

Explore the different types of disgrace presented in jm coetzee's novel 'disgrace...



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JM Coetzee's 'Disgrace' is a novel that chronicles the fall from grace of its protagonist, David Lurie. The misfortunes he suffers are varied and sometimes disturbing.

But, although David's experiences of disgrace could be interpreted as being only that of a middle aged white South African who is refusing to grow old gracefully, the idea of disgrace is tackled from many angles. Using the setting of post - apartheid South Africa, Coetzee's novel also is a reference to political disgrace and the effect that it has had on the lives of South Africans. The opening of the novel instantly gives us an idea of David's character" For a man of his age, fifty-two, divorced, he has, to his mind, solved the problem of sex rather well." His attitudes to sex and relationships are instantly apparent from this line and we see that Lurie harbours a private disgrace. Soraya, whom he visits weekly, helps him to solve his 'problem'. The phrase, 'to his mind' shows the implication here is that David's 'solution' is far from adequate.

Lurie's rather passionless attitude to relationships is mirrored in the description of the pairs love-making session" Intercourse between Soraya and himself must be he imagines, rather like the copulation of snakes: lengthy, absorbed, but rather abstract, rather dry, even at its hottest." From this introduction we can see that Lurie does not take relationships particularly seriously and that he seems purely interested in what he can gain. A lover to whom he only has to give money seems the perfect solution for Lurie. There appears to be a lack of emotional engagement and moral responsibility here towards his partners which is shown also by Lurie's

decision to see a prostitute, Coetzee describes, is indirectly caused by the loss of his youth.

When he finds he is no longer able to attract women in the same way he did as a young man, David embarks on a self-indulgent quest to prove his virility. He relates how he has slept with colleague's wives in an attempt to rekindle the passion of his youth." He existed in a flurry of promiscuity. He had affairs with the wives of colleagues; he picked tourists in bars on the waterfront or at the Club Italia; he slept with whores." The language here implies desperation as Lurie is clinging on to the memory of his youth.

The way Coetzee lists Lurie's encounters emphasises the frantic nature of his behaviour. This then offers an initial explanation for Lurie's behaviour and of the nature of his disgrace. He has effectively reached a mid-life crisis and is refusing to accept his age and the changes in lifestyle that it brings. Lurie is aware however that he is growing old. He is aware that others may find him repulsive, in fact the idea preoccupies him.

David has a deep seated internal conflict, he is unable to reconcile the knowledge that he is old and no longer attractive with his intense sex drive. This results in difficulty for David very early in the novel and he suffers a disgrace that he is unable to keep as quiet as Soraya. David's mid-life crisis manifests itself in a far more spectacular way than an ordinary middle-aged father's. He embarks on a rather sordid affair with a student of his named Melanie. This comes across as slightly perverse at times especially considering his description of her:" Her hips are as slim as a twelve-year-old's." Which is clearly all the more repulsive when you consider his age.

David's conflict often comes into play during this relationship. During their first exchange he makes constant comment on the fact that they are from two very different generations." ' From fairest creatures we desire increase,' he says, ' that thereby beauty's rose might never die.'Not a good move. Her smile loses its playful mobile quality. He has become a teacher again, man of the book, guardian of the culture hoard.

" Also throughout the relationship he is seen to be aware that she is so young, and yet he never says ' no', he is always driven by his sexual urges." She licks away a drop of rain from her upper lip. A child! He thinks: No more than a child! What am I doing? Yet his heart lurches with desire" This then also seems to be a theme of disgrace; the disgrace which occurs when you cannot control your instincts, even when it defies reason or sensibility. Davids naïve attitude to the relationship is also made clear as shown by his belief that there may be a future to them, based solely on her becoming more proficient in the bedroom" when she hooks a leg behind his buttocks to draw him in closer.

Who knows, he thinks: there might, despite all, be a future" There is a similarity between this excerpt and the opening line of the novel, where the phrase ' he thinks' has similar connotations to ' to his mind'This all ties in with David's explanation of his actions at trial; where he claims he was " A slave to Eros". This is an important theme in the novel as it implies having been reduced to base instincts . He became almost like an animal in his desire, not stopping to consider his actions and how what he was doing was a gross abuse of his authority. This idea of being reduced to an animal level is continued throughout David's journey.

