

# **J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*: Expression of *Disgrace* in Contemporary Post-Apartheid South-Africa**

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**Abstract:** From the perspective of a cultural researcher, it can be said this paper tries to unveil the meaning of the expression “disgrace” in the work *Disgrace* by J.M. Coetzee with the purpose of finding out how Coetzee depicts David Lurie’s disgrace in the entire novel, and what he does to gain his grace back. In addition, the approach of a New Historicism used in this article can help reflect something about Coetzee and his current society to today’s readers. Much more than that, at deeper level of research, it can be revealed that this novel is filled with both critique and judgment of the South African system, its moral standards as well as its citizens. And, it seems Coetzee is right when he says that he just depicts a factual state as he sees it because the entire novel is the description of a huge South African society.

**Key words:** *Disgrace*, David Lurie, Coetzee, New Historicism’s perspective, Post-Apartheid

## 1. Introduction

*Disgrace* by J. M. Coetzee, which won the Booker Prize in 1999 and the Commonwealth Writers Prize in 2000, is said to be at the frontier of the world literature because it is one of the 100 best novels. It is also considered as a “disturbing book that forces the readers to confront the darker side of life and deal with ethical issues and the baser instincts of humanity” (Dailey 2010). It also explores “the furthest reaches of what it means to be human.” (The Guardian 2015)<sup>1</sup>

Iris Radisch (2000) from her own perspective, in the *complete review*'s review, says that:

*Disgrace* is a terribly dark book. The rape is discreetly handled, but there is a great deal of unpleasantness that is described quite closely. Much of it involves violence against animals (both arbitrary and necessary). Even where there isn't outright violence, there is almost always menace in the air, from Lurie's seduction of Melanie to Lucy's relationship with Petrus.

Lurie and Lucy are strong-willed but misguided, unwilling to do the obvious or simple. But Coetzee handles these basically ugly characters well: they are convincing, if not sympathetic. The writing is compelling, the voices (there is a great deal of dialogue) and descriptions sharp and true. The book moves forward somewhat

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/aug/10/100-best-novels-disgrace-jm-coetzee-intensely-human>

uncertainly, but this mirrors Lurie's own state. More impressively, Coetzee does not impose an easy resolution, allowing for uncertainty (though leavening it with a dash of hope).

*Disgrace* is a troubling work, of troubled people in troubled times. Ill-equipped—or unwilling—to face the new realities of post-apartheid South Africa, Lurie and his daughter nevertheless try to find their place in it. As they live largely apart from society in any case (uncomfortable with it under the best of circumstances, one imagines), the book is not as effective as it might be in shedding all that much light on the new realities. Still, it's a powerful work and a gripping (if unsettling – and not always in a productive way) read. (Iris Radisch 2000)

Much more than that, New Historicism is said to be a method of literary criticism that emphasizes the history of the text by relating it to the configurations of power, society, or ideology in a given time (Merriam-Webster Dictionary). In other words, when the text is analyzed from the perspective of this theory/ school, it will be influenced by political, social, and cultural societies. It means that the author and theme relationship are compared to the text and how they correlate are paid attention to.<sup>2</sup> It is, therefore, important to mention something about post- apartheid in South Africa and the author J. M. Coetzee in this paper.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://bowiestate.libguides.com/c.php?g=442217&p=3014973>

It can be seen that the period of Apartheid in the history of South Africa was lasting rather long from 1948 until early 1990. The country shifted into another period known as Post-Apartheid since the presidency of Mandela in 1994. According to Bill Freund and Vishnu Padayachee (1998):

the most striking features of contemporary South Africa, [can be summed up as] the growing ascendance of a corporate-cum-state black elite with little effective challenge either from below or from the formerly powerful white minority, the relative modesty of social change, the disintegration of Left critiques in favor of a crude materialist and instrumental view of life, the pursuit of economic policies that will perpetuate existing inequalities and power relations even while deracializing and, most strikingly, the failure to find a modus operandi that will break the historic walls of privilege in this society of extreme contrasts to create a real new South African identity. A consequence may well be a process of long-term civic decay coupled with a vibrant if extremely inequitable civil society.

