



A Gender Perspective on the Possession of Power in J.M Coetzee's *Disgrace*

David and Petrus' usage of women.

Maktförhållanden utifrån ett könsperspektiv i J.M Coetzee's *Disgrace*
David och Petrus utnyttjande av kvinnor.

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Abstract

This essay deals with sexual power abuse in J.M Coetzee's *Disgrace*. The essay focuses on the two characters David and Petrus and their way of acting. The question asked is simply: how do these two men use women to gain their power? And how do they deal with women? The result can be summarized in the following way: at the beginning the male characters tear women apart till they become totally insecure and thus they can control them completely. Petrus remains this way but as time goes by, David's thoughts of women gradually changes. The essay also focuses on how David and Petrus shift in power. David, who started out as strong, becomes weak, and Petrus develops in the opposite direction and I am going to argue that this is a result of their relations to women. The essay uses a gender perspective and it can be considered a guide to the sexual abuse in *Disgrace*.

Disgrace is a novel written by J.M Coetzee. The story is mainly about three characters: David, a fifty-two-year-old professor at the University of Cape Town, his daughter Lucy, who lives on a farm on the country side and Lucy's dog-keeper Petrus. The novel tells a story about two men, David and Petrus, and how they use women to gain power both psychologically and materially. Coetzee gives us a story filled with personal as well as national problems. It reflects a country with lacking security and with inhabitants with a destructive look upon life. He reveals the deepest thoughts of characters put in challenging situations. Derek Attridge describes it as "a society in which crime is rampant, the police service is inadequate and the middle classes are barricaded into the fortress homes" (315). In other words, this is a country filled with distrust.

The name of the book, *Disgrace*, could mean many things, for instance shame and dishonor, and both shame and dishonor take place throughout the book. According to Miloslawa Stepien the word itself could refer to three actions in the story: David being accused of sexual molestation, Lucy's rape, and the disgrace of the dying dogs, the ones David helps put to sleep (219). David starts out as a powerful man, but as time goes by, we see his strength weaken because of his inability to control his desire for women. Petrus, on the other hand, starts out as a person who is looked down upon, but he ends up as the most powerful of all. Half way through the story, Petrus and David's paths crosses, both psychically, on the country side in South Africa, and metaphorically when David and Petrus switch positions in terms of power. David faces his rock-bottom and Petrus his success. Throughout the story, we are shown that the male figures show no remorse towards the women who become their targets. Hence, this paper is written from a gender perspective with focus on how men use women to gain and possess the women's power. A feminist perspective is also used to show that women are undermined, socially and psychologically. According to Derek Attridge, feminist readers tend see David as an unsympathetic character since his "seduction" of women is built on male power and women's voices are never heard. A discussion of the treatment of gender can be raised and the worrying sexism in the story needs to be questioned (317). Thus, this essay is built on the following question: how do men use women to gain and possess power in *Disgrace*, and how are women related to loss of male power? The story takes place after the times of Apartheid but it has not fully left the characters. The memories of the past are still an important part of the story which is hard to ignore. Hence, racial and ethnic questions are sometimes raised even though the essay itself concentrate on the gender perspective. I am going to argue that Petrus and David use and undermine women to gain power and then take advantage of their superior positions.

Furthermore I am going to claim that the result of these actions is that they switch positions, David becomes the weaker one and that Petrus reaches his goals.

To begin with, the concepts of power, feminism and gender need to be defined. In terms of power, a definition stressing control is relevant to this essay: “the ability or right to control people or events” (Longman 1356) and “the ability to influence people or give them strong feelings” (Longman 1356). These two definitions are used because control and influence are central throughout the story. Both David and Petrus use this kind of power when they gain control over women and scare or put them in unwanted situations to get to what they want. What needs to be kept in mind, however, is that *Disgrace* deals with two different kinds of power, the visible power which the men use to use women and the inner power of self-confidence and inner peace.

Gender can be defined in many different ways and the concept is widely used but Harriet Bradley gives us an applicable definition from her book *Fractured identities* which focuses on the relation between women and men:

Gender refers to the varied and complex arrangements between men and women, encompassing the organization of reproduction, the sexual divisions of labor and cultural definitions of femininity and masculinity (Bradley 205).

