Polarity Dimensions in Cotzee’s *Foe*

An Analysis of the Reality/Fantasy and Freedom/Captivity Dichotomies

Dimensioner av polaritet i Coetzees *Foe*

En analys av dikotomierna verklighet/fantasi och frihet/slaveri

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Abstract
This essay examines the literary reasoning behind employing antagonistic themes in J.M. Coetzee’s novel *Foe*. The emphasis of this analysis is on two of the most predilected of Coetzee’s topics and their antipodes – *reality/fantasy* and *freedom/captivity* – but references to secondary themes like feminism and colonialism are also included. Analysing dichotomies in *Foe* aims to demonstrate that a concept could be understood by its opposite and that the boundary between two antagonistic elements could be a matter of perception. Another intention of this analysis is to provide a plausible decoding of Coetzee’s intricate literary message in *Foe*. The complexity of this narration resides in its ambiguity generated by polarities and in the multitude of cryptic literary, historic and linguistic details, which are obscured to any superficial reader. To fathom the intended meaning in *Foe* implies a laborious study, and it requires a deep analysis of all its constituent elements. This essay only refers to a few of them and for that reason I consider that this essay should be regarded as a starting point to further in-depth studies concerning *Foe*.

**Keywords:** Coetzee, dualism, authorship, truth, fiction, slavery, postmodern, paradox, Friday, castaway, desert island, self

Sammanfattning

**Nyckelord:** Coetzee, dualism, författarskap, sanning, fiktion, slaveri, postmodern, paradox, Fredag, skeppsbrutna, öken ö, själv
Distinguished scholar, Nobel laureate for literature and disputed postmodern writer, J. M. Coetzee has developed a unique writing style by creating parallel literary universes in which fantasy and reality are braided into what may seem a confusing weave. His novel *Foe* is an eloquent example in this respect, comprising elements of surrealism, philosophic entanglements, antagonistic relationships and deep perplexity, all these being the hallmark of the refinement of Coetzee’s authorship. *Foe* could be considered a reinterpretation of the canonical motif of *Robinson Crusoe*, but Daniel Defoe’s novel is just a starting point for Coetzee’s narrative. Reinterpreting the theme of the castaway on a desert island, *Foe* introduces a woman named Susan Barton who is marooned on Cruso and Friday’s island. Cruso, furthermore, does not have any of the virtues of Defoe’s Crusoe, and Friday, his coloured slave, has no tongue, been cut out under unknown circumstances. In this strange companionship, Susan spends a dull whole year until a British ship passes by and rescues them all. Cruso dies during the sea journey, leaving Friday with Susan. Once returned to London, Susan struggles with the shortcomings of a life that now she was sharing with Friday. Trying to escape her misery, Susan seeks a professional writer to publish her castaway story, wishing that the narrative would follow the reality in detail. She finds Foe, a famous author who is willing to rewrite her account and spice it with fiction. Susan is the main narrator in *Foe*, except for the last chapter of the novel, whose storyteller remains not known.

The experience of reading *Foe* is like groping for reality, grasping for meaning in a constant tumble of reversed connotations. For the best results in decoding it, the reader should take the suggestion of Jan Wilm, a scholar who pointed out that Coetzee’s oeuvre should be read “slowly” (14). Coetzee’s characters manage to deceive and bewilder the reader who is often made to feel lost in the novel. Everything is true and everything is false, everything is normal, yet simultaneously abnormal. In *Foe* the reality changes into fiction, the slave can enslave the master while being freed into captivity, while the voice of the mute can become the only surviving testimony of the failure of words. This essay will argue that the confusion caused by the combination of antagonistic elements in *Foe* is in fact a narrative technique that offers insight into concepts through understanding their opposites, i.e. by the use of polarities. The first and most important of these is the reality/fiction polarity, and related to this a second polarity between freedom and captivity. The essay will demonstrate that reality and fiction function in the novel as two concepts that will intertwine, exchange meanings, shape destinies and raise questions. The other significant polarity in *Foe* is attained through the opposites freedom/captivity and their interchangeable roles played in this novel. This pair of opposites relates to the previous one because Coetzee uses the reality/fiction
dichotomy to change freedom into captivity and vice versa. Throughout the essay, the analysis will focus on Susan, the main narrator in Foe, because she is a complex key character that is essential for the comprehension of this literary text. The novel is not about her, but about the most silenced, obscure and enigmatic character: Friday. Yet, through Susan the reader decodes not only Friday, but other characters as well, such as Foe and Cruso. She acts as a self-conscious author seen in the fact that she, on a few occasions, clearly refers to a potential audience that reads her narration.

