

Extended Essay – English A1

Research Question: How does J.M. Coetzee use the animal motif to convey David Lurie's instinctual behaviour, perception of women and change in self-empowerment in his novel *Disgrace*?

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ABSTRACT

Disgrace deals with the transition of a fifty-two year old English professor, David Lurie, in terms of perception as he adapts to the new social order in post-apartheid South Africa. With the change in David's social position as a white man in post-apartheid era, his self-empowerment and perception transforms. The transformation can be seen in the development of his relationship with animals who are seen to be a neglectable part of the society from David's former point of view. He accepts the shift of power and acknowledges his inner conflicts, as he starts to approach dogs with a friendly manner. The transition also affects his perception of others and helps him develop empathy. Raised in a patriarchal system, David perceives women as sexual objects but his apathy starts to fade away as he is condemned for abusing his student and losing his charm with aging. Coetzee also includes animals to reflect the change in David's perception of women. From this amplification, David's understanding of animals reflects his approach towards women since they show similarity. David's impulsive behavior towards women and the inner conflicts that arise from the denunciation for those behaviors are emphasized with imageries that involve animals. The animal metaphors in the description of characters, David's relationship with dogs and his approach to other animals point out to their significance in the novel.

ANIMALS IN DISGRACE

INTRODUCTION

In his novel *Disgrace*, J.M. Coetzee portrays the life of a fifty-two year old, twice divorced, English literature professor, David Lurie, who is forced to resign from his teaching position at the university for the sexual abuse of his student. Following the incident in which he is accused of abusing Melanie Isaacs, his student, a public apology, a penance, is expected, however, when Lurie does not make amends, his reputation is stained. His decision to take refuge with his daughter Lucy, who makes a living by breeding pedigree dogs in Eastern Cape, an extremely rural part of South Africa, engenders a profound transition in his perception of women, animals, and especially of himself.

The egocentric, libidinous David enjoys a patriarchal approach to women, whom he regards primarily as instruments to satisfy his needs, which are mostly just raw, sexually oriented urges. These uncontrollable appetites, which he defines as instinctual and an unchangeable part of his birthright, change abruptly after the rape of his daughter during which his hands are both literally and figuratively bound. After the rape, he volunteers at the animal welfare clinic and has an affair with Bev Shaw, a vet at the clinic where unwanted

animals euthanized. Lurie's trials of understanding women and his redemption, for his apathy towards women's feelings begins (Graham, 2003).

The fundamental social and political changes of post-apartheid South Africa compose the backdrop against which exposes David's white male elitism as discriminatory attitudes towards animals, women, and black people generally. Raised in the apartheid era, he believes that black people are inferior which we see from his unambiguous behavior towards Petrus (Bonnici, 2001). The transformation in his approach to animals points out his acceptance of the political and social changes that have so often re-enforced the inequality of the races. Once a white man on top of the social order, his reactions to the change in the social order depicts the shock of having to adapt to and live with the new circumstances.

Animals play a significant role in reflecting changes to David's social position, his temperament, and his personal evolution. Coetzee includes dogs as important characters in the novel using them to depict rock bottom in the social order: 'To start at ground level. With nothing. Not with nothing but. With nothing. No cards, no weapons, no property, no rights, no dignity. Like a dog' (Coetzee, 1999, p.205). Through the vulnerability and inferiority of the dog, Coetzee emphasizes both David and Lucy's loss of power. Lurie can empathize with the creatures that he was once so indifferent toward due to

their groveling and debased appearance which further enriches the idea of inferiority. So, David's relationship with the dogs develops as he accepts the loss of the long-gone charm of his youth, his reputation, his self-esteem, and crucially, his position in the new order.

David's inner conflict about his desires are portrayed through the animal motif: 'No animal will accept the justice of being punished for following its instincts. At that point it would have been better to shoot it. At the deepest level I think it might have preferred being shot' (Coetzee, 1999, p.90). He compares the suffering caused by the restriction of his desires to a dog that has been castrated for living according to its nature, according to instinctual behavior. Animals are a foil reflecting David's outward struggle with society's denunciation of his sexual behavior symbolizing his inner conflicts as he comes to grips with the idea that he must tame himself. Animals are significant characters and symbols in reflecting the social changes in the post apartheid South Africa, its effects on the social classes and David's personal transition.