Gender is a social construction and it is used by human beings to make it easier to handle the world around and make sense of it. Harriet Bradley claims in her book *Gender: Key Concepts* that the distinction between males and females has a very old history (3) but gender is something that varies according to time and place, which means that gender today is not the same as hundred years ago and gender in Sweden is not necessarily defined in the same way as it is in South Africa. This is an important thing to keep in mind since the different characters in the story do not share the same age, culture and religion. Feminism, on the other hand, examines how women often are subjugated. Lois Tyson claims that women are often portrayed as sweet, beautiful, weak, irrational and emotional, while men are described as strong, fear no pain and the ones who makes all decisions. The ultimate goal for feminism is to increase our understanding of women’s experience, both in the past and present, and promote our appreciation of women’s value in the world (Tyson 119). These explanations are important to be aware of since sexuality and gender are a big part of the book which could be summarized in the following way:

It seems that one of the most important subjects touched upon in the novel is sexuality, in its different varieties: those of older and younger men, rapists and men who impose themselves on women in some way dependent on them or else manipulate them into having sex; and also blurred images of the sexuality of women, those sharing their bodies in return for money or favors, willingly and unwillingly, those raped or violated (Stepien 203).

The first thing I am going to focus on is the concept of how David uses women to gain power. In the beginning only one of the male characters occur in the book and that is David. David is a 52-year-old professor at the University of Cape Town. He has been divorced twice and has not found a new wife since his last relationship ended. David has always found it easy to seduce women but since he is getting older, he loses this quality more and more. This is something David has not realized himself, however, as will be shown throughout the essay. David has built his world on power and he is used to controlling everything around him – his job, life and *women*. David starts out as a powerful and respected person with a great job. Attridge claims that the fact that David is a white male is important to keep in mind, when it comes to power, especially in South Africa after Apartheid and on occasions he tries to show himself better than everyone else as the white male, which could be remaining from apartheid and the subjugation of the black inhabitants (317). He often looks down on or questions people who choose to live their lives in other ways than himself, for instance his daughter Lucy. This is part of David's behavior and personality - there are many statements in this book that points to the fact that everything in David's life revolves around himself. He thinks that everything that happens is related to himself. David's daughter Lucy makes a statement about this once:

[...] David, I can't run my life according to whether or not you like what I do. Not any more. You behave as if everything I do is part of the story of your life. You are the main character, I am a minor character who doesn't make an appearance until halfway through. Well, contrary to what you think, people are not divided into major and minor. I am not a minor. I have a life of my own, just as important to me as yours is to you, and in my life I am the one who makes the decisions'. (Coetzee 198).

One of the things that is recurrent when it comes to David is that he shows no remorse towards women and this will be shown many times in this essay. He also frequently uses his desire as an excuse to use women and this will also be shown many times throughout

the essay. A good example is in the beginning of the story when David meets Soraya, a prostitute. David uses her to satisfy himself and he uses his power to show his superior position. During the time he sees this girl, he tries to change her in many ways, for instance the way she looks with her make up: "Not liking the stickiness of the makeup, he asked her to wipe it off. She obeyed, and has never worn it since" (Coetzee 5). This is the first time in the story David takes advantage of his position to show power, firstly by using Soraya and secondly by telling her to change her looks. He gains power by putting himself in a position where he is shown as the dominant one and Soraya as his possession. This continues and the third time David disrespects women is when Soraya disappears back to her real life and requests that no one should be looking for her and David does the opposite since he already has a relationship with her in his mind. He does not respect her will to be left alone, because of his own wish to be pleased by her. Later, Soraya gets away (Coetzee 9-10).

After these events, David tries to seduce one of his students, Melanie Isaacs, and it all ends up in sexual violence and he does not respect her will to be left alone. Melanie is portrayed as emotional and weak, which is, according to Tyson, how women usually are described when it comes to traditional gender roles (85). David sees Melanie on the street and he starts to make contact. Here we face David's manipulative personality and his way of using women to get what he wants. He tries to convince Melanie to stay the night with him even though he knows deep within that she does not want to:

[David speaking to Melanie]

- 'Stay. Spend the night with me.' [...]

- [...] 'Why?'

- 'Because you ought to.'

- 'Why ought I to?'