The novel thematises the dichotomy truth/fiction, and whether a writer’s allegiance lies with one or the other. Coetzee debates this notion with Dr. Arabella Kurtz, a reputed English psychologist and psychotherapist, in The Good Story, a collection of philosophical, literary and psychological analytical exchanges. Referring to Plato’s accusations that poets do not speak the truth, Coetzee explains that poets used to defend themselves against Plato:

Poetic truth is in part a matter of reflecting the world accurately (‘truthfully’), but also in part a matter of internal consistency, elegance, and so forth – in other words, a matter of satisfying autonomous aesthetic criteria. [...] You will find some version of the beauty-is-truth plea in the practice of almost any writer. I may be making up this story, but for mysterious reasons that have to do with its internal coherence, its plausibility, its sense of rightness and inevitability, it is nevertheless in some sense true, or at least it tells us something true about our lives and the world we live in. (Coetzee & Kurtz 7, 8).

Coetzee’s problematic is not the literary aestheticization of truth, but the fact that the writers, like rhetoricians, persuade readers of their truth versions “using the full armamentarium of poetic tricks and devices” (8).

In Foe, Coetzee fuses the real-life truth, which readers can verify, and a fictional truth, both becoming in fact fantasy, as a part of a narration. The character Daniel Foe is the actual birth name of the famous English author D. Defoe, creator of Robinson Crusoe. Some of the “real” protagonists of Defoe have been used as adjunct characters in Foe, such as Dickory Cronke (Defoe, The Dumb Philosopher) or the late Mrs. Veal (Defoe, The Apparition of Mrs Veal) and her friend, Mrs. Bargrave, who in Foe becomes Mrs. Barfield. Defoe’s protagonist, Mrs. Veal, appears in Foe as a character as well, being “another humble person whom Mr Foe has made famous in the course of his writing” (Coetzee 58). This literary truth and fiction braiding suggests that what people read and take for a narrative is actually true and
it comes from the real life. He thus implies that truth can be fictionalised and thus integrated into a fictional context. The reader can even recognize the real address of Daniel Defoe in Stoke Newington as being the residence of the character Foe. The Fleet prison looks like a real menace for the fugitive Foe as the writer Defoe has been locked up in it in 1703 (Rogers 451). There are also similarities with the life of the English writer in the fact that the character, just as his real inspiration source, was confronted with financial troubles and has been, at some point in life, chased by bailiffs. Apparently, employing characters of a real author inside a fiction gives more veracity to the narration. In fact, Coetzee is problematizing the valency of literary truth.

The reader cannot be sure of the veracity of any character in Foe. Cruso, for one, is telling different stories about his origins, all of them plausible, but still divergent. Once he is telling Susan that he is the son of a wealthy merchant and some other time he admits that he was a poor child captured by the Moors. He also says that he and Friday have been living on the island for fifteen years, but his statement is no longer trustworthy either for the reader or for Susan:

But the stories he told me were so various, and so hard to reconcile with another, that I was more and more driven to conclude age and isolation had taken their toll on his memory, and no longer knew for sure what was truth, what was fancy. [...] So in the end I did not know what was truth, what was lies, and what was mere rambling.

(Coetzee 12)

Susan’s credibility is also challenged, either by her own words and behaviour, or by other characters such as Foe or the mysterious girl Susan Barton. Susan is openly seeking the truth and cherishes reality in such a degree that the reader might believe in her reliability. Despite her rigour to remain rooted in reality, Susan is liminally placed at the border between fantasy and madness.

The reader learns about Susan Barton by her own descriptions that she is a “woman alone” (Coetzee10) in her forties, tall with black hair and dark eyes. She is English but half French on her father’s side, who was originally called Berton, and “who fled to England to escape the persecutions in Flanders”(10). Susan is the proponent of truth as the only accepted element in a narrative, as opposed to Foe’s conviction that writing must be seasoned with fantasy. Yet, Susan’s turmoil does not reside in the reality-fiction dilemma, but in her “impotence” of writing her own story, meaning the failure to penetrate a patriarchal society, in which a woman who “begets” (126) a story is unheard of. According to her version, she has only one daughter, who was kidnapped by a compatriot and shipped to the
New World. The reader witnesses here another of Coetzee’s bizarrely twisted reality, in which a white girl follows in the footsteps of a coloured slave.

