A disgraceful cycle

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“ It is not politically correct to talk about white, poor people,” advised a senior official of Solidarity, a prominent South African trade union, during a visit of President Jacob Zuma to the impoverished white community of Bethlehem (Evans). Under the system of Apartheid, “ there was an implicit promise that all whites would be guaranteed a basic minimum standard of living” (“ Afrikaners Hit Bottom”). This standard of living, however, was often supplied at the expense of the black majority; for that group, Apartheid offered restrictions of all kinds, running the gamut from systematic employment discrimination to prohibition of visits to museums (Slessor). With the abolition of Apartheid, it was clear that these restrictions, amongst many others, would have to disappear. Indeed, since 1994, South Africa has made strides toward empowerment of the majority; National Assembly membership, which was exclusively white less than 20 years ago, is now primarily black, and between 2007 and 2008 alone, 16. 8% of all black households migrated into the high-income category of 100, 000 to 300, 000 South African Rand (“ High-income black households show dramatic growth”). Interestingly enough, though, this black empowerment has at times come at the expense of the white minority much in the same way that Apartheid came at the expense of the black majority. According to a report submitted to President Zuma, the number of unemployed whites increased by 74% between 1998 and 2002, and the number of whites without access to housing increased by 58% between 2002 and 2006 (“ White Poverty in South Africa”). Clearly there has been a trade-off in South Africa’s balance of power, and this trade-off has not gone unnoticed by the white community; many websites have arisen which viciously condemn the ruling ANC and its “ Black Economic Empowerment” policy, which sets quotas on the number of

whites in any given business, creating tensions anew in South African society. Author J. M. Coetzee, however, has chosen to portray the trade-off in a less direct manner. In his Nobel Prize-winning book, Disgrace, Coetzee portrays the changes in South Africa’s balance of power symbolically through three characters: David, an aging college professor, Lucy, his farm-dwelling daughter, and Petrus, Lucy’s black assistant-turned-co-proprietor. In Disgrace, David and his abuses represent the White South Africans of the older generation who grew up in the Apartheid era, and Petrus and his abuses during his rise through the ranks reflect the position of Post-Apartheid Blacks, but it is Lucy, who committed no crime in the past and still suffers in the present, who represents the new generation of South African Whites. As a child of the old system, David’s actions and his fate, at times almost paradoxical, reflect the hypocrisy of older White South Africans in the face of the shifting balance of power. Indeed, David’s representation of that group is made rather obvious time and time again. A young secretary in David’s department talks with him about “ your generation” over lunch. Furthermore, David and his colleagues are said to have “ upbringings inappropriate to the tasks they are set to perform” (4). Despite these declarations, though, it is David’s actions which tie him to the White South Africans of old with the most conviction. David Lurie is a rapist, a pragmatic rapist. “ Not rape, not quite that, but undesired nevertheless, undesired to the core” (25), states the narrator as David has sex with his student, Melanie. Legally speaking, David has not at all committed rape. Melanie made no move to do away with David, but the fact remains that David exploited his highly advantageous power relationship with Melanie to procure sex. Sex is all David wanted from the relationship, as is explicitly

stated: “ When he made the first move, in the college gardens, he had thought of it as a quick little affair—quickly in, quickly out” (27). In addition, consider Melanie’s position for a moment. Turning down David’s advances would have certainly caused David to retaliate in terms of grading. Furthermore, having turned said advances down, she would have no provable case in terms of harassment. Indeed, in attempting to make this case after turning his advances down, she would likely be the one shamed as other professors and students would try to avoid her and perhaps scorn her for her “ false” testimony. Basically, Melanie does not want to go along with it; she simply has no choice. Adding this fact to the context of David’s actions makes said actions moral, if not legal rape. In this way, David reflects the White South Africans of the Apartheid era. Just as David committed rape only because it could never truly be called illegal, White South Africans expressed no moral reservation to cruelty toward Blacks when it was legalized in the form of Apartheid. Also, the White South Africans, like David, made use of an uneven power relationship to back the subject of their oppression into a corner, making them unable to protest. Through his own actions and the words of others, David can be seen to represent the Whites of the Apartheid era, but as the story progresses, David begins to represent that same group in the Post-Apartheid era. David’s dismissal from the Cape Technical University is the barrier in his life that roughly corresponds to the final abolition of Apartheid, and after said dismissal, his hypocrisy comes into full swing. For further proof of David’s representation of the older White South African community, one need only look to David’s actions before the committee set up to investigate his misconduct. “ I am guilty… of all that I am charged with” (49), repeats David consistently, with uncaring tone and

