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"You Keep Misreading Me": The Limits of Knowledge in J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*

In modern-day South Africa, hyperawareness of race and racism, sex and sexism, affects every part of daily life. These thought structures are the legacy of apartheid, a cruelly divisive and discriminatory system that split society by race and gender. Evaluating the other according to such a dichotomy ignores all other qualities, simplifying the other into an object and destroying the ability to sympathize. J. M. Coetzee's novel *Disgrace* fights back against this reduction to racial or gender oppositions. It presents main character David Lurie in his entirety, refusing to decontextualize his sexism and racism from the other parts of his life. In this way, *Disgrace* draws its power from its irreducibility; it cannot be divided into message and vehicle or theme and opposition. Rather, Coetzee asks the fundamental question from which these messages and themes arise: Is it possible to know the other? If not, what are the implications for sympathy and reconciliation? By confining the reader to David's perspective, Coetzee shows the reader the impossibility of fully understanding the other. Dependent on his interpretations of the world, the reader is forced to assume David's sexism and racism. In this way, the reader, too, must confront his own prejudices and ask himself whether he is capable of sympathy.

For years, David has taught at the University of Cape Town, satisfying his needs for companionship and sex with "sudden little adventures" with women (166). When the university discovers his affair with a student, he resigns rather than publicly apologize. His daughter Lucy accepts him into her solitary life in the country. Then, out of nowhere, three men break into the farm to rape Lucy and rob the house, assaulting David in the process. In the aftermath of the unimaginable, David must face the limitations of knowledge and understanding instead of continuing to rely on logical analysis. Confronted unavoidably with the reality of someone else's perspective, his attitudes toward women and blacks are thrust into the foreground of his consciousness.

At the beginning of the novel, David's relationships with women are self-serving, part of his great rationalization of the world rather



Keith Haring

American, 1958-1990

Free South Africa, 1985

White chalk on black paper

Gift of Steven E. and Sue J. North

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than a genuine interaction or connection with an other. He seduces both his student Melanie and himself into believing that their involvement is moral by arguing that "a woman's beauty does not belong to her alone," but is a gift for men to realize (16). He idolizes the poet Byron, the ultimate playboy intellectual, and considers sex a "problem" that can be "solved" without any emotional component (1). In keeping with this constant intellectualization, David tries to "solve" the attack by viewing it as a theory of the circulation of wealth "so that everyone can have a chance to be happy." This rhetoric commodifies women, grouping them with the possessions that circulate. "Cars, shoes; women, too," he reflects. "There must be some niche in the system for women and what happens to them." Like the car, the shoes, and the cigarettes in the circulatory system, a woman's body is "a risk to own" (98). This phrase echoes David's justification for seducing Melanie: "She does not own herself. Beauty does not own itself" (16). But the assault shows David the shortcomings of such rationalisation by giving him a new vantage point for learning about women. Suddenly his ability to know and sympathize with their experiences expands. When he tries to understand the attack by falling back on his old habit of rationalization, he finds that it is no longer enough to satisfy him.

By observing someone else objectify a woman, David is able to see accurately "what women undergo at the hands of men" (111) rather than distorting the knowledge in order to continue his own womanizing. For the first time, he considers womanizing and rape as violations of women. His obsession with understanding Lucy's experience takes over; not content with sympathizing, he wants to truly share what she felt. Because he loves Lucy and sides with her against the rapists, he re-evaluates himself as a perpetrator rather than a "servant of Eros" (52). This new understanding impels him to apologize to Melanie's mother, humbling himself by kneeling at her feet and touching his forehead to the floor. Moreover, the depth of his new sympathy is exposed by the point of view he chooses for the opera he writes about Byron. He can no longer conceive it from Byron's bigoted perspective, but focalizes it instead on Byron's lover, Teresa. "Can he find it in his heart to love this plain, ordinary woman?" he wonders. "If he cannot, what is left for him?" (182). David has realized the importance of sympathy. Though he still lusts, he no longer acts; he finds that he can love Teresa, and her opera grows day by day. These developments all add to the central discussion of his ability to sympathize: "Does he have it in him to be

the woman?" (160). Ultimately, the answer is no. As Lucy reminds him over and over again, David will never know first-hand what it is to be a woman; instead, he must accept the limitation of his knowledge and respect women's perspective with an outsider's sympathy.

