

# J.M. Coetzee: The Master of Cape Town

South African-born writer John Coetzee is one of the most decorated and celebrated living writers. He has won the Nobel Prize, the Jerusalem Prize, and was the first two-time winner of the Booker Prize. He has written 13 novels, 3 fictionalized autobiographies, and numerous essays and translations. Every one of his works from his first novel, *Dusklands* (1974), to his most recent novel, *The Schooldays of Jesus* (2016), is uniquely compelling, difficult, ambiguous, and, for me and many other readers, richly intellectually rewarding.

Coetzee was born in Cape Town in 1940 to white, liberal, middle-class Afrikaans parents who insisted on speaking English at home and sending him to English, rather than Afrikaner schools. He was a sensitive, poetry-loving child in a land of ruddy, big-boned, bullying brutes who maintained violent separation of blacks and whites, all of which gave him a life-long sense of being a foreigner in his own land. It is no wonder that one of the most ubiquitous themes among the many to be found throughout his works is the solitariness of the outsider, and the need for individuality to resist powerful systems of government or societal control.

✘ J.M. Coetzee

He has long had a reputation in the literary world as a writer of austere, inscrutable, almost Platonic prose, and as something of a recluse with no sense of humor. Always a moderately experimental novelist, since approximately 1999, when he won his second Booker Prize for *Disgrace*, he has adopted a confessional, highly metafictional style of writing which has revealed an intriguing portrait of a renowned author who is wrestling with his legacy, his mortality, and his place

in the literary pantheon, while also subtly hitting back at critics and giving academics much more to analyze and debate.

Coetzee is himself an academic, with a Ph.D. in literature (written on Beckett's novels), and decades of university lecturing in America, South Africa, and now Australia. He is the namesake patron of the J.M. Coetzee Centre for Creative Practice at his current position at the University of Adelaide, and he is well-respected, studied, and taught in the academic world (he has inspired as many monographs and research papers as any living writer). Coetzee once ruminated on his critics by writing that he consoled himself for many years of his early teaching career by telling himself that he was actually a novelist; once he became famous it was frequently claimed that he was just an academic pretending to be a novelist. Either way, his work is indeed steeped in the history of literature and ideas, with widespread intertextuality a key feature. His most important influences are Dostoevsky, Kafka, and Beckett.

The two phases of Coetzee's career can be roughly divided based on his relationship to South Africa; the first phase lasting through the last years of [apartheid](#) and the presidency of Mandela, culminating in the publication of *Disgrace* in 1999. The second phase is ongoing since his move to Australia, where he has been a citizen since 2002. It seems apparent that *Disgrace* is the final novel that derives most of its ideological and narrative intensity from the need to resist colonial violence and the pressures of the apartheid state. The "Australian" phase novels and autobiographies are much more focused on literary and ethical concerns. Coetzee was always an opponent of apartheid and the National Party in general, but he chose to deal with politics in his works obliquely, unlike other South African writers and intellectuals, such as Nadine Gordimer. The key quote to help understand this perspective was given in a 1987 interview, during the death throes of apartheid. "In times of intense

ideological pressure like the present when the space in which the novel and history normally coexist like two cows on the same pasture, each minding its own business, is squeezed to almost nothing, the novel, it seems to me, has only two options: supplementarity or rivalry." For Coetzee, the role of literature is too important to allow it to merely supplement politics (which is present history, temporary, and changeable). In his eyes it is necessary for novelists, and artists in general, to create their own reality and history that challenges real-world events on its own terms, and, one assumes, striving for universality and timelessness that are beyond the province of *merely* history or politics. Coetzee's first-phase works, often enriched by the reader's awareness of the landscape of contemporary South Africa, do in fact surpass local politics, reaching the level of literary allegory or fable (I'm thinking especially of the two most important works of this phase: 1980's *Waiting for the Barbarians* and 1983's *Life & Times of Michael K*), though they still suggest complicity in the systems of violence that are often present in these books.

The second, Australian, phase is characterized by more metafictional experimentation, and a preoccupation with physical mortality and literary immortality. In *Elizabeth Costello* (2003) the title character is a quintessential Coetzeean (he has attained nominative adjectival status) creation: an aging Australian novelist with a prickly personality, a problematic relationship with her surviving relatives, and a set of strong, contrarian opinions despite inner uncertainty. She first appeared in the short campus novella *The Lives of Animals* (1999) which presents her two speeches at an American university to accept an award, all within a narrative frame involving her son and daughter-in-law's reluctant hospitality, and the various (skeptical) reactions to her speeches afterwards. Interestingly, these two speeches were really delivered by Coetzee at Princeton before this book was published, and the whole of this novella was