Susan’s account passes as real until the unexpected appearance of a girl, named Susan Barton as well, who claims to be Susan’s missing daughter. The deep plunge from an alleged reality to a presumed fantasy is even more difficult to discern by the reader who discovers the touching story of a lost daughter looking for her mother. Despite the girl’s seemingly sincere feelings, her story makes obvious reference to Daniel Defoe’s fiction. She claims that her father and Susan’s husband was a brewer and ardent gambler, who lost everything and flew to escape creditors, leaving Susan, her daughter and her made, Amy in poverty. This story closely resembles the plot and the characters of Defoe’s novel Roxana: The Fortunate Mistress. The parallel that Coetzee is making with the reality of Defoe’s fiction is that Susan, just as Mademoiselle de Beleau, is lucidly exchanging her virtue for notoriety and prosperity. Susan, resembling Roxana, is far from being a paragon of morality, being easily taken for a hussy, but in Coetzee’s fiction, this is far from being important. Susan’s virtue is lost the moment she wants to tell her story from purely pecuniary reasoning.

Susan’s daughter is also questioning the name as an identity, and she does so from a feminist point of view. She tells her alleged mother that her father is called George Lewis, another of Coetzee’s explicit references to the verifiable reality. Once more, authenticity and fiction intertwine in Foe, the author alluding thus to George Henry Lewes, the lover of the Victorian author Mary Ann Lewis, better known as George Eliot. The presence in this fiction of such an authentic nonconformist personality encourages female detachment from the patriarchal domination that, among others, labels women with men’s family names. Captain Smith was the first to suggest Susan take Cruso’s family name in order to secure social status (Coetzee 42), but later on, she willingly presented herself as Mrs. Cruso (Coetzee 47). Susan’s alleged daughter makes a clear difference between the “name in law” (75), which represents women obeying a social convention, and “the name in truth”, which is women’s “true name, the veritable name” (Coetzee 76).

The girl’s story iterates the reality - fiction polarity, generating a legitimate question from the reader’s side concerning when exactly the action of the novel unfolds. Susan’s presumed daughter claims that she is born in May 1702, but Susan herself places the narration more than a hundred years later, during the “twopenny post” (Coetzee 94). According to E. J. Shanahan, the twopenny post came into being in 1801 and was used until the end of 1822, a detail that makes Susan an unreliable character. Even if Susan’s credibility is compromised, she persists in sustaining her reality against the girl’s fiction. She suspects
Foe to have been fabricating the girl’s return story in order to make her biography more marketable: “Do you think women drop children and forget them as snakes lay eggs? Only a man could entertain such a fancy” (Coetzee 75). In Susan’s mind, the girl’s story has been invented. She does not look like her daughter, she does not have her daughter’s name – even if Susan never reveals her daughter’s real name – and her life’s account is not familiar to her. The girl is not part of her reality, and for that reason she considers her story a mere narration forged by a writer. She tells the girl that her father is Foe, the author: “You are a father-born. You have no mother. The pain you feel is the pain of lack, not the pain of loss” (Coetzee 91).

Nevertheless, her breakthrough to reality is very oneiric, a dream-like trip with the girl into the woods aiming to tell her the truth. Susan meets the mysterious girl again in Foe’s house and, this time, their reunion is clearly concerted by the writer. On this occasion, Susan seeks to impose her own reality, trying to liberate herself from the female stereotype. She kisses the girl on the mouth not from an erotic impulse, but as a statement of her emancipation, of her (delusive) metamorphosis, revealing her new masculine self. She has the same attitude when sleeping with Foe, “straddling” (Coetzee 139) him in an attempt to harness a phallocentric world.