Even more extreme than David's attitudes toward women are his attitudes toward race. In the post-apartheid era, his unwitting assumption of colonial stereotypes reflects the dichotomy between knowledge and ignorance. Consciously, he initially makes every effort to be color-blind and to resist the widespread tendency to reduce analyses of society to racial tensions. The first mention of Melanie's race is made not by David but by the university committee hearing his case. Until then, the reader has no idea that their affair is interracial, and therefore, like David, views it without "overtones" (50). At the same time, David's unconscious remains deeply affected by racial differences and prejudices. He interprets his country's changing demographics through the lens of its long tradition of racism, understanding the work he does for Petrus, Lucy's black neighbor, as having "historical piquancy" (77). On the whole, however, David's racism is dormant, and he views himself as tolerant and accepting. But when three black men loot the farmhouse, assault David, and rape Lucy, the trauma strips him down to the unfettered unconscious. Suddenly his homeland becomes "darkest Africa" and he a "missionary in a cassock and topi waiting with clasped hands and upcast eyes while the savages jaw away in their own lingo preparatory to plunging him into their boiling cauldron" (95). Habitually cynical and antireligious, he identifies himself with the missionaries who attempt unsuccessfully to civilize the "savage" natives. "Mission work: what has it left behind, that huge enterprise of upliftment? Nothing that he can see" (95). In moments, David's subconscious, historical racism supplants his conscious efforts at modern tolerance.

In the aftermath of the attack, David tries to assimilate it by reducing it to a theory of race relations: this was an incident of historical justice, of the redistribution of wealth, "not human evil, just a vast circulatory system" (98). Instead of addressing the assault head-on, David now hides behind the overtones. Lucy argues that it "is a purely private matter" (112), implying that her rape should not be appropriated by the discourse of race or racism. But David cannot allow it to exist on the personal level. For the first time, he labels people as black (110). He ironically refers to himself and Petrus as "*baas en Klaas*," almost nostalgically recalling that "in the old days one could have had it out with

Petrus" about his role in the attack, but now "Petrus is a neighbour" (117). David must adjust to the fact that the old patterns of interaction are obsolete: "It is a new world they live in, he and Lucy and Petrus. Petrus knows it, and he knows it, and Petrus knows that he knows it. Nonetheless he feels at home with Petrus, is even prepared, however guardedly, to like him" (117). David's racism here is the product of the desire for control rather than of hatred. Later on, he encounters one of Lucy's rapists at Petrus's house and cannot force apology or even recognition from him. The continued lack of control drives David's racism into the open again. He is consumed by rage, setting a dog on the boy and craving retribution for the rape. "Phrases that all his life he has avoided seem suddenly just and right: *Teach him a lesson, Show him his place*." (206). David recognizes the tension between his conscious and unconscious, self-knowledge and denial. That white David could teach the black boy a "lesson" and "show him his place" in a racial hierarchy reduces the boy to a faceless racialized object. At the same time, it also necessarily reduces David himself to racial terms. David blocks any potential for his sympathy for the boy or the reader's sympathy for himself by locking their personal qualities behind the façade of racialized discourse.

