

Rape as violence in Coetzee's *Disgrace*

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Abstract:

*David imagines the rapists taking pleasure in the fact that they force Lucy in her place, who was then too ashamed to seek help. This is an example of David's growing awareness of other men's pejorative attitudes towards women. Perspectives like these reinforce David's growing sense of feminism as the novel progresses. David imagines the satisfaction that the intruders will get from not being charged with rape - and also from beating Lucy into a silence and submissiveness. Suffering in *Disgrace* isn't about physical pain. Perhaps more importantly, experiencing feelings of shame and disgrace constitutes an even more powerful kind of violence. Lucy seems to get over her physical injuries, but the emotional injuries left from her rape will have a significantly longer-lasting consequences.*

Keywords: *Coetzee, Disgrace, Rape, Violence, Shame*

Not rape, not quite that, but undesired nevertheless, undesired to the core. As though she had decided to go slack, die within herself for the duration, like a rabbit when the jaws of the fox close on its neck.
p. 25

This quote refers to the time David has intercourse with Melanie at her flat and she is also described as holding back. Parallels

between this situation and the later rape of his daughter may be drawn as it Melanie does not reveal whether she experiences the seduction as rape. Although she files a complaint against him, we and David never discover the details of her complaint and she does not speak about this here or elsewhere in the novel. Because of her lack of testimony, David's morality is depicted as ambiguous and nebulous.

Scandal. A pity that must be his theme, but he is in no state to improvise. p. 31 in this instance, Melanie has appeared in class with her boyfriend (Ryan) and David has already planned to talk about the theme of scandal in relation to Byron. This situation is an example of the awkward humor that Coetzee uses from time to time, and this acts as some comic relief to the later intense action.

That is how it begins. 38

This sentence comes immediately after Melanie's father, Isaacs, has confronted David publicly about his relationship as a teacher with Melanie. There is an element of foreshadowing of events with this line ('That is how it begins') as the readers are introduced to the idea that a downhill spiral of events is about to happen to David.

Confessions, apologies: why this thirst for abasement? A hush falls. They circle around him like hunters who have cornered a

strange beast and do not know how to finish it off. 56

At this point in the novel, David has just emerged from the inquiry and has been asked by a girl with a tape recorder if he feels remorse. The inquiry and later media interest in his situation highlights the public demand, which has been fed by the media, for the confessional response of remorse and regret.

It reminds me too much of Mao's China. Recantation, self-criticism, public apology. p. 66

David is explaining to Lucy why he would not accept the idea of counselling to help his defense with the inquiry, and the analogy he draws with Mao's China highlights how he regards this as a form of a show trial with no justice. He also goes on to say that he sees these as 'puritanical times' and is depicted at this point as questioning the moral self-righteousness of those he has been indicted by.

What was ignoble about the Kenilworth spectacle was that the poor dog had begun to hate its own nature. It no longer needed to be beaten. It was ready to punish itself. At that point it would have been better to shoot it. p. 90

David is referring to the dog that used to be beaten for reacting aggressively when a bitch was in the area. This story outlines his concern for the voicing of desire and is also a means for criticizing violence to animals.

Too many people, too few things. What there is must go into circulation, so that everyone can have a chance to be happy for

a day. That is the theory; hold to the theory and to the comforts of theory. Not human evil, just a vast circulatory system, to whose workings pity and terror are irrelevant. That is how one must see life in this country: in its schematic aspect. Otherwise one could go mad. Cars, shoes; women too. There must be some niche in the system for women and what happens to them. p. 98

This is David's response following the rape of his daughter, the attack on him and the robbery of her home. He is depicted as attempting to adopt a soft and non-judgmental position despite the damage that has been incurred. It is also a position that recognizes that women's bodies are a part of this currency system.

More and more he is convinced that English is an unfit medium for the truth of South Africa. Stretches of English code whole sentences long have thickened, lost their articulations, their articulateness, their articulateness. Like a dinosaur expiring and settling in the mud, the language has stiffened. p. 117

The inadequacy of language has been a significant aspect in the novel in that David, a Professor of Communications, is seen to have difficulties with speaking about major topics such as Apartheid, his daughter's sexuality and the rape of her. At this point, the inadequacy of the English language is made specific and David shows a recognition that South Africa needs to move beyond its colonial history (and which he embodies in many ways).

You behave as if everything I do is part of the story of your life. You are the main

character, I am a minor character who doesn't make an appearance until halfway through.p. 198

Lucy's anger with David is expressed here as she questions the minor role allotted to her as the daughter of the main character. This quotation highlights the self-reflexivity of this novel, as it reminds us that this is a fiction we are reading where Lucy is a minor character who appear in the middle.

