to do so he has to take history into account to be successful. And that is part of history too: those who are included and those who are ignored. In this regard, Coetzee uses Robert to express that is impossible to be apart from history. Not even high classes can do it although they have the power to record history:

If these people really wanted to be rid of us, he thought (...), if they really wanted to forget us forever, they would have to give us picks and spades and command us to dig, then, when we had exhausted ourselves digging, and had dug a great hole in the middle of the camp, they would have to order us to climb in and lay ourselves down; and when we were lying there, all of us, they would have to break down the huts and tents and tear down the fence and throw the huts and the fence and the tents as well as every last thing we had

owned upon us, and cover us with earth, and flatten the earth. *Then*, perhaps, they might begin to forget about us. But who could dig a hole as big as that? (LTMK 94)

In this passage Coetzee establishes the conditions that would make it possible for somebody's existence in history to be forgotten. The first one is that they have to be oppressed. Somebody must force them to be forgotten. It is not a voluntary task. The second one is that they have to collaborate. The oppressors cannot succeed if the oppressed are not doing the hard job of accepting the imposition. They have to be accomplices in some way. And the third one is that even if the two previous conditions were true, there still would not be enough space to hide so many people. The soil covering this oppression cannot be "flattened" because there are too many stories underneath. Through Robert's words we can deduce that the attempt can be done but it will not succeed. Not even with the collaboration of the oppressed.

With regards to Michael's presence in history, Julian Gitzen claims that "Michael gets out pushing his mother in a make-shift cart on a journey that eventually will draw him further outside history (...)" (7). Contrariwise, it is precisely his journey with his mother that drives him into history. Up until this moment in the novel, Michael is simply watching time pass. Coetzee shortens Michael's life to a couple of pages and the plot of the novel commences when he has his mother's phone call. Michael's life before their journey is barely mentioned. Then, when his mother dies he is free to live his life. It is in this moment that he chooses to travel, to farm, to run away... He does not let somebody else dictate what to do. He is making his story worth recording and, therefore, worth becoming part of history.

Despite the inevitability of being part of history, Michael is obsessed with leaving no trace of his existence. In his way to the farm he loses all his belongings but for some clothes and his mother's ashes (38). When in the farm he tries to grow pumpkins, he covers them with leaves to hide them and make it look like there is nothing there (114). When he first lives

at the Visagies', he does not fix the roof or clean the house. When Visagie's grandson arrives he does not know that anyone has been there (60). When Michael comes back to the farm, he builds a burrow that he can leave behind without struggle (121). Even his body is becoming thinner and thinner as the story advances. At one point, the narrator reflects, "[what] a pity that to live in times like these a man must be ready to live like a beast. A man who wants to live cannot live in a house with lights in the windows. He must live in a hole and hide by day. A man must live so that he leaves no trace of his living. That is what it has come to" (99). The readers cannot know for sure whose point of view this is. A few lines before this statement the narrator focalizing through Michael's point of view, but in this passage we cannot say if it is Michael's or the narrator's external perspective. Still the narrator suggests that in order to live, one must to be careful and try to go unnoticed. However it does not mean that Michael is not going to be part of history. It means that being part of the powerless, the only way to endure is to survive and become a living witness of one's own story. Michael is close to die twice in the novel. Curiously enough, the army "saves" him and takes care of him until he is healthy enough to work. When he is about to die and disappear, the class in power offers him the opportunity to go on with his story. At the same time they provide the opportunity to transform his story into history by telling them. Nevertheless Michael refuses to speak to those "who [wish] to exercise authority over him" (VanZaten Gallagher 162). And by doing so, it might seem that he is putting his permanency in history in danger. At least that is what he is encouraged to think: "do you want your story to end with you?" (*LTMK* 140). The Medical Officer is taking for granted that the story dies when Michael dies, but he contradicts himself as he goes on: "you are not important. But that does not mean you are forgotten. No one is forgotten" (136). This character states that even if Michael's story comes to an end when he dies, Michael will remain in history. And by saying that Michael is not important, he alludes to his social class.

