Rape and the Violence of Representation in J. M. Coetzee’s Disgrace

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ABSTRACT

An analysis of Disgrace’s representation of sexual violence exposes the inextricability of the social categories of gender, class, and race insofar as these identities are shown to accrue meaning in relation to one another rather than a posteriori. Specifically, the novel demonstrates that rape is not primarily a gendered crime that is then complicated by considerations of race or class, but a deeply discursive phenomenon whose material consequences are constituted by the profoundly racialized and class-based discourses that give it meaning. This paper shows how the discrepancy between the responses to the two rapes in the novel is only naturalized when insufficient attention is paid to the workings of narration, narrative, and racial politics. Coetzee’s book exposes not just the contingency of justice but also the deeply racialized nature of this contingency, whether the response to rape occurs in black South Africa or in the white liberal context of the university.

Coetzee’s Disgrace, the novel that won its author his second Booker Prize in Britain, was far from received with unalloyed praise in South Africa. Many South African critics and reviewers were outraged by its dark and pessimistic assessment of postapartheid race relations. Coetzee’s fellow Nobel Laureate Nadine Gordimer stated that in the novel “there is not one black person who is a real human being. . . . I find it difficult to believe, indeed more than difficult, having lived here all my life and being part of everything that has happened here, that the black family protects the rapist because he’s one of them. . . . If that’s the only truth he could find in the post-apartheid South Africa, I regretted this very much for him” (qtd. in Donadio 1). Similarly, South African writer Christopher van Wyk claimed that Disgrace “is a racist book. The white characters are fleshed out, the black evildoers are not” (Donadio 1). And last but not least, the acclaimed black South African playwright Athol Fugard expressed outrage that “we’ve got
to accept the rape of a white woman as a gesture to all of the evil that we did in the past. That’s a load of bloody bullshit. That white women are going to accept being raped as penance for what was done in the past? Jesus. It’s an expression of a very morbid phenomenon, very morbid” (qtd. in Attridge 164n). In other words, the novel has been widely criticized as colluding with and perpetuating the worst nightmares and clichés about South Africa as a violent society. Specifically, it is its representation of the female victim as shackled by white guilt and of blacks as revengeful that is taken to task for fanning the flames of white paranoia.1

Ironically, Coetzee himself has taken issue with South African novels that, like Disgrace, focus on attacks against white farmers. These novels, which include Breyten Breytenbach’s Dog Heart and André Brink’s The Rights of Desire, have been labeled “Liberal Funk Novels” that register dismay at the breakdown of law and order in the country. This is, for instance, what Coetzee had to say about Breytenbach’s Dog Heart:

The crime statistics are distressing. South Africa is . . . a violent country. Nevertheless, criminal violence is by no means directed against whites alone, while the circulation of horror stories is the very mechanism that drives white paranoia. (Stranger Shores 256)

The question is how Disgrace, which features at its centerpiece a similar horror plot (Lucy’s gang rape), escapes the logic of the Liberal Funk Novel that Coetzee has himself so forcefully criticized.

I argue that condemning the novel on the grounds that it reproduces and perpetuates stereotypical representations of black and white relationships in South Africa overlooks two fundamental aspects of the narrative and of the ideological work it performs. First, unlike the typical Liberal Funk Novel, Disgrace focuses not on the attack so much as on the response to it. Secondly, and most important, seeing the novel as implicated in the very economy it seeks to criticize overlooks the way in which the plot is relayed and the perspective through which it is told.2 While it is true that the novel is about mapping out a white middle-class subjectivity, this focus does not reproduce so much as expose the workings of racist ideologies and their inextricable link to gender.3 An analysis of the novel’s representation of sexual violence in particular exposes the interdependence of the social categories of gender, class, and race and their accruing of meaning in relation to one another rather than a posteriori or in a cumulative manner. Disgrace demonstrates that rape is not primarily a gendered crime that is then complicated by considerations of race or class, but a deeply discursive phenomenon whose material consequences are constituted by the profoundly racialized discourses that give it meaning.

