

IMAGINING THE OTHER:
THE POSSIBILITIES AND LIMITS OF THE SYMPATHETIC IMAGINATION
IN J. M. COETZEE'S RECENT FICTION

Christine Segó Caldwell

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David E. Hoegberg, Ph.D., Chair

Jane E. Schultz, Ph.D.

Master's Thesis
Committee

Jennifer Thorington Springer, Ph.D.

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Introduction

In three of J. M. Coetzee's recent novels, *Disgrace* (1999), *Elizabeth Costello* (2003), and *Slow Man* (2005), the South African author explores notions of authorship and challenges the possibilities of the sympathetic imagination. The notion of the sympathetic imagination has roots in Romanticism, and it connotes inhabiting another in order to understand or interpret. Romantic poet John Keats described the poet as "continually in for [sic] and filling some other body" (Letter to Richard Woodhouse), and Coetzee addresses the notion of the sympathetic imagination in his work. There are two facets of the sympathetic imagination: that which governs social relations and that which authors and creative minds attempt to claim as a driving force behind their work. It is important not to conflate the two separate facets of the sympathetic imagination. The social facet encourages good citizenship and allows humankind to behave in humane ways. It counters one's private desire for mastery and balances self-interest with self-sacrifice; the sympathetic imagination helps others attain their goals and places others' needs alongside one's own selfishness. A sympathetic imagination is an essential quality in society, yet it will always yield only partial success. It cannot achieve complete success because truly inhabiting and embodying another living person is simply impossible, but in fiction, Coetzee explores the possibilities and limits of the sympathetic imagination at the level of language and metaphor.

The other facet of the sympathetic imagination is often claimed by authors, poets, and artists to allow them to inhabit the subjects of their creativity. Coetzee tests the limits of authorial claims that writing is accomplished by applying a sympathetic

imagination. In doing so, he creates metaphysical frames in which his own author-characters interact with other characters to reveal that some characters resist being written. In these metaphysical frames of fiction, Coetzee suggests that an author's sympathetic imagination will never have total success; he sets forth a notion of partial success that helps address what is gained when the sympathetic imagination runs up against limits. My argument is that the authors and characters in these three novels attempt acts of sympathetic imagination and recurrently encounter limits. Coetzee questions perceived notions of authorship and the possibilities of the sympathetic imagination without offering alternatives. He critiques common notions of authorship and character writing but offers no real solutions.

Throughout these three novels, Coetzee focuses his notion of authorship. It seems that he is rejecting two extreme models of authorship and instead seeks an alternative model. The model of authorship as a process driven by an author's sympathetic imagination is most frequently under investigation in Coetzee's work. Perhaps Coetzee finds the paradigm of an acute sympathetic imagination self-serving because it permits authors to subscribe to a cult of genius. On the other hand, the rhetorical model of authorship represents the author as a sly manipulator of words and messages. At its most positive, authorship as rhetoric situates the author as a craftsman whose writing skill lies at the level of technique. By testing common notions of authorship in his writing, Coetzee looks for alternatives to these two paradigms. He undertakes an examination of authorship without the mysticism of the sympathetic imagination and the clarity of the rhetorical model without the negativity.

Coetzee additionally resists making an ideological commitment despite the fact that he was formed in an environment – apartheid South Africa – in which clear ideological commitment was required. Unlike fellow South African Nobel Laureate Nadine Gordimer, Coetzee has been unwilling to take up an ideological cause. Gordimer, for instance, is much more willing to take a Marxist stance within her fiction, using rhetoric to advance her cause. Coetzee, on the other hand, assumes a more post-structuralist mantle in which the author’s position, while perhaps not clearly stated, is present. Coetzee and Gordimer reflect a key debate in theory: which is the better model of the subject? The sympathetic imagination approach cuts against the more rhetorical model of Marxist theory, and Coetzee seems to acknowledge throughout his fiction that an author cannot be a blank slate or an empty vessel. Coetzee finds neither model totally acceptable. Importantly, though, Coetzee uses post-colonial themes of power, authority, and the gaze within his own post-structuralist works.