Coetzee criticises the system of apartheid by using his novel as a weapon against it. He attacks apartheid with great skill by disguising his criticism within the pages. He makes no mention of apartheid and still most critics take it for granted as a basis for their analyses. He writes a novel in which the title *Life & Times of Michael K* gets a new perspective. “Life” is condensed in a few years and still feels like a whole existence. And “times” are not a precise moment but a timeless period. The personal denomination “Michael K” does not provide clues about identity either. Coetzee changes the character’s name to Michaels or to Michael Visagie and these changes do not change his story. We know that it is still Michael K although official records say opposite (Michael Visage in the charge sheet at Jakkalsdrif camp, and most likely Michaels at Kenilworth camp). Laraine O’Connell defines Michael as “a skeletal figure, a universal nobody whom we can never know intimately” (41). Following her argument, Michael K allegorically represents more than just one person so his identity is even more blurred. As has been demonstrated, however, we cannot know him closely not because of his identity, but because he is not telling his own story. It would of course be possible for us to have an accurate story about him, even if others narrated it, but in this case we cannot be certain that we truly know him because he sometimes refuses to tell his story and prefers to remain silent. We know that “he has systematically been schooled into silence” (Bohm), so it is not illogical to conclude that he refuses to talk when he faces institutions. Huis Norenius played a decisive role in Michael’s life and influences him in his future relation with authorities. Many critics discuss Michael’s reluctance to talk and to tell his story. Some of them connect his silence to his hare lip or perceive his imperfection as an obstacle for verbal communication. But only the Medical Officer supports this statement. Not other character mentions it as a problem to understand Michael’s words. Michael chooses not to tell, to remain silent. According to Bohm, “[by] refusing to answer questions and by not producing an ‘interesting’ story, Michael K has avoided becoming the subject of a history

written by others.” However he did not avoid it: two different narrators tell his story and help him become part of history. They are recording his life in a book that is going to endure time and make him part of the history. Besides, we must remember that even those who are not in history belong to it. Michael’s life is the story of those outside history books that also lived in history.

Finally, Coetzee describes a country where the protagonist does not live, survives. Michael is trapped in a country that does not have any free land without fences and keeps him in a social system that makes him feel like trapped into “cages”. In order to recreate the same oppressive system based on discrimination, Coetzee has to portrait a war. Not any war, a civil war, the most terrible of all wars because it is among fellow countrymen. They do not fight for territory but for rights: white people are fighting for their right to keep the status quo and keep themselves in power where the rest of the population is oppressed.

Disgrace

Some politicians branded *Disgrace* (1999) as a novel that describes the impossibility of a civilized reconciliation and as one that promotes the persistence of racism in South Africa by portraying non-white characters in negative colonial terms (Roy 700). However, the diversity of opinions among the critics that deal with this novel proves that its study is not simple. Their analyses portray mixed opinions about the novel, its protagonist, David Lurie, and his involvement with other characters. For instance, David Medalie says about the novel that the “representation of post-apartheid South Africa is marked by dystopian elements” (3) and about David that he seduces Melanie (6). In contrast, Mike Marais asserts that David is a rapist and that the novel “appears to suggest that post-apartheid society (...) is defined by an absence of ethical action, and that the political changes that South Africa has undergone in recent years have not affected the base of sociality” (58-9). These are just two examples of many different views of *Disgrace*, which proves that the novel is controversial. As in the

previous two sections, in this analysis I propose a socio-historical approach that reflects how Coetzee describes South African society since the fall of apartheid in 1994 until 1999, when he writes *Disgrace*. This analysis will argue that the novel has a three-stage internal structure that is history-related. Indeed, each of these three sections reviews the main features of the historical periods of apartheid, transition and post-apartheid (and, as a result, a new South Africa). The beginning of the novel reproduces the social structure of apartheid: a white man in a position of power takes advantage of his situation and overpowers non-white women. The next stage (transition) begins when David has to report to the hearing at the university and explains his acts in the past. The final stage, which starts when David has to leave the city and move in with his daughter at her farm, portrays post-apartheid. An additional common nexus links these stages: sex offences. There are two rapes in the novel: Melanie's and Lucy's. Both depict an interracial intercourse and have very different consequences. Nevertheless, they symbolize the presence of the evils from the past in the present as well as allude to real problems that historical South Africa has.