David's sexism and racism make it difficult for the reader to sympathize with him; yet this is precisely what Coetzee demands. In the opening chapters, David characterizes himself neatly when he quotes Byron's description of a Lucifer whose occasional kindness stems from perversity and pride rather than from sympathy. "Note that we are not asked to condemn this being with the mad heart, this being with whom there is something constitutionally wrong," David instructs. "On the contrary, we are invited to understand and sympathize. But there is a limit to sympathy" (33). This development of appropriate sympathy is the process that the reader undertakes by accepting the bias of Coetzee's focalized narration. In taking on David's voice, the narration sweeps the reader along with his train of thought and forces him into David's identity. Further, the blurring of narrator and character lends David's perspective false authority because the narrator discards objectivity for subjectivity. Rather than relating events or portraying situations factually, the narrator shares David's tone and attitudes. Subsequently, the reader's only sources of knowledge—David and the narrator—are irreparably biased. Through the focalized narration, Coetzee structur-

ally questions the validity of knowledge, even as David's character demonstrates its limits. As David's new lifestyle subjects him to new experiences, his understanding of his ability to know matures so that he is able to sympathize with others for the first time. Simultaneously, the reader undergoes a parallel process that enables him to accept and sympathize with David as well.

In addition to the use of a very limited perspective, Coetzee's choice of the present tense contributes to the problem of unreliability for the reader. There has been no time to reflect; David's actions and the narration are unstudied and immediate. Consequently, the narrator has no more authority than David does. He does not know what will happen either and has no more time to plan his response and reflect. This choice structurally challenges the importance of self-reflection, suggesting that experience or impression is more revealing and honest than contemplated, cold knowledge. Because the present tense precludes reflection, the novel exposes David's unconscious as well as his thoughts. Events are reported as they are felt, not as they occur. As a result, the reader must accept that no truth is objective; every observation comes through a perspective.

At the same time, the present tense creates the sense of future, and with it, the possibility for hope. When David arrives at Lucy's farmhouse, the memory of teaching students "the distinction between *drink* and *drink up*, *burned* and *burnt*" seems distant and irrelevant to his new, rural life. "The perfective, signifying an action carried through to its conclusion. How far away it all seems! I live, I have lived, I lived" (71). The novel's events are still about to happen, unknown, unplanned, life-like; the time and potential for David to change keep the reader in suspense. After the three men set David on fire, the narrator says, "Everything is tender, everything is burned. Burned, burnt" (97). Echoing the word that David taught in the classroom mocks his intellectualism and underscores the hugeness of the change in his life. Its meaning has changed for him forever now. Something irrevocable has happened, has become part of history and part of David.

The immensity of the concept that something can be irrevocable hits home again when David hesitates outside the house: "His child is in the hands of strangers. In a minute, in an hour, it will be too late; whatever is happening to her will be set in stone, will belong to the past. But *now* it is not too late. *Now* he must do something" (94). The use of the present tense makes the situation at once hopeful and terrifying.

The narrator repeats the perfective "burnt" one last time on the novel's final page. David allows his favorite stray dog to be euthanized along with the other unwanted strays at the local veterinary clinic, committing to seeing that its corpse is "burnt, burnt up" (220). He views this action as a small and unworthy service, but still a gesture of respect and humanity. In his mind, he is relinquishing the dog to the past, "giving him up" (220)—he is relinquishing the present to the past, giving up possibilities. For the reader, the use of the present tense permits an unusual proximity to David's character. The reader has constant access to his thoughts and opinions, creating an interchange between character and reader on a personal level.

By blurring the boundary between narrator and character, Coetzee submerges the reader in a biased perspective. There is no objective base from which the reader can make independent judgments; instead, he must navigate the subtle tension created by the not-quite-identical narrator and David. In phrases like "Her hips and breasts are now (he searches for the right word) ample" (59), the narrator's voicing of David's words is evident. But in others, notably the development of other characters, the narrator insidiously states opinions as facts. In this way, the reader unavoidably takes on David's behavior and attitudes, becoming trapped in his character. Just as David ends up incriminating himself when he rationalizes the attack, the reader becomes complicit with David by reading the novel from his perspective. Dialogue and actions provide a few clues for an independent analysis of the other characters, but these indices are only enough to show that David's conclusions are wrong. When Lucy accuses David, "You keep misreading me" (112), she reminds the reader that her character will remain essentially unknowable. The reader, too, is confined to David's misreadings. This forced acceptance of limited knowledge illustrates that not only are David's and the narrator's perspectives unreliable, but so is every perception of the other.

