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**J.M. Coetzee:**  
**Is There a Morality Here?**

by

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Since Kelley joined the faculty of Fairmont State College, she has served as treasurer, vice-president, and president of the West Virginia Association of College English Teachers. She has also served on the Faculty Senate at Fairmont State and has edited the faculty magazine, *Perspectives*. She has presented and published papers on contemporary film, Virginia Woolf, Charlotte Brontë, and popular fiction. In addition to teaching at Fairmont State, she continues to teach summer courses at Boston College.

J.M. Coetzee:  
Is There a Morality Here?

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Susan M. Kelley

J. M. Coetzee, John Michael Coetzee, is a South African writer who was educated at the University of Cape Town, where he received his master's degree in 1963. He earned his doctorate at the University of Texas in linguistics in 1969. For two years, he taught at SUNY Buffalo, where he was arrested for protesting the Vietnam War. This arrest returned him to South Africa. He has been teaching at the University of Cape Town since 1971 and was appointed Distinguished Professor of General Literature in 1999. His books are critically acclaimed, and he is the only writer to have been awarded the prestigious Booker Prize twice, once for *The Life and Times of Michael K* in 1983 and again for *Disgrace* in 1999.

One of the many things that interest me about Coetzee's writing is his style. It is spare, and it is seductive. His novels are short and are comparatively fast reads, at least until we stop and think about what we have read. Even though the settings of his novels drop us into agonizing political situations, like apartheid, the Soweto riots, and the Vietnam War, and even though we cringe at the situations he creates, his style allows the reading experience to be a quick and relatively painless descent into the hell he depicts.

One example of the sparseness of Coetzee's style occurs in *Disgrace*. The protagonist, David Lurie, and his daughter, Lucy, are under assault by three young black men. After these men rape Lucy and before they set Lurie on fire, one of them goes to the pen where Lucy keeps her dogs, who have been her only companions in this open land:

With practiced ease he brings a cartridge up into the breech, thrusts the muzzle into the dogs' cage. The biggest of the German Shepherds, slavering with rage, snaps at it. There is a heavy report; blood and brains splatter the cage. For a moment, the barking ceases. The man fires

twice more. One dog, shot through the chest, dies at once; another, with a gaping throat wound, sits down heavily, flattens its ears, following with its gaze the movements of this being who does not even bother to administer a *coup de grace*. (95)

This is the world Coetzee paints with minimal strokes. Gratuitous cruelty can be represented quickly, but the staccato images do not soon leave us. How his characters behave in this deepening darkness, in this world where the withholding of death is as cruel as administering it, is the work of the novels.

His style is minimal, but, as we can see from the example in the slaughter of the dogs, that does not mean nothing happens. There is so much that goes on in one of his novels, explicitly and through implication, that it is difficult to tease out a single thread of thought. In *Dusklands*, Eugene Dawn is a public relations man who is working on a manual for his boss, a man named Coetzee, whom Dawn would like to impress. In his report, he outlines the proper ways to break the Vietnamese psychologically so that America can win the war. He carefully points out the strategic mistakes America has made, most of which suggest that thinking of the Other, the Vietnamese, in the only ways we can, as extensions of ourselves, results in an inability to see their real differences or to realize that America has assigned to them its own values; in the minds of those running the war, none of the Vietnamese should really mind being conquered by a people who are as wonderful or who have as much to offer as Americans. Meanwhile, Dawn obsesses on one particular photograph that has been sent to him to help him in his research. In this photograph, a group of young American soldiers is gathered, some standing, some squatting. All are smiling. Each holds a bleeding head of a Vietnamese citizen—women, children, and men. Dawn rather decently has a mental breakdown and is institutionalized, but not until after he has kidnapped and stabbed his son.

In another example, Mrs. Curren, the woman who narrates *Age of Iron*, has lived her life as a privileged middle-class woman, a former Latin teacher, in South Africa. She has witnessed the changes apartheid has wrought, but has mostly seen these changes on television because she lives in a protected suburb. She cannot be protected forever, though, so the day

that her doctor informs her that she has a terminal cancer and has about six months to live, she returns to her home to find a homeless man sleeping in the alley next to her garage. South Africa's problems are now hers, too. This homeless black man, Vercueil, has survived being tortured by the police and has two misshapen, repeatedly broken hands to show for the experience. He serves as the elderly narrator's awakening to the conditions black South Africans endure and of her own complicity in the creation of these conditions. She comes to understand that the country is being consumed from within, as her cancer soon will consume her. Vercueil, a representative of the people she has chosen not to know until he appears on her property, ends up being the one who rescues her when she has been raped by a gang of black youths who are compounding the rape by shoving a stick down her throat and kicking her head. Although Vercueil saves her, the reader cannot help but wonder how long he has been there before he intervenes. When the narrator dies, she does so in Vercueil's arms, the homeless man who has been displaced by South African policy, by colonialism, by imperialism, and by racial hatred. She feels no satisfaction in these arms, but Coetzee suggests that the whites and blacks of South Africa are bound together—even into eternity—for the atrocities that have been committed.