All different interpretations about the same event are possible because Coetzee creates a third-person narrator that is not completely trustworthy for two reasons: on the one hand, the narrative voice is limited to David's focus and, as such, its vision of the whole picture is biased and incomplete. On the other hand, sometimes it judges David and differentiates its point of view from him, although David's experiences still restrict their knowledge of the story: "For a man of his age, fifty-two, divorced, he has, to his mind, solved the problem of sex rather well" (*Disgrace* 3, from this point forward *D*). By asserting "to his mind", Coetzee "establishes distance between the narrator's and the character's ideological slants" (Mardorossian 80) and also "indicates the disjunction between Lurie's perception and reality" (Roy 615). This proves that, throughout the story, although the narrative voice is limited to David's view, we cannot trust that it will share David's opinions. John Douthwaite says about

the narrative voice that it uses a Free Direct Thought (FDT) which gives access to David's mind and translates "into greater reliability, for nothing interferes with the presentation of the consciousness of the character" (149). Despite this free access to David's mind, we know that we cannot be sure whether the narrator shares David's perception or whether David is faithful to the actual facts. Nevertheless, disregarding the distorting tendency of their points of view, we can assert which facts actually happen and which ones are products of their imagination.

Coetzee starts his novel by remembering how social power relations were during apartheid times: white Afrikaner men in the highest social position. David is a fifty-two year-old man that works as a teacher at Cape Town Technical University (*D* 7), and from the beginning we know that sex is a major issue for him. No further than the first page of the novel we meet Soraya, his first "lover". She is a non-white prostitute that "makes love" with David – according to the narrator, who adopts David's point of view, as was earlier mentioned (3). These first descriptions are not random. They have the specific purpose to inform us that David is in a position of power regarding Soraya. According to Peter Blair, this situation "[entails] his abuse of privilege (...) taking advantage of Soraya's relative poverty" (581). He is not only in power because of his economic situation (he can afford paying for her services) but also because of his social class (he is a white man and a teacher at the university). Coetzee omits explicitly mentioning David's skin colour at this point in order for us to judge him as a man and not as a white man. However, we will later find out that he is white, and this changes the perception of the situation with Soraya: their unbalanced relationship acquires a racial dimension as well. As Soraya's skin is "honey-brown" and she is "unmarked by the sun" (3), we know that she is non-white and, thus, her relationship with David reproduces the social power status based on race during apartheid. It also reproduces the power of the higher class to write the history of the oppressed: David has the power to change Soraya's story. The narrator, through David's point of view is inventing Soraya's

story because she reveals nothing to David (*D* 7). He creates a whole story for her: her actual name is not Soraya, she has children, she lives in the suburbs, and she is Muslim (7). Later, we can verify that David was right regarding her children, but this should not disorient us and make us think that the other pieces of information are also true. There is no other kind of evidence in this regard. Precisely after seeing Soraya's children he cannot objectify her and continue with their relation. She has a story on her own far from him and that story does not match David's invented narrative about her and her relationship with him. In order to keep his power over her, he must "control" her, so their relationship finishes when he realizes that he does not.

His second sexual relationship is with a secretary from his university. As she does not let him lead but takes on an active attitude towards sex, David is frustrated, he cannot exercise any control over her. He is not in a position of power and decides not to meet her again. Finally, David's third sexual relationship has Melanie as protagonist. From the perspective of apartheid's social classification, she is marked as socially inferior in relation with David: she is a non-white woman. Moreover, David is her teacher in a literature seminar dealing with Western Romantic poets. According to Douthwaite, David knowledge and teaching of occidental culture "is indeed a weapon which he deploys constantly to assert his identity as a superior being, and consequently his right to appropriation and suppression of the inferior" (157). It emphasizes his position in "dominant" culture in which depicting David as a highbrow person who must educate the rest stresses the difference between David and Melanie. Melanie's father endorses David's position by pointing out his knowledge: "No, Professor Lurie, you may be high and mighty and have all kinds of degrees" (61). The culminating moment of their oppressive relationship is Melanie's rape. He abuses his position of power as a teacher and a white man again and subdues Melanie. He forces her explicitly in two occasions, and third one is suggested. As he did in Soraya's situation, he exercises his

power rewrite a story for Melanie. He redefines the rape and calls it “mak[ing] love” (32) and by doing so, he never admits that it is a rape. Douthwaite analyses this rape from the postcolonial point of view and he agrees that “[in] committing rape, and in refusing to admit that he is fully aware of having committed rape, namely a heinous act, Lurie is exposing colonialism for what it is – pure exploitation of weaker humans by the more powerful” (156). In the postcolonial context of apartheid, David abuses his power not only by doing what he wants but also by redefining stories as he pleases. Although, in his distorted reality, David describes Melanie’s rape as “making love”, he rapes Melanie not once (*D* 32) but twice (41-2) and probably three times (48). Still, this incident has proven to be very controversial for critics, as they do not agree in defining it as “rape”. Some of them depict it as an affair (Blair 581), others as a seduction (DelConte 446; Longmuir 119), while still others as “almost a rape” (Boehmer 142).