- 'Why? Because a woman's beauty does not belong to her alone. It is a part of the bounty she brings into the world. She has a duty to share it.' (Coetzee 16)

This time Melanie gets away. At the same time as David is at the top of his power, with his profession and taking advantage of his position when it comes to women, his power is bit by bit already starting to fade. He makes too old-fashioned moves when he tries to seduce Melanie which makes him distant:

‘From fairest creatures we desire increase’, he says, ‘that thereby beauty’s rose might never die.’ Not at good move. Her smile loses its playful, mobile quality. The pentameter, whose cadence once served so well to oil the serpent’s word, now only estranges. He has become a teacher again, man of the book, guardian of the culture-board. She puts down her cup. ‘I must leave, I’m expected’. (Coetzee 16)

David’s power of seducing women is not what it used to be. David often uses this kind of poetic words when he thrusts himself upon Soraya and Melanie. He more or less use these words to romanticize and justify his actions against women. He hides behind his romantic words of love and justifies his actions through them.

David keeps contacting Melanie and at one time they end up in David’s apartment and this time Melanie’s inferiority is in focus. Melanie is passive throughout their meeting while David follows his instincts and desire with no thought of the consequences and once again we see David’s manipulative personality shine through:

[David:] ‘Is something the matter? Do you want to tell me?’

She shakes her head.

‘Are you worried about the two of us?’

‘Maybe’, she says.

‘No need. I’ll take care. I won’t let it go too far.’

Too far. What is far, what is too far, in a matter like this? Is her too far as the same as his too far?

[...] He takes her back to his house. On the living room floor, to the sound of rain pattering against the windows, he makes love to her. [...] When he comes back the rain has stopped. The girl is lying beneath him, her eyes closed, her hands slack above her head, a slight frown on her face. (Coetzee 19)

In this short quotation the narrator twice points out Melanie’s inferiority to David. Firstly by writing: “he makes love to her” and not writing “they make love”. David is the subject in this act and Melanie is obviously the object, what she feels and does is not important. Her way of being passive throughout and not wanting this is even more obvious through the explanation of how *David* makes love to *her*. Secondly, the narrator says “*the girl* is lying beneath him”. At this point, Melanie is not even referred to with her name. When the act is over and when David has gotten what he wants, Melanie is just a girl amongst the others, she is not tempting anymore. “‘I must go’, she whispers. He makes no effort to detain her” (Coetzee 19). Before

the act was taking place, David would not let Melanie leave but when he got what he wanted, he does not care about her presence at all and this is symptomatic to David's behavior and his way of using women.

The last time David intrudes on Melanie is when he runs into her apartment and more or less forces her to bed and this is where the sexual violence becomes a fact:

He has given her no warning; she is too surprised to resist the intruder who thrusts himself upon her. [...] 'No not now!' she says, struggling. [...] But nothing will stop him. He carries her to the bedroom, brushes off the absurd slippers, [...] Not rape, not quite that, but undesired nevertheless, undesired to the core. (Coetzee 24-25)

David's objectification of women is shown in this quotation. Melanie carries no meaning to David. He does not even try to convince her. The rape itself would have hurt Melanie enough, but like that was not enough, David takes time to note Melanie's absurd slippers. This allows the reader to face David's bizarre behavior, when he tears Melanie apart by raping her and at the same time takes time to note her slippers in a condescending way. This is typical when it comes to David and gaining power. He always weakens his victims and when they are totally undermined, he thrusts himself upon them to show that he is in charge.

David is accused of having a sexual relation with his student and he is called to have a meeting with people at the university. At this time he does not even want to read the statements given by Melanie Isaacs and he refuses to make a public apology. According to Stepien, the female voice is constantly silenced in the novel (203). This could be considered a tool of power because when his victims' voices are silenced, nothing can stop him from keeping going. At this time David silences Melanie, which can be contrasted to his reaction to Lucy when she is raped and she does not want to report the rape. David is at this time frustrated that she does not want to report it and that she lowers her voice, which is interesting to compare to when he silences Melanie and is not even interested to hear her side of the story.