Coetzee creates dilemmas in his works that reverberate with their intensity. Almost every novel, for instance, features a rape. We know enough about rape to condemn it, but Coetzee's rapes, like everything else he presents, are loaded.

Coetzee's return-to-South-Africa novel, *In the Heart of the Country*, sets up a situation in which the Master of the farm, no longer young and widowed since his middle-aged daughter was a young child, falls into desire for the new bride of Hendrik, the most loyal and longest lasting of the black workers on the farm. This nameless woman is already married, is at least twenty years younger than the Master, belongs to a different race from the Master's, and belongs to a class not in keeping with the Master's assumed and declared position. In many ways, then, the Master forces a match that is hardly suitable. Undeterred by possible objections to such a joining, the Master woos this bride with presents and candy, and one

night gives Hendrik a bottle of fine brandy to console himself with while the Master takes the bride to his own bedroom.

The Master's middle-aged daughter, the novel's narrator, imagines the triumph the bride may well feel in having conquered the Master. She then imagines the bride's overstepping the boundaries of her lowly position and taking advantage of the Master's interest in her by leaving dishes and messes for the daughter to clean up. In other words, in the narrator's imagination, the bride would profit from this situation by figuratively trading places with the daughter, turning the daughter into the one cleaning up after the Master rather than the hired help's doing so. In addition, the narrator implies that the bride would be replacing her in the father's heart. This exchange would eliminate whatever advantages the narrator has enjoyed under the Master's protection. For her, much is at stake.

While it appears through the narrator's eyes that the bride benefits from this union, we finally wonder. Does the bride have an option? Is she allowed to say no? This farm is isolated. The Master runs it with an iron fist. He has the power to choose her. He has the power to order the bride's young husband to wait outside, powerless to intervene. He has the power to expect the young bride to comply with his wishes. Is their subsequent intercourse voluntary? Is it an action that takes place between consenting adults? No physical force is used; does it qualify as rape?

Coetzee's novel contrasts the sex between the Master and the bride with an obvious rape. The narrator shoots her father the night of the lovemaking. Since she fired her shotgun at night and aimed, she tells us, at the ceiling, there is some implied innocence here. Even so, this action results in the Master's death and a major shakeup on the farm. The Master's death results in control of the farm landing in his daughter's lap; however, the everyday workings of the farm have not been shared with her. She has no idea how to run the farm. As the Master's daughter's control ebbs, Hendrik becomes more rebellious and daring. His newly acquired relative freedom leads to his rape of the mistress. Considering the indignities practiced on him by both the Master and the Mistress, perhaps

we can find it in our hearts to feel some sympathy for Hendrik. He has had no power whatsoever. His resentment could well build to the urge to rape, perhaps as payback. Yet Hendrik's action is not simply payback. It is an assertion of a newly acquired power. He now can rape the mistress. The Master is no longer there to protect her. The old ways are crumbling.

Moreover, the person who is raped, the Mistress, is hardly innocent. While she may be a virgin, she has abused Hendrik, as has her father; she has abused the bride, as has her father. She has murdered her father. She has even lied to the reader, for the novel begins with her claiming that she has axed her father and his new woman to death. It is not until a good deal later in the novel that she tells us she shot him but never meant it. Not only does she lie to us, she continues to ask Hendrik to do things he does not want to do, such as bury her father. She expects Hendrik and his bride to continue working on the farm even though she has no idea how to obtain her father's money, no idea even where the bank is, and no real recognition that Hendrik and his bride are usually paid. She expects them to continue to do her bidding with no compensation offered on her part simply because she is her father's daughter. When Hendrik rapes her, the novel may obliquely suggest that she deserves it.

This narrator complicates the situation even further. While she experiences the rape as a violent invasion of her person, she soon transforms it. She, too, now, crosses boundaries of race and class that she has spent years insisting upon and maintaining. She falls in love with the rapist. In subsequent nights, she begs him to return to her bed, although he makes clear his contempt for her and eventually leaves her alone on the farm. She begins to see the rape as an act of love. It seems, temporarily at least, to have softened her. If so, maybe, then, it is not so bad that she was raped. Maybe, it was even good for her. Since the novel ends, however, with her retrieving her father from the grave and, as she puts it, unfolding him at every meal to spoon soup into his rotting mouth, that the rape was good for her or cured her hardness hardly seems an appropriate conclusion.