Coetzee’s critics have addressed his proclivity to use intertextuality and author characters throughout his fiction. Sam Durrant addresses Coetzee’s exploration of the sympathetic imagination most directly, and while he discusses *Elizabeth Costello* and *Disgrace* to some extent, he focuses more on Coetzee’s earlier work. Mike Marais examines the sympathetic imagination in *Disgrace* and concludes that the novel undermines the possibilities of the sympathetic imagination. Many critics, including David in “Coetzee’s Estrangements,” Derek Attridge, and Florence Stratton, approach Coetzee from a historic standpoint, situating his writing as coming from a South African perspective. Critics Lucy Graham, Elleke Boehmer, and Laura Wright write about Coetzee’s investigation of the sympathetic imagination with a feminist approach.

Disgrace has received much critical attention, while *Elizabeth Costello* and *Slow Man* have received less. No critics, however, examine these three novels and Coetzee's continued interest in the sympathetic imagination together. As the three novels were written one after another and published within a span of six years, it is important to consider the ways in which Coetzee explores the possibilities and limits of the sympathetic imagination during this stage of his career.

Additionally leading up to *Disgrace*, Coetzee often set his novels in South Africa or in other postcolonial settings in which there were oppressors and those whom they oppressed. Durrant correctly points out that "almost all Coetzee's fiction is narrated, whether in the first person or third, from a position of social and/or racial privilege" (119). *Disgrace* in particular deals directly with post-apartheid realities from the point of view of a privileged white male professor. However, *Elizabeth Costello* and *Slow Man* address more global concerns that are not specific to South Africa. Coetzee uses these two more recent novels to respond to a late twentieth-century world. Coetzee's exploration of the sympathetic imagination is situated within post-structuralism and takes its cue from Michel Foucault's destabilizing of the subject. While post-structuralism has a strong foothold in the theoretical realm, it has no strong foothold in popular culture. However, Coetzee has sought to reach a larger audience outside theory. Further, Coetzee is not merely a mouthpiece for post-structuralism but builds upon some of its key ideas – that characters and authors are written.

Foucault pointed out the analogy between author and character in "What Is an Author?" If it becomes possible to think of the subject as unstable or something other than the first cause of behavior, then people (both author and character) are written.

According to Foucault, it is as “wrong to equate the author with the real writer as to equate him with the fictitious speaker; the author function is carried out and operates in the scission itself, in this division and this distance” (385). This scission in which the author functions is what Coetzee explores in these three novels. Coetzee exposes the truth of Foucault’s claim that a “‘deep’ motive, a ‘creative’ power, or a ‘design,’ the milieu in which writing originates,” are merely projections the reader makes onto the author (384). Nesting authors within his texts allows Coetzee to talk about authorship within a fictional framework while underlining the fact that the reader projects motives, powers, and designs onto the author.

In *Disgrace*, *Elizabeth Costello*, *Slow Man*, and many of his other novels, Coetzee uses a recurring author-within-the-author structure. These layers of authorship are a fabrication that permits Coetzee to test the sympathetic imagination paradigm. In *Disgrace* and *Elizabeth Costello*, the motif of trial persists, and even in *Slow Man*, the author-character Costello is questioned about her writing. By using the trial theme, it is as if authorship—or common notions of authorship—is on trial. Indeed, throughout these novels, Coetzee puts the notion of sympathy-driven authorship on trial.

Another major theme of the three novels in focus here is *otherness*. Coetzee reveals problems of othering others throughout his work. In *Disgrace*, Coetzee situates animals, particularly dogs, as candidates for sympathy. In addition, race is a central matter in *Disgrace*, and Coetzee uses dogs in the novel to question and challenge the protagonist’s beliefs about race. He further explores gender and colonial power dynamics in *Disgrace* and *Elizabeth Costello*. Costello openly claims to possess a sympathetic imagination and maintains that her sympathetic imagination is what has enabled her to

write with such success. In *Slow Man*, in which the author-character Elizabeth Costello appears, Coetzee builds upon and places under further scrutiny Costello's notions of authorship. In addition, *Slow Man* addresses issues of disability, immigration, and eroticizing women in order to reveal how easy it is to other others. The result is that, through the characters in these three novels, Coetzee challenges common notions of authorship and the possibilities of the sympathetic imagination. He builds upon the issues Foucault brought to light in 1969 and asks what would happen if we really questioned common notions of authorship.