later subsumed into *Elizabeth Costello*. The most memorable and controversial part of these speeches is when the character compares the modern system of factory farming and the suffering it imposes to the Holocaust. Coetzee is himself a longtime vegetarian and animal rights activist. In a break from his usual fictional renderings of his own ideas, he has written essays and [editorials](#) under his own name arguing for the immorality of factory farms and abattoirs, and his concern for animals has featured in some of his other fiction (such as the treatment of dogs in *Disgrace*). The second novel gives much more substance to the character of Elizabeth Costello's life and travels, with each chapter featuring other speeches she gave on different continents (and all of which were actually given by Coetzee in real-life, which could be considered an example of literary performance art). Coetzee's fictionalization of his own life for novelistic ends is an ongoing project (or joke) of his. The last chapter of *Elizabeth Costello* is a direct homage and appropriation of a Kafka story, where the protagonist finds herself in the afterlife trying to express her inexpressible beliefs before a tribunal in order to gain access to the golden gates. The meta-character of Elizabeth Costello also appeared in Coetzee's following novel, *Slow Man* (2005), as well as a [short story](#) in which the author's alter-ego visits her daughter in Nice. *Elizabeth Costello* is probably my favorite of all Coetzee's novels due to its fascinating ideas presented with great literary craft and exceptionally intelligent dialogue.

Another recent novel, his most autobiographic, is *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007), featuring another thinly disguised authorial doppelgänger known as Señor C. The main character, an author whose life and works almost totally align with Coetzee's, is working on a collection of serious essays about politics and other things called *Strong Opinions* to be published in a German magazine. One of the most powerful and recurring arguments deals with his horrified reaction to the Iraq War and the use of torture by the Bush regime. The range of the

essays is broad and reminiscent of Montaigne. He discusses the relative merits of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, and also reaches the conclusion that the music of J.S. Bach may be “the best proof we have that life is good.” The most interesting part of the book is the almost Bach-like contrapuntal narrative in which each page of the essays is shared by the story of author’s working relationship with his beautiful, part-Filipina secretary who lives upstairs with her sleazy investment banking boyfriend. Two threads of narrative strands are woven in simultaneously with the essays—the conversations between C. and the woman, and also between the woman and her boyfriend. It is another complicated self-conscious metafictional gambit that Coetzee somehow pulls off successfully, in the end revealing personal stories and opinions that are deeply revealing and anything but banal.

His two most recent novels, *The Childhood of Jesus* (2013) and *The Schooldays of Jesus* (2016), both tell the ongoing story (I’m sure we can expect a third part in a few years) of a young boy named David, his guardian Simon, and his adoptive mother, Ines. The setting is an unnamed Spanish-speaking country (or afterlife) where everyone arrives by boat with no memory, everything seems to be vaguely socialistic, and people go about their daily routine with no real problems but also no real passion. These inscrutable novels are highly open to interpretations in what message they may be conveying from the author. This is exactly the point, to my mind. Coetzee in these latest works seems to be trying to set up a stage for universal questions that have always been present in his work, but which results in the raising of even more questions than answers. At its heart, the questions are what is truth, what is happiness, what does it mean to be an individual in a rule-based society, what would a post-historical society look like? Coetzee has apparently drawn heavily on his literary influences with a Beckett-like stage and Kafka-like mysteriousness and inexplicability.

The three novelistic “*autre-biographies*” of late Coetzee also introduce a fascinating way to subvert a well-worn literary form. *Boyhood* (1997), *Youth* (2002), and *Summertime* (2009) are all narrated in third-person, present tense, and they all present the author in the harshest possible light. The first deals with his time growing up, attending school, and visiting the family farm in rural South Africa in the 40’s; the second covers three years from finishing university in Cape Town to working as a computer programmer for IBM in London in the early 60’s; the third acts as a posthumous series of interviews by a researcher talking to four women and one man the author was close to in the mid-70’s. None of the books say much at all about any of the published novels or even ideas of the great writer; rather, they detail an endless series of personal shortcomings and character flaws, especially his emotional immaturity, selfishness, and sexual ineptitude, of the young man to an almost uncomfortable degree. Of course, it is highly fictionalized and it’s hard to know how much to take seriously and how much is some sort of dark humor, but they make for fascinating reading. The first two books are clearly *Künstlerromane* in the mold of Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Another obvious precursor is Tolstoy, who also wrote self-criticizing autobiographies called *Boyhood* and *Youth*. The confessional spirit of Rousseau and especially Dostoevsky seems ubiquitous in these and all Coetzee’s later works. In all three autobiographical works, it is clear that Coetzee’s holds consistently to his devotion to literature and art as rivals to history even when it is his own personal history.