David is removed from his work and accused of having a sexual relation with one of his students and this is when all of David's power is taken away from him because of his inability to deal with his desire. He loses his profession and respect amongst people in his town. This is when we see David weakens and he flees out to the country side to his daughter Lucy to stay with her. Earlier in the novel, we could actually predict this happening when David talks about Byron. "He went to Italy to escape a scandal, and settled there. Settled

down.” (Coetzee 15). David’s desire for women becomes his burden and he cannot control it, and the loss of his work is a result of it. I would say that David once tries to explain his burden to Lucy, but as a comparison to a dog:

[...] when we were still living in Kenilworth, the people next door had a dog, a golden retriever [...] ‘It was a male. Whenever there was a bitch in the vicinity it would get excited and unmanageable, and with Pavlovian regularity the owners would beat it. This went on till the poor dog did not know what to do. At the smell of a bitch it would chase around the garden with its ears flat and its tail between its legs, whining, trying to hide.’ [...] A dog will accept the justice of that: a beating for a chewing. But desire is another story. No animal will accept the justice of being punished for following its instincts’. (Coetzee 89-90)

This could be considered an excuse for his own behavior and his daughter Lucy asks him: “‘So males must be allowed to follow their instincts unchecked? Is that the moral?’” (Coetzee 90). Whereupon he answers:

What was ignoble about the Kenilworth spectacle was that the poor dog had begun to hate its own nature. It no longer needed to be beaten. It was ready to punish itself. (Coetzee 90)

David states that: “[...] desire is a burden we could well do without” (Coetzee 90) and he makes himself comparable to a dog and its hatred of its own nature. David sees the problem with his desire and he hates what it does to him. He cannot control it but no matter how hard he punishes himself he cannot deny his own nature. Desire is something uncontrollable to David, it leads him to women and he shows his power through it but at the end of the day, he also loses his power through his desire for women.

Women in the story are looked down on throughout, not only by David and Petrus but also by other people in society. People at the University more or less support David and his actions towards Melanie. A teacher at the University states that: “[...] David, I want to tell you you have all my sympathy. Really. These things can be hell.” (Coetzee 42). Many people support David and his actions: “You may find this hard to believe, David, but we around this table are not your enemies. We have our weak moments, all of us, we are only human” (Coetzee 52). David’s actions are thus justified by his peers. He is backed up by other people on the same level. This could also be connected to how women are looked down on in

the story. Melanie, who is a victim of this man, is not supported by people around. Carine Mardorossian claims that David establishes his own right to sexual violence and gains legitimacy through the other powerful people at the university (79). Similarly, Stepien argues that David tries to justify his rape by claiming that the harassment is a result of his uncontrollable desire, which often dwells in his romantic poems and old-fashioned quotes (217). He never says, nor admits, that his harassments of Melanie Isaacs are disgraceful. There is only one person who actually tells him that his actions are inappropriate and shameful (Stepien 218) and that is his former wife Rosalind: “[...] The whole thing is disgraceful from beginning to end. Disgraceful and vulgar too. And I’m not sorry for saying so” (Coetzee 45). Nobody ever tells David that what he does is wrong since he always is supported by others, apart from a few exceptions. Therefore, he sees his actions as more acceptable than they are and his actions may be considered a product of the society he lives in.

There are two women in the story David cannot really control, Lucy and her friend Bev. They are strong women, which is something different from the women David has dealt with earlier. David always tries to keep Lucy within the frames of the traditional gender roles but he cannot do it. Lucy is from the start a very strong woman who takes care of herself and she breaks all the traditional gender roles. Lucy has a big house and a farm that she takes care of. David’s thoughts about Lucy and Bev are revealed in the first pages Lucy is mentioned. Some of the first things David actually notices about Lucy when he sees her is: “[...] she has put on weight” (Coetzee 59). “Soon she will be positively heavy. Letting herself go, as what happens when one withdraws from the field of love.” (Coetzee 65) But Lucy never becomes a part of David’s image of men and women since he never is able to control her.

The first time David meets Bev he perceives her as:

[...] a dumpy, bustling little woman with black freckles, close-cropped, wiry hair, and no neck. He does not like women who make no effort to be attractive. (Coetzee 72)

And once again, women’s looks is what David is most interested in and since Bev is not good-looking enough, she is not likeable to him. From a feminist perspective, this is a typical way of undermining women, implying that a woman being feminine is the major thing that matters. In the quoted passages David reveals his thoughts about the women who are close to him. If he likes them or not depends on their looks. He wishes Lucy would find someone

better because Helene is not beautiful enough. Lucy's changed body is the first thing David notices when he meets her after one year apart and only after that he thinks: "What a nice girl," then hugs her and continues: "[...] what a nice welcome at the end of a long trip!" (Coetzee 59). David is judging even his own daughter.