flat diction. Many who appeared before the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission shared David's tone and diction; oftentimes they were described as accepting guilt with " flat, emotionless delivery [that] sounds hopelessly disingenuous" and being followed by others reading " nearly the identical statement" (Goodman). At this point, after Coetzee has conclusively established David's representation of the older White South Africans, he moves to make an important commentary on that group that becomes the core of David's character. After Lucy is raped brutally by the three attackers on the farm, David tells Petrus, " I am Lucy's father. I want those men to be caught and brought before the law and punished. Am I wrong? Am I wrong to want justice?" (119). When Petrus provides an unemotional response, David begins to whip himself up into a rage: " Violation: that is the word he would like to force out of Petrus. Yes, it was a violation, he would like to hear Petrus say" (119). David, here, fails to realize his hypocrisy on two counts. First of all, David is clearly intensely angered by the rape of daughter, but he raped another girl on his daughter's bed. David thus has little right to seethe at the rape of his daughter. While it is true that the context in which Lucy was raped was illegal, unlike the context of David's rape of Melanie, it is also true that it was legal to shoot defectors along the Berlin Wall from the Eastern side and illegal to shoot them from the Western side. Does this mean that a shot fired from the East was not still murder? Just the same, in the existence of Apartheid, White South Africans willingly took advantage of blacks, economically repressing them for the benefit of whites. With the black majority in power, does this give the White South Africans any right to contest the " Black Economic Empowerment" program or expropriation of white land holdings on the claim that these initiatives are

illegal under international law? As obvious as David's hypocrisy becomes in the context of Lucy's rape, there are multiple other situations that unveil strong examples of David's hypocrisy, and they are, if anything, more direct and striking than previous instances. The second count of David's hypocrisy in the context of his heated conversation with Petrus is that he emotionally expresses willfulness to extract a specific response with a passionate tone from Petrus. Mere weeks ago, he denied the committee set up to investigate his misconduct a response of this exact type, instead giving it an indifferent expression of accord, just the same as Petrus is now doing. Furthermore, perhaps trying to set himself apart from the men who raped Lucy, David visits Melanie's family to make amends. When he does this, David sees Melanie's sister, Desiree, and his mind again reverts to sex: " The two of them in the same bed: an experience fit for a king" (164). A few chapters later, David notices one of Lucy's rapists (now staying with Petrus) " peering in through the bathroom window, peeping at Lucy" (206). David begins to rain blows upon him. Time and time again, David expresses indignation at acts that he himself committed in the past. All in all, Coetzee is stating, the White South Africans of the old generation have no moral high ground to stand on, no right to call any government-sponsored affirmative action unjust, for their injustice has been at least as great. Throughout Disgrace, Coetzee crafts an intriguing extended metaphor, using dogs to introduce the conventions of Apartheid into the story as tacitly as possible. Said metaphor is quite complex, and interestingly enough, the best way to begin to understand it is to start at the end. After the dog Driepoot's " period of grace" had run its course at the end of the story, David decides not to extend Driepoot's life by another week. Doing this would cause the dog to