Dostoevsky’s influence on Coetzee is very overt in one way: he wrote a novel about him. *The Master of Petersburg* (1994) recounts (mostly invents, actually) a few turbulent months of the Russian writer’s life in 1869, three years after *Crime and Punishment* was written, and during which time he was writing the lesser-known novel *Demons* (aka *The Possessed*). The story is that Dostoevsky returns from exile in Germany to Petersburg

to investigate the apparent suicide of his 20-year-old stepson, Pavel. The author stays in his Pavel's lodgings, starts a relationship with the landlady and (possibly) her young daughter, and interacts with police authorities and the leader of an anarchist group with whom his son was involved. The novel is very evocative of 19th-century Russian literature, and there seems to be some attempts at dry humor or irony that is part of Dostoevsky's style (he was a great admirer of Gogol). The novel's style is occasionally reminiscent of the Russian's work, in the later scenes with the landlady and her daughter, and with the anarchist leader, Nechaev. While real-life Dostoevsky did lose his newborn son with his second wife around this time, the stepson story is wholly invented. Real-life Coetzee, on the other hand, lost his 23-year-old son to a mysterious accident similar to Pavel's four years before this novel was published. Knowing that fact helps explain how this is one of the darkest and difficult, but also most moving, novels in Coetzee's oeuvre.

One way in which the common critique of Coetzee as an academic, austere, even pedantic writer rings true is in another of his major influences: poststructuralist philosophy and literary theory. As a lifelong literary scholar and academic himself, Coetzee is obviously steeped in these theories that have more or less dominated university humanities departments since the 60's. Various themes that can be found in many of his works include the limitations of language, the paradoxes of post-colonialism (including Coetzee's common theme of awareness and complicity in violence carried out for the sake of others), the subversive role of the author, and the impossibility of locating unambiguous objective truth or semantic meaning. There are entire monographs dedicated to poststructural deconstructions of Coetzee's work. The French philosophers of Barthes, Derrida, and Foucault figure prominently, as usual. As an example, the novel *Foe* (1986), a retelling of Robinson Crusoe, is overflowing with poststructural ideas. A woman named Susan

Barton lands on Crusoe's island where she finds the old castaway living with Friday, a mute ex-slave who had his tongue cut out by slavers (or possibly by Crusoe). Crusoe dies en route to England, and Barton hires the writer Daniel Defoe to make the story into a best-seller. It is very easy to see Barton as a representation of feminist critique, and Friday as representing postcolonial theory. The somewhat duplicitous character of the writer Defoe is also interesting; at various points he says things like: "you must ask yourself, Susan: as it was a slaver's stratagem to rob Friday of his tongue, may it not be a slaver's stratagem to hold him in subjection while we cavil over words in a dispute we know to be endless?" Curiously, Coetzee returned to this theme in his 2003 Nobel Prize acceptance speech, where he read a short story called "He and His Man" also questioning the nature of fiction by way of the conflicting authorial relationship between Defoe and Crusoe (and Coetzee).

Another novel that is ripe for poststructural analysis is the Booker Prize-winning *Life & Times of Michael K*. The hero is a very simple (or perhaps autistic, or just severely uncommunicative) black South African (though there are only the faintest explicit references to location or race in the novel) who journeys from the city to the country to help his mother find her childhood farm. She dies en route, and Michael finds himself adrift in a confusing and unforgiving world. He spends a lot of time living rough outside an abandoned farm, before being taken to a camp, where he stops eating and eventually escapes by floating away and walking through the fence. At one point towards the end a medical officer at the camp imagines addressing Michael directly saying: "Your stay in the camp was merely an allegory, if you know that word. It was an allegory—speaking at the highest level—of how scandalously, how outrageously a meaning can take up residence in a system without becoming a term in it." This is a reference to Derridean deconstruction in the apparent lack of any final meaning to the words that comprise the novel. The

novel also plays off the story of Joseph K. in Kafka's *The Trial*, where the search for knowledge is always elusive and incomplete. Michael K.'s personal agency and continued survival on his own terms is also paradoxical and subversive of such merely intellectual constructs as deconstruction.