It can be inferred that the common serious problems of that contemporary society are inequality and power relations which can be found in *Disgrace* by Coetzee. It helps readers acquire the status of shifting from power to powerless of its characters depicted by Coetzee, who is an author and academic from South Africa. He is now an Australian citizen and lives in Adelaide, South Australia. Coetzee, who works as a novelist and literary critic as well as a translator, has won the Booker Prize twice and was awarded the 2003 Nobel Prize

in Literature. He was in Cape Town, Cape Province, Union of South Africa. He spent most of his early life in Cape Town and in Worcester in Cape Province as narrated in his fictionalized memoir, *Boyhood* (1997). He first attended St. Joseph's College in the Cape Town suburb of Rondebosch, and later studied mathematics and English at the University of Cape Town, receiving his Bachelor of Arts with Honors in English in 1960 and his Bachelor of Arts with Honors in Mathematics in 1961. He got his PhD degree in English, linguistics, and Germanic languages in 1968.<sup>3</sup> It was made into a film in 2008, directed by Steve Jacobs and starring John Malkovich.

In an attempt to better interpret the novel, this paper will be divided into 2 parts. The first section tries to analyze the meaning of disgrace and the "real" disgraces which David Lurie encountered in the entire of *Disgrace* such as shifting from the status of power to powerless of Coetzee's character while the second one hopes to unveil the relationship of Coetzee and *Disgrace* via the perspective of New Historicism.

## **2. Expression of 'disgrace' and the disgraces David Lurie encountered in *Disgrace***

The word 'disgrace' which was supposed to stay in literature and was first used in English in 1549. It connotes "an ill-fortune, defeature,

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<sup>3</sup> The Nobel Prize. 2011. "J. M. Coetzee—Biography(2003)". The Nobel prize. Oct. 4. 2011. [http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/literature/laureates/2003/coetzee-bio.html](http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/2003/coetzee-bio.html)

mishap, disfavor, dishonor in general or public estimation” (Oxford Univ. press et al.: 773). It comes from the French word *grâce* meaning “favor shown another, kindness, loveliness, charm; thanks, thankfulness, gratitude” (Klein 1966: 672). However, the prefix ‘dis’ which means “separation, removal, negation, deprivation, undoing, reversal” is added to “*grâce*” makes its meaning become opposite (Klein 1966: 455). In other words, ‘disgrace’ is the opposite of favor shown by another being. Skeat, in terms of etymology, explains ‘disgrace’ as “an ill fortune, hard luck” (Skeat 1961: 173).

‘Grace’ is connected with “mercy” as well as “pardon” (Skeat 1961: 246). On the other hand, Klein shows that “disgrace” has something related to reputation in an old Prussian connotation (Klein 1966: 672). It is what David is reminded of by his ex-wife “An inglorious end to your career, don’t you think? [...] was what you got from this girl was worth the price” (Coetzee 1999: 44).

Furthermore, according to Longman, ‘*Disgrace*’ is described as a situation where one loses “people’s respect because [she/e has] done something they strongly disapprove of” (Longman 2003: 447). In other words, this term can be comprehended as doing “something so bad that [one can] make other people feel ashamed” (Longman 2003: 447). It is, therefore, something where people feel ashamed to be involved with that “one” or that person. And that is what our author lets David seriously suffer as “Her relief is palpable [...] She does not look back” (Coetzee 1999: 180). By tracing the historical development of the term ‘grace’, it can be found that in Hebrew language meaning “love where there was no obligation for it” (Kulandran 2004: 35). Likewise, in Greek it is termed “*charis*” which illustrates favor from superior to

inferior, generously given and never to be possessed. It is a “prerogative of the superior giving out ‘grace’ to be able to withdraw ‘the grace,’ putting the inferior in ‘disgrace’” (Alexander & Rosner 2000: 524). It seems that in Coetzee’s perspective, he implies the University as the superior and David Lurie- the inferior. As far as it can be observed, not only the specific university depicted by Coetzee but also many other universities in the world nowadays, can give out “grace” or withdraw it easily with lecturers or staff put into the status of “disgrace” very easily.