Disgrace is the story of fifty-two-year-old Professor David Lurie of the Cape Technical University, an ordinary, rather unhappy white man, twice divorced with one grown-up daughter Lucy, who is obsessed with sex and Byron. When his weekly sexual relationship with a prostitute (the “honey-brown,” “Muslim” Soraya) ends (Disgrace 1, 3), he has what he thinks of and represents as “an affair” with a student thirty years younger than him, Melanie Isaacs (the “dark one,” Disgrace 18). The “affair” leads, after some time and most likely due to the involvement of the student’s parents, to a widely publicized disciplinary hearing and ultimately
to Lurie's resignation from the university. His own account of the proceedings, which self-consciously evoke South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission and its media coverage, emphasizes his contemptuous refusal to accept the terms of the disciplinary committee’s requests due to “reservations of a philosophical kind” (Disgrace 47). He justifies his behavior by claiming allegiance to “the rights of desire” (89), scoffs at the committee's demand for a written confession, and goes to live with his daughter Lucy—a post-hippie earth mother lesbian—on her Grahamstown farm. One day, two black men and a boy arrive on the farm and attack the father and daughter. They set him on fire and take turns brutally raping Lucy. Despite Lurie's insistence that she press charges against her attackers, she refuses and offers the following explanation:

“What if . . . what if that is the price one has to pay for staying on? Perhaps that is how they look at it; perhaps that is how I should look at it too.” [They see me as owing something. 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] (Disgrace 158)

Lucy accepts her fate as a symbol of the redistribution of power in postapartheid South Africa and sees her rapists as gathering apartheid debts. Her father—who was ironically a perpetrator in relation to the first sexual offense but a victim in the context of the second—now harbors a diametrically opposed view about the importance of legal and financial restitution as a response to his daughter's rape. He wants her to seek retribution through the law. However, Lucy, who is pregnant as a result of the rape, accepts Petrus's offer to marry her for her own safety in exchange for her land. This decision is all the more remarkable since the text intimates that there is a strong likelihood that Petrus, the black man with whom she previously shared the farm, may have known about the impending attacks. Critical analysis often falters in the face of extreme violence or acute suffering. The victim's logic assumes an “authority of experience” in light of which further analytical considerations seem of bad taste, ill-placed, and unwanted. The victim's perspective is typically considered the last word on the subject. Is Coetzee colluding with such a postviolence pathos through his representation of white trauma/guilt and black violence? Is Lucy's admittedly mediated final word also his? Are readers encouraged to let her rape rest and naturalize the state of affairs it both bemoans and reinforces? Is her “freedom to be silent” (Disgrace 188) to reflect the aporia of analysis?

I argue that through his characteristically skillful use of narration and juxtaposition, Coetzee takes a horrific scene of violence and urges readers to view it not as the black hole of analysis, but as an opportunity to overhaul normative approaches to rape, justice, and human relationships. Readers are encouraged to rethink not just the assumptions through which black on white rape is viewed (Lucy’s decision alone certainly urges them to do that) but also the deeply racialized way in which rape is naturalized precisely as a black on white crime (thus decriminalizing white on white sexual violence). Indeed, as it has already been noted, the two sexual offenses in the novel cannot but be understood in relation to one another. The violence directed against Lucy should be read not just as an instance of the black on white violence that is seen as defining racial relations
in postapartheid South Africa but as the context through which other sites of gendered violence get normalized (and deracialized). Rather than representing postapartheid violence merely as a racial issue that operates in isolation from other axes of power, in other words, *Disgrace* highlights the inextricable relation between incommensurable categories of identity such as gender, class, or ethnicity in the application of legal and moral authority.