Susan is a bizarre and contrasting combination of bigoted feminine impertinence and frivolity on the one hand, and a preconceived masculine lucidity and profundity on the other. She proves to be a very ethical character, being truly concerned with what reality actually is. She even problematizes the correspondence between reality and the preconception about reality that we have in our minds (Coetzee 65). In her letter to Mr Foe from April 20th, she thoroughly describes his working room, giving the reader the distinct impression that her depiction is based in experience and mirrors nothing but reality. She writes about a room in the attic of his house, and his working table standing in front of a rippled window that looks out on fields and grazing cows (Coetzee 49-50). However, the letter from May 29th reveals that the previous description, no matter how meticulous and colourful it might have been, was nothing but a figment of her imagination. Foe’s real working room disappoints compared with Susan’s mind projection, yet the two accounts share common elements, like the dispatch box where the writer kept his manuscripts and even some of his famous stories. His real writing place is nothing but a banal room with a bureau, with no glimmer of mystery, no rustic views, nothing from the charm of a wordsmith’s lair that Susan has fancied. Coetzee’s choice to place testimonials of reality, such as “the memorial of the life and opinions of Dickory Cronke” (Coetzee 50), inside Susan’s envisioning is not accidental. Once again he brings to
the forefront the theme of truth and fiction in authorship, proving that these two antithetical concepts are actually interrelated.

The word “truth” per se offers Susan reasons for philosophical reflections. Trying to elucidate the mystery of Friday’s loss of his tongue, she focuses on the meaning of words. She argues that her failure of communicating with Friday probably resides in the fact that linguistic connotations may vary in different cultures. She asks herself if European gestures such as putting out one’s tongue have the same connotations in his cannibalistic society. She also reflects that her drawings, which are nothing but cultural conventions, could be misinterpreted or even perceived as obtuse for a primitive savage who does not share European customs. Her reasoning even becomes slightly misandrist, not being the first time when her discourse grows feminist: “Who was I to say there do not exist entire tribes in Africa among whom the men are mute and speech is reserved to women? Why should it not be so? The world is more various than we ever give it credit for [...]. Why should such tribes not exist, and procreate, and flourish, and be content?” (Coetzee 69). However, her liberating outbreaks remain only anaemic attempts to confront the dominant world of men. Unfortunately, her words are not echoed by corresponding feminist actions, Susan preferring to remain submissive, accepting in the end her humble place in a patriarchal society. Her own words reveal the truth about her condition: she is a woman who waits, and not a woman who acts. Susan, even if conscious of her frailty, admits that all she did was to wait for her daughter in Bahia, wait for rescuers on the island, wait for Foe to appear, wait for her story to be written (Coetzee 66).

Susan is a character obsessed with reality, which most of the times seems surreal because it contrasts with her enigmatic behaviour. She is both superficial and profound. Her typical feminine manifestation of frivolousness is in dissonance with her reflective and meditative self. She constantly pendulates between these diametrically opposed features of her personality. Moreover, she is contrastingly behaving both like an obedient female and like an Amazon, ready to overthrow the patriarchal dominance, and yet her attempts to do so remain irrelevant lacking the capacity of changing anything. The duel between these disparate performances emphasizes her desperation to escape her imposed condition and, at the same time, the incongruity between her valid desires (fiction) and the cruel reality. It is true that the Muse is a goddess, but her inspirational touch is never credited to her. It is always the male author who wears the laurel of success, but in fact, this reality is nothing but a fiction. The game of reality mirrored as fiction and vice versa is a strong leitmotif in Foe and it is meant to reach reader’s subconscious in hope of sowing the seed of ethical and philosophical
The reader observes Susan in many introspective moments, when she even questions herself and her reasoning. Her monologues and the cornucopia of her rhetorical questions clearly show her identity issues and the deep confusion that she struggles with: “What kind of a woman was I, in truth?” (Coetzee 42). She thinks of herself as “a figure of fortune” (Coetzee 48), “a Muse, both goddess and begetter” (Coetzee 126), but in reality she has a beggar’s life, sleeping “in doorways, churchyards, under the bridges” (Coetzee 125). She poses as a slave liberator, but she is just as much of a slave owner as Cruso or Foe: “There are times when benevolence deserts me and I use words only as the shortest way to subject him [Friday] to my will” (Coetzee 60). Susan’s reality is further questioned when Foe tries to assign her the life of a fictional character (Roxana), this manipulating manoeuvre puzzling her even more. At first, Susan is fighting for her truth by arguing that she is not a story (Coetzee 131) or that she is not “a mere receptacle ready to accommodate whatever story is stuffed in me” (Coetzee 130-31). She defends her right to not disclose her life story before Bahia because she is “a free woman who asserts her freedom by telling her story according to her own desire” and because she does not owe proof to anyone that she is “a substantial being with a substantial history in the world” (Coetzee 131). The reader is tempted to make out of Susan a picture of a self-confident woman, who knows who she is. Yet, this feminine character ends up in confusion and insecurity, questioning her identity: “But if these women are creatures of yours, visiting me at your instruction […], then who am I, and who indeed are you?” (Coetzee 133).