In addition, “*charis*” is used for ‘reward’ in the New Testament. It can be seen that even “the ungrateful and the wicked,” including David Lurie, can be rewarded with the grace of God (Luke 6:35). We can see that God chooses who He wants to show mercy to and that it is not up to us simple humans to try to understand His ways (Exodus 33:19). It is, therefore, once again, an allegory for the “almighty” University and the main character, the “simple human” David Lurie.

Moreover, to be judged as righteous or to rise from ‘disgrace,’ one has to show their repentance. In other words, a person has to change from their faulty ways (Longman 2003: 80). In “*Disgrace*” David, however, refuses to do it (Coetzee 1999: 77). As a result, he remains in disgrace until near the end of the novel. And how David is portrayed as deeply in “disgrace” throughout the entire story will be thoroughly investigated further ahead in this paper.

David Lurie is the main character of *Disgrace*. He is a South African professor who is twice divorced and nothing remains from his reputation, his job, his peace of mind, his good looks, his dreams of artistic success, to finally, the ability to protect his own daughter.

He used to teach modern languages but being a victim of “the great rationalization”, he works as an “adjunct professor of communications” (Coetzee 1999: 3). At the grace of the university, he, once a year offers a course in his special field, without having to consider enrolment (Coetzee 1999: 3).

The first “disgrace” that David faces can be seen as when he is pushed away by Soraya, a prostitute, and “all of a sudden life is dull” (Coetzee 1999: 11). At first he thinks that he is rather handsome, being popular and weekly, he visits Soraya to solve “the problem of sex” (Coetzee 1999: 1) but later seeing her shopping with her two sons, he starts to think about her as living a double life, a “respectable” wife during the day and only working for the Discrete Escorts Agency some hours a week (Coetzee 1999: 3, 6). She is cooler when they meet next time and finally ends their arrangement (Coetzee 1999: 8). As he does not accept the fact that he is in “disgrace” for buying sex, he accuses her of being “a loose woman” (Coetzee 1999: 3) who helps him solving the problem of sex. In the same manner, Sarvan states that “Sex is not an intimate relationship with another human being, an individual, but a “problem” to be solved” (Sarvan 2004: 26, 27).

By the sexual affair with Melanie Isaacs—one of his students, Coetzee brings the second “disgrace” to David Lurie as follows: he by chance meets her on a walk home. He has noticed her before and lavishly describes her “striking” outfits (Coetzee 1999: 11). He is “mildly smitten with her” (Coetzee 1999: 11) but thinks nothing of it. There is one female student almost every term that awakens these feelings and he knows that they know. He pursues her and they have dinner at his house (Coetzee 1999: 12, 13). He calls her and after one word from her mouth,



David “hears all her uncertainty... She will not know how to deal with him” (Coetzee 1999: 18). As what Coetzee portrays in the novel, she is really confused in solving this problem because she is still too young and is the same age as David’s daughter. She knows neither how to refuse him nor how to accept him because he is the powerful professor who will let her pass or fail, and she is at his mercy. The researcher is wondering if this is a special case or a popular phenomenon in current society. In “*Reading the Unspeakable: Rape in J. M. Coetzee’s Disgrace*,” Gramham describes “Melanie’s position in *Disgrace* is not an uncommon one in contemporary South Africa” (Gramham 2003: 438). In other words, this problem is very common in David’s society. In terms of Kachru, this matter can spread from the “outer circle” to the “expanding circle” (Kachru 1998: 94) and into society nowadays. In the sense of teacher power, it results a very negative impact on the teachers in general and on male teachers more specifically.

Linnell reveals that J.M. Coetzee was working as a Professor of Literature at the University of Cape Town at the time of “*Disgrace*” (Linnell 1999: 424). As in the “*Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality*,” Rubin remarks that: “Sex is always political” especially for the tertiary level (Rubin 1984: 267). As a citizen of South Africa, Coetzee, who must have been well aware of the importance of this problem and rape not because of the sex but in the way that it reports a demonstration of power.<sup>4</sup> David, however, says he “has never been passionate” (Coetzee 1999: 2) but Melanie made him “a servant of

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.rapecrisis.org.za/downloads.asp>