Chapter 1

Disgrace and the Limitations of the Sympathetic Imagination Through David Lurie

I. The Potential for the Sympathetic Imagination Across the Species Boundary

A. Dogs as Metaphor for Interracial Mixing

The novel *Disgrace*, set in post-apartheid South Africa, contains dogs on nearly every page. Although the novel may address much larger social and cultural concerns, the dogs in the story represent a telling history. The history of interracial mixing in South Africa includes a racist nationalist discourse of fearing interracial mixing held by the ruling (white) class (Cell; Thompson, *Political Mythology of Apartheid*). Its fear of miscegenation also informs dog breeding and disdain for mixed-breed dogs. Particular breeds have been valued by white South Africans for their abilities as watchdogs, and *Disgrace* author J. M. Coetzee utilizes the issue of dogs and dog breeds (or lack of discernable breeds) within the novel to reveal other larger issues and attitudes held by citizens in late 1990s South Africa. Dogs even catalyze protagonist David Lurie's beginnings of a transformation while simultaneously revealing his elitism. His role as "dog-man" (*Disgrace* 146) involved with dogs' deaths brings about the first signs of sympathy developing within him. Within a post-apartheid South Africa, old attitudes are challenged, and dogs are both the symbolic and the literal vehicle through which Lurie's attitudes start to change.

Dogs have long held a distinctive place in human society because domesticated dogs are the product of both nature and culture. They are animals, but at the same time,

they are welcomed into homes as members of families. Beyond dogs' existence as pets, police and private citizens often used dogs to protect themselves and to intimidate black South Africans in order to enforce apartheid. In discussing the history of dogs in nineteenth-century Cape Town, Kirsten McKenzie compares the ambiguous status of dogs with slaves: "Both dogs and slaves possess symbolic ambiguity. They were both within and outside the household, they could be loyal and useful members of the 'family' as well as threatening outsiders" (249). Even in the colonial period, then, the oppressed races were at least symbolically connected with dogs. A mixed-breed dog called the *boer hond* developed and often accompanied travelers, military posts, and indigenous groups for protection or hunting (Van Sittert and Swart 143).

With the growth of urban areas, Victorian values began to influence colonists' attitudes toward animals, reflecting a distinction between town and country life (Van Sittert and Swart 144). The emerging urban middle class encouraged humane treatment of domesticated pets, and Coetzee's treatment of dogs and other animals in *Disgrace* echoes Victorian concerns for humane treatment. Coetzee himself strongly opposes animal cruelty and is well known for his vegetarianism (Malan; Sampson). Keeping Coetzee's personal stance on animal rights in mind, Lurie's evolving relationships with dogs are especially telling. Along with humane treatment of domesticated pets came the increased importation of standard British breeds and the creation of the South African Kennel Club in 1883. While standard breeds surged in popularity with the middle class, mongrel dogs were considered the underclass of the dog world in comparison to the well-established pure breeds. Lance Van Sittert and Sandra Swart explain that the classification of dogs into breeds (which were upper-class) and mongrels (which were the

underclass) “was founded upon Victorian typological thinking about race, quality, purity, and progress” (145). Middle-class breeders could openly discuss “pure blood,” and “the value placed on breed purity was animated by older ideas of human aristocracies and thoroughbred horses” (Van Sittert and Swart 145). Thus, “race, blood, genealogy, merit, and purity” of dog breeding became an ideology “permeated with the urgency of racial thinking” (Van Sittert and Swart 145-6). While the pure-bred dogs were celebrated and welcomed into families, the growing underclass of dogs wandered through city streets in packs and threatened the social order, paralleling the growing populations of lower class non-whites in the cities.

