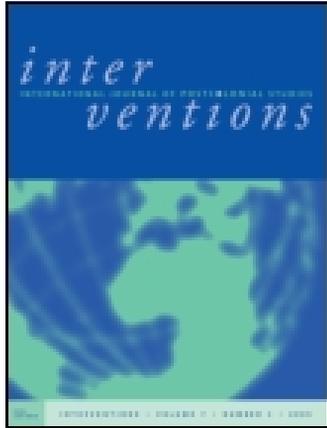


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Peter D. McDonald

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articles

DISGRACE EFFECTS

Peter D. McDonald
St Hugh's College, University of Oxford, UK

ANC

Disgrace

ethics of reading

J. M. Coetzee

millennial

nation

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Since its publication in July 1999, *Disgrace* has provoked intense debates, especially within South Africa, the most significant of which centres on the question of race. A number of commentators have found it offensive, while others, most notably the ANC, have interpreted it in more positive but still racialized terms. This essay considers these responses and asks whether or not the award-winning novel can survive the most suspicious of readings.

.....

When the Labour MP Gerald Kaufman declared *Disgrace* the winner of the Booker Prize in October 1999, he called it 'a millennial book because it takes us through the 20th century into a new century in which the source of power is shifting away from Western Europe'. It was also, he noted, 'an allegory about what is happening to the human race in the post-colonial era' (*New York Times* 1999). Six months later, when it won the Commonwealth Writers Prize, Shashi Deshpande, chair of that panel, described it as 'a complex story' that 'embraces with remarkable skill the politics of a new nation', adding that

the ‘unflinching honesty with which [it] confronts complicated moral issues makes it a work of great significance for our times’ (*Calgary Herald* 2000). Whether or not Coetzee intended *Disgrace* to be a ‘millennial book’, these very different endorsements from London and New Delhi certainly made it so. This was not just because they invited readers to think about it in certain, notably unlitrary, ways, but because they made it into *the* millennial literary event. It became a bestseller and briefly the focus of international media attention. Yet if these accolades gave the novel a special pertinence at an epochal moment, they also set it on a collision course with ‘our times’. This is what really made *Disgrace* a ‘millennial book’.

Though the novel rapidly earned a status that put it, as one British reviewer commented, ‘at the frontier of world literature’ (*Sunday Telegraph* 1999), this should not be taken to mean it miraculously rose above its South Africanness to be reborn as an expression of free-floating, universal values. It does, however, entail that it is not wholly contained by its South Africanness, since it circulates, like many contemporary novels in English, simultaneously within myriad public spheres, where it serves and resists multiple interests and has various, often unpredictable, effects. It may, in other words, be a story set in South Africa and written by a South African, but it is not *ipso facto* a ‘South African novel’. That is only one of many possible accounts we could give of it, and a particularly tricky one at that. A nation-centred reading would be problematic if, for instance, it underestimated the fraught and wholly ideological history of the category ‘South African literature’, or if it implied that *Disgrace* in some way speaks *for* the nation as such. Characteristically, Coetzee, who has consistently posed the question of his own writerly authority, took particular pains to pre-empt this last possibility. He gave the story a historically significant *regional* setting – it takes place mainly in Cape Town and Grahamstown; that is, in key centres of what was the British ‘Cape Colony’ – and he included self-reflexive comments on the bankruptcy of English. In a disarming gesture, directed as much at the self-assurance of the global language as at readers eager for transparent representational truth, he has David Lurie think at one point that ‘English is an unfit medium for the truth of South Africa’ (Coetzee 1999: 117). Most obviously, however, he chose to filter the story mostly through a near-dead white male whose South Africanness is, if anything, debatable.