Eros” (Coetzee 1999: 52). From the perspective of a “romantic” like David, he thinks that his actions are not a crime; just a man’s passion. Whatever David says for his actions, it cannot be acceptable, not only for his society but the current society as well, especially within the professor-student relationship. The University takes on its superior, God-like role and condemns David to “dismissal with censure,” the most severe penalty possible (Coetzee 1999: 54). Thus, he is in disgrace. David becomes hot news of the day with cameras flashing in his face but as time goes by, he becomes a pariah (Coetzee 1999: 55). His acquaintance and friends pretend not to recognize him and turn their backs on him. To avoid nuisance, he decides to go to his daughter place in Salem, in the Eastern Cape Province. Why does the author settle his daughter down at this place but not somewhere else? This is the question that the researcher pondered when reading this part of the novel. There must be some reasons for this particular place to be chosen. Salem carried a strong negative meaning and the town of Salem, Massachusetts, is notorious for one of humankind’s biggest disgraces, witch-hunts.<sup>5</sup> Besides, the Eastern Cape Province has a violent past infected with conflicts between white colonials and the residing black population.<sup>6</sup> It can be inferred that all the factors mentioned above can serve as a perfect arena for “*Disgrace*.” It is this place where David’s third “disgrace” takes place. As David becomes gradually accustomed to living in a rural area, disaster happens. Three young black men rob the farm and they lock David in the bathroom.

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.salemwitchmuseum.com/education/index.shtml>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.inter-disciplinary.net/ptb/hope/h1/burrows%20paper.pdf>

His hair is set on fire and the only way to put out the flames is by using water from the toilet. He watches as all the dogs in the kennel are shot and is finally let out by a robe clad Lucy (Coetzee 1999: 97). He is now experiencing the misery of rape in depth, which his daughter had to undergo. That of what Melanie Isaacs used to bear. And he gradually realizes his “passion” for Isaacs and his daughter’s rape has some similarities. They are both unwilling and powerless to resist. He might relate to some of the feelings that Isaacs suffered. The attack causes David to change his view points, he becomes very pessimistic “like a fly-casing in a spider web, brittle to the touch, lighter than rice-chaff, ready to float away…His pleasure in living has been snuffed out” (Coetzee 1999: 107). It becomes more serious when the main character does not seem to recognize the complexity of rape. That is why Lucy thinks he should have no problem (Coetzee 1999: 158), resulting in Lucy “close[s] him out” (Coetzee 1999: 134). He still cannot realize the bad situation even when Bev hints “Menstruation, childbirth, violation and its aftermath: blood-matters; a woman’s burden, women’s preserve” (Coetzee 1999: 104). This point occurs to the researcher, a question why a communication major like him, is such a failure in communication in this context? In his second “disgrace” with his student, he did not recognize that her black clothes referred to her unwillingness, and this time he is not sensitive enough to realize the context which his daughter finds herself in. It makes him feel “shocked” when he is informed that Lucy is pregnant (Coetzee 1999: 198). He wants her to abort her pregnancy, but she refuses to “go through it again” (Coetzee 1999: 198). It can be inferred that she used to experience one before. Lucy, from the perspective of

the researcher, is given a very cruel fate by Coetzee. In other words, David is a “*disgrace*” in duty as a father because he is helpless when it comes to his daughter. This issue worsens when his daughter wants to be the third wife of a very old man because “He is offering an alliance, a deal. [She contributes] the land, in return for which [she is] allowed to creep in under his wing. Otherwise, he wants to remind [her], [she is] without protection, [she is] fair game.” David does not “believe his eyes” when he hears the naked truth from Petru, as he says, “I could hardly believe what I was hearing” (Coetzee 1999: 203).