For a man of his age, fifty-two, divorced, he has, to his mind, solved the problem of sex rather well."

This quote gives us two ways to look at David's sex life at the beginning of the novel. We see that sex has been an issue for David, and that he's "solved" it by getting into a habit of visiting a prostitute. Doesn't it make it seem that, at this point, sex for David is a habit?

"Not rape, not quite that, but undesired nevertheless, undesired to the core. As though she had decided to go slack, die within herself for the duration. [...] So that everything done to her might be done, as it were, far away."

In *Disgrace*, sex tends to be a violent act Even though Melanie doesn't explicitly fight David off, he can still tell that she doesn't want it. Whether or not it can be construed as rape is something that worries David.

"I was not myself. I was no longer a fifty-year-old divorcé at a loose end. I became a servant of Eros."

Here, David explains to the committee just why he was so besotted by Melanie. She bred passion in him. At first it seems like

he's giving himself a way to argue temporary insanity ("I was not myself, your honor"), but we know from his guilty plea that David isn't really out there to make excuses. Instead, he's confessing that Melanie had the ability to bewitch him. Still, he blames it on Eros (Cupid) instead of taking personal responsibility for what he did.

"When it comes to men and sex, David, nothing surprises me anymore. Maybe, for men, hating the woman makes sex more exciting. [...]Pushing the knife in; exiting afterwards, leaving the body behind covered in blood - doesn't it feel like murder, like getting away with murder?"

One of the major ways that we encounter sex in *Disgrace* is as a tool of violence and domination. Lucy gives David a really unsettling image of what sex can be like from a woman's view, and it seems clear at this point that David hasn't thought about it in such terms.

"He is a father, that is his fate, and as a father grows older he turns more and more—it cannot be helped—toward his daughter. She becomes his second salvation, the bride of his youth reborn."

Throughout the novel, David has inner conflicts with what his relationship with Lucy actually is. Since she's a grownup now, the dynamic between father and daughter is no longer the same as it was when Lucy was a kid. As a man getting on in years, David has to come to depend on Lucy in new ways than he's used to.

One can punish a dog, it seems to me, for an offence like chewing a slipper. [...] But

desire is another story. No animal will accept the justice of being punished for following its instincts.

David compares his own sexual instincts as a man to those of a dog and tells a story of a dog who was beaten for going after the bitches he liked. This is a way of him saying, I'm a guy. You cannot blame me for following my instincts.

"No, I have not sought counseling nor do I intend to seek it. I am a grown man. I am not receptive to being counseled. I am beyond the reach of counseling."

David doesn't just seem hostile to the idea of being counseled; he seems outright insulted by the suggestion. His retort? "I'm a grown man." The thought of being counseled is framed in part as an insult to his masculinity.

They will read that they are being sought for robbery and assault and nothing else. Too ashamed, they will say to each other, too ashamed to tell, and they will chuckle luxuriously, recollecting their exploit."

Here's another example of the way that male/female dichotomies play out in *Disgrace*. David imagines the satisfaction that the intruders will get from not being charged with rape - and also from beating Lucy into a silence and submissiveness.

"Like a stain the story is spreading across the district. Not her story to spread but theirs: they are its owners. How they put her in her place, how they showed her what a woman was for. "

Once more, we get vision of the perspectives of characters we don't actually talk to. Here,

David imagines the rapists taking pleasure in the fact that they force Lucy in her place, who was then too ashamed to seek help. This is an example of David's growing awareness of other men's negative attitudes towards women. Perspectives like these reinforce David's growing sense of feminism as the novel progresses.

"She would rather hide her face, and he knows why. Because of the disgrace. Because of the shame. That is what their visitors have achieved; that is what they have done to this confident, modern young woman."

Suffering in *Disgrace* isn't about physical pain. Perhaps more importantly, experiencing feelings of shame and disgrace constitutes an even more powerful kind of violence. Lucy seems to get over her physical injuries, but the emotional injuries left from her rape will have a significantly longer-lasting consequences.

"The blood of life is leaving his body and despair is taking its place, despair that is like a gas, odorless, tasteless, without nourishment. You breathe it in, your limbs relax, and you cease to care, even at the moment when the steel touches your throat."

Suffering doesn't just have to be a product of feeling either physically or emotionally. Sometimes not feeling can arouse feelings of suffering. For David, despair is kind of like an invisible, tasteless, undetectable movement that takes away the joy of living.

Works cited:

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