Whether the judgmental attitude exemplified here actually adds to David's power or not can be questioned. Being confident is to a certain point a good quality and it brings a lot of personal power but at the same time, however, David loses his power because of his exaggeratedly good image of himself when he is "seducing" Melanie. His self-image does not agree with reality, he is getting older and he is not as handsome as he thinks he is, which becomes a lack and cause him more problems than advantages.

Petrus is introduced halfway through the story and the first time David and Petrus meet their power is more or less equal but from here, their positions starts to switch. David has lost his profession and stays at the farm and Petrus has a job at Lucy's. He works as her dog-keeper and lives next to them. The lines between the powerful rich white male and black powerless farmer become blurry. Petrus will eventually be very powerful since he uses sex and women, or more specifically, Lucy to gain power, while David uses the same tools but loses his power this way.

Lucy is raped by three men in her own house and from thereon everything changes both for David, Petrus and Lucy. Petrus is the one who arranged the rape, but at the time it happens, he is away. David is trapped inside the bathroom while the three men rape Lucy and at this point David is totally powerless: "He speaks Italian, he speaks French, but Italian and French will not save him here in darkest Africa. He is helpless [...]" (Coetzee 95). Carine Mardorossian says that David now ironically enough is the victim of a rape attack, compared to the last time when he was the perpetrator. (74) After the rape Lucy goes to the bathroom: "Don't come in,' says Lucy's voice" (Coetzee 98). This is comparable to Melanie after David raped her: "[...] he has no doubt, she, Melanie, is trying to cleanse herself of it, of him. He sees her running a bath [...]" (Coetzee 25). This is also comparable to Elleke Bohemer's statement that David is an agent of desire while Lucy is a passive recipient of violent desire, which she experiences as hatred. She is forced to take upon herself the consequences of the violence and accept the burden [of desire] (349). Petrus and David both mentally damage their targets and Lucy and Melanie can do nothing but accept what has happened. Neither one of them raises their voices against their perpetrators and once again men's desires win over women's silenced voices.

When Lucy gets raped, David is more interested in his own experience than he

is in Lucy's. Stepien argues that once again Lucy is omitted, even though she is the one who went through the worst part of the attack (216). At this point, however, David wants Lucy to report the rape but she does not want to and David gets angry. He wants her to stand up for herself and not hide. This is comparable by contrast to David when he rapes Melanie and he does not even want to read her charges. David constantly silences Melanie's voice but now he wants Lucy to be heard for the same reason. At this point David starts to show some signs of awareness of what he has done.

The story does not reveal much about Petrus and this is because Petrus is always described from David's perspective. Therefore, we never get to see his own thoughts about the events in the book. Petrus' thoughts about women, however, are revealed at two times and especially once when he talks about the fact that he is having a baby:

'The baby is coming in October. We hope he will be a boy.' [...] 'Always it is best if the first one is a boy. Then he can show his sisters – show them how to behave [...] A girl is very expensive.' He rubs thumb and forefinger together. 'Always money, money, money.' (Coetzee 130)

This time it might be cultural differences that need to be taken into consideration but the fact that he says that he hopes for a boy because he can show his sisters to behave, tells a lot about what Petrus actually thinks about women.

A second thing is that Petrus hires three men to rape Lucy to scare and tear her apart and then offers her protection by marrying her to get to her property. Graham states that Petrus shows that women are regarded a property and are in need of protection and should therefore belong to a man (439). At this point sex becomes a women's weakness but a man's power:

'I think I am their territory. They have marked me. They will come back for me. [...] Hatred ... When it comes to men and sex, David, nothing surprises me anymore. Maybe for men hating the woman makes sex more exiting. You are a man, you ought to know. (Coetzee 158)

Lucy is having a baby from the rape and to protect her baby she needs someone to protect her and Petrus knows that she cannot turn down his offer. Lucy therefore marries him and Petrus gets what he wants to become even more powerful. To Petrus, Lucy is just

another brick in the game and he needs to play it right. Now when he did, he got everything he wished for:

‘I don’t believe you get the point, David. Petrus is not offering me a church wedding followed by a honeymoon on the wild coast. He is offering an alliance, a deal. I contribute the land, in return for which I am allowed to creep under his wing. Otherwise, he wants to remind me, I am without protection, I am fair game.’ (Coetzee 203)

Lucy Valerie Graham shows that this whole event could be seen from a gender perspective, women owning farms in this story are more threatened than men because of the sexual violence and the social oppression (439). The traditional gender roles could also be taken into consideration since when Lucy gets raped and pregnant, one can assume that she returns into the house to take care of the baby and lets Petrus take care of the farming, placed in the traditional gender roles.