Because David refuses to accept his faults, Coetzee lets disgraces happen to him again and again. David thus urges for forgiveness. When David desires the status of grace, he decides to contact Melanie’s family to achieve it. He confesses:

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 out 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? (Coetzee 1999: 172)

The Isaacs family being black puts political overtones in this encounter and Sue Kossew supposes it might be considered as an “ironic...reference to the Truth and Reconciliation process” (Kossew 2003: 160). It can be interpreted that David’s action of kneeling down and touching the ground with his forehead before Melanie’s mother

(Coetzee 1999: 173) indicates his sincere plea to the victim's family. It is not easy for him to do this action until he is "sunk into a state of disgrace" (Coetzee 1999: 172). It takes time and a lot of vicissitudes in David's life to come up with his final decision, asking for the forgiveness from his student's family. This indicates the great shift in David's view of himself. At first, he considered himself as a handsome, lady-killer man with good popularity and high position in his current society but later he comes to confess his faults, not for a political purpose, but for peace of mind. He gives up everything, "no property, no rights, no dignity. Like a dog" (Coetzee 1999: 176, 205). Kossew supposes this is David's effort to repent (Kossew 2003: 160). In the New Testament, Jesus Christ says "...those who humble themselves will be exalted" (Luke 18:14). David, thus, humbles himself to be exalted or he gives himself up to be given grace. He will be free as Coetzee hints "he is a free man, with duties to no one but himself" (Coetzee 1999: 178). In other words, it is never too late to be repentant and to ask for forgiveness which shows Coetzee's wide tolerance to contemporary society.

### **3. The relationship of Coetzee and *Disgrace* via the perspective of New Historicism**

Coetzee is considered to be successful in depicting post-Apartheid South African society. Cooper (2005) reveals that disgrace in the novel can be pictured as a symbol of "desire, sex, transgression and shame" and she challenges that the image of blacks is not a damaging one but

something worth discussing (Cooper 2005: 24).

From the approach of New Historicism, it can be said that all literature is to be seen as a “product of the time, place and circumstances of its composition rather than as an isolated creation”.<sup>7</sup> From the perspective of a researcher, I think this is a quite relevant view to use for exploring the world of “*Disgrace*.”

When immersed in this novel, the reader cannot separate the connection between fiction and fact because it is impossible for readers to comprehend and interpret the novel without recognizing its context. And the researcher does not think *Disgrace* is an exceptional case. I will try my best to investigate the ways in which disgrace is portrayed in the novel and show how this reflects its time and society. In terms of time and place, Cornwell states that Cape Town, Grahams Town, Salem, and George are real places mentioned in the novel and its “historically identifiable” time can be inferred as “Post-Apartheid, actually specified in the novel as 1997 or 1998” (Cornwell 2010: 307). In terms of circumstances, current society’s picture is portrayed by Coetzee’s pen. Much more than that, by *Disgrace*, Coetzee seems to criticize the Post-Apartheid South Africa due to the following reasons:

Firstly, the police are the core force to keep society in order, but in Coetzee’s view, they are inefficient and dull. In other words, they seem can do nothing to fulfill their role and let the society become disordered “Drug-peddlers hang around the playing-fields [...] the police do nothing” (Coetzee 1999: 8). Besides, the police

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<sup>7</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New\\_Historicism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_Historicism)

are irresponsible in their job: “Behind the lavatory door, two spent matchsticks, which they do not even notice” (Coetzee 1999: 109). This indicates their professional weaknesses. It becomes more ridiculous when Lucy reveals that “the police are not going to find [the rapists] without help” (Coetzee 1999: 119). They are the security force but cannot do anything to protect citizens’ lives. It can be understood that the people there can be attacked at any time and at any place. Depicting the details above might be one of the ways that the author laughs at the political system in contemporary society in general.

Secondly, through the “great rationalization,” a University College now becomes a Technical University (Coetzee 1999: 3). This can be referred as a sign of “disgrace” which society is falling into. According to Kochin’s explanation (2004), the University is in disgrace because of “its failure to reproduce the cultural heritage that was placed in its keeping” (Coetzee 1999: 4). It is even worse when students are said “to come to learn nothing” and the teachers—“old masters are discarded” (Coetzee 1999: 5, 179). The researcher is also wondering if Coetzee is offering a satirical view on the teaching quality of their educational system in the circumstances described above.