Like the committee that sees racial overtones in David's colorblind affair (50), the reader brings his own racial stereotypes to the story and expects the novel to resolve it. But Coetzee merely exposes the reader's hypocrisy; he offers no balm or justification. For example, the reader establishes an opinion on David's affair based on the assumption that Melanie is also white. Once the affair becomes racialized, this opinion shifts, reflecting once again on the reader's own prejudices. Each demonstration of the limits of David's ability to know applies to

the reader as well. When he confronts Lucy about the facts of her rape, she brings him up short: "There are things you just don't understand. . . . You think you understand, but finally you don't. Because you can't" (157). David cannot understand what he has not experienced; the reader cannot understand what he has not inhabited. The reader is forced into a lifelike experience of events, forced to be David rather than to simply observe him. Willingly or no, the reader empathizes with him but can only sympathize with the other characters.

By containing the events of *Disgrace* within one man's perspective, Coetzee reminds his readers of the limits of knowledge. The focalized narration destroys any claim to objectivity, leaving the reader lost in David's psyche. Into this character, Coetzee packs provocative attitudes toward gender and race that rouse equally provocative responses from the reader. By forcing the reader to take on a controversial identity, the novel acts as a mirror. The reader judges David as an other, but then must come to terms with the ease or the difficulty with which he was able to see from David's perspective. The reflection in this social mirror is tinged with residual racism and sexism, but its pessimism is mitigated by its ability to change. As the narrator reminds us after the tangible experience of the attack is over, "the day is not dead yet but living" (102).

Written entirely in the present tense, *Disgrace* is also unfinished, unresolved, just as the reader's life is not yet decided. At the beginning of the novel, David declares that "his temperament is not going to change, he is too old for that. His temperament is fixed, set" (2). But the events of the novel broaden his knowledge of others, forcing him to confront their perspectives and the limitations of his own, leaving "a vital organ bruised, abused—perhaps even his heart" (107). This shattering of his old arrogance does not reform him or excise his lust and bigotry, but he changes just enough to admit that "there may be things to learn" (218). David's understanding of the world is far more complicated at the end of the novel than at the beginning, but this messy lack of resolution is a sign of progress: racial and gender dichotomies no longer satisfy David's search for knowledge and understanding. While he can never truly know the other, his recognition of this limitation has opened up a new capacity for sympathy. In subsuming the reader into David's development, *Disgrace* creates a similar uncertainty and space for sympathy in him as well. Whatever phase of knowledge and sympathy David and the reader may be in now, there is still a future in

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which change is possible.

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Nonsense in Wonderland

Throughout Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, the notion of nonsense becomes a crutch for critics and readers alike, an excuse for a word to lose its relation to those around it, a question to lose its answer, a moral to lose its morality. Critics abound who have tried to qualify Lewis Carroll's nonsense—that lovely negative, that “absence of rationality or meaning,” as *The Oxford English Dictionary* puts it (Nonsense)—to apply meaning to something that is by definition the “absence . . . of meaning.” They define a “nonsense system” as a means for the sense/nonsense dialectic to exist. In so doing, however, they resolve that very dialectic by giving nonsense its own sense. Such critics begin and end with the dialectic of sense/nonsense and ignore what the nonsense of Wonderland *does*.