All the "disgraces" of David as a white man are portrayed through the animal motif and they play a key role in reflecting the other characters' feelings and perception, especially Lucy's. Analyzing animal's functions in the novel and acknowledging the importance of them is essential to fully

understand the dynamics of power and conflicts both in the society and David's life.

INNER CONFLICTS

Animals as a trope are used to depict those women who have had a sexual relationship with David. As Soraya's actions are compared to a snake's in a negative context, Melanie and her apathy during sex are portrayed as a mole slipping, escaping, into its hole: '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' (Coetzee, 1999, p.25). These depictions illustrate David's emotionless and impulsive way of thinking and perceiving his partner during sex. The behavior of animals are only visceral and don't hold deeper meaning revealing the animalistic attraction underlying, even characterizing, his sexual motivations.

In the beginning of the novel, David realizes that his age holds him back from having intercourse with young women: 'He ought to give up, retire from the game. At what age, he wonders, did Origen castrate himself? Not the most graceful of solutions but then ageing is not a graceful business. A simple enough operation, surely: they do it to animals every day, and animals survive well enough, if one ignores a certain residue of sadness'(Coetzee, 1999, p.9). As he is aware of the fact that he cannot continue to act on his drives; he compares quitting

chasing women to the castration of animals to emphasize the supposed simplicity of the process. His effort to sexually satisfy himself by comparing it to gelding demonstrates how David belittles animals' experience and their feelings.

As a result, David's self-esteem and confidence about his sexuality diminishes: 'He has a shrewd idea of how prostitutes speak among themselves about the men who frequent them, the older men in particular. They tell stories, they laugh, but they shudder too, as one shudders at a cockroach in a washbasin in the middle of the night' (Coetzee, 1999, p.8). The comparison between old men and cockroaches evokes a deep repulsion in David as he reflects upon himself from Soraya's perspective. David feels insecure about his ability to serve women's sexual needs during his affairs with young women as exemplified by Soraya and Melanie. This insecurity is at the heart of his inner conflict challenging him to choose between acting on his instincts and developing social if not moral responsibilities.

Through metaphor, Coetzee uses dogs to portray David's inner conflict. The ethical consequences of the affairs trigger the rise of David's problems within the society with which he has always been associated as a top dog. From this amplification, Katy, the abandoned dog, symbolizes the clash of David's morals with the understanding of ethics in the city: 'The bitch continues to strain, hanging her tongue out, glancing around shiftily as if ashamed to be watched' (Coetzee, 1999,

p.68). The metaphor of the defecating dog interweaves David's struggle to bring his sexuality into the open while simultaneously confronting his feelings of exposure to the denunciations of the society.

EMPOWERMENT

Coetzee emphasizes the position of animals at the base of the social order: 'On the list of the nation's priorities, animals come nowhere' (Coetzee, 1999, p.73) to show David's realization of his standing in the new social order. The perspectives of father and daughter differ in their approach to the lowly creatures. David has been part of a patriarchal and racist social system which had placed him in the highest social position as a white man. The post-apartheid setting in which a South Africa that discriminated against black people while glorifying white people, is reflected in the changing conditions in which David finds himself. There is the uncomfortable suggestion that his own reaction and transformation might depict that of the former ruling class generally as they see their political and social standing fall out of favour in the new order (Bonnici, 2001). His former position in society shapes David's understanding of his self-empowerment, worth and superiority. Consequently, David's perception of animals shows his detachment from the lower social classes: 'We are of a different order of creation from the animals. Not higher

necessarily, just different' (Coetzee, 1999, p.75). The understanding of white people is shown to be racist and discriminating through David's nuanced use of the term "different". However as a white woman, Lucy's approach towards the dogs contrasts with David's. She accepts that she is not at the top of the social hierarchy and she has interactions with black people: 'They are not going to lead me to a higher life and the reason is, there is no higher life. This is the only life there is. Which we share with animals' (Coetzee, 1999, p.74). By claiming there is no higher life, Lucy rejects the concept of social hierarchy. The distinction emphasizes on David's contradistinctive understanding of himself and others and encompasses David's transition in his own self-understanding.

