Disgrace

J.M. Coetzee
Nadine Gordimer’s verdict (2006)

“In the novel ‘Disgrace’ 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 a 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.”

Opening questions

- What is the position of English in South Africa in this novel (whose protagonist is a university professor of English)?

  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 articulatedness. Like a dinosaur expiring and settling in the mud, the language has stiffened. Pressed in the mould of English, Petrus’s story would come out arthritic, bygone. (117)
‘Lucy is our benefactor,’ says Petrus; and then, to Lucy: ‘You are our benefactor.’

A distasteful word, it seems to him, double-edged, souring the moment. Yet can Petrus be blamed? The language he draws on with such aplomb is, if he only knew it, tired, friable, eaten from the inside as if by termites. Only the monosyllables can still be relied on, and not even all of them. (129)
Note how Lucy’s changed status vis-à-vis the land at the end of the novel—and by extension, the position of the white minority in the new South Africa—cannot be rendered in English, but only in Afrikaans:

‘A bywoner.’

‘A bywoner. But the house remains mine, I repeat that. No one enters my house without my permission. Including him [Petrus]…’ (204)
Opening questions

- How do we cope with a novel whose protagonist is neither likeable nor honest—with himself or with the reader?
- Is an allegorical reading the only one possible?
- Why is the novel largely silent about the racial/ethnic positions of the non-white characters, with the exception of Petrus, his family, and the rapists who are identified as ‘African’ and Xhosa-speaking?
Opening questions

- Why is it generally assumed that Melanie is ‘coloured’—and what is the significance of this assumption?

Together they contemplate the picture: the young wife with the daring clothes and gaudy jewellery striding through the front door, impatiently sniffing the air; the husband, colourless Mr Right, apronned, stirring a pot in the steaming kitchen. Reversals: the stuff of bourgeois comedy. (14)
Opening questions

• Why does the novel concentrate South Africa’s problems—both historical and post-apartheid—around the sexual?
Sex and Focalization:
Lurie’s point of view

“Cape Town: a city prodigal of beauty, of beauties.” (12)

‘Are you married?’

‘I was. Twice. But now I am not.’ He does not say: Now I make do with what comes my way. He does not say: Now I make do with whores. ‘Can I offer you a liqueur?’ (16) [“lubrication”]
Sex and Focalization: David and Melanie

“He takes her back to his house. On the living-room floor, to the sound of rain pattering against the windows, he makes love to her. Her body is clear, simple, in its way perfect; though she is passive throughout, he finds the act pleasurable, so pleasurable that from its climax he tumbles into blank oblivion.” (19)

“(unbidden the word leaching comes to him).” (24)
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: she even helps him, raising her arms and then her hips. Little shivers of cold run through her; as soon as she is bare, she slips under the quilted counterpane like a mole burrowing, and turns her back on him.

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. So that everything done to her might be done, as it were, far away.

‘Pauline will be back any minute,’ she says when it is over. ‘Please. You must go.’

He obeys, but then, when he reaches his car, is overtaken by such dejection, such dullness, that he sits slumped at the wheel unable to move. (25)
The deed is done. Two names on the page, his and hers, side by side. Two in a bed, lovers no longer but foes. (40)
‘[Lurie] 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.’

—Carine M. Mardorossian 80
Lucy’s rape

• Focalizing the narrative through Lurie allows for the rape to mimic the convention of Greek drama, where the violence takes place offstage.
• Does this focalization allow the novel’s events to present the narrative as, to some degree, a function of David’s hubris?

Is he happy? By most measurements, yes, he believes he is. However, he has not forgotten the last chorus of *Oedipus*: Call no man happy until he is dead. (2)

When the police come after the attack: Lucy’s secret; his disgrace. (109)
Lucy’s rape

• This focalization also enhances Lucy’s power NOT TO NARRATE the rape ➔ a refusal to “be raped” and a refusal to be defined by this act or to accept a problematic status as victim.

‘You tell what happened to you, I tell what happened to me,’ she repeats. (99)

‘Should I choose against the child because of who its father is?’ (198)

• BUT David thinks, “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.” (115)

• AND, “They were not raping, they were mating. It was not the pleasure principle that ran the show but the testicles, sacs bulging with seed aching to perfect itself.” (199)

• PLUS does the new South Africa have to be grounded in Lucy’s child’s genesis as the fruit of rape—the “bitter fruit” we will see again in Dangor’s novel?
Lucy’s rape: lesbianism

• Lucy’s lesbianism: a marker of David’s inability to understand women, or a marker of Coetzee’s own aggressive (anti-feminist) position?