Lucy’s refusal to report her rape is particularly significant in this respect. In response to her father’s incessant entreaties that she explain her decision, she simply says: “‘I can’t talk any more, David, I just can’t’, she says, speaking softly, rapidly, as though afraid the words will dry up. ‘I know I am not being clear. I wish I could explain but I can’t’” (155). While he holds on to “abstractions” (112) and “reading[s]” (98, 112, 133) to try and make sense of the event, she resists his determination to find a rationale. Most important, she challenges his attempts at positing himself (or her) as the transparent communicator of knowledge about “others” (or the self). Her unwillingness to rationalize her decision also reflects the fact that she knows she is caught between a rock and a hard place when it comes to representing herself as a rape victim in postapartheid South Africa. If she presses charges, the gendered dimension of the rape will immediately be recuperated by a racially motivated reading and reify social hierarchies that have historically been produced precisely through the link between rape and the construction of race. As historians have shown, the way rape has been brought to the public’s attention since the nineteenth century has primarily been through racism. In the United States, for instance, fraudulent rape charges were routinely invoked as grounds for the lynching of black men. The tough-on-crime rape policies that emerged after the 1970s were primarily adopted to protect (white) women against black criminality. Similarly, in South Africa, and until the abolition of the death penalty, more black men were hanged for raping white women than white men for raping black women (Buhlungu et al. 435). Rape scares have also typically been more about regulating black men and white women than about protecting women’s rights.

Berger (1992) explains how the same concern for containment and regulation underwrote the 1930s campaign to prohibit white women from working under the supervision of black men. Today, in a country that was ranked first for rapes per capita in the world for the period 1998–2000 (Beinart 333), rapes of white women by black men similarly garner a disproportionate amount of media attention, even though nine out of the ten women who are raped in the country are black.

In such a context, a white woman’s decision to report sexual aggression by black men is to say the least a fraught decision. In fact, even nonsexualized crimes conjure up a host of challenges for victims of crimes sensitive to the ways in which claims of white victimization in South Africa fuel the fires of racism in a country used to criminalizing the black population. In 2006, the eighty-two-year-old Nadine Gordimer was attacked in her Johannesburg home by four young black men but resisted relating the incident in terms of her own trauma. Instead, she focused on her attackers’ social status, describing them as “products of a society grappling with the legacy of South Africa’s past” and as “young people in poverty without opportunities.” The author of the article further referred to the Nobel Laureate as “overcome by sympathy” and “sorrow” for her aggressors, implicitly revealing how any individualized attention to the trauma experienced by the victim would serve as fodder for generalizing racist assumptions.
Similarly, Lucy’s subject construction in *Disgrace* cannot be separated from power inequalities (Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” 306). Her balking at reporting the rape suggests that she knows that representing the self is inseparable from representing others, that her empowerment through legal reparation would inevitably play itself out in her representation of “others.” In “Reading the Unspeakable,” Graham suggests that while we may not have direct access to Lucy’s motivation, one may speculate that her refusal to seek legal redress is indeed linked to her awareness of the history of “black peril” scares and their justification of black oppression (435). Practices of representation are eminently recuperable as the ground for hierarchies of oppression and privileged ontological positions that problematically rely on binaries such as “black and white.” Yet, Lucy’s accounting for her body’s inevitable positioning at the crossroads of history “doesn’t make it [any] easier . . . the shock simply doesn’t go away” (156). She cannot presuppose any obviousness of oppression and is left with “one right” only, “the right not to be put on trial like this, not to have to justify myself” (133). Her politics of representation stresses the impossibility of knowing “others” but also the impossibility of attempting to know “the self” in a climate where her body is overwritten with narratives of power that both harm and benefit her.