Katy, the abandoned dog, plays a role in the reflection of David's separation from the city and his indifference to the rural area as empathy begins to seep into his understanding of the world. Abandoned like a dog, Lurie, feels alienated and upset because of his sudden fall. The shock exposes the feelings of white men in the post-apartheid era for not getting away with their former unethical behavior: 'Scapegoating worked in practice while it still had religious power behind it. Then the gods died, and all of a sudden you had to cleanse the city without divine help. Real actions were demanded instead of symbolism. The censor was born, in the Roman sense.

Watchfulness became the watchword: the watchfulness of all over all. Purgation was replaced by the purge,' (Coetzee, 1999, p.91). In this allusion to former greatness, Coetzee uses the term "gods" to describe the political view of the apartheid state and the collusion of white people who supported the violation of black people's rights. The changes in the law utterly remove white people's privileges. White people, in this case David, see the changes to the social and political order as the ultimate limit to their freedom of expression symbolized by the terms castration and purge. The comparison to former Roman glory and the historical trauma of an empire's downfall reflect that "dark ages" into which white men have been cast, a paradoxical new order in which former acts are deemed unethical and no longer acceptable (Attridge, 2000).

Lucy's rape contributes to David's transformation toward self-knowledge. After Lucy is raped by a gang of black men, David realizes his position in the new order that requires him to take a hard look at his past misdeeds as a vulnerable member of the lower classes who can no longer escape his fate: 'For the first time he has a taste of what it will be like to be an old man, tired to the bone, without hopes, without desires, indifferent to the future. When that is finished, he will be like a fly-casing in a spiderweb, brittle to the touch, lighter than rice-chaff, ready to float away' (Coetzee, 1999, p.107). The irresponsible, even abusive, behavior that is depicted by the

word “desire” is no longer permitted and as soon as David recognizes the change he compares himself to a fly trapped in a spider’s web. Animals are used to emphasize the new inconsequence of David and white men generally in the new order.

Dogs are in a disrespected class of the social system from David’s point of view (Herron, 2005). As he transforms into a powerless old man, his occupation is to take care of the corpses of the animals who are euthanized in the Animal Welfare clinic: ‘A dog-man, Petrus once called himself. Well, now he has become a dog-man: a dog undertaker; a dog psychopomp; a harijan,’ (Coetzee, 1999, p. 146). No longer a top dog. Toiling amongst the neglected he has become a meek man, but a new man (Walther, 2014).

At the end of the novel, David embraces his new position despite his awareness of his fall: ‘What a tale to tell back home: a mad old man who sits among the dogs singing to himself!’ (Coetzee, 1999, p.212). Lurie starts to care about the dogs which is another sign that he has embraced his transformation moving from recognition through reflection to self-knowledge, acceptance, and ultimately self-empowerment. Another sign of David’s acceptance of the world as it now is plays out in the final scene in the novel when he gives the dog he bonded with to Bev Shaw who will end its suffering by it with injecting fatal venom. The climax of the novel reflects

David's acceptance of both his own and society's transformation (Bonnici, 2001).

WOMEN

David is portrayed as a handsome man whose sexual demands have never been rejected by women. This contributes to his ego-centric approach towards women and the way he sees them. After losing his charm through aging, alienation, and condemnation, he becomes more insecure and powerless, characteristics which are reflected in his relationship with women as an obstacle to his own self-understanding. His standards and segregation fade away which leads to his affair with Bev Shaw and the opera he starts to write about Teresa (Graham, 2003). The transition occurs while he is in the country developing a new-found empathy with the dogs and the other animals. David's relationship with animals and parallel's his evolving, understanding of women, his redemption for abusing women and his efforts to accept their perspective (Attridge, 2000).