A shocking depiction of racial inequality during apartheid, Melanie’s rape allows Coetzee to move on to the next stage in South African history: the transition to the post-apartheid period. He will mimic and criticize one of the most representative and controversial measures at that time: the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). One of the aspects that he translates to the novel is the influence of religion in the concept of confession. In the historical TRC, religious leaders led the hearings and influenced them: “[Desmond Tutu and Alex Boraine] were foremost church leaders and imposed their religious inclinations on the TRC’s understanding of justice” (Anker 237). Coetzee places a religious person to chair David’s university hearing: Manas Mathabane, Professor of Religious Studies (75). The aim of David’s hearing is to find out the truth about Melanie’s written allegations and to recommend a penalty, if necessary. However, problems arise because the committee misunderstands the concept of confession and punishment. David pleads guilty but it is not enough because the committee wants more (92). They ask him to confess and to speak the

truth “from his heart” (86) but David’s answers do not satisfying them (83). Influenced by religious concepts, they ask for repentance, but David tells them that “Repentance is neither here nor there. Repentance belongs to another world, to another universe of discourse” (92). With this hearing, Coetzee criticizes that the TRC demanded repentance rather than promoted justice. Nevertheless justice was not the goal of the creation of the TRC, but conciliation in order to be able to create a new South Africa. Needless to say, the expectations were not the same for the victim as for the aggressors. The victims were looking for justice and reparation, because truth and repentance would not compensate for the damages. Meanwhile, the aggressors were looking for amnesty: by telling the truth they expected not to be punished regardless of whether they regretted what they had done. Antjie Krog states that “If [the Commission’s] interest in truth is linked only to amnesty and compensation, then it will have chosen not truth, but justice” (qtd. in Poyner “Truth” 151). About the TRC, Jane Poyner specifies that “the ultimate goal of truth-telling was to establish a peaceable nation through reconciliation” (“Writing Under Pressure” 106). Thus, they were looking for the truth to establish a peaceable nation. However Coetzee chooses justice over reconciliation and blind acceptance over truth: David’s hearing committee will dictate a punishment fitting the offence. They ask for truth in order to make an informed decision and give him adequate punishment. In this way, Coetzee gives an example of a TRC hearing without TRC guidelines.

Another change that Coetzee introduces in his hearing is that David does not want to be there but he has no other choice. His male colleagues also support him. In contrast to his female co-workers, the men in his hearing want to help him to reduce the penalty. They dismiss the severity of the charges and try to support David as victim rather than as an aggressor (82). This shows a double standard in the decision-makers and a doubtful sense of justice and impartiality. Like the actual TRC, this committee seeks the truth but the

development is different. Probably, just like many others in the TRC hearings, David confesses his biased truth - not a reliable account of what happened. Nevertheless, the consequences were quite different. David's university trial ends with the most severe punishment at the university context: he loses his job and his prestige. In contrast, during the TRC hearings "in some cases the committee granted amnesty despite the availability of contradictory evidence on the grounds of memory loss or faulty recollection, ignoring the likelihood that the applicant was lying" (Chapman and Ball 156).

The part in the novel that represents the new South Africa starts after David's hearing (*D* 99) and goes on until the end of the novel. In this part, Coetzee portrays a heart-breaking post-apartheid period in South Africa through different strategies: the past is extremely present, power institutions are not helping in the reconciliation, and there is a general pessimistic perception of the whites' future. When Lurie loses his job, he has no more relationships with non-white women and he is not a teacher anymore, so abandons the city and flees to his daughter's farm. He has to face a new social situation: he is no longer in power (social or economic) and he depends on her to find a place in their new society. David will submit to another social structure where he is not in a privileged position. He will work for others and he will have to comply. He will accept orders from Petrus (121). This character, as black man, would be in a lower social position regarding him during apartheid times, but in the new South Africa the social roles change and all characters have to redefine their position within society. This applies to David in particular, who is aware of the contrast between his power in the past and his imprecise social situation in the present. This indicates a huge change in social hierarchy: the white man who lives in the city does not occupy the top of the pyramid and the black man who works the land is not at the bottom. Petrus is now a landlord and does not have to comply with the others decisions.