The novel compounds this situation until it is difficult to find a single adequate response to any of the four characters.

The Master imposes his will on all those around him. Whatever he wants to do is done without opposition. The Master truly thinks he is in love with the bride. She is not rejecting, so perhaps she has responded to him in the positive way he desires. Maybe he is not such a bad man and is only going through some life crisis that makes him grab the bride in the interest of his own survival. What about the bride? The Master is a step up for her. Perhaps he will provide her protection. Perhaps he will provide security. We can understand the bride's rationalizing, perhaps, what is happening to her in this way. The daughter feels threatened by the pairing. Yet her father has never acted as though he loved her, so she has years of well-earned resentment behind her. When we hear enough of her history, we think that perhaps she has reason to shoot him, reason that is not self-serving. Moreover, neither does the daughter ever have a choice. She was born into a situation where her father had absolute control; she, too, could never say no. Hendrik has been loyal and hardworking; he has put up with abysmal treatment; he has finally earned enough to go away to find a bride. That the bride is taken from him by someone who already seems to have everything is cruel. That there is no appeal to be made and no apparatus through which to make an appeal seems desperately unjust. We can hardly be surprised when Hendrik turns around and does to the mistress what he believes was done to him. If we can at some level sympathize with the rapists as well as those who are raped, toward what kind of morality is Coetzee pointing? Is everything relative? Are all of our actions cruel? Are we always guilty and innocent simultaneously? What does he mean?

This rape and other rapes in Coetzee's novels seem to serve as an allegory of conditions in South Africa and of the dynamics of power. The rapes also seem to demonstrate the basis for relations between the sexes, between classes, and between races. Love has nothing to do with this allegory. It is a raw, alienated world. Relations with another person that penetrate our alienation and force us to consider another perspective are violent and demeaning.

The allegory that rape presents to us vibrates with language. When Coetzee was studying linguistics, he tells us in an essay entitled "How I Learned About America—and Africa—in

Texas," he reached the point of asking himself:

If a latter-day ark were ever commissioned to take the best that mankind had to offer and make a fresh start on the farther planets, . . . might we not leave Shakespeare's plays and Beethoven's quartets behind to make room for the last Aboriginal speaker of Dyrbal, even though that might be a fat old woman who scratched herself and smelled bad? It seemed an odd position for a student of English, the greatest imperial language of them all, to be falling into.

For Coetzee, the English language itself embodies imperialism. The word rape is jammed with implications of colonialism. In the *Oxford English Dictionary's* definitions of rape, sexual assault as a definition falls third or fourth in historical usage. What comes first is an obsolete sense of rape as an action done in a hurry, done in the present, done under pressure of some kind. The Master, the mistress, Hendrik, the bride, and South Africa — all in crisis — act hurriedly, under the pressure and emotion of circumstances. Rape is also a way of measuring and dividing land into districts. It is a way of dividing the spoils. Since South Africa's history is one of taking land from those who were there first and of constructing an elaborate bureaucracy to maintain that land, rape serves in this and other novels by Coetzee as an entirely appropriate metaphor. Rape, too, refers to the refuse of grapes from which the juice has been pressed and which is used to make vinegar. Rape, then, yields a bitterness that itself becomes an essence. Coetzee's novels suggest that he carefully chose rape for the allegory of his novels. The word and the act add depth to the allegory he has crafted.

Even though he creates such allegories, which serve to convert a violent act into an abstraction of political and other power-laden systems, he will not allow us to inhabit the abstract universe for very long.

In "The Harms of Pornography: Catherine MacKinnon," Coetzee admonishes Catharine MacKinnon for her work on pornography because, as he sees it, she treats pornography, as well as rape, as "political issue[s]" rather than addressing them on "moral grounds" (*Giving* 77). This admonition would

suggest that Coetzee objects to the immorality of all that is involved in the act of rape, whether that rape be of the land or of people. We should base our disapproval of rape on morality, Coetzee insists, rather than on analysis or abstraction. But how can we do that when his events provide us with no clear morality? Each of the characters has a point and a reason. Each of the characters seems justified in some way. We cannot condemn them out of hand. Nor can we condemn the characters in his later and more subtle novels. So what is this morality he wants us to turn to?