David subordinates women by acknowledging them merely as sexual objects and believing that their worth is determined by their beauty: 'Because a woman's beauty does not belong to her alone. It is part of the bounty she brings into the world. She has a duty to share it' (Coetzee, 1999, p.16).

David believes women's function in the world is to please men which leads to the idea that women matter only when they look acceptably beautiful to men.

Lurie's understanding of women's reason for being intertwines with his patriarchal way of thinking created by the apartheid regime. This understanding of women implicates his exploitative approach to Melanie (Graham, 2003). His approach is evocative of predation which is emphasized through using imageries that involve animals: 'What does she see, when she looks at him, that keeps her at such a pitch of anger? A shark among the helpless little fishies?' (Coetzee, 1999, p.53). The comparison is associated with hunting so it justifies his feeling of dominance over women. 'Poor little bird, he thinks, whom I have held against my breast!' (Coetzee, 1999, p.32). The bird imagery represents women's vulnerability, defenselessness, weakness and David's false understanding of his attitude as protective and embracing. The metaphor justifies David's lack of guilt and responsibility for his apathy toward women.

David overlooks women's dignity and doesn't accept rejection: 'She does not own herself. Beauty does not own itself' (Coetzee, 1999, p.16). This implies that women exist to serve men's sexual needs. David's perception of animals and their function shows similarity to his understanding of women:

‘Sheep do not own themselves, do not own their lives. They exist to be used, every last ounce of them, their flesh to be eaten, their bones to be crushed and fed to poultry’ (Coetzee, 1999, p.123). Animals and women are intricately compared to objects that are simply consumed and disposed. David’s ideas contradict those of Lucy so their conversations play a role in changing David’s way of understanding: ‘They are part of the furniture, part of the alarm system. They do us the honor of treating us like gods, and we respond by treating them like things’ (Coetzee, 1999, p.78). Coetzee frames Lucy’s awareness of David’s understanding and her efforts in conveying the injustice of the system (Vermeulen, 2004).

As he becomes weaker socially throughout the narrative, his perception of the other classes of the new order transforms with him: ‘A woman in love, wallowing in love; a cat on a roof, howling; complex proteins swirling in the blood, distending the sexual organs, making the palms sweat and voice thicken as the soul hurls its longings to the skies. That is what Soraya and the others were for: to suck the complex proteins out of his blood like snake-venom, leaving him clear-headed and dry’ (Coetzee, 1999, p.185) The comparison between Soraya and a snake appears in the first chapter, when he perceived women as no more than a stimulus that evokes troublesome sexual desires. However after his transformation he believes women don’t create the impulses but help him get

rid of the effects of the urges. This transformation in his perception leads to his redemption and sympathy.

The loss of power exemplified by his daughter's rape helps him to understand women and his redemption is signified with his efforts in taking care of animals: 'It sounds like someone trying to make reparation for past misdeeds. All right, I'll do it. But only as long as I don't have to become a better person. I am not prepared to be reformed. I want to go on being myself' (Coetzee, 1999, p.77). At first, David can't embrace the fact that he has to transform since he has trouble accepting the effects of his behavior on women. After Lucy is raped, he goes through the same painful process of being inferior and having nothing to do so he realizes what he has done to Melanie and the other women. He redeems himself by going to Melanie's house and apologizing to her parents.

David's approach to women is similar to his attitude towards animals since he believes women exist to share their beauty by serving men sexually and animals exist to serve men's needs in means of security and nutrition. Once his understanding of what women are for changes through certain incidents and loss of power, he rejects his former attitudes and behavior. This process of redemption is reflected through his efforts in providing an honorable death to dogs in the Animal Welfare Clinic. The job in the Animal Welfare Clinic

symbolizes David's efforts in making up for his wrong attitude and approach to women. Coetzee focuses on his function in the clinic, which is carrying the dog corpses to the dump, to reflect his new understanding of the changed order and how he obeys it: 'For that it would be enough to drop off the bags at the dump and drive away. For the sake of the dogs? But the dogs are dead; and what do dogs know of honor and dishonor anyway? For himself then. For his idea of the world, a world in which men do not use shovels to beat corpses into a more convenient shape for processing,' (Coetzee, 1999, p.146).