Donald Rackin provides an excellent example in an introduction to his collection of essays on Lewis Carroll and the *Alice* books:

Despite many skillful attempts . . . a fully satisfying explanation of [the *Alice* books] “meaning” and of their perennial hold over adult imaginations continues to elude even the shrewdest scholars and critics. Indeed regardless of the good sense the books make for countless readers, the *Alices* are also often cited as prime models of “nonsense,” a genre whose success depends upon a *lack* of applicable “meaning”—a liberating and delicious indeterminacy, an immunity from the usual demands upon classics to make good sense about real life. (14)

Rackin's use of “delicious” suggests a tone of inconsequentiality, of triteness, that absurdly misrepresents the “absence of rationality” and “*lack* of applicable ‘meaning.’” For most “adult imaginations” and “even the shrewdest scholars and critics,” so steeped in rational thought and a sense of “the way things should be,” nonsense should seem nothing less than terrifying. Similarly questionable are his uses of “sense.” Once again *The Oxford English Dictionary* can serve as a guide. The entry that best fits our instance of sense is a “mental apprehension,



Lewis Carroll
English, 1832–1898
Alice's Adventures in Wonderland with forty-two
illustrations by John Tenniel, 1866
Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections
Cornell University

appreciation, or realization of (some truth, fact, state of things). Also, comprehension, perception of the meaning of" (Sense). According to Rackin, readers can make good sense, or obtain a good "perception of the meaning of" *Alice* despite its classification as nonsense. Furthermore, though we can perceive a meaning in Carroll's nonsense, we cannot use that meaning to "make good sense about real life" (Rackin 14). In this way Rackin implies a closed system that equates the negative, nonsense, and the positive, sense, within that system; in other words, for Rackin, "nonsense" is the "sense" of Wonderland. This, like his use of "delicious," frees the reader from the inherent discomfort of nonsense and reduces the consequences of it, for both the narrative and the interpretation.

Jacqueline Flescher directly delineates the boundaries of the nonsense system in her essay "The Language of Nonsense in *Alice*." She, like Rackin, begins with nonsense as she opens her essay by declaring, "Nonsense bears the stamp of paradox. The two terms of the paradox are order and disorder" (Flescher 128). Drawing from Elizabeth Sewell's essay "The Field of Nonsense," Flescher determines that "the backbone of nonsense must be a consciously regulated pattern" (128). She continues, "It is the departure from . . . order which distinguishes nonsense from sense" (129). And yet she offers two ways in which nonsense can be ordered and systematized, by way of language and by "metrical framework" (129). "Language," Flescher argues, "offers endless possibilities of upsetting the order of behavior because it can establish a coherent system in a variety of ways. Provided that the backbone of such a system stand out clearly, it can act as a regulator for the most disorderly examples of behavior" (129). Thereby, in one sense, nonsense is the systematic upheaval of the expected. For example, the mad tea party's consistent misrepresentation of Alice's expectations for manners: "Have some wine," the March Hare said in an encouraging tone. Alice looked all round the table, but there was nothing on it but tea. 'I don't see any wine,' she remarked. 'There isn't any,' said the March Hare. 'Then it wasn't very civil of you to offer it,' said Alice angrily" (Carroll 54). The fact that the March Hare so blatantly violated Alice's, and indeed the reader's, expected code of conduct represents the linguistic system of nonsense set out by Flescher, that is, the reversal of the order presupposed by the reader and, in this case, Alice.

Flescher's second nonsense system, that of a "metrical framework," achieves the same effect, but through different means. "It is the pattern

provided by verse that makes verse a suitable vehicle for nonsense. But a similar pattern can also be attained, simply by exploiting a particular letter: . . . and they drew all manner of things—everything that begins with an M . . . such as mouse-traps, and the moon, and memory, and muchness . . . did you ever see such a thing as the drawing of muchness?" (Flescher 130). Flescher qualifies this kind of nonsense as a system bound by some poetic feature—be it rhyme, or alliteration, or in this case the letter M—but which allows the "free association of totally incompatible elements" within it (130). Both of these classifications of nonsense specify and exemplify Rackin's generalizations. Furthermore by systematizing nonsense, by giving it a framework, a sensibility, nonsense represents merely a different sense. Rackin, Sewell, and Flescher hold up Carroll and say, "this is nonsense" and then show how much sense the "nonsense" makes; they begin with the dialectic between sense and nonsense and then show, without acknowledging the impact of the analysis on *Alice*, the impact of nonsense on *Alice*, and the impact of nonsense on interpretation.

