

## J.M. Coetzee

Born in 1940 in Cape Town to parents of Afrikaner descent, the life of John Maxwell Coetzee (pen name J.M. Coetzee) spans the history of the rise and fall of apartheid -- in which racial segregation is enforced through government policy and legislation -- in South Africa. Whereas for a postcolonial critic this biographical context might immediately invite certain readings of his work, such an approach would be extraordinarily reductive. In fact, many (though by no means all) of the literary texts of which Coetzee's large oeuvre is comprised make a point of not specifying the racial makeup of their characters, preferring instead to allow the reader to infer them. Such a move exhibits an explicit rejection of South Africa's racial politics and what has now become its somewhat suffocating history.

Interestingly enough, then, Coetzee emigrated to Australia and in 2006 officially became an Australian citizen. After receiving a PhD in linguistics in 1969, Coetzee taught English Literature in institutions in the USA and South Africa, becoming the University of Cape Town's Distinguished Professor of Literature between 1999 and 2001 before he retired in 2002 to Adelaide. Coetzee has a number of critical publications, many of which are now central to the field of literary criticism, and particularly to those concerned with postcolonialism and its relation to literature.

The geographical zones of South Africa and Australia, each with their own different but equally fraught colonial histories, are the sites of all his novels. Furthermore, Coetzee's novels that locate themselves in an explicitly colonial setting, such as *In the Heart of the Country* (1977) and *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), simultaneously present the reader with bare, sparse landscapes and colonialists situated in far-flung outback areas, that are reminiscent of Southern Africa and Australia, without ever actually specifying the precise historic-geographical location. However, other novels, such as Coetzee's Booker Prize winning *Disgrace* (1999), are situated in extremely specific historical and geographical circumstances and, as many critics have noted, these are often employed to give the texts a greater sociopolitical bearing. From this brief insight we can draw forth one general statement about Coetzee: every novel is carefully structured, every sentence carefully crafted, every word carefully selected. All information is disclosed (or not), it seems, for a reason, a reason that is nevertheless allusive and tricky to pin down. If there is a general feeling that a reader takes from a Coetzee novel, it would be safe to say that it is not one of resolution -- indeed, most often we find ourselves asking, 'Why?'

This paradox of extraordinarily well-crafted and provocative novels that nevertheless reject a sense of resolution might be explained through Coetzee's engagement with broader literary traditions. Indeed, this intertextual engagement (which is in fact often configured as explicit rejection), as well as the content of his novels, are what mark Coetzee out as a Post/Colonial Writer. Many of Coetzee's novels engage with the English literary canon, some in explicit, others in implicit ways. His novel *Foe* (1986), for example, is a conscious literary interpretation of Daniel Defoe's eighteenth century novel, *Robinson Crusoe* (1719). By engaging with a text that was arguably the first novel written in English, and that details the fictional autobiography of a castaway on a tropical island -- a castaway who was previously on board a ship transporting slaves from Africa to the Caribbean, and whose story has been read as an allegory of

colonialism -- Coetzee draws on that which went before him and undoes it in subtle and illuminating ways.

This constant preoccupation with the past is complicated by the fact that all of his novels, with the exception of *The Life & Times of Michael K* (1983), are written in the present tense. Though he has only ever produced novels of varying lengths, he himself has emphasized the influence of poetry upon his literary style. What results is a restyling of the novel form -- and its distinctly European and implicitly imperialist history -- that demands we, as readers, approach his texts in ways that we had not previously considered. By looking back, Coetzee engages these literary and colonial historiographies to interrogate, in original and nuanced explorations, the future of the post-colonial world in which we live.

---

**Source URL (modified on 04/08/2020 - 09:00):** <http://writersinspire.org/content/jm-coetzee-1>