The trouble is none of this counts for much in the real world of reading where globalization has done little to weaken the ties that bind culture to nation, and where *Disgrace* is more often than not presented as a ‘South African novel’. This is unsurprising. In the west, the understanding of literature, as a category of discourse, is still strongly inflected by a legacy of nineteenth-century nationalist thinking. Where traditional instruction in ‘English literature’ has been abandoned, it has frequently been replaced by a catalogue of literatures in English still defined nationally (Indian,

Australian, etc.). Moreover, as a W. H. Smith advertisement for the Vintage paperback edition of *Disgrace* implied, definitive national statements about countries like South Africa are good for marketing purposes. Above a reproduction of the book cover – the mongrel dog in a desolate landscape – a large headline read: ‘In South Africa things are never simply black and white.’ This was, however, a relatively innocuous case of restrictive territorialization. Far more damaging were the various readings of it as a ‘South African novel’ of a deeply racialized kind, made by the ANC and other South African commentators.

In an oral submission to the South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC) of inquiry into racism in the media, made on 5 April 2000, the ANC used *Disgrace* as an historical witness to the persistence of racism among white South Africans. In it, they claimed, Coetzee ‘reported on’ the still pervasive idea of the black as a ‘faithless, immoral, uneducated, incapacitated primitive child’, a version of white racism they traced back to J. B. M. Hertzog, the father of ‘so-called pure Afrikaner nationalism’ (SAHRC 2000b: 123). Their argument centred on Lucy’s rape; or, more accurately, on Lucy and her father David’s subsequent conversation about the meaning of this brutal violation. The submission, delivered by Jeff Radebe, Minister of Public Enterprises, began by citing Lucy’s bafflement at the personal nature of the attack, and went on to quote David’s two attempts to console her. In the first, her father explains that it was not personal, ‘it was history speaking through them’ (Coetzee 1999: 156); while, in the second, he acknowledges her justifiable sense of fear. This, it should be said, does not go down well with Lucy. Throughout the conversation, David’s presumptive egoism and patriarchal guilt irritate her and, at one point, she shocks him by identifying him with her predatory attackers. ‘Maybe, for men, hating the woman makes sex more exciting’, she says. ‘You are a man, you ought to know’ (p. 158). This reference to their differences in gender and sexuality only widens the generational gulf between them.

In the submission, David’s claim to understand her fears is immediately followed by his private thoughts about her attackers once their conversation is over.

They do rape. He thinks of the three visitors driving away in the not-too-old Toyota, the back seat piled with household goods, their penises, their weapons, tucked warm and satisfied between their legs – *purring* is the word that comes to him. (p. 159)

After this Radebe returned to Lucy’s own earlier declaration about her attackers – ‘I think I am in their territory’ – and her first, tentative reading of them which goes some way towards explaining why she refuses to follow her father’s advice to leave the country: ‘They see themselves as debt

collectors, tax collectors. Why should I be allowed to live here without paying? Perhaps that is what they tell themselves' (p. 158). This prefigures her final words in the novel, with which the quoted passages in the submission also end. Having, as Radebe put it, accepted 'that to secure her personal protection she might have to marry one of her black farm workers and see to [*sic*, probably 'cede'] the land to him', she chooses to live 'like a dog' (Coetzee 1999: 205). He glossed this by saying 'Lucy keeps many dogs in her kennels' (SAHRC 2000b: 124).

As these passages reveal, the ANC claimed, Coetzee 'represents as brutally as he can the white people's perception of the post-apartheid black man' (*ibid.*). In his depiction of Lucy and David's response to the rapists, they suggested, we see Hertzog's 'primitive child . . . without the restraining leash around the neck that the European had been obliged to place in the interest of both the native and society'. This sounds like praise for Coetzee as a clear-eyed witness to, and particularly astute analyst of, white racism after apartheid. Yet Radebe then went on to make a further, less straightforward claim, echoing Lucy's final words:

It is suggested that in these circumstances it might be better that our white compatriots should immigrate [presumably 'emigrate' in the original] because to be in post [apartheid?] South Africa it is to [be] in their territory as a consequence of which the white will lose their cards, their weapons, their property, their rights, their dignity. The white women would have to sleep with the barbaric black men. (*ibid.*)