The key to understanding the shortcomings of such analysis may indeed lie in the analysis itself. Flescher's statement that "the backbone of nonsense must be a consciously regulated pattern" exemplifies this shortcoming. Flescher uses a very important modifier of "pattern"; that is, the system must be "consciously regulated." This begs the question, *by whom?* In Flescher's analysis of the means, or "backbone," of the system (language, and metrical pattern), she implies that the author is the subject. Why does the reader hold no responsibility, or even the system *itself*? The latter option is disavowed by the fact that the system is "consciously regulated," and not merely "regulated," which would completely open the possibilities, or "self-regulated," in which case responsibility *would* lie solely with the system. And so the consciousness behind the regulation must be either the author's, or the reader's. The author creates the object of interpretation (in this case the corresponding parts are Lewis Carroll and *Alice in Wonderland*), but it is the reader, as Flescher shows by her very analysis, that determines the object as nonsense and *creates the system*. If the reader creates the system, maintenance or regulation of that system must lie with the reader. In this way nonsense becomes a way of reading, a function of the reader's drive toward meaning or sense. *Alice* consistently eludes attempted "meanings" so that the reader finds only reading, or, interpretation; this is the nonsense of Carroll's Wonderland.

There are many examples of the lack of meaning in *Alice*. The most explicit come in the form of unanswered questions. One example comes right in the middle of Flescher's own example of a nonsense system: "and they drew all manner of things—everything that begins with an M—'Why with an M?' said Alice. 'Why not?' said the March Hare. Alice was silent." Flescher calls the M a random limit to include the "free association of totally incompatible elements." But there is a reason; that is, "why not? . . . silence." And so while the components of the system, the "moon" and "memory" and "muchness," and the system itself may be nonsense, the reason for the system, the unanswered question, is a more important distinction of nonsense because it is that which forces interpretation, forces the system set out by Flescher.

Specifically, the concluding two chapters of *Alice in Wonderland* reveal this distinction of nonsense at work within the greater text. The chapter "Alice's Evidence," which concludes the story, can even be seen as a microcosm for the reading experience of *Alice* as a whole. The King and the reader are given a problem for which they must determine an answer that is: "who stole the Queen's tarts?" The King is given a key piece of evidence in the form of a poem. As a microcosm the King is analogous to the reader, or interpreter, and the poem should be considered *Alice*. Alice may too be considered a reader, as she first poses the problem of meaning: "I don't believe there's an atom of meaning in it" (Carroll 95). The poem is even a good example of Flescher's nonsense system; it has little relation to terms outside itself, and so constitutes a closed system of nonsense. And so with the intent of finding meaning, the King delves into the text of the poem. He begins by quoting and explicating lines from the poem,

"We know it to be true"—that's the jury, of course—"If she should push the matter on"—that must be the Queen—"What would become of you?"—
What, indeed!—"I gave her one, they gave him two"—why that must be
what he did with the tarts. . . . Nothing can be clearer than that (96)

Thus the reader and the King enter into a reading and analysis of the poem that each expects will yield an answer that it never does. This drive at meaning, which is confounded by the absence of a resolution, represents what readers determine "nonsense."

The King, in his explication of the evidence, attempts to derive meaning and make sense of the poem, just as the reader does with

Alice. The microcosm folds in on itself when the King finds no answer at all, and the whole event becomes just another riddle that the reader must then interpret. Thus, our interpretation itself is nonsense and our interpretation determines Wonderland's nonsense as a function of reading. At this point we feel a strong tendency, like Alice, to stand up to this marauding, nonsensical deck of cards, throw up our arms and shake ourselves back into reality. This discomfiting paradox of nonsense as object of interpretation and interpretation itself is the true import of nonsense in *Alice* and explains the story's "perennial hold over adult imaginations," and its elusiveness to "even the shrewdest scholars and critics."

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