Even though the novel is set at a time of transition after the end of apartheid, the past is present throughout the novel. Coetzee frequently refers to them in the same sentence or paragraph (26, 153) to compare and contrast the social differences between the past and the present (182), and, also to establish cause-effect relation (122). Even David is defined as “the typical male chauvinist, a breed which is moving slowly towards extinction, perhaps. (...) [The] symbol of the white colonialist or, more limitedly, the white colonialist in post-apartheid South Africa, another dying breed, perhaps” (Douthwaite 136). He is the living proof of a past system that is no longer valid and he has to adapt or disappear in the new era. David himself concedes that he did not change as time went by: “Well, he is too old to heed, too old to change” (*D* 321). David’s lack of adaptation allows Coetzee to criticize the progress of the events in the country. When David meets his ex-wife and they talk about Melanie’s accusation, she speaks her mind and says: ““Don't expect sympathy from me, David, and don't expect sympathy from anyone else either. No sympathy, no mercy, not in this day and age. Everyone's hand will be against you, and why not? Really, how could you?”” (71). She highlights the difference between the past and the present as common knowledge. She makes clear that what David did is a morally blameable act in both time periods. However, what is different is the support. In the past, he could have expected empathy, but not now. She condemns the immorality of the situation. She does not know about the rape but she does know about the abuse of power related to apartheid: he is a white high-class man and Melanie is in a lower position. He committed sexual abuse and he does not get away with it. He should not find legal or moral support, as it is not only a despicable act on moral grounds but also a punishable crime in the courts of the new South Africa. However, Coetzee portrays a contrast between past and present that reflects a no very optimistic perception of the changes: “In the old days, cattle and maize. Today, dogs and daffodils. The more things change the more they remain the same. History repeating itself, though in a more modest vein. Perhaps history has

learned a lesson” (98). David compares farming and cattle raising to point out the changes between the past and the present. He also introduces the doubt of whether these changes have really affected history. Moreover, he focuses on these changes that are strongly related to white people and, therefore, he does not include the whole population of South Africa. From the traditional cattle to the watchdogs and from the basic maize to the ornamental daffodil, there is quite a difference, but they have their core in white population. In the past, whites owned the farms and exploited non-white people to have low labour costs in slave-like conditions. They could produce as they pleased because the costs would not be high. Their priority was covering basic needs so they had cattle and maize. However, in the present, the situation is different. They are losing control of the farms and, as they cannot have access to cheap labour, they have to change their priorities in farming and cattle raising. According to this quote, they have dogs instead of cattle and, as far as we know, these dogs are watchdogs (97). Their objective is to protect and defend, which indicates that white people are afraid of an inner threat. And they cultivate daffodils, which are easy to grow and very resistant to bad weather conditions. Furthermore, a dilemma arises within this quote: as we saw, the narrator suggests that “the more things change, the more they remain the same” and as such, that maybe “history has learned a lesson”. The narrative voice is talking about white people, and, he makes us think that, despite all these changes, the situation is only moderately different. It is not so important what they harvest or which animals they breed, whites still own most of the farms and have the power to decide what to farm. Even when things have changed, they did not change in their cores and, therefore, history is doomed to be repeated even in a “more modest vein”.

Besides David, Coetzee contrasts past and present through the relationship of characters such as Petrus and Lucy. Petrus is a non-white polygamous male character and Lucy is a white Afrikaner female character. They had an initial relation of employer-

employee in which Lucy owned the farm and the land and Petrus worked for her. This was the regular situation during apartheid: white people in a position of power regarding non-white people. However, their relation evolves and it matches the new South Africa: they change from the unequal situation in which Lucy has power over Petrus, economically and socially, to a more equalitarian one in which they are co-workers, co-proprietors and neighbours: “Petrus is my new assistant. In fact, since March, co-proprietor” (98). This evolution is possible because of the changes in the legislation: non-white people are now allowed to own land and farms, and even reclaim their land if they were dispossessed with the Land Act of 1913. However, they could have their land back “only with the agreement of its current owners, few of who were inclined to be cooperative” (Worden 161). We cannot say if Petrus’s family was dispossessed in the past but we know that “He got a Land Affairs grant earlier this year, enough to buy a hectare and a bit from [Lucy]” (D 121). All in all, Lucy is one of the cooperative owners and she sells a portion of her land to Petrus. Thus, their relation changes not only because of the legislation, but because she takes part in the evolution. However, this positive step towards equality in South Africa bring some unrest as well: “white farmers like Lucy and her German neighbour Ettinger find themselves living in a more pressured, populous, and dangerous world” (Coleman 600). The loss of land entails a loss of power and white people find themselves in a place where they are not only in a minority position as a result of their number, but also physically isolated and, as such, vulnerable. As a white man who is not quite as open to change as his daughter is, David acknowledges the difference in his position vis-à-vis Petrus:

In the old days one could have had it out to the extent of losing one's temper and sending him packing and hiring someone in his place. But though Petrus is paid a wage, Petrus is no longer, strictly speaking, hired help. The word that seems to serve best, however, is *neighbour*. Petrus is a neighbour who at

present happens to sell his labour, because that is what suits him. He sells his labour under contract, unwritten contract, and that contract makes no provision for dismissal on grounds of suspicion. It is a new world they live in, he and Lucy and Petrus. (original emphasis, Coetzee, *D* 182)

Now Petrus is no longer socially inferior to him but his equal and David shows nostalgia for his past social power. In the past he could have handled Petrus' life as he pleased, and there would have been no retaliation. Not so long ago, Petrus was economically, socially and politically inferior to David and he would have had no opportunity to defend himself.

After so many years in an unequal society in which most population was denied their basic rights, and with an oppressive high class that is at present devalued, it is not illogical to think about physical attacks as a response for a whole life of exploitation: "(...) there has been a deep anxiety to acknowledge the culture of violence in post-apartheid South Africa as part of the enduring legacy of apartheid" (Diala 50). Adriaan Van Heerden acknowledges this violent inheritance of apartheid and explains the historical background of Lucy's rapists: "these black men had grown up in a political system that denied 'non-white' people their basic human rights and perpetrated awful acts of violence on those who resisted its racist ideology and social structures" (53). Having said that, we can understand Lucy's rape as a "product of centuries of domination" (Longmuir 121). Coetzee successfully portrays the violent atmosphere in new South Africa by setting sexual violence as the central point. As he chooses rape again as one of the main events in this part of the novel, he establishes a relation between past and present: Melanie's rape in the past, Lucy's rape in the present. David agrees with the critics just mentioned that the attack is a legacy of apartheid when he tells Lucy: "You want to make up for the wrongs of the past" (*D* 208). He even suggests that some people could have the perception that suffering in the present is the way to make up for past crimes (176). At this time, he shows no nostalgia for the past. He speaks about the past in

negative terms that he then extrapolates to history “‘It was history speaking through them,’ he offers at last. ‘*A history of wrong*. Think of it that way, if it helps. It may have seemed personal, but it wasn’t. It came down from the ancestors’” (emphasis added, 243-244). At first, Lucy resists this interpretation and views her attack as personal (243) but later she understands it as a consequence of the unstable present: the new situation in the country for white people does not give her any other choice but to “pay” a price to stay on (246).

Coetzee includes Lucy’s rape not only to portrait how violence in the present is a direct consequence of the violence in the past, but also to denounce the survival of the black peril prejudices over white peril prejudices. When David and Lucy discuss the rape, David concludes: “‘If they had been white you wouldn’t talk about them in this way,’ he says. ‘If they had been white thugs from Despatch, for instance’” (247). This perceived difference between black and white assaulters recalls the previous events with Melanie. Unlike Lucy’s rapists, Melanie’s is a white man. The crime happens in an intimate place, far from witnesses and we have a full description of the three times that David rapes her (twice explicitly and another one suggested). Coetzee plays with the readers and he makes us witnesses of the crime. We can picture in our minds exactly what is happening. However, as was discussed earlier, the critics are not unanimous about whether this incident can be considered rape or not. Contrariwise, in Lucy’s case her rapists are black men, their crime has witnesses (David and themselves) and readers do not get any description of what happened. Still, the critics are unanimous: it is rape. Even Dominic Head details that Melanie’s rape by three black men is the central point of the novel (“*Disgrace*” 77). They give more importance to this rape than Melanie’s and, as a consequence, they fall in Coetzee’s trap. They prove that black peril prejudices not only survives but it is still dominant. An example of the endurance of the black peril prejudice is the attack that the writer Nadine Gordimer suffered in 2006. According to Carine Madorossian, four black men attacked the writer in her home but she did not want to

report it at the beginning (5). Her concern was that if she made it public, audience would focus in assailants' skin colour. This way, she would contribute to perpetuate the black peril prejudices against her intentions.