Coetzee's novels and essays point us in several directions that usefully inform the question of morality. First, there is a constant in that the central character, the narrator, semi-consciously chooses to be unaware of the dynamics of the system in which he participates at the start of the novel. He or she is vaguely oblivious. That is, Coetzee's characters have no real awareness of the evils being perpetrated around them until these evils catch up with them and involve them directly. The characters know of the wrongs at some level but choose to ignore them until the wrongs turn on them. The Magistrate in *Waiting for the Barbarians* has generally gone on a fishing trip whenever representatives of the government have come to his town to investigate the barbarians' activity. At the start of this novel, he has for once decided, for no apparent reason, to stay. This decision puts him in a position, apparently for the first time, to see what goes on in these investigations. It puts him in direct contact with the instruments and dynamics of torture. He can never unknow them. Nor can he unknow his participation in the ruling order that allows for torture. While at the start of the novel he seems like a reasonable and decent person, especially when he protests the torture, the novel reveals aspects of his past and his relations with women that give us pause. He has used his power to acquire women. He continues to do so, even when the official who supervises the torture, Colonel Joll, is in town. The magistrate differentiates himself from the extremes of the torturer, but, like the Master in *In the Heart of the Country*, the magistrate leaves the working women and the barbarian woman little choice when he chooses them to come to his bed.

Similarly, in *Disgrace*, David Lurie does not consciously

understand the implications of his actions. He visits a prostitute every couple of weeks, a practice which he is satisfied has been his successful way of handling the demands of sex. When his prostitute disappears, he turns to a young female student and courts her. Soon, he has made love to her. Not long after that, she has him before the administration on charges of harassment, rape, and abuse. Lurie cannot understand her position because, after all, he loves her. He wonders how she can possibly interpret their lovemaking as an invasion, as inappropriate, as traumatic? He loves her. He discounts the reactions of others because his own feelings seem so very right to him.

Once Lurie loses his job, he visits his daughter on the isolated farm she has chosen to make her home. During this post-apartheid visit, several young black men lock Lurie in the bathroom and rape his daughter. Lurie tries to rescue his daughter by protesting, screaming, pounding on the door of the bathroom. The young men come in, pour lighter fluid on his head, and throw a match on him. He ends up alive but disfigured; his daughter survives the rape but becomes deeply depressed and soon finds she is pregnant. Again, the problems of black and white South Africa are linked together through future generations as well as in the past. Lurie argues with his daughter to take any number of actions to improve her situation. Instead, she marries the black uncle of one of the men who raped her, so she will be seeing her rapist in one way or another for the rest of her life. Lurie's daughter seems to accept it as penance for all the harm apartheid has done. Lurie himself, meanwhile, continues to work on his opera about Byron's true love, a woman who is silent, mute, and an object for Byron's own fantasies.

Lurie comes into some halting awareness, as does the magistrate. He never can see the harm he may have done his student. He can, however, see the harm that has been done to his daughter. He can see that a post-apartheid South Africa is violent, cruel, and unjust, too. Shifting power does not necessarily solve anything.

With the possible exception of Michael K., each of Coetzee's central characters has been complicit in the evils of his or her society. Each has benefited from his or her position within the

ruling class. Each, even if disapproving or embarrassed by the actions of the government, has turned a blind eye to the horrors of apartheid, of tyranny, of the torture chamber because each, until the opening of the novel, has been allowed to live his or her own life relatively undisturbed. But the life that character leads is a life of complicity, a life tainted by a refusal to acknowledge participation in evil and a life tainted by the character's own silence.

In "How I Learned about America—and Africa—in Texas," one of his few essays in which he reveals anything about himself, Coetzee notes that a friend asked him when he was in America, "If you dislike the [Vietnam] war so much . . . why don't you leave?" To this question, Coetzee responds, "Complicity was not the problem—complicity was far too complex a notion for the time being—the problem was with knowing what was being done. It was not obvious where one went to escape knowledge." This response suggests several ideas in regard to Coetzee and morality. One is the idea that all human beings are complicit. He claims he could not even consider his complicity at that time, but it is an idea that permeates his work.

Coetzee gave the Tanner Lectures at Princeton University in 1997-1998. His lectures took the form of fiction, a short work entitled *The Lives of Animals*. In this work, Elizabeth Costello, an elderly and famous novelist, has been invited to speak at a university where her son is a physics professor. Instead of speaking about fiction or her own writing, she delivers a series of talks on the barbarity with which we treat animals. In this series of lectures, she attacks a good number of the rationalizations for the mass slaughter of animals, ranging from considering the ability to reason as a confirmation of human superiority to comparing anyone who maintains silence to the Germans who said nothing but knew of the slaughter going on during the Holocaust. She asserts that "anyone who says that life matters less to animals than it does to us has not held in his hands an animal fighting for its life. . . . When you say that the fight lacks a dimension of intellectual or imaginative horror, I agree. It is not the mode of being of animals to have an intellectual horror: their whole being is in the living flesh" (65). Animals exist, feel, and think on a different plane from

humans. That difference does not make us superior, Costello claims.