Here the ANC's response becomes less certain, since the vague clause 'It is suggested' obscures any clear sense of agency. Is this a suggestion on the part of the characters, the novel, or perhaps even Coetzee himself? Though the larger context of the submission would favour a reading that identifies this with the characters, whose apparently typical perception is, for the ANC, a key element of the 'subjective' form of racism (*ibid.*: 122), a further formulation complicates matters again. Having discussed the rape episode, Radebe remarked that the 'category of white fears emerged at the time it did [the early 1990s] . . . because it became clear to white South Africa' that Hertzog's 'child' was 'about to be let loose leading to the inevitable consequences which J. M. Coetzee accounts [presumably recounts]' (*ibid.*: 126). Here the phrasing puts Coetzee's neutrality, as a mere depicter of white racism, in some doubt.

For all these uncertainties, it seems clear that the ANC's primary aim was to use the novel as a powerful witness to contemporary realities. This view is strengthened if we situate their response in the larger context of the media inquiry. The SAHRC, the guardian of the 1996 constitution, launched its investigation into racism in the media in November 1998. Its aims were, among others, to encourage a national debate and to enable the media to

‘understand how their work is viewed by South Africans’ (SAHRC 1999: 6). In this context, the logic of the ANC’s opening gambit was clear: using *Disgrace* as an impressive testament to the persistence of racist stereotypes served their primary interest, which was to show that the same prejudices were, unsurprisingly, at work in day-to-day journalism. The novel, in other words, confirmed their general sense of the challenges raised for the inquiry by the way post-apartheid South Africa was being portrayed in the national and international media.

If the ANC’s praise was at best heavy-handed and at worst ambivalent, some other South African commentators were unequivocally hostile. The journalist Aggrey Klaaste, writing in the *Sowetan*, felt ‘its substance is that of a typically disgruntled Afrikaner’ and found the ‘story of black men raping a white woman . . . quite offensive’. He also thought Coetzee ‘totally cynical’ (*Sowetan* 2000: 9). The most significant criticism, however, came from Jakes Gerwel, the distinguished professor of literature and Director-General of the President’s Office under Mandela. In a carefully qualified and respectful article, published in the Afrikaans weekly *Rapport* on 13 February 2000 under the title ‘Is *this* the right image of our nation?’, he praised Coetzee as a compelling chronicler of ‘the dislocation [*onbehuisheid*] of the white-in-Africa’, but went on to express dismay at the novel’s portrayal of the ‘almost barbaric post-colonial claims of black Africans’, at its representation of ‘mixed-race [*bruin*] characters’ as ‘whores, seducers, complainers, conceited accusers’, and at its ‘exclusion of the possibility of civilized reconciliation’ (Rapport 2000; my translation).

The timing of Gerwel’s intervention is significant. He was writing just after hearing Thabo Mbeki’s inaugural ‘state of the nation’ address, delivered on 4 February, which he thought ‘outstanding and well-considered’. With the international success of *Disgrace* very much on his mind, he wondered if Mbeki’s ‘elevation’ in that speech of a ‘racist anecdote into a national symbol’ was not ‘stylistically and idiomatically calculated’. To focus on the challenges ahead in the ongoing struggle against racism, Mbeki had quoted at some length an e-mail by an unnamed white engineer, intercepted by the Food and Allied Workers Union a month earlier, which set out, as the author put it, ‘to summarise what the Kaffirs have done to stuff up this country since they came into power’ (Mbeki 2000). After various inflammatory statements about political corruption and economic mismanagement, the e-mail turned to crime:

Our girlfriends/wives are in constant threat of being brutally raped by some AIDS infected Kaffir (or gang of Kaffirs). . . . Everyday someone you know is either robbed, assaulted, hijacked or murdered. . . . Half these black bastards have bought their (drivers) licences from corrupt traffic cops. . . . All I am saying is that AIDS isn’t working fast enough!!!