As already noted, Lucy’s response to the rape brings into relief the earlier response to the act of sexual aggression in the novel, namely, the legalized proceedings to which Lurie’s “affair” with his student led. Significantly, both instances of sexual violence are focalized through Lurie’s perspective rather than through the victims’. Lurie’s own sexual infraction, which he identifies as “not quite” rape (25), is consequently represented as having occasioned excessive punishment, while the gang rape of his daughter is seen as not having induced enough. Despite Lurie’s own flip-flopping rhetoric in relation to the appropriateness of a legal response from one instance of sexual aggression to the next, the logic that makes Lucy ask her father, “[S]houldn’t you be standing up for yourself?” (*Disgrace* 88) is ironically the same that motivates any ambivalence toward the appropriateness of a disciplinary outcome to the first sexual offense in the novel. Shouldn’t Melanie have stood up for herself is the question that echoes the dominant response to gendered crimes such as rape and domestic violence in Western societies. It is also the question that grounds the reader’s discomfort and Lurie’s self-righteousness in response to the disciplinary committee’s admonishments. It is the form of ideological equivocation that inevitably follows rape claims and that Lucy evokes when she states that “[I]f there is one right I have it is the right not to be put on trial like this, not to have to justify myself” (133). Echoing society’s response to this social crime, she states that her experience of sexual violence is a “purely private matter” (112), “my business, mine alone, not yours” (133). She knows that evidence of autonomy and agency in a victim of sexual violence seeking retribution is always already compromising, since its absence is held against the victim as potential consent while its presence (whether before or after the incident) is seen as taking away from—if not outright denying the scope and reality of the violation. Victims of sexual violence are therefore caught between a rock and a hard place when it comes to remedy, and Lucy chooses to completely eschew this pseudo-choice in favor of a model of futurity that challenges such individualizing response to its core.

Seen in this light, Lucy’s refusal to seek legal reparation is not an extension of her “refusal to resist” (Farred 19) so much as of her resistance against a
legal machinery that poses as neutral arbiter between incriminated and isolated individuals in a context of collective violence it was historically instrumental in creating. Lucy is then refusing “to be raped” (Spivak, “Ethics” 21) insofar as she recognizes that her rapist is history (in both senses of the phrase). It is the history of apartheid she identifies as the instigator of the horrific violence she was subjected to, but it is also a history that is in fact history. Its effects are lingering and undeniable but so is its passing, and it is its disappearance rather than its stronghold that she chooses to remember, reify, and will into the future. She is not, as Lurie puts it, “expiat[ing] the crimes of the past by suffering in the present” (Disgrace 112) but redeeming the present in the name of the future. In rejecting legal redress, she also challenges any notion of individual responsibility to which her rapists and she could be held. In so doing, she offers a scathing criticism of the logic that always already informs discussions of rape, namely, as in the context of her father’s act of sexual aggression, one that emphasizes the degree of responsibility of the victim, her compromising (suppressed) agency, the ambivalence of the notion of consent on the one hand, and the stereotypical framing of black youth as inherently violent on the other. She intuitively knows that, as Lurie’s ex-wife puts it, “[T]rials are not about principles, they are about how well you put yourself across” (188) and that it is individual performance (circumscribed by class, gender, and race) not justice that drives the legal machinery (Anker 241).

That Lucy’s rape is not just about race any more that her father’s fantasized sexual “relationship” with a student is just about gender is an awareness that is simultaneously offered and withdrawn by the workings of narration in the novel. The singling out of one rape along with the normalization of the other, has everything to do with Lurie’s racialized and racist perspective. Indeed, the authorial narrator tells a story that is consistently focalized through the consciousness of the protagonist Lurie. Critics have addressed the issue of the absence of Lucy’s perspective at length, arguing, for instance, that it works to highlight the ethical limitations of Lurie’s character and to encourage the reader’s active participation in the narrative. What is remarkable about the workings of narrative in Disgrace is that such omission facilitates rather than hampers our identification with the protagonist’s stance.

It is certainly the case that despite focalizing the narrative through Lurie, Coetzee is encouraging readers to distance themselves from his protagonist from the very first sentence: “For a man of his age, 52, divorced, he has to his mind solved the problem of sex rather well.” Coetzee does not write “for a man of his age, 52, divorced, he has solved the problem of sex rather well.” The phrase “to his mind” establishes a distance between the narrator’s and the character’s ideological slants. The self-satisfaction the character feels at having solved the problem of sex is obviously not naturalized by the author, so readers have access to Lurie’s thoughts and feelings even as they are driven to distance themselves from them.