Coetzee goes a step further with Lucy's rape in order to continue his criticism to the past and the present of the new South Africa. He gives Lucy's rape a physical aftermath: she gets pregnant. David raises all concerns before knowing that Lucy is pregnant: "'There's the risk of pregnancy,' he presses on. 'There's the risk of venereal infection. There's the risk of HIV. Shouldn't she see a gynaecologist as well?'" (*D* 168). At the time when Coetzee writes *Disgrace*, the risk of HIV infection was a real concern in South Africa. President Mbeki's denial that HIV and AIDS were connected, as well as the ineffective measures taken by the government to fight the disease led to a rapid growth in the HIV epidemic. Didier Fassin and Helen Schneider state that the three main social factors that affected this rapid growth (i.e., inequality, mobility and sexual violence) "are partly the legacy of centuries of colonial exploitation and racial segregation" (469). They also point out that the impact in pregnant women increases 23.8% from 1990 to 2000. As a major problem in the country, it is more than likely that Coetzee wants to highlight AIDS in his criticism of the new South Africa. However, the risk of pregnancy is also a concern inherited from the past. As a white Afrikaner, David cannot overlook the possibility of having a mixed grandchild. Miscegenation was a concern for Afrikaners during apartheid, manifested in, among other ways, the Immorality Act (1950), which forbade sexual relationships between whites and non-whites. Also, the mixed-race children were despised, as they were the result of a relationship conceived of as abhorrent. David cannot help but feel shocked by his daughter's decision of having the baby. The consequence of the rape is conceived as an abomination in the novel not only by present social standards but also by past ones.

One of the reasons that Lucy does not report the rape to the police is because of the corruption in the institution. Although Coetzee barely mentions the university, the hospital and the police, he presents them as far from being the equalitarian ideal institutions that South Africa people needed. As we saw in the analysis of institutions in *Life & Times of Michael K*, during apartheid, institutions were one of the instruments of the government to keep the status quo of an unequal social system that favoured a white minority. As mentioned earlier, Coetzee uses the university in the novel to criticize the past. When he writes about the police the references are short but meaningful. The police go to Lucy's house to inspect but "the policemen avert their eyes, pass on" (D 172). They may suspect what happened, but they would rather ignore it than do their job properly. They are unreliable: "The best is, you save yourself, because the police are not going to save you, not any more, you can be sure" (158). The feeling of hopelessness at this situation is common among the characters. They know that if they have an untrustworthy police institution, the idea of justice is meaningless. However, the mention of the hospital has no other purpose but to point out what is really important. Lucy and David go to the hospital, but only David is attended to. David's injuries are external: everybody can see them on plain sight. As they are visible, they are easier to heal and probably there will be no scars. Contrariwise, Lucy has the deepest injury but nobody can see it. The medical staff cannot provide care for it and the scars will last forever. She will have a lasting reminder of the injuries and the pain.

As a result of this description of the new South Africa, Coetzee foresees a pessimistic future. According to the novel, white population must make a choice: leave the country or stay and adapt. During the time in which the novel was written, the political attempts aim for creating a new society in which equality was the leit motif. In their attempt to foster equality, Thabo Mbeki, president of South Africa in 1999, delivered a speech that promoted the African renaissance and equality (Foster 19). These inspirational words could be positive to

contribute to equality. Nonetheless, in his promotion of the African renaissance he got a rebound effect that lied in reversing the roles by empowering non-white people in an upper position. This could be another reason for Lucy not to report the rape: with an unreliable police and a government that promotes the African renaissance at the expense of weakening the others, she might think useless to report a crime that in advance she knows will be ignored. Thus, Lucy will stay and adapt to the new South Africa. She will give birth to a mixed-race child, the result of violence and a forced relation between whites and non-whites. She fits in the pessimistic view that Ian Glenn points out regarding “the possibility for the white coloniser of finding a true home in the colonised space or of coming to a full integration of settler with colonised through happy hybridity” (31). In order to stay, Lucy dies: “I am a dead person and I do not know yet what will bring me back to life. All I know is that I cannot go away” (*D* 250). And we may say that David also dies: “He has a sense that, inside him, a vital organ has been bruised, abused – perhaps even his heart. 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” (168). Both survive but do not live. They will be empty bodies without any expectations for the future. In contrast, Lucy’s neighbour, Ettinger, offers a different point of view. His children went back to Germany, but he stays by barricading himself in a house isolated by fences, like a fortress, in which he always carries his “Beretta” (158) for protection. Taking him as representative of white population that was concerned about self-protection, this example proves the insecurity and instability of the society for some white Afrikaner people. Thus, the options if they stay are not too promising. They would have to live in a society far from the hypothetical nonracist and nonsexist one that the government wants to promote.