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David's disgrace at having taken advantage of his student could be interpreted solely as a man's mid-life crisis and uncontrolled sexual urges leading him to act in an uncontrolled manner. However, parallels can be drawn between his actions and subsequent punishment and the actions of the apartheid government. He decided to abuse his power and take advantage of someone far more helpless based on an instinct, rather than reason, which he was also aware of but chose to ignore. There are similarities between this and the racist behaviour of the apartheid government.

Therefore, while Lurie's disgrace is that of a middle-aged man, it is also representative of the disgrace of a nation. Further parallels can be drawn between Lurie's trial and the show trials of apartheid. David's trial is an example of his disgrace becoming public, it is no longer David's private disgrace, but also that of the faculty, and they must attempt to rectify it. The entire situation is reminiscent of post-apartheid show trials.

The tribunal in those situations and also in 'Disgrace' is not interested in punishing David but in saving face for the establishment. All that is required from him is a token apology and a show of remorse." 'I am being asked to issue an apology about which I may not be sincere?' The criterion is not whether you are sincere..

. The criterion is whether you are prepared to acknowledge your fault in a public manner and take steps to remedy it." The factor that makes this situation so different is the inclusion of the media; which reveals David's scandal to everyone in Capetown. This also highlights the idea of people's

natural desire to see others disgraced, the media frenzy over the situation and the way they are prepared to ridicule Lurie to sell papers is an example of this." The photograph appears in the next day's student newspaper, above the caption ' Who's the Dunce Now?'" In this situation though, David sets himself up for a fall by refusing to conform to the wishes of the council; and, as a result of the media attention, David can no longer show his face in Capetown and is effectively banished. Through the novel up until this point there have been various references that predict this turn of events for David.

The idea of damnation or a fall from grace is one that is repeated and is especially obvious in his class discussion of Lucifer and his banishment ." He stood a stranger in this breathing world, An erring spirit from another hurled; A thing of dark imaginings, that shapedBy choice the perils he by chance escaped" This clearly seems to relate to his own life, his disgrace at the university and his having to live in the alien environment of his daughter's home which parallels the ' breathing world' to which Lucifer is exiled. Again, these ideas of an abuse of power and authority followed by a fall could be related to the South African political situation. On moving to the smallholding, the themes of disgrace become quite different. David is forced to seek refuge with his daughter.

The situation here shows just how far he has fallen, as the role of parent and child are practically reversed. Lucy is now a fully grown woman with her own business, making her own way in life. She does not refer to him as ' dad' but calls him David, indicative of the way their relationship has changed and perhaps even broken down. A theme of disgrace that is apparent in this part of the novel is David's inadequacy as a father and his inability to

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communicate properly with his daughter. Coetzee initially creates some tension between them in the form of minor disagreements”..

. animal welfare people are a bit like Christians of a certain kind. Everyone is so cheerful and well- intentioned that after a while you itch to go off and do some raping and pillaging..

.. You think I ought to involve myself in more important things. You don't approve of friends like Bev because they are not going to lead me to a higher life” His comments here show a detached superiority as he is yet to accept his new role in society. This argument is an example of their almost completely opposite views on life, however these do not prevent them from getting along amicably until after Lucy's rape. Here in the country he is reliant on Lucy for food and shelter and to find him work to do.

“ You could help with the dogs. You could cut up the dog meat” The language used here is simple and refers to a very basic practical task. This contrasts strongly with the academic world from which Lurie hails and makes his contemptuous attitude all the more ridiculous. Here we see that David's position in society has been greatly reduced. Previously he was a well respected academic, now he must cut up dog meat. Lurie reaching this diminished state was hinted at earlier on in the novel when he claimed to have been ‘ A Slave to Eros’.

This shows he was operating almost purely on animal instincts and it seems inevitable that he would be reduced to a more basic existence later on.

Another interesting theme is introduced here when Lucy suggests that David

should help Petrus, an ambitious black farmer who worked for Lucy” Petrus is busy...

you could give him a hand Give Petrus a hand. I like that. I like the historical piquancy” Again we see David is asked to perform manual tasks but he responds with academic jargon which again suggests a feeling of superiority. David is aware of the role-reversal here, the idea of an educated white man, doing manual labour for a black land worker strikes him as quite amusing. This however is indicative of the shifting balance of power in South Africa, and the disgrace of the white man.