The effects of violence, especially in colonial and imperial societies, is the last major theme I will discuss that runs through many Coetzee novels, figuring most prominently in all throughout the "South African" phase. One of the questions he also raises, and struggles to answer, is how the writer, *qua* artist, can represent violence and torture without supplementing or becoming complicit in it. This is most apparent in *Waiting for the Barbarians*. An unnamed magistrate represents an unnamed Empire in a small provincial town at the Empire's northern edge, beyond which lie nomadic barbarians. The question of torture and its psychological effects is explored in great depth here. In an essay, Coetzee wrote that the writer's duty is to "establish one's own authority to imagine torture and death on one's own terms," and to refuse to "play the game by the rules of the state." Resisting the regime is not only the job of real-life dissidents (in apartheid South Africa; the martyred Steve Biko, for example), but also writers by way of their characters' actions, and how the state-sanctioned violence and torture is dealt with in narrative form. Though the magistrate (and Coetzee) resist the violence and torture of empire, Coetzee always acknowledges the complicity of "ordinary" citizens that make state terror possible. The novel, whose title is taken from a poem about the Roman Empire by Constantine Cavafy ("Now what's going to happen to us without barbarians? Those people were a kind of solution."). It also evokes the Kafka short story "In the Penal Colony." This is a powerful allegorical masterpiece that I would recommend as the best place to begin for first-time readers of Coetzee.

I will briefly touch on three other novels from Coetzee's

first phase whose narratives all feature varying types of political (imperial and colonial) violence and implied resistance to it. His first novel, *Dusklands*, a fusion of two thematically-related short novellas, features his most unsettlingly explicit verisimilar representation of violence; he refined his allegorical and distancing technique in subsequent novels. The first is a tale of a psychological warfare analyst writing a report about effective propaganda in the Vietnam War, involving the campaigns of terror that characterized much of the American effort, and who ends up going mad. In this harrowing excerpt, the narrator ponders the use of the torture and prison camps by Americans in Vietnam: "These poisoned bodies, mad floating people of the camps, who had been—let me say it—the finest of their generation, courageous, fraternal—it is they who are the occasion of all my woe! Why could they not accept us? We could have loved them: our hatred for them grew only out of broken hopes. We brought them our pitiable selves, trembling on the edge of inexistence, and asked only that they acknowledge us...But like everything else they withered before us. We bathed them in seas of fire, praying for the miracle." It is worth mentioning that Coetzee was arrested, but never charged, for participating in an anti-Vietnam protest while a faculty member in SUNY Buffalo; this is apparently the reason why his permanent visa was later denied, forcing him to return reluctantly to South Africa in 1971. The second tale is of a brutal Dutch colonizer named Jacobus Coetzee who marches inland from Cape Colony on an elephant hunting expedition in the early 18th century. As the first white man in these parts, he "discovers" the giraffe and the Orange River, ends up being humiliated by a "Hottentot" tribe, and returns later to exact vengeance (I am reminded of an ice-cold line from the scientific Vietnam report in the book's first part: "Atrocity charges are empty when they cannot be proved. 95% of the villages we wiped off the map were never on it."). In these two stories of imperialism, the theme of complicity (by way of awareness and complacency) in violence becomes personal since

one of the characters is an actual, though completely fictionalized, ancestor of the author.

Coetzee's second novel, *In the Heart of the Country*, is the story of a white Afrikaner woman on an isolated farm in the Karoo desert. She first imagines her father bringing home a young wife and murdering them both; later, she does commit patricide after her father begins an affair with the young wife of the black farm worker. Afterwards the power relationship between the black worker and the white woman reverses when they are left to survive unaided on the remote farm. It is narrated in numbered paragraphs representing the main character's lonely and disjointed thoughts.

The final novel I will discuss is *Age of Iron*, in which an old white South African woman who was a classics professor becomes terminally ill. The novel takes the form of a letter to the woman's daughter in Canada. She is completely alone and allows a homeless black man to live with her, drive her around, and listen to her one-sided conversations (he rarely speaks). Two young black men, the son of her housekeeper and his friend, are murdered by the police, and the woman protests vehemently but ineffectually (even this harmless, liberal old woman concedes that the system was designed to protect "people like her", thus conceding her own complicity in the violence) against the state of affairs in the country. It is Coetzee's most explicit political commentary on South African politics. It is a powerful and thought-provoking meditation on mortality, which also features Coetzee's first attempts at the confessional style he will later perfect.

Albert Camus said that "the whole of Kafka's art consists in compelling the reader to re-read him." This is high praise that can only be applied rarely, though subjectively, in the canons of literature. Borges, Chekhov, perhaps, for shorter fiction. For longer fiction, the universality and depth of human experience captured by Homer, Shakespeare, and Tolstoy makes them the undeniably strongest precursors to their

literary inheritors. Below this holy trinity, the slopes of the literary Olympus become more and more populated the farther down one goes. John Coetzee will never be as re-readable as Kafka, nor does he reach the rarified heights of the summit (or of one of his heroes, Dostoevsky); nevertheless, by great imaginative skill and intellectual tenacity he has climbed higher up the mountain than any of his coevals. That is a significant achievement, and a gift to readers like me.