Petrus shows no care for Lucy and the way she was raped. Directly after the rape Petrus asks David: “Will Lucy go to the market tomorrow? (Coetzee 115). This tells a lot about Petrus and his inability to understand a woman’s experience of a rape and he never does anything to atone his actions. At this point the female inferiority becomes obvious and the usage of women cannot be denied. Women are never given justice in the story and they stay subjugated. David’s rape which he himself declares as “not quite rape” is at some degree punished, he loses his job and all of his power, while Petrus’ actions never are punished. Petrus gains from it and never get punished (Mardorossian 76), hence, the women are never given their justice.

David and Petrus have different intentions with using women. Petrus gains economic and material winnings and that is probably because he has always been poor and riches is therefore what he looks for. In the care of David, on the other hand, it is harder to tell what he gains from using women. One could argue that David’s way of acting towards women is a consequence of his troubled life, since he lost his wife. David at least gains sexual pleasure and takes advantage of the position he possesses when he uses Soraya and Melanie. The narrator makes Petrus’ way of acting and using women seem less accepted than David’s. This may be because the story is focalized through David, as mentioned earlier, and therefore we do not get much sense of what Petrus’ thoughts are. Lowry claims, however, that it needs to be kept in mind that there are two patriarchs in the story, one worse than the other. David’s

actions cannot be considered more acceptable for this reason.

The rapes themselves might be some kind of payback from both David's and Petrus' sides and function as a tool to show their power. Petrus' rape may be some kind of payback towards the white inhabitants in South Africa because of the power they possess. Through the rape he shows his power over them. Stepien states that the harassments of Lucy also functions as a concept which makes David see his own actions towards Melanie from another angle (217). The actions against David during the violent night may also be some kind of payback towards the white male and to show that he should not come to the country side and think that he is better than anyone else. The story takes place after apartheid but the memories are not gone. Elizabeth Lowry claims that this is one of the reasons why the three black males rape Lucy, citing the following passage:

[Lucy asks David]

[...] But why did they hate me so? I had never set eyes on them.'[...] 'It was history speaking through them,' he offers at last. 'A history of wrong. Think of it that way, if it helps. It may have seemed personal, but it wasn't. It came from the ancestors.' (Coetzee 156)

South Africa's history is hereby still present in the story and the portraits of white and black people are brutally showed. It could all be a contest to show who is in charge. David's rape seems to be more about not seeing women as worthy but let us not forget about Soraya, the black woman he struggled for. He spent time mentioning many times that Soraya is black and he also takes time to hate *the black men* for raping Lucy, a white innocent girl. David's old-fashioned thoughts of black and white people are still present.

At the end of the story David's and Petrus' lives are totally different from how they were at the beginning. David loses all his power and Petrus gains everything he wishes for. Petrus' actions are never punished and we never get to see if he ever changes his way of being. When it comes to David, however, it is important to keep in mind is that even he gains from the rape of Lucy. He gains understanding and sympathy. He apologizes to Melanie's father for the pain he caused their family. At this point he realizes what he caused them because he went through the same process with Lucy. He now looks for forgiveness and some kind of catharsis and his way of seeing women changes. He once told Melanie, as I quoted earlier: "A woman's beauty is to share [...]" David never uses these kinds of words after the rape.

There are many times David points out his rights to follow his desire when it

comes to women and it also becomes his burden and it makes him lose his power. When he at the end asks Mr. Isaacs for forgiveness, he tells his side of the story:

‘A fire: what is remarkable about that? If a fire goes out, you strike a match and start another one. This is how I used to think. Yet in the olden days people worshipped fire. They thought twice before letting a flame die, a flame-god. It was that kind of flame your daughter kindled in me. Not hot enough to burn me up, but real: real fire’. Burned – burnt – burnt up. (Coetzee 166)

He tells Mr. Isaacs that he could not resist Melanie. He usually finds one woman and then let her go to find another one but Melanie was different. Yet in the olden days, people thought twice before letting love die to light a new love, back then it was real and lasting. With Melanie it was real. The fire was not hot enough to touch him fully, but it was real. He could not let go of her. He was the one starting a fire and he forced himself upon her. This is comparable to when David is locked inside the bathroom and the three men started a fire on his face while they raped Lucy: “A flame dances soundlessly on the back of his hand [...] He stands up, beats out the last of the flames on his clothes. [...] Everything is tender, everything is burned. Burned, burnt” (Coetzee 96-97). The flame is at that time not started in David, but started by someone else’s desire, and then forced upon Lucy and David. The last time a flame was set in David, he forced himself upon Melanie. This fire, as the other one, could be seen figuratively. It could be seen as the difference between one setting the fire himself and being forced into someone else’s flame. The flame could be comparable to desire, once a flame is started in you, one would do anything to get there but being a victim of someone else’s flame could be very unpleasant.