David believes his position in the order requires redeeming his former manners by respecting the animals, women and black people and the dead ones among them. He also feels responsible for his actions that involve animals being harmed and asks for forgiveness: ' "Yes we eat up a lot of animals in this country," she says. "It doesn't seem to do us much good. I'm not sure how we will justify it to them." Justify it? When? At the Great Reckoning? He would be curious to hear more, but this is not the time' (Coetzee, 1999, p.82). Before his transformation started, he couldn't make sense of the feeling of responsibility towards animals. 'I am going to eat this, he says to himself. I am going to eat it and ask forgiveness afterwards,' (Coetzee, 1999, p.131). Empathy and consumption are a tangled process in his journey to self-knowledge.

David unwillingly empathizes with the lower social classes

since he is no longer at the top of the pecking order conjoined with his being left defenseless and vulnerable during Lucy's rape. Sympathy is the source of the change in his perception of women and animals. The pursuit starts with his trials in reaching Lucy emotionally: 'Or do they think that, where rape is concerned, no man can be where the woman is? Whatever the answer, he is outraged at being treated like an outsider' (Coetzee, 1999, p.141). Bev Shaw and Lucy keeps David out of the overcoming process and their attitude provokes David to feel the need to empathize with Lucy. Once he has observed the consequences of the cruel and selfish behavior of men, he starts caring about women's and animals' feelings: 'If, more often than not, the dog fails to be charmed, it is because of his presence: he gives off the wrong smell (*They can smell your thoughts*), the smell of shame,' (Coetzee, 1999, p.142). David cares for the animals in such a way that he is even cautious about the energy his mind releases 'A bond seems to have come into existence between himself and the two Persians, he does not know how. The bond is not one of affection. It is not even a bond with these two in particular, whom he could not pick out from a mob in a field. Nevertheless, suddenly and without reason, their lot has become important to him,' (Coetzee, 1999, p.126). David redeems himself for not being able to protect Lucy from being abused (Graham, 2003). As the feeling of guilt washes over him, he feels like he has to

protect the vulnerable and defenseless, the sheep.

The connection between his sympathy towards animals and women is emphasized through the smelling thoughts metaphor 'Can she smell his thoughts?' (Coetzee, 1999, p.156) It may be deduced that his empathy towards women develops accordingly. 'You were afraid that after you had been used you would be killed. Disposed of. Because you were nothing to them' (Coetzee, 1999, p.157). The described incident is similar to what people do to their animals by giving them to the clinic. So David compares the experiences of animals to what women go through which intertwines his ideas and attitude towards both of them.

CONCLUSION

Disgrace deals with the transformation of David Lurie in terms of empowerment and the change in his perception towards animals, women, and black people. Aging, his loss of reputation and the new house in the rural area contribute to his transformation into a vulnerable old man who knows his own mind which is depicted by his comparisons to dogs and his interpretations of the dogs.

With symbolism, the novel also depicts the change in the social order of the post-apartheid South Africa and the

reactions of the former superior racial class to losing its power. Thus, David Lurie's relationship with animals and his perception of animals play a huge role in reflecting the emotions and behavior of white men as the changes in the new world order encompass them.

With the loss of racial empowerment, his understanding of the other social orders, dogs and women, leads him to form sympathy towards both the groups. The new-found empathy is reflected through David's relationship with the animal characters. Coetzee includes animals as important characters in the novel to convey David's approach to the inferior and how it changes in step with his own transition (Attridge, 2000). Moreover, the inner conflicts that arise due to restrictions in reflecting his desires are portrayed by using animal interpretations. Thus, animals play a key role in reflecting the transformation process of David and society.

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