In the end, the certainty given by her reality stands no chance faced with the fiction and insecurity insinuated by the versed writer: “My sweet Susan, as to who among us is a ghost and who not I have nothing to say: it is a question we can only stare in silence, like a bird before a snake, hoping it will not swallow us” (Coetzee 134). Susan herself admits that she wants Foe to write her story because she needs someone to actually tell her what happened: “[A]nd of the true story of that year, the story as it should be in God’s great scheme of things, I remain as ignorant as a new born” (Coetzee 126). Foe, as a writer who has been lost so many times “in the maze of doubting” (Coetzee 135), is advising Susan to accept other forms of reality as well, because seeking the truth could mean never getting out of the maze.

The problematic of our need of confronting us with our real-life stories is also approached in The Good Story. Coetzee is wondering whether it is important for patients in therapy to be confronted with their reality, or with an acceptable reality, one that should “enable them to live more adequately (more happily, which in the minimal Freudian
prescriptions amounts to being able to love and work again)” (Coetzee and Kurtz 7). Would finding her real story make Susan Barton more relieved from her misery? Would the truth actually set her free? Dr. Kurtz argues that “one must content oneself with a version of the truth that works” (9):

A psychotherapist aims to operate by working to understand the internal world of the patient […]. Truth in psychoanalytic psychotherapy is internal truth – the truth of what is in the heart and the mind of a patient, perceived – and if one is lucky – understood through the heart and the mind of the psychotherapist. (10-11)

I think that Dr. Kurtz’s definition of truth could be applied to all characters in Foe. Susan’s truth is that she was a castaway who lived a boring, unspectacular whole year on a desert island together with Cruso and his slave. She had a daughter that was kidnapped and shipped to Brazil. Foe’s truth is that he feels the need to adorn Susan’s story with pirates, cannibals and the fierce “kraken” (Coetzee 140) that lurks from below the seaweeds. Susan’s alleged daughter’s truth is that she was abandoned by her mother, Susan Barton and was raised by gypsies. When she finally manages to find her mother, the latter does not recognize nor accept her. Cruso’s truth is that he lives a good refuge life on his unbeknown island, away from his home island. He always sought escape in the horizon, but it was not in a ship, like Susan’s kind of escape, but in loosing himself between “the wasters of water and sky” (Coetzee 38). But what is Friday’s truth? He does not talk and his silence is a mystery. Friday’s truth is a constant makeover depending on other’s wishes, needs or impressions: he is a cannibal, a laundryman, a castrated slave, “an animal wrapt entirely in itself” (Coetzee 70), a lazybones, a lunatic dancer or a tone-deaf hummer. Susan is the one that makes the difference between what Friday is to himself and what he is to the world: “he is neither cannibal nor laundryman, these are mere names, they do not touch his essence, he is a substantial body, he is himself, Friday is Friday. […] what he is to the world is what I make of him” (Coetzee 121-22). It is natural for the reader to wonder “who is Friday to himself then”? I believe that a possible answer to this riddle lies behind Friday’s closed eyes. His eyelids are like a floodgate, one that keeps out the alluvium of the outer world, one that shuts the border to the “demonic other” (Tyson 421), which is the real foe. Coetzee suggests that Friday’s untold truth lies drowned on the bottom of seas, unspoken words that turned into a spring, “soft”, “cold”, “dark and unending” (Coetzee 157).