At the end we see David’s transformation. He now more or less sees women as independent and not as a part of a man’s possession. It makes him wiser and free from troubles. Although he loses all his visible power, he gains an inner peace. He releases the exaggeratedly perfect picture of himself and once even compares himself to a dog:

Perhaps that is what I must learn to accept. To start at ground level. With nothing. Nothing with nothing but. With nothing. No cards, no weapons, no property, no rights, no dignity.’

‘Like a dog.’

‘Yes, like a dog.’ (Coetzee 205)

At the end of the story, David works with Bev and puts dogs to their last sleep. There is one dog left David has become close to, which he possibly wants to spare:

There is only the young dog left, the one who likes music, the one who, given a half chance, would already have lolloped after his comrades into the clinic building, into the theatre with its zinctopped table where the rich, mixed smells still linger, including one he will not yet have met with in his life: the smell of expiration, the soft, short smell of the released soul. (Coetzee 219)

This quote equates the dog to David and it also contains his dreams of having his own musical. David has more or less found himself in this dog. The last two lines in the book says:

[Bev asks David] 'Are you giving him up?'
'Yes, I am giving him up.' (Coetzee 220)

This quotation shows that David accepts his loss of power and what has happened. He leaves his past behind and gives up the old David with the old habits and his power. He described himself earlier as a comparison to Lucifer:

'He does what he feels like. He doesn't care if it is good or bad. He just does it.' [...]
He doesn't act on principle but on impulse, and the source of his impulses is dark to him. (Coetzee 33)

He now leaves the "dark source" and burden behind to find a new self and new thoughts about life as a released soul, released from desire.

To summarize my examination of Petrus and David's power and the subjugation of women, we see that David starts out as the most powerful character in the story. He is respected but as time goes by, he loses his authority and his power to seduce women starts to fade. The first time we see David lose his power is when he tries to seduce Melanie. His moves are too old-fashioned and his ability is not what it used to be. His loss of control is also seen when he tries to find Soraya after she disappears and he cannot control her anymore. He loses his good looks in the attack at the farm when the perpetrators burn his face. He becomes more distant to the younger women he tries to seduce. As shown by several quotes, we see that David blames many of his actions on his desire of women, which he cannot control. He cannot deny his own nature. This all changes at the end of the story when he has lost all his material stuff and his looks. He then gains another kind of power and realizes that women are

more than just the possessions of men and that their voices should be heard just as everyone else's. When David puts dogs to sleep, he leaves his own self behind and gains an inner peace. You could possibly say that he has found some kind of catharsis. Petrus on the other hand starts out as a withdrawn man who is not very powerful, but eventually he gains more and more power and he gets the last piece when he gets to Lucy's property. This shows a reversed picture of how the story started. It also shows a reversed picture of the white powerful man and the black subjugated man, that once was a big part of the South African society. Lowry summarizes it in her review: "Lurie has made use of Soraya and Meláni, but there is a lethal symmetry in the fact that his own daughter is used in turn and becomes a chattel of the Petrus clan." We face the conversion David goes through when he at the end works side by side with a woman and actually learns from her. He also shows a sign of conversion when he asks Melanie's father for forgiveness, even though one would think that he could have changed focus from Melanie's father to Melanie herself. The rape of Lucy affects the story in many ways. David changes his way of acting towards women and he never uses women after that event since he sees his own actions from another perspective. From this day, one could argue that David wants women to speak louder and not more silently as he used to think.

The story itself never punishes Petrus, he gains power by sexually violating Lucy to scare her and then get her property. Soraya and Melanie are never heard from again after David uses them and apologies are never given to them personally, justice is therefore never given to the female characters. Hence, the book cannot be considered a story with a happy ending but it gives an insight into the lives of women in South Africa and their experiences of male superiority.

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