This brought Gerwel back to *Disgrace* with only more doubts: ‘That such racists exist, is no surprise; that the nation can be typified thereby, is a question.’

In this context Coetzee’s supposed report on white racism indeed appears dangerously uncertain in its implications. Stripped of its challengingly complex rhetoric, *Disgrace* does, after all, depict at the level of story not just gang rape, but black-on-white assault, burglary, and police incompetence. By giving privileged space to the idea of the white as victim, and by using the colonial nightmare *topos* – the violation of white women – it can also be seen to play up to ‘white fears’. Allowing for its rhetoric is not necessarily to the novel’s advantage. The narrative form, a present tense version of free indirect style, makes it difficult to say, conclusively, that all this is simply a staged depiction of a self-indicting white male. This puts the reader, especially (but not exclusively) the black, gay, or woman reader, in the uneasy, even provocative, position of being obliged to see the story through a disturbingly alien gaze without having any secure sense of the boundary between character and narrator. The fact that we are in Lurie’s verbal world is, at times, signalled only incidentally. This is how we first see Lucy, for example: ‘For a moment he does not recognise her. A year has passed, and she has put on weight. Her hips and breasts are now (he searches for the right word) ample’ (Coetzee 1999: 59). At other, more decisive moments a final attribution of authority – who speaks? – is difficult to establish conclusively. This is how one of Lurie’s encounters with Melanie Isaacs, the young student he abuses, is described: ‘Strange love! Yet from the quiver of Aphrodite, goddess of the foaming waves, no doubt about that. . . . Not rape, not quite that, but undesired nevertheless, undesired to the core. . . . A mistake, a huge mistake’ (p. 25). Given this, it is not hard to see the grounds for a suspicious reading. As Gerwel implied, *Disgrace* as story lends itself to being seen as a grim ‘state of the nation’ address, which exists in an altogether more precarious relationship to the racist coverage of South Africa in local and international media than the ANC wished to claim.

The question is: can the novel survive such suspicions? Does it offer enough resistance, even at the level of story, to racialized readings, whether praiseworthy, like the ANC’s, or more adversarial, like Gerwel’s? One way into these questions is to examine what such readings assume, starting with the idea that *Disgrace* is an allegory, an assumption Kaufman shared. For him the novel is about the decline of the west, an ‘allegory about what is happening to the human race in the post-colonial era’. No doubt, on this reading, Lurie stands for washed-up western culture. For the ANC and Gerwel, it is an allegory of ‘white people’s perception of the post-apartheid black man’. Here Lurie represents racist white South Africans. The second assumption, which is distinct from but potentially related to the first, is that the novel makes sense mainly as a story expressing or reflecting some reality beyond it.

It speaks *of* but also possibly *to* and *for* ‘white fears’, as the ANC and Gerwel variously suggested, or *for* South Africa as the W. H. Smith advertisement implied. While readings based on these assumptions might feel perfectly natural, even inevitable, it is possible to ask what effects *Disgrace* would begin to produce if read without them.

On the face of it nothing would change. Lurie would still be a white South African, Lucy would still be his daughter, and her attackers would still be black. The rape would also remain a disturbing pivotal moment in the story. At the same time, however, everything would change. In the first place, we would need to make sense of the characters, not as types in an allegory that constantly points beyond itself, but as complex individuals caught in an intricate network of evolving relationships that constitute the drama of the story. Yet we would also have to recognize that they are not absolutely singular. They are individuals whose identities are ineluctably shaped by ties based on gender, generation, sexuality, nationality, and ethnicity. On this analysis, Lurie is not just white. He is always at the same time middle-aged, heterosexual, male, probably Jewish, etc. Likewise, Lucy’s attackers are not just black. They are male, heterosexual, etc. Second, if we resist the strong temptation to read the novel as a story that bears witness to history, we would need to understand key events functionally, rather than expressively or mimetically. On this sort of reading the rape, for instance, would feature not as a sign of the ‘realities of South African life’ – however horrific its rape statistics may be – nor as a manifestation of ‘white fears’. Its justification would lie primarily in its *narrative* function measured in part by its impact on the novel’s central characters.