Although his novel criticizes a certain image of the society in the new South Africa, Coetzee cannot be said to agree with the old one. He criticizes the two periods mainly by

describing the same horrendous crime committed in the (symbolical) representation of both: rape. Furthermore, black peril prejudices influences both of them closely. The rapes prove that the double standard based on racist prejudices of apartheid still casts a long shadow over the present South Africa. Despite the different interpretation of both rapes, they are the same crime. And it is not coincidence that Coetzee reflects the reality by portraying one of the most recurring crimes at that time: “[in] the period leading to the publication of *Disgrace*, Interpol reported that South Africa had the highest number of reported rapes of all countries selected for a survey” (Graham 5-6). In his description of the rapes and their aftermaths, Coetzee contrasts past and present as a criticism to both through David’s biased point of view.

Coetzee describes the new South Africa in his novel reproducing how the actual one arose: from the recent history of apartheid, going through the transition and living the aftermath in the present. As David Medalie has put it: “[in] South Africa, many literary works published since 1994 are concerned with the ways in which the past makes its influence felt in the present. History in these works is not relegated to the past, but, paradoxically, is imbued with an active and authoritative presence” (3). *Disgrace* is one of these literary works and David Lurie is the common thread for a story full of complex characters in which the past endures in the present.

Conclusion

Having analysed each text individually, the study comes to the conclusion that Coetzee successfully portrays the social reality of South Africa from the beginning of apartheid to the creation of the “new South Africa”. He sets his main characters in the different stages of the history of South Africa: John lives in the early years of commencement of apartheid, Michael lives the most violent years, and David lives in the aftermath of this period. Furthermore, in order to both avoid the promotion of racial prejudices and to criticize once again the social classification of apartheid, it has been pointed out that Coetzee avoids describing characters’ skin colour. He plays with the readers’ prejudices, as we share apartheid’s obsession for categorising, and we are inclined to classify them.

The essay has also analysed the significance of recurrent violence and of state-imposed normalcy in the three texts: John wants to be “normal”, but in order to fulfil his wish he needs his father to hit him, so as to comply with what considered “normal” in the country during apartheid. John also proves to be different from other boys at school, where his teachers compel this twelve-year old to define himself regarding social categories. In the second text, Michael tries to escape and lives apart from a territory that is immersed in a civil war. He is also marked as physically different because of his hare lip, although this (the only physical description that Coetzee gives of Michael) has been proven to be put as excuse to highlight the nonsense of apartheid. Finally, David is not average either: he is the perpetrator of several sex attacks against a student and the isolated witness of his daughter’s violent rape. He belongs nowhere: not in time, not in space. He loses his job and leaves his home. He does not fit in the present and he cannot back to the past. Thus, we can say that none of the main characters are “normal” as they do not respond to the stereotype that apartheid reserves for them.

The Afrikaner farm has an important role in the development of the three stories. The three main characters are connected to it through some relative. In a farm, John discovers the “other” and his questions about other social classes start in this place. Unconsciously, he adopts his Afrikaner family’s farm as his place of origin and, as a symbol of his maturity, he stops going to the farm as he grows up. Michael wants to go to the farm as his mother’s wishes. Eventually, he finds the farm that he presumes is the correct one, and he tries to live there. Although unsuccessfully, Michael works hard to be able to stay in the farm and live from it but he has to give up this idea as he is close to death twice. David’s farm is his daughter’s. He escapes from the city to find some comfort there, but he finds quite the opposite- it proves to be the most unsafe place to live for David.

The three characters show a conflictive relationship with history, either because they do not want to be part of it or because they realise that they do not cannot change it. John feels the weight of the world over his young shoulders. He feels responsibility to remember all the stories and consequently to be a witness of history. Michael’s relationship is more complex. He unsuccessfully tries not to leave any trace of his existence in this world. He resists telling his story to those who can keep a record of it and lives a life of subsistence that he can abandon anytime he wants. Finally, David lives the present with a class-conscious education from the past. He enjoyed (as white Afrikaner) the past privileges and powers promoted by the government. However, he lives the present “new South Africa” in which he is not longer part of the social class in power and he has to make his choice towards adaptation to remain in a country that he used to think of as his own.

In the three texts, Coetzee has proved the inescapability of apartheid regardless social class, race, age or gender. Despite his own refusal of categorisation, all his characters have been labelled according to some of these categories as a result of their living within this social

context. Coetzee portrays the magnitude of apartheid by pointing out its full implications in society before, during and after its reign.

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