The analysis of the second polarity between freedom and captivity can begin with the observation that the shipwreck in literature is often regarded as a sort of detention determined by the laws of hazard, an unwanted isolation and home alienation. However, even
if this is explicit in most tales of shipwreck, Cruso’s island is an atypical shipwreck island, as he himself is an atypical castaway. Susan refers to it as his “island kingdom” (Coetzee 13) or to his improvised hut as his “castle” (Coetzee 15). Moreover, Susan remarks that the life on this island gives Cruso another identity, different from the one from his home island: “the idea of a Cruso on his island is a better thing than the true Cruso tight-lipped and sullen in an alien England” (Coetzee 35). Cruso and Friday’s life on the island is rudimentary and quiet because of Friday’s mutism and because of the absence of danger. They do not have any tools, light or unnecessary furniture; they eat lettuce, fish and bird’s eggs. They enjoy the solitude and the vast stretches of water they use to scrutinize every evening. Cruso is content with his castaway life and does not wish nor look for salvation, “We sleep, we eat, we live” (Coetzee 32) and this seems to be all he wants. He himself admits that “not every man who bears the mark of the castaway is a castaway at heart” (Coetzee 33). In the interdisciplinary essay collection Shipwreck in Art and Literature, Carl Thompson pleads for the importance of myths of seafaring and also aims to “demonstrate the rich imaginative potential of the shipwreck topos” (3). Thompson notes that “inherent in all renderings of shipwreck motif is a sense of danger, crisis and suffering” (5). Oddly, none of this is to be found in Cruso’s island, at least from Cruso’s perspective. To him and Friday the island means freedom, not captivity, the liberty to live as one wishes to, the liberty not to speak, the liberty not to write, the liberty not to remember. However, not the same can be claimed about Susan. She resembles to some extent Thompson’s prototype of a castaway, in the sense that, for Susan, the shipwreck island was an undesirable place, a source of tedium and psychological suffering. Cruso’s beloved sky and sea are for Susan nothing but an “emptiness” that is “vacant and tedious” (Coetzee 38). Her recollections of the island are sometimes those of a madhouse, recalling the sound of Friday’s “damnable [six note-] tune” mixed with the noise of “the rain falling in torrents” and “the wind howling” (Coetzee 28-29), all these overlapping with Cruso’s shouting during his fever crisis. Susan is a captive on Cruso’s island and she desperately wants to be set free.

In a reading with what Lois Tyson terms “with the grain” (7), the shipwreck island signifies freedom for Cruso and captivity for Susan. One can never state with certainty the significance of the island for Friday because, as in England, he is treated like a slave. Yet, when he is forced onboard the rescuing ship, he explicitly shows his reluctance to leave the island. However, a reading “against the grain” (Tyson 7) reveals the opposite. During one of his fever crisis, Cruso deliriously cries “Masa or Massa” (Coetzee 29), word that has no meaning for Susan. In fact, according to English Oxford Living Dictionaries, “massa” is a black speech word, with its origin in the time of slavery, and it means “master”. This minor
detail overturns the “reality” about Cruso’s freedom. Likewise, Susan is rushing to escape from her so-called island of captivity only to end up in England, which unequivocally becomes her dungeon: “When I was on the island I longed only to be elsewhere, or, in the word I then used, to be saved. But now a longing stirs in me I never thought I would feel” (Coetzee 50). Josiah Blackmore argues that “this inability to leave the scene of wreck, both mentally and physically, is part of the inward turn of the shipwreck experience, a nostalgic impulse to an immediately past and traumatic event that prevents forward movement” (as quoted in Thompson 69). However, Susan’s (self-) incarceration is grounded in her own choices, ideals and deeds. She becomes enslaved by her desire to set Friday free, of educating him in the civilized spirit of the Western World. Moreover, she does not wish “a life of a thing” (Coetzee 126) anymore and tries to change her role as a woman in a patriarchal society, by “fathering” her own fiction-free story. Finally, she becomes the prisoner of her doubts and uncertainties about truth/reality, without realising that it is a significant difference between the “internal emotional” truth and the “external truth” (Coetzee and Kurtz 11). Susan believes that she is a liberator, struggling to free Friday and even sacrificing her welfare for this purpose. For a cursory reader she could even pass for a well-intentioned woman, but there are many literary clues that reveal that she is nothing more than a slave owner, just as Foe. Moreover, her attempts of setting Friday free turn out to be her own enslavement trap.