live without that grace, with disgrace, the same sort of disgrace that David (and thus the White South Africans) faced. Basically, Driepoot has to be given up one way or another, and letting him live would only serve to prop up David's conscience short-term; it would be a selfish thing to do. Just the same, hanging onto the provisions of apartheid was clearly a selfish, losing battle for the White South Africans as the Apartheid-era drew to a close. With the international community closing in, the longer Apartheid was kept up, the more of a disgrace it would become. The way David (representing the White South Africans of old) works to kill off the dogs, albeit with some remorse, then, represents the way the White South Africans were forced to slowly kill off the laws of Apartheid once their " period of grace" had come to a close. While it may seem lewd at first to think that dogs could symbolize the conventions of Apartheid, this is not the only context that makes that symbolism apparent. When the attackers on Lucy's farm have subdued David and Lucy, they proceed to viciously shoot the dogs with hatred, instead of disposing of them with the dignity that David feels is deserved. Similarly, during the negotiations to end Apartheid, Black South Africans were calling for a much more abrupt end to Apartheid than White South Africans. Even further evidence of the relation of the dogs to the conventions of apartheid can be seen when David attacks Pollux; Katy the usually-glum dog attacks as well, painting the attack by a white man on a black man as a momentary resurgence of apartheid. All in all, Coetzee's complex dog-metaphor may, at times, seem contrived, but it is only through said metaphor that we the readers can move on to fully understanding the character that is Petrus. Just as David's hypocrisy is meant to represent that of the old White South African community, Petrus' rise through the ranks and

his indifference toward the situation of David and Lucy is meant to represent the Black community of the new South Africa. When Petrus is first mentioned, Lucy states, “ Petrus is my new assistant. In fact, since March, co-proprietor” (62). Thus Petrus’ introduction already comes with evidence of the beginning of his rise through the ranks. Soon afterwards, Petrus throws a party to celebrate, and by chapter sixteen, when Petrus asks David for help with pipefitting, “[David’s] role at the dam soon becomes clear. Petrus needs him not for advice on pipefitting or plumbing but to hold things, to pass him tools” (136). This passage is perhaps one of the most explicit reflections of the trade-off of power in South African society. However, similar to the situation with David, deeper, more meaningful symbolism, as well as these direct declarations, confirm Petrus’ representation of Black South Africans. Petrus, in the beginning, introduces himself as the “ dog-man” at Lucy’s farm; recalling the dog symbolism in Disgrace, Petrus thus paints himself as someone initially burdened by Apartheid. By the time of his party in celebration of his government-sanctioned land grant, though, Petrus is able to say, “ No more dogs. I am not any more the dog-man” (129). This conclusively represents Petrus’ rise through the ranks without the constraints of Apartheid. Soon after this, the narrator makes a comment on David: “ A dog-man, Petrus once called himself. Well, now [David] has become a dog-man” (146). Like the subservient position of David during Petrus’ pipe-laying, this illustrates that it is now White South Africa, not Black South Africa, which has regulations against which it must struggle. However, Petrus expresses very little care for these troubles of David and Lucy at the hand of “ his people.” “ It is bad,” comments Petrus, misunderstanding Lucy’s situation, “ But it is finish” (201). As opposed to the indifference that

characterized Apartheid, it would be apt for Petrus, a representative of the new ruling class, to express sympathy so as to avoid a reversal of fates anew. Sadly, Petrus does not do this. Apartheid has disappeared, Coetzee points out, only to be replaced with things like restrictions on the number of white workers in any given enterprise, on the number of white students in any given university, and indifference by Black South Africans to the repercussions (and potential consequences) of these policies. The White South Africans of old may have no moral high ground to stand upon and reject these restrictions, but said restrictions also affect the new generation of South Africans, guilty of nothing, as represented by Lucy. Consider the situation of a White South African old enough to remember the cruelty of Apartheid but young enough to have had absolutely no hand in promoting it or its cruelty. Would this individual deserve to be punished for the misdeeds of his/her elders? Unlike David, who committed crimes and expresses indignation when others do the same, and unlike Petrus, who endured the crimes of Apartheid and thus sees no reason to sympathize with the two main characters or disallow crimes from being committed against them, Lucy committed no crimes and yet sees it as necessary to pay in full for the crimes of her forefathers. " As far as I am concerned," states Lucy, " what happened to me is purely a private matter. In another time, in another place it might be held a public matter… This place being South Africa" (112). Lucy here makes it obvious that she intends to let the full extent of the crime committed against her go unreported due to her wish to make reparations. Later, Lucy posits that the rapists may be " tax collectors" of a sort: " What if that is the price one has to pay for staying on?" (158), she wonders. In considering why the men expressed so much hate for Lucy in raping her,