In David’s case, the rape marks a turning point in his always imperfect self-understanding. With Lucy’s prompting, it enables him to see his own complicity, as a predatory heterosexual man, with the black rapists about whom he had originally been horrified: ‘Lucy’s intuition is right after all: he does understand; he can, if he concentrates, if he loses himself, be there, be the men, inhabit them, fill them with the ghost of himself. The question is, does he have it in him to be the woman?’ (p. 160).

Lucy’s emphatic answer is no. Forced to see beyond the ties of race and family, David discovers that he and his daughter are not ‘on the same side’ (p. 159). This recognition of the depth of the gender divide, and the limits of his sympathetic imagination, tellingly precipitates his dubious attempt at a private apology for his treatment of Melanie Isaacs. Though it is never clear just how well he has grasped this, his abuse of her mirrors, and is mirrored by, Lucy’s rape. To Melanie’s family, especially to her mother and sister, he clumsily expresses the remorse he refused to show at the public inquiry, where he nonetheless freely admitted his guilt. Incurably feeling the ‘current of desire’ – he is captivated by Melanie’s beautiful younger sister – he ‘gets to his knees’ before the two women ‘with careful ceremony’ and ‘touches his

forehead to the floor’ (p. 173). With this wordless gesture he perhaps – again we cannot know for sure – comes closest to acknowledging the ‘pain he has caused’ and the ‘long history of exploitation’ of which his abuse is a part (p. 53). These were the two things Farodia Rassool, a key member of the university disciplinary committee, wished him to confess publicly. This private gesture also reflects his new appreciation of the extent to which his male Romantic literary heroes might have legitimized patriarchal exploitation. After his conversation about the rape with Lucy, he thinks Byron ‘looks very old-fashioned indeed’ (p. 160). The opera about the poet’s life to which he dedicates himself in the final part of the novel can, in other words, be seen in part as another attempt at redress on David’s part. Testing his daughter’s claims about the limits of his imagination, he tries to see the woman’s side of the story by putting Teresa Guiccioli, one of Byron’s spurned mistresses, at its centre. For all this, we can still rightly ask just how much the rape has taught David, since his understanding of redress remains at best partial, even at the end.

On this reading, the rape has different consequences for Lucy, which also, however, centre on the ethics of redress – indeed, more convincingly so in her case. It serves, above all, to give her decision to stay in South Africa and on the farm, which her father never fully understands, the weight the story demands. As an expression not simply of the racist ‘history of wrong’ to which her father alludes, but also of the patriarchal exploitation he fails at first to see, the rape is overdetermined when seen from Lucy’s perspective (p. 156). Her sexuality is also relevant. Soon after the rape, David, already feeling an ‘outsider’ as a man, is reported as thinking: ‘Raping a lesbian worse than raping a virgin: more of a blow. Did they know what they were up to, those men? Had the word got around?’ (p. 105). Establishing an intricate tangle of ties based on race, gender, and sexuality, the rape separates Lucy from David still further by bringing her identity as a lesbian woman sharply into focus. No simple idea of ‘sides’ suffices in her case. If the rape makes sense as an act of revenge on the part of her attackers for the horrors of apartheid, it can also be understood in patriarchal terms. It is a story of ‘how they put her in her place, how they showed her what a woman was for’ (p. 115). Both exploiter and exploited, Lucy, unlike her father, plays many parts in the numerous histories of violation to which the novel alludes.