At the same time, what may be even more extraordinary about the work of narration in Disgrace, is the extent to which this safe distance between the authorial narrator and the character constantly vanishes. Indeed, it is easy to let one’s guards down as a reader vis-à-vis a man who is so remarkably self-conscious and lucid about his own shortcomings. Lurie’s character is intelligent and adept at scrutinizing his own and others’ motivations and emotions. He points out the different angles from which a same event can be viewed, an analytical skill that implies a
critical distance that obscures the biased nature of his own perspective. He is so forthcoming about his own imperfections that he appears trustworthy. Even his deluded Romantic notions and the existential crisis that he is traversing contribute to making the reader identify with him (who has not fallen prey to either or both?). The use of the present tense throughout the novel—which is incidentally one of Coetzee’s trademarks—along with the fact that the narrative is focalized through Lurie’s consciousness, also adds to the immediacy and proximity with which the protagonist’s viewpoint is represented. What is happening to Lurie is rendered palatable because he is narrating it through a white middle-class sensibility that has been largely normativized, and readers are bound to catch themselves identifying with many of his reactions because they appear “commonsensical.” It is difficult, for instance, not to share his contempt for the culture of confession whose response to rape is to demand the perpetrator’s repentance. Readers are thus brought into an uncomfortable proximity to and complicity with the white masculinist subject’s way of thinking.

Authorial complicity moves in and out without clearly allowing readers to discern when it begins or ends. They may recognize how violent Lurie’s representational politics are, but they are also constantly driven to see things the way he does. In other words, it often means a double take to be able to distance themselves consistently from the protagonist, because it is extremely easy and “natural” to go along with his thought processes. This is compounded by the fact that many of Lurie’s biased assumptions are so naturalized that recognizing them as problematic takes more than a first reading. As a result, readers are forced to come to terms with their own investment in normative representations of gender and race. In other words, the text challenges the normalization of rape on the one hand, first by making readers at times participate in this process of normativization, and secondly, by insisting on the unrepresentability of Lucy’s rape. Coetzee’s, and through him Lucy’s, refusal to represent the violence perpetrated against her is how the text ultimately avoids what Nancy Armstrong calls the “violence of representation,” a violence that Lurie’s viewpoint (and the reading it encourages) exemplifies. This challenge to unmediated representation is yet another trademark of Coetzee’s work, one he certainly offers as an ethical gesture.

One striking example of this unstable process of identification and disidentification with the character occurs when Lurie describes his “liaison” with his student:

He has given her no warning; she is too surprised to resist the intruder who thrusts himself upon her. When he takes her in his arms, her limbs crumple like a marionette’s. Words heavy as clubs thud into the delicate whorl of her ear. ‘No, not now!’ she says, struggling. ‘My cousin will be back!’ But nothing will stop him. He carries her to the bedroom, brushes off the absurd slippers. . . . She does not resist. All she does is avert herself: avert her lips, avert her eyes. She lets him lay her out on the bed and undress her. . . .

Not rape, not quite that, but undesired nevertheless, undesired to the core. As though she has decided to go slack, die within herself for the duration, like a rabbit when the jaws of the fox close on its neck (24–25).

In this passage, there is a stark contrast between the utter repulsion and resistance his student’s body expresses and his reassuring assertion that this is not
rape. He comments on her lack of maturity, her lack of desire and even consent; he is conscious of the fact that she is repulsed, yet he refuses to call his act “rape.” Disturbingly, at this point in the narrative, the text makes no effort whatsoever to establish an explicit and salutary distance between the authorial narrator and the character’s viewpoint. Readers are made privy to the reasoning that leads Lurie to decide this is not rape, and it is impossible not to participate in his way of thinking without also taking away from the violence of his act. He sets the terms in which this event is viewed so readers are made complicit with an economy that obscures his responsibility by focusing on the victim’s. The narration encourages them to ask not “what was he thinking?” but why does she not resist, or why did she say “no, not now,” (25) rather than “no, never”). This passage, then, forces readers to engage in debate about whether this is legally and actually a rape based on her behavior. As a result, his forcefulness is naturalized as expected and somewhat normal (after all, isn’t he, as he states, the servant of Eros?) and to “intuitively” understand his allegiance to the rights of desire (as opposed to a human rights paradigm that includes women’s rights).