To begin with, she promises Friday a better and free life when he is forcibly “rescued” from the island: “They will bring us back to England, which is your master’s home, and there you will be set free. You will discover that life in England is better than life ever was on island” (Coetzee 41). The issue of reality, once again comes to the forefront. “Freedom” and “better life” have different connotations for Susan, Friday and Cruso, and this discrepancy twists the meaning. The captive Susan believes that by returning to England she will set her and her fellow castaways free. In reality, she sentences herself and Friday to enslavement, and Cruso to an unwanted death. Despite her superficiality, Susan is a conscious character, one that realises that Cruso is dying not of fever, but of “the extremest woe”, and that “he was a prisoner” and she was his “gaoler” (Coetzee 43). There is also a contrasting metaphorical detail in Cruso’s funeral. If death were to be considered an escape from the sufferings in life, then his after death liberation comes with a “great chain” (Coetzee 45) wrapped around his shrouded body before being thrown into the sea. Coetzee also creates far-reaching connotations by the name he gives the rescuing ship, John Hobart. My view is that the significance of this name may lie in a combination of two important and tragical moments of the nineteenth century. Firstly, the name John likely alludes to the famous shipwreck of the
brig St. John in 1849. Henry Thoreau poignantly reported this disaster in his travelogue *Cape Code* in 1865 (Thompson 16). According to Thoreau, the shipwreck led to the loss of more than one hundred humans that were running away from the famine in Ireland in hope of finding a better life in America. This subtle clue foretells the fate that was awaiting Susan in England. The second name, *Hobart*, may refer to the capital of the Australian insular state of Tasmania. According to Ryan Lyndall, Hobart, as indeed the entire Tasmania, had been the setting for cruel acts against the aborigines during the period of British colonization between 1803 and 1835. Hundreds of natives had been kidnapped, tortured and killed by the British military forces. The atrocities in Hobart pinpoint the grim destiny that Friday, like all slaves, was going to have in England.

Susan argues that the truth that is impossible to be spoken differs from the truth that is intentionally unspoken. With other words, she signals a clear distinction between Friday’s silence about his identity and her deliberate muteness about her life before Bahia. The nature of the silence could make the difference between subjugation and liberty. She considers Friday to be “the child of his silence, a child unborn, a child waiting to be born that cannot be born” (Coetzee 122). That is to say that it is Friday’s silence that is yielding his identity. In the absence of truth about him, every other character, and even the readers, are free to forge whatever plausible and convenient “reality” about his origins. In contrast, Susan’s silence regarding her past is voluntary, and it proves her liberty of keeping certain stories intimate and away from any audience.

Also, Susan’s thoughtfulness towards Friday misrepresents her true feelings. She aspires to become a slave liberator and protector, but she despises everything about him. For a woman that fights against the prejudices of an unfair society, Susan is an unconscious promoter of discrimination. For her, Friday is “like a dog” (Coetzee 21), “an imbecile incapable of speech” (Coetzee 22), “a shadowy creature” (Coetzee 24), “a Negro slave” (Coetzee 39), “a slave unmanned” (Coetzee 119) who “[f]rom eating too much and lying abed […] is growing stupid” (Coetzee 57). The reason why she wants to free Friday comes not from altruism, but because, as she admits, “[i]f I cannot be free of him I will stifle!” (Coetzee 148). Susan cannot free herself, let alone decide over someone else’s freedom. She arrogates the right of a slave owner and grants Friday his liberty by signing a written deed to this effect. However, she does admit her incapacity of taking such a decision and signs the document in Cruso’s name. This denotes that her freedom to act in this way was only an alleged one, and that, in reality she was as captive as Friday was. An important detail of this bogus liberation is that Susan puts this document in a little bag and hangs it around Friday’s neck. Later on, in
the last chapter of the novel, an unknown author writes about finding Friday, the only survivor of the story, laying on the floor and baring the cicatrix of his so-called liberation on his neck. “About his neck – I had not observed this before – is a scar like a necklace, left by a rope or chain” (Coetzee 155). It is also in this final chapter where Friday is no longer called “slave” or “cannibal”, but “the man Friday” (Coetzee 154).

Susan questions herself about what makes a slave remain obedient to his master, instead of revolting and seeking freedom: “Is there something in the condition of slavehood that invades the heart and makes a slave a slave for life, as the whiff of ink clings forever to a schoolmaster?” (Coetzee 85). A slave accepting being submissive does not necessarily mean recognizing the authority or superiority of the enslaver. Friday could “Fetch and Dig” (Coetzee 149) or launder, but he would have never sought to understand or to become part of Susan’s world. He himself was a world that was beyond the reach of the enslaver. He was like a seashell telling the story of his island and of his kind, but sounding only like “the roar of the waves” (Coetzee 154) in the ears of the conqueror, fascinating, intriguing but incomprehensible. He was the mute that was never able to communicate with his masters, but always interacting with his world within, “nodding to himself as though a voice spoke privately inside him that he was listening to” (Coetzee 13). Susan even suspects the presence of a “spark of mockery” (Coetzee 146) in Friday’s eyes regarding her failed attempts to colonize his soul. For Susan, communication depends on receiving answers to her questions and this reflects the westerner’s attitude towards life. She, as a colonizer, feels the need to interact and shape, to receive answers and attention: “Oh, Friday, how can I make you understand the cravings felt by those of us who live in a world of speech to have our questions answered! It is like our desire, when we kiss someone, to feel the lips we kiss respond to us” (Coetzee 79). She is so keen to communicate that she never learns how to coexist.