Thirdly, it can be said that Coetzee has full recognition of the moral issues operating in post-Apartheid South African society. David and Lucy can be viewed as a symbol of the white population of South Africa; they feel guilty and they are being punished for the errors of previous generations. What are Coetzee’s implications on the fact that Lucy refuses to move away to “...start a new chapter elsewhere?” (Coetzee 1999: 155). It seems that Coetzee wants them to leave their past aside and live in harmony with each other so that South Africa can

be graceful again. And that the image of blacks is not a damaging one but something worth discussing as mentioned earlier (Cooper 2005: 24). It serve as a successful key part of Coetzee's novel. Furthermore, Kossew seemed to be reasonable in his comment as follows:

this is a novel about ethical choices, and it is important to note the irony...an irony that seems to dissipate towards the end of the novel as David and Lucy each find a "modus vivendi" not through any grand revelation or absolution, but through attending to the everyday...In this quiet way, humanity is measured in a society that has made a spectacle of its inhumanity. (Kossew 1996: 161)

#### **4. Conclusion**

In general, it can be observed that it is in the paper, scholars are offered chances to voice themselves on *Disgrace* by Coetzee (1999).

Firstly, with the open-minded view of a cultural researcher, the researcher tried her best to explore what Coetzee means by "disgrace" and the "real" disgraces which David Lurie encountered in the entirety of *Disgrace*, shifting from the status of power to powerless. In other words, the researcher is keeping her patience while finding out how Coetzee depicts David Lurie's disgrace in the entire novel and what he does to gain his grace back in the first part of this research.

The term "disgrace" can be comprehended as doing "something so bad that [one can] make other people feel ashamed of him or her. To rise from 'disgrace,' one has to show repentance. In other words,



a person must repent and give up their faulty ways (Longman 2003: 80). In “*Disgrace*” David, however, refuses to do it (Coetzee 1999: 77). As a result, he remains in disgrace until near the end of the novel. It is the one of the reasons why Coetzee lets David suffer disgrace 3 times. The first “disgrace” that David faces can be seen as when he is pushed away by Soraya, a prostitute and “all of a sudden life is dull” (Coetzee 1999: 11). He feels bitter and does not accept the fact that he—a university professor, is disconnected by a prostitute. It is where he falls into his first disgrace. And by the sexual affair with Melanie Isaacs—one of his students, Coetzee brings the second “disgrace” to David Lurie. This problem leads David to the fact that he loses his reputation and his job and that he is in disgrace for the second time. It turns David from a powerful lecturer to a powerless person who can do nothing to his community or society. Much more than that, this main character does not feel guilty for all what he has done in his lifetime, and he does not repent for his sins, so his third “disgrace” takes place. It happens to David as he gradually becomes accustomed to the living in a rural area, disaster happens. Three young black men rob the farm and they lock David in the bathroom. His hair is set on fire and the only way to put out the flames is by using water from the toilet. He watches as all the dogs in the kennel are shot and is finally let out by a robe clad Lucy (Coetzee 1999: 97). The problem worsens when the main character is experiencing the misery of rape in depth which his daughter had to undergo. This extreme pain forces David to recall his raping of his student– Melanie Isaacs. He runs to her and her family to beg for their forgiveness. It can be inferred that it is never too late to be repentant and to ask for forgiveness which show Coetzee’s wide

tolerance to contemporary society.

Secondly, the researcher's effort to unveil the relationship of Coetzee and *Disgrace* via the New Historicism's perspective was conveyed in the second part of this article. In addition, the New Historicism approach can help reflect the "disgrace" about Coetzee and his society. It can be inferred that there are some similar things between David and Coetzee. They both live in post-Apartheid South Africa and are lecturers for famous universities. They have well-known publications. Both of them have been married and divorced. Coetzee however has full recognition of his political, moral, social system. He illustrates teacher power at tertiary level but its implications are more than that. As a reader, it is observable that both David and all of South Africa society are in disgrace. It seems that describing this main character is one of the ways that Coetzee sends a message to the world about his current society. David's actions cause him to be judged and in disgrace. He has to pay a very "expensive price" to go back to grace. What does the author imply when he lets David give up everything (Coetzee 1999: 176, 205) and spend his rest life on the edge of a democracy under development? The answer will depend on the readers' view and the extent to which they can interpret the novel.

From a deeper level of research it can be recognized that this novel is filled with both critique and judgment of the South African system, its moral standards as well as its citizens. And, it seems that Coetzee is right when he says that he just depicts a factual state as he sees it because the entire novel is the description of the huge South African society.

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