David basically posits that it has to do with racial tension, saying, “ Slavery. They want you for their slave.” “ Not slavery,” Lucy replies, “ Subjection. Subjugation” (159). Even after explicitly declaring this fact, Lucy promptly refuses any suggestion by David that she move away from the farm, implying that she holds on to some misdirected sense of guilt and duty. In the end, Lucy is left with “ no cards, no weapons, no property, no dignity. Like a dog” (205). Just as David has become the dog-man, then, Lucy has become a dog-woman, burdened by the retribution that she did nothing to deserve. Altogether, it seems that Coetzee means to use Disgrace as a cautionary tale. A generation of Black South Africans were robbed of their dignity and thrust into disgrace by Apartheid. Even at a lesser magnitude, it is unwise to do the same to a new generation of White South Africans. All in all, Disgrace proclaims that while those who make the biggest fuss against the new balance of power are those who took part in the crimes of Apartheid, those who suffer from the laws intended to shift the balance of power are those who committed no crime at all. This scathing commentary on the current social situation in South Africa is expounded through the characters David, Petrus, and Lucy. David Lurie, representing the older White South Africans, is a man who wreaks many misdeeds on the world around him, only to express hatred and dismay when the world around him retaliates in the same way. Petrus, representing Black South Africans, endured the crimes of Apartheid and now has taken it upon himself to rise through the ranks, but in doing so, he overlooks many of his peers’ crimes and refuses to sympathize with Lucy. Lucy, representing the new generation of White South Africans has done nothing wrong, but she is wronged, she feels that it is her responsibility to make reparations for her forefathers. Through all of the

book, Coetzee crafts a brilliant extended metaphor, utilizing dogs to represent the conventions of apartheid inequality, and through this metaphor, he further illustrates the shift of power, portraying how the title of “ dog-man” shifted from Petrus to David and Lucy. On the whole, Coetzee tells us, abolishing Apartheid has greatly improved South Africa, but we must never forget the past, lest the situation reverse itself. In the end, though, the reader is left with a glint of hope. As David carries the final dog, Driepoot, toward his end and proclaims, “ Yes, I am giving him up” (220), Driepoot is said to be “ like a lamb,” imparting connotations of a sacrificial lamb. Thus David sacrifices the final workings of Apartheid, and with that chapter in South African history finally brought to a close, one is left with the impression that South Africa may finally be able to exist in a state of harmony, instead of disgrace. Works Cited” Afrikaners hit bottom.” New Internationalist Jan.-Feb. 2010: 34+. Expanded AcademicASAP. Web. 13 May 2010. Coetzee, John Maxwell. Disgrace. New York: Penguin Group, 1999. Print. Evans, Ian. “ South Africa wakes up to growing white poor.” The Independent. independent. co. uk, 1 August 2008. Web. 13 May 2010. Goodman, David. “ Why killers should go free: lessons from South Africa.” TheWashington Quarterly 22. 2 (1999): 169. Expanded Academic ASAP. Web. 13 May 2010.“ High-income black households show dramatic growth.” South Africa: The Good News. sagoodnews. co. za, 16 September 2009. Web. 13 May 2010. Slessor, Catherine. “ Memory and struggle: an apartheid museum that celebrates theordinary is South Africa’s latest attempt to come to terms with its past.” The Architectural Review 219. 1311 (2006): 40+. Expanded Academic ASAP. Web. 13 May 2010. “ White Poverty in South Africa.” Solidarity. soldeer. co. za, July 2008. Web. 13 May 2010.