The last chapter in Foe reunites both the reality/fantasy and freedom/captivity dichotomies. Ambiguity was a definite trait of this narration, but its end culminates with a real conundrum. If until this point it was possible for the reader to have made a somewhat approximate image about Coetzee’s literary intentions, the few pages of the last chapter manage to sink the reader’s judgement into deep perplexity. The reader cannot be sure of anything, what is real, what is imagined, not even of who is the narrator of the last pages. The setting changes as well and the action of the novel “capsizes” in the waters around Cruso’s island. Thompson explains the connotation behind exploring the submerged wreck:

Diving into the wreck, therefore, we encounter perspectives which challenge triumphalist attitudes and simplistic narratives about the emergence of western
modernity, and we salvage from the sea-bed a treasure-trove of forgotten, sometimes suppressed stories which speak poignantly of modernity’s costs and consequences. (Thompson 22)

Thompson’s conclusion resonates with Coetzee’s ending. The last pages of the narrative introduce a mysterious character who enters Foe’s house and finds him and Susan lying dead on the bed. The only survivor in the room is Friday, barely breathing but recognised by the strange visitor. On the floor, there is Foe’s box where he kept his writings, and inside, there is a written version of the story of Susan Barton under the form of a letter addressed to Foe. The reader could hypothesise that Susan is the narrator of this final account in which, finding herself swimming in the waters near Cruso’s island, she never makes it to shore. Nevertheless, it is not Susan who writes this account as the narrator finds the floating bodies of “Susan Barton and her dead captain, fat as pigs in their nightclothes” (Coetzee 157). The enigmatic writer meets Friday as well, who is not dead and who is as mute under water as he was above it. Obsessed with the secret of Friday’s muteness, the narrator opens the mouth and from thence a “slow stream, without breath, without interruption” (157) begins to flow, inundating the sea itself. As mentioned before, the novel is about Friday and this closure is entirely dedicated to him and his world. The last chapter is a conceit mirroring the damage left by the colonizer, using imagery from a realm of fantasy, but in fact, describing a blunt reality. The slave has survived, but the scars, the dirty sea and the bodies that “are their own signs” (Coetzee 157) are evidence of the pandemic called colonizer, a colonizer that, even at the eleventh hour is obsessed with knowing what lies behind the silence of the invaded.

As shown throughout the essay, Foe abounds in polarities that at first create confusion, yet after an in-depth analysis offer an understanding of the narrative. The essay focused on analysing Susan in relation to the other characters in order to reveal the actual meaning of these polarities. The most frequently used polarity is reality/fiction. It is employed from the beginning till the very end of the narrative and it reveals subtle insights about each one of the two opposite notions. Moreover, by playing with polarities, Coetzee demonstrates that they are not opposed, but interrelated. Reality could be born from fantasy and vice versa, like Susan’s envision contains details from a verifiable reality (Dickory Cronke) and, at Daniel Defoe’s real address in London lives a fictional character, by the name Foe. This interrelation of two antithetical concepts is also valid for the second dichotomy analysed in this essay, namely freedom/captivity, two concepts that can exchange meaning depending on whether they are based on reality or fiction. Susan considers herself free but only in her imaginary reality, whereas Friday’s obvious captivity reveals an unblemished freedom of the
self. Many of the apparently amiss references in Foe are in fact key elements in Coetzee’s semiotics. This essay is offering just one possible decryption of this narration, one out of numerous other variants. This multitude of realities is possible because Foe is not a novel that gives easy answers, but one that raises questions. In it Coetzee becomes the voice of the colonized, seemingly shutting the essence of the story inside himself, silencing the truth, but in fact provoking the reader to explore reality.


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