The audience erupts into an uproar over her presentations. Her son is embarrassed. Her daughter-in-law wants her in an institution. And yet she has outlined the very points Coetzee presents in the rapes of his novels. Another perspective cannot seem to penetrate our being. We work hard to overlay our thinking on others, we work hard to define others as inferior so that we can torture and abuse them, we find ways to justify our actions through philosophy, science, and other studies. None of this changes Costello's argument that we are acting immorally. By being silent when animals are tortured for scientific experiments, for slaughter, for production, we are complicit. We are participating and we are approving in our silence, in the same way that we perpetrate and condone in our silence any atrocities committed on the planet, from rape to torture to censorship to murder.

So, complicity is at the core of Coetzee's morality. Yet another and contrary position is that there is no escape. We can see this in Coetzee's life choices. He tried to come to the land of freedom; he tried to escape the horrors of South Africa. What happened? He ended up in America during the Vietnam War. There is no escape. And there is no escape from knowledge. Once a person knows how oppression works, what its dynamics are, and that one lives in and among it, that one benefits from it, that all people and all countries practice it, where does one go? There is no escape. It is the human condition. If there were no escape, however, it would seem that one's complicity in atrocity is diminished. Yet we are outraged by the horrors we observe. Are these two positions reconcilable? Not in Coetzee's world. The very machinery of the hell he creates depends upon our screams of outrage in the midst of our creating unbearable conditions from which there is no exit.

Coetzee goes further. The most damning of Coetzee's moral assumptions, it seems to me, is that human beings commit atrocities simply because they can. The mistress in *In the Heart of the Country* informs us that "life in the desert teaches nothing if not that all things are permissible" (39). The mother and lecturer in *The Lives of Animals* notes, "Each day [is] a fresh holocaust, yet, as far as I can see, our moral being is untouched.

We can do anything, it seems, and come away clean'' (35). Coetzee makes this point again and again throughout his work. We commit evil because we are capable of it and because, when there is a fresh land, a clean slate, a helpless population, there is nothing to stop us. What we do with our lives is cause pain and suffering to others.

And yet all of Coetzee's characters yearn for the freedom to be left alone, to live a simple life in peace. Alienation, in this sense, is a positive thing. Freedom, in this sense, is positive. If we can be left alone, we can be productive, we can be relatively kind, we can be at peace. Michael K., in *The Life and Times of Michael K*, is born a victim and continues to be a target throughout the novel. He is born with a hare lip and mild retardation, and even his mother cannot find it in her heart to love him. When she finds she is dying, she asks him to take her to her homeland, a farm somewhere inland. With no money and no food, he walks and finally, after she has died, carries her to this home. He understands at once what she loved about it. It is isolated; it is free. Times are hard; he has no money. He stays on the farm, acquires a handful of seeds, and grows squash, giving each plant a spoonful of water each day. The army finds him and accuses him of feeding the enemy. They destroy his garden and imprison him in a concentration camp. At the end of the novel, starved, sick, yet still planning to find a way back to the farm, Michael K. tells us:

He would clear the rubble from the mouth of the [well] shaft, he would bend the handle of the teaspoon in a loop and tie the string to it, he would lower it down the shaft deep into the earth, and when he brought it up there would be water in the bowl of the spoon; and in that way, he would say, one can live. (184)

If that is all Coetzee's characters can expect, they will make it enough. Even a mere teaspoon of water is enough for life. Yet this desire for a life where one is left alone is a dream. Michael K. imagines returning to the farm, imagines finding water, imagines being left alone. From what Coetzee has told us of his past experiences, it is doubtful that the dream and reality will ever align.

All of Coetzee's characters know at base that there is some

decent way to live. Their problem—and ours—lies in determining what it is we can do that is decent. If loving another person is perceived by that person to be rape, what is it that we are able to get right? How do we live a moral life when all of our actions, negative and positive, are an imposition and burden on others? The outrage Coetzee inspires in us suggests that we know what is wrong. The problem lies in knowing what can be right that does not hurt others. The best option he leaves us is life itself. Life itself is the positive act, but that comes to us beyond our moral or physical control. Our outrage at the ill-treatment of others or ourselves leads us to make demands that our behavior be moral. All that we do within it, Coetzee suggests, whether we are driven by desire or structures of morality, whether we are driven by the will to do good or evil, produces suffering for ourselves or others.

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## Colophon

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