Furthermore, the disciplinary hearing to which Lurie is subjected as well as its parodying of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s proceedings also seem to legitimize Lurie’s perspective so much so that his appeal to an instinctual paradigm of Byronic desire ultimately feels less extreme than the university’s appropriation of human rights discourse in response to his crime. Elizabeth Anker goes further to argue that Lurie’s claims about the “rights of desire” in fact “exhibit a certain wisdom that works to illumine critical limitations of human rights and the available diagnoses that they offer” (246). Indeed, she explains that “Lurie’s instinctual rights constitute an indisputable, though competing human universal, and Disgrace suggests that they too demand reckoning by the law. To the extent that human rights fail to countenance sexual and other irrational manifestations of desire, Disgrace implies that the rights paradigm is, in a basic sense, structurally inadequate” (247). In other words, insofar as the law does not account for passion and unreason, it ultimately offers a limited form of social justice.

To suggest that Lurie’s valorization of desire is anything but self-serving, however, reinforces the spurious equivalence he establishes between the “rights” of desire and sexual violence (which is, needless to say not a right), an equivalence that is then given legitimacy through its (oppositional) association with the issue of human rights. This reading hides from itself the truth that what is disavowed by the law is neither passion nor unreason, but is rather the violating effects these may have on another person. In other words, the university’s response to Lurie’s “affair” feels excessive (beside being inappropriate) because the novel is confronting the cultural systems that define gendered and racial relations in a way that outlives, limits, and contests the law. Disgrace reveals the extent to which the law’s effectivity or validity is conditioned by these cultural expectations. Had the professor having the “affair” been a black middle-aged man forcing himself on one of his young white students, the emotional (and legal) response to that scene of violence would be fundamentally different (both diegetically and extradiegetically). The way in which the two scenes of violence in the novel are read against one another reveals the arbitrariness with which human rights discourse and its attendant Enlightenment ideals are appropriated and applied along differential axes of power.
The salutary check on Lurie’s biased perspective that is missing from his account of the Melanie affair is thus provided retrospectively when the response to the second act of sexual violence is depicted in the novel, namely Lucy’s gang rape. It is through the second rape that Coetzee retroactively exposes the masculinist and racist bias through which the first one is represented and naturalized. Indeed, in light of his own abuse of a student, Lurie’s violent hatred towards his daughter’s rapists functions as a double standard. After all, Lucy is as accepting of her fate as his student Melanie was of the sexual act to which she was subjected. That he identifies his daughter’s violation as rape while being unable to recognize his own act as such exposes his sexism as well as his racism. The contrast in his response to each instance of sexual violence shows that it is his investment in racist ideology that allows him to do what his investment in sexist norms prevented him from doing earlier, namely, call rape “rape.” He can only see rape as what black men do to white women, an attitude that ultimately exposes him as a white anachronism of the colonial era.

By establishing a parallel between these two instances of sexual violence in the novel, Coetzee highlights how the critical attention paid to black on white sexual violence in the charged context of postapartheid South Africa masks its link to the similar forms of more or less naturalized violence perpetrated in white liberal contexts. It is the discrepancy between the response to these two instances of gendered violence that Disgrace helps bring into relief, a gap that is only naturalized when insufficient attention is paid to the workings of narration, narrative, and racial politics in the novel. The book exposes not just the contingency of justice but also the consistently racialized nature of this contingency, whether our response to sexual violence occurs in black South Africa or in the white liberal context of the university.

NOTES

1. In a more nuanced critique, Glenn argues that Coetzee’s “pessimistic prediction about the place of whites in South Africa” (91) is not racist but remains caught in the limits of “liberal Afro-pessimism” (93). According to Glenn, liberal Afro-pessimism incriminates white Africans as agents (but not the only ones) of the dysfunctional race relations in post-apartheid South Africa, but it is profoundly limited insofar as it fails to provide an adequate projection of the current imaginative pre-occupations of South African youth (96).