Her decision to accept Petrus’s patronage is, then, in part a reflection of the way in which she *chooses* to see the rape. (The fact that the *narrative* insists that it can be understood in many ways relativizes her final interpretation of it, crucially distancing the reader from her perspective.) The rapists are, as she puts it, ‘debt collectors’; and so she cedes the farm to Petrus, not only for her own protection, but also as a gesture of redress. Reversing the colonial order of the South African farm, she elects to become a ‘*bywoner*’, a tenant on Petrus’s land (p. 204). Characteristically, her father misreads this

as an act of ‘private salvation’. ‘Do you’, he asks, ‘hope you can expiate the crimes of the past by suffering in the present?’ For Lucy this is further evidence of his patriarchal blindness. ‘Guilt and salvation are abstractions’, she replies. ‘I don’t act in terms of abstractions’ (p. 112). Always more embodied than her intellectual father, she quietly makes her private life public by establishing new ties across the racial divide; and, in what amounts to an austere, quasi-religious way of dispossession, she negotiates a postcolonial future for herself and the mixed-race child she is carrying. Without cards, weapons, property, rights, or dignity, she chooses to live ‘like a dog’. This, in a novel preoccupied with the lives of animals, and, as importantly, with the pernicious metaphors of bestiality, is a particularly resonant simile. (Its larger political significance is brought home by Radebe’s remark in the ANC submission that ‘some of those white farmers treat our people like animals’ (SAHRC 2000b: 140)). At one point or another, everyone, including the rapists, is called a dog. Petrus describes himself as a ‘dog-man’, an ironic reference both to his first job on the farm and to his status under the old regime (p. 129). When David decides to work in Bev Shaw’s animal sanctuary, he comments, echoing Petrus, that he has now ‘become a dog-man: a dog undertaker; a dog psychopomp; a *harijan*’ (p. 146). As this last reference to Gandhi’s attempt to dignify the Untouchables with a new name suggests, the novel ends with a trick – but not a cheap one. Lucy chooses figurally to live ‘like a dog’, without dignity, as an act of redress and as a way forward for herself as a citizen; but, as David’s final actions imply, actual dogs have the right to be treated with dignity, even in death. This is something David, who began by rejecting any idea that animals have lives worthy of respect, has successfully come to see, or, more accurately, feel, in the course of the novel. In this understated shift from the figural to the literal, then, the stories of human and animal rights that thread their way through the labyrinth of *Disgrace* briefly converge. And yet it is also precisely at this point, with the phrase ‘like a dog’, that this character-based reading reaches its own limits, since these pivotal three words also work intertextually. They recall the last sentence of Kafka’s *The Trial* where K. is finally executed: ‘“Like a dog!” [his killer] said: it was as if he meant the shame [or disgrace] of it to outlive him’ (Kafka 1953 [1925]: 251). This allusion suggests that, at the level of the *narrative*, other, more radical ways of reading are necessary.

Yet even if read as a *story* about the politics of identity it is difficult to see that the novel would have a racial, let alone a racist, effect on this analysis. Indeed, as the oblique references to the Indian caste system, and, more chillingly, to the Nazis’ final solution – the word *Lösung* recurs twice (pp. 142, 218) – suggest, it is even difficult to see that it is just another story of another South African farm. The questions it raises about racist language, the violations of human dignity, and the ethics of redress are not universal, but they do have a bearing on many times and places. For all these reasons,

Deshpande was perhaps right to say that the novel is about ‘complicated moral issues’ of ‘great significance for our times’. Yet it could also be argued that it is as much about the ethics of reading. Its charged story, artful rhetoric, dense allusiveness, and studied refusal to moralize necessarily produce diverse effects by making difficult, even excessive, demands on its readers. This is not to say, lamely, that it means what every reader takes it to mean. It is, rather, that the novel is written in such a way as to risk putting contemporary expectations, especially with regard to reading texts called ‘literary’, provocatively to the test. The fact that it won some of the most prestigious literary prizes, though apparently for rather unliterary reasons, and was suspected of racism in its first year is, no doubt, some measure of its success as an index of millennial anxieties in South Africa and elsewhere. It is also, however, a chastening testament to the essential instability of the ‘literary’ – dare one say, particularly in ‘our times’ – a category that is at once tenaciously resilient and always on the edge of extinction.

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