• A double irony in the context of the rape:
  - The woman who does not desire men being punished for her sexuality?
  - The lesbian who would not procreate through ‘natural’ relations with a man?
…Attractive, he is thinking, yet lost to men. Need he reproach himself, or would it have worked out like that anyway? From the day his daughter was born he has felt for her nothing but the most spontaneous, most unstinting love. Impossible she has been unaware of it. Has it been too much, that love? Has she found it a burden? Has it pressed down on her? Has she given it a darker reading? (76)
…Is she calling Johannesburg, speaking to Helen? Is his presence here keeping the two of them apart? Would they dare to share a bed while he was in the house? If the bed creaked in the middle of the night, would they be embarrassed? Embarrassed enough to stop? But what does he know of what women do together? Maybe women do not need to make beds creak. And what does he know about these two women in particular, Lucy and Helen? Perhaps they sleep together merely as children do, cuddling, touching, giggling, reliving girlhood—sisters more than lovers. Sharing a bed, sharing a bathtub, baking gingerbread cookies, trying on each other’s clothes. Sapphic love: an excuse for putting on weight. (86)

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Not for the first time, he wonders whether women would not be happier living in communities of women, accepting visits from men only when they choose. Perhaps he is wrong to think of Lucy as a homosexual. Perhaps she simply prefers female company. Or perhaps that is all lesbians are: women who have no need of men. (104)
The Problematic Representation of Polygamy

- “Protection” for women in the rural, African environment
- Tars Africans with an inalienable attachment to patriarchal values
- The ultimate capitulation for the woman-defined woman?
Disgrace and the TRC

• Lurie’s trial as a parody of or commentary on the TRC, whose proceedings were ongoing at the time the novel was composed

• Both pivot around the question of whether confession equates with an admission of responsibility and true feelings of remorse through the self-narrativization of past events

• “First the sentence, then the trial.” (42)
Desmond Tutu,
Foreword to the TRC Report (2003)

It is something of a pity that, by and large, the white community failed to take advantage of the Truth and Reconciliation process. They were badly let down by their leadership. Many of them carry a burden of a guilt which would have been assuaged had they actively embraced the opportunities offered by the Commission; those who do not consciously acknowledge any sense of guilt are in a sense worse off than those who do. Apart from the hurt that it causes to those who suffered, the denial by so many white South Africans even that they benefited from apartheid is a crippling, self-inflicted blow to their capacity to enjoy and appropriate the fruits of change. But mercifully there have been glorious exceptions. All of us South Africans must know that reconciliation is a long haul and depends not on a commission for its achievement but on all of us making our contribution. It is a national project after all is said and done. (1)
'Yes. I want to register an objection to these responses of Professor Lurie’s, which I regard as fundamentally evasive. Professor Lurie says he accepts the charges. Yet when we try to pin down what it is he actually accepts, all we get is subtle mockery. To me that suggests he accepts the charges only in name. In a case with overtones like this one, the wider community is entitled—’ (50)

‘... The issue goes beyond mere technicalities. Professor Lurie pleas guilty, but I ask myself, does he accept his guilt or is he simply going through the motions in the hope that the case will be buried under paper and forgotten? If he is simply going through the motions, I urge that we impose the severest penalty.’ (51)

‘...all of a sudden it is not abuse of a young woman he is confessing to, just an impulse he could not resist, with no mention of the pain he has caused, no mention of the long history of exploitation of which this is part...’ (53)
Confessions, apologies: why this thirst for abasement? (56)

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…Repentance is neither here nor there. Repentance belongs to another world, another universe of discourse. (58)

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‘I brought it on myself. I was offered a compromise, which I wouldn’t accept.’

‘What kind of compromise?’

‘Re-education. Reformation of character. The code-word was counselling.

‘And are you so perfect that you can’t do with a little counselling?’

‘It reminds me too much of Mao’s China. Recantation, self-criticism, public apology. I’m old-fashioned, I would prefer simply to be put up against a wall and shot. Have done with it. (66)
The emasculation of the white male..

He was going to add, ‘The truth is, they wanted me castrated,’ but he cannot say the words, not to his daughter. In fact, now that he hears it through another’s ears, his whole tirade sounds melodramatic, excessive. (66)
‘... But I [Mr Isaacs] say to myself, we are all sorry when we are found out. Then we are very sorry. The question is not, are we sorry? The question is, what are we going to do now that we are sorry?...

‘...In my own terms, I am being punished for what happened between myself and your daughter. I am sunk into a state of disgrace from which it will not be easy to lift myself. It is not a punishment I have refused. I do not murmur against it. On the contrary, I am living it from day to day, trying to accept disgrace as my state of being. Is it enough for God, do you think, that I live in disgrace without term?’ (172)
Urban South Africa

v.

Rural South Africa

- The problematic representation of the rural as dangerous, as the place where white privilege is eroded and eroding
- “Curious that he and her mother, cityfolk, intellectuals, should have produced this throwback, this sturdy young settler. But perhaps it was not they who produced her: perhaps history had the larger share.” (61)
- “Country ways—that is what Lucy calls this kind of thing. He has other words: indifference, hardheartedness. If the country can pass judgment on the city, then the city can pass judgment on the country too.” (125)
- The encroaching city: “He had been away less than three months, yet in that time the shanty settlements have crossed the highway and spread east of the airport.” (175)