2. In his book J. M. Coetzee’s Disgrace, Andrew van der Vlies similarly shows how insufficient attention to narrative perspective prevents readers from engaging meaningfully with the book.

3. In his unauthorized biography of Nadine Gordimer, Ronald Roberts argues that Disgrace offers a criticism of whiteness rather than a reinforcement of black stereotypes.

4. Lurie explains to his daughter that “[m]y case rests on the rights of desire, on the god who makes even the small birds quiver” (89). Elizabeth S. Anker calls this speech “perversely self-serving” (245), Derek Attridge “romanticizing” (189), Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak “ironic representation” (25), and Peter McDonald “intellectual” as opposed to “embodied” (328).

5. See Elizabeth Anker’s incisive essay “Human Rights, Social Justice, and J. M. Coetzee’s Disgrace” where she argues that the novel consistently exposes the discrepancy between legal authority and social justice.
6. See Joan Scott's influential and much reprinted essay “Experience” on how “[t]he project of making experience visible precludes critical examination of the workings of the ideological system itself, its categories of representation (homosexual/heterosexual, man/woman, black/white as fixed immutable identities), its premises about what these categories mean and how they operate, its notions of subjects, origin and cause” (25). In other words, appealing to experience to justify one’s analysis is problematic insofar as it often precludes analysis of what the category encompasses in different spaces and times.

7. According to Graham, Coetzee seeks to “dissolve clear boundaries” between the two attacks (443). Similarly, Glenn argues that “[i]n Disgrace, Coetzee insists, through plot and repetition, on the parallels between Lurie’s seduction-violation of Melanie and the rape of his daughter Lucy” (86). By contrast, Cornwell argues that readers are urged to read the two offenses as distinct because the length at which they are narrated differs so widely in the novel.

8. In “Can the Subaltern Speak?” Spivak takes issue with representational practices that assume to know, or have unmediated access to knowledge of “others” (283). She argues that any ethical strategy of representation will work within a framework that acknowledges the impossibility of fully or completely knowing “others.” Lucy’s refusal to be called to account falls within this framework.

9. See Bevacqua’s Rape on the Public Agenda for a genealogy of the relationship between race and rape from the nineteenth-century to rape’s reappearance on the public agenda in the 1970s.

10. See Etherington; Martens; and van Onselen.

11. This statistic was the result of a survey compiled by the United Nations (ODCCP). As Kelly St. John reports, in South Africa, women are also five times more likely to be raped than in the United States (see “Where HIV Skyrockets, . . .”).

12. See Baeyens.

13. See Meldrum.

14. One can question the disciplinary committee’s request for a statement of contrition without questioning the appropriateness of a disciplinary response.

15. See Spivak, “Ethics and Politics.”

16. After describing Lurie’s affair as a human rights violation, the disciplinary committee asks that Lurie write a public statement of contrition confessing “without reservation [to] serious abuses of the human rights of the complainant” (57).

17. In J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading, Attridge discusses literature as an “ethically charged” event (xi) that takes place in the intimate relationship between literary text and reader. For Attridge, Coetzee epitomizes literature’s ability to engage the reader through an intense experience of “other-directed” impulses and acts that reveal the impossibility for dominant narratives of realism to apprehend the Other in a meaningful and direct way. For Attwell, the ethical dimension of Coetzee’s novel resides in the complexity of the relation between fiction and history, postmodern textuality and South African politics that Disgrace successfully negotiates.

18. See Anker for a discussion of the opposition between these two forms of rights in the novel.

19. Jane Poyner, Mark Sanders, and Rebecca Saunders all highlight the parallels between the disciplinary hearing to which Lurie is subjected and the TRC proceedings. See also Jacqueline Rose for a discussion of the TRC.

WORKS CITED