This slightly facetious interpretation of the situation is an example of how David does not take this way of life seriously. At first, David’s pride does not allow him to accept this new role in society, he still feels superior to those around him, notably Bev Shaw, who’s views he silently ridicules; the enormity of his disgrace has not yet sunk in at this point.” Bev Shaw, not a veterinarian but a priestess, full of New Age mumbo jumbo, trying, absurdly to lighten the load of Africa’s suffering beasts.” After Lucy’s rape, David is humbled. He is forced to take his situation far more seriously as the incident clearly takes its toll on him emotionally.

After the attack, he is left with physical injuries to his head and eyes. It is possible that the damage to his eyes is intended to symbolise blindness, perhaps the blindness that he showed towards Melanie and the vulnerability of her situation. If then, this abuse of power with Melanie was representative of the actions of the South African government, maybe this attack then is the



retribution exacted by disillusioned and anarchic but now empowered black youths. His scars are now the physical embodiment of his disgrace.

Whereas before he would have to be recognised for anyone to realise what he had done, he is constantly reminded about what has happened by peoples reactions to his freakish appearance." Brown ash, all that is left of his hair, coats his scalp and forehead...One eyelid is swelling shut; his eyebrows are gone, his eyelashes too" David is much humbled by this experience and no longer has any airs of superiority. The most obvious example of how he has changed is his affair with Bev Shaw.

" After the sweet young flesh of Melanie Isaacs, this is what I have come to. This is what I will have to get used to, this and even less than this." The old David would never have considered this, and we saw previously that he made extremely derogatory comments concerning her." The veins on her ears are visible as a filigree of red and purple. The veins of her nose too.

And then a chin that comes straight out of her chest, like a pouter pigeon's. As an ensemble, remarkably unattractive." This unflattering description shows how superficial David can be; again there is an implied air of superiority. David's disfigurement later on in the novel however forces him to find some humility as we can see he probably becomes far more repulsive to look at than Bev.

The humiliation suffered by David after the attack is nothing compared to that which Lucy must cope with. However, she refuses to make known what has happened, which is the cause of much tension between them and leads

almost to the complete breakdown of their relationship." I cannot be a child forever. You cannot be a father forever.

I know you mean well, but you are not the guide I need, not at this time." This then shows how disgrace has enormous destructive potential, as it can drive families apart and almost completely destroy one's self-esteem. But, although David has been reduced to almost a shadow of his former self, some positive effects are apparent. He appears find some humanity in the animal sanctuary where he takes personal responsibility for the burning of dead dogs." The more killings he assists in, the more jittery he gets..

. One Sunday evening... he has to stop at the roadside to recover himself.

Tears flow down his face...his hands shake.

" This reveals some self-identification and self-realisation as David sees himself in the redundant animals who've outlived their usefulness and all they can now do is die with dignity. This seems very sentimental and very unlike the old David. This is particularly significant because throughout the novel Lurie has made a point of saying that his personality is set in stone, and that he is too old to change Rural South Africa is where the changes to David's personality are most evident, but when he returns to Capetown we see the effect that his disgrace has had on his status, his personal life and his material possessions, the yardsticks by which one is measured in society. Upon returning he finds his house has been looted, leaving him with nothing." He wanders through the house taking a census of his losses. His bedroom has been ransacked, the cupboards yawn bare.

“ This acts as a symbol, just as his house has been ransacked with nothing left behind, he has now become a shell of his former self, the disgrace has taken almost everything from him. By the end of the novel David Lurie seems quite a ridiculous figure, destroyed by the disgrace, he now has nothing except his romantic dream to write an opera. Even this will never really come to fruition though as he attempts to compose it using a banjo. We can see then that the first part of the novel is more concerned with the types of disgrace that Lurie suffers and the reasons for them.

The later part, after moving in with Lucy talks about the effect that disgrace can have on ones life relationships and personality. 'Disgrace' is not a novel about political disgrace masquerading as one about a disgraced white South African , both aspects of the novel are important. Coetzee explores many types of disgrace, David's abuse of power, coming as a result of his inability to control his animal instincts; then his disgrace being revealed through the media to the rest of society. His dysfunctional family situation with two divorces and a daughter with whom he cannot communicate. The detail in which David's fall is explored cannot be passed off as a metaphor. The essence of the novel is the idea of a disgraced man in a disgraced society who, at the end of the novel, finds some strength in self-knowledge and some dignity in resigned acceptance.