In South Africa breeds were deliberately selected for their fierceness and protective natures. The German Shepherd dog, which is typically called an Alsatian in South Africa, was the most popular breed from 1952 through 1989, with the exception of the Dobermann from 1976 to 1978. The popularity of these breeds “reflected escalating black opposition to apartheid after 1960, producing a clear preference for large, fierce dogs on the part of the white public. By 1980 just four out of the 177 recognized breeds—alsatian, rottweiler, bull terrier, and dobermann—accounted for a third of all SAKU¹ annual registrations” (Van Sittert and Swart 154). These breeds have a history of use as watchdogs and police dogs, and their popularity reflects the perceived needs of white South Africans to protect themselves and their homes;² the number of police dogs

¹ Formerly the South African Kennel Union. The organization was founded as the South African Kennel Club in 1883 and is currently named the Kennel Union of Southern Africa.

² In comparison, the top breeds in the United States during that time were the Cocker Spaniel (1936-1952 and 1983-1990), Beagle (1953-1959), Poodle (1960-1982), and the Labrador Retriever (1991-present), according to the American Kennel Club. Arguably, none of these breeds is especially known for a

rose from 167 to more than 1,000 from 1960 to the 1980s “in direct relation to the escalation of black rebellion against the apartheid state” (Van Sittert and Swart 163-4). Many dogs that were used to defend private property³ were even trained by the South African government, and “the dog became an easy metaphor for apartheid” because of its association with defending positions of white power and property (Van Sittert and Swart, 165-6).

The mention of specific breeds by Coetzee reflects white anxiety, elitism, and shreds of a nationalist ideology⁴ held by the protagonist, David Lurie. When David Lurie arrives at Lucy’s farm, he lists the kinds of dogs she is housing in her five pens: “Dobermanns, German Shepherds, ridgebacks, bull terriers, [and] Rottweilers” (61), the same breeds that were most popular for the protection of whites. In addition, he points out a dog that Katy, the bulldog, looks bored (62). Lucy remarks that they are “‘Watchdogs, all of them,’ she says. ‘Working dogs’” (61). Here, Lucy explains to her father that the dogs are there for protection, with the implication that they are to protect Lucy and her property against black intruders; they have been bred to perform very specific tasks, and their current role in South Africa is to be watchdogs. When asked by David if she is “nervous” on her farm, Lucy remarks that “‘There are the dogs. Dogs still mean something. The more dogs, the more deterrence’” (60). In Tom Herron’s article,

watchdog temperament.

³ An article called “When Dogs Don’t Bark” in the *Economist* suggests that when dogs owned by whites no longer automatically bark at black South Africans, some of the racist effects of apartheid will have ended because it will mark a change in racist attitudes and economic disparities.

⁴ The National Party held power in South Africa from 1948 until 1994. Composed primarily of Afrikaners and concerned with the idea of “separate development,” the National Party was largely responsible for enacting the Population Registration act, classifying people by race, and the Group Areas Act, effectively forcing people to live in racially designated zones, until these laws were repealed in the early 1990s and the first nonracial election was held in 1994 (Thomson, *A History of South Africa*).

“The Dog Man,” he situates dogs in South Africa as “part of an apparatus of deterrence . . . including electrified fences and guns” (72). Even in the world of *Disgrace*’s post-apartheid South Africa, dogs are used to protect against the perceived threat of blacks—a measure of how much has *not* changed.

David Lurie especially notices the bulldog bitch Katy, who has been abandoned by her owners. Lurie’s attachment to Katy throughout the novel reflects his elitism and association with British culture. He is a professor of literature, particularly of the Romantics Wordsworth and Byron, and he laments that “proper” scholarship is being phased out at universities in South Africa in favor of more practical courses such as communications. Florence Stratton identifies Lurie’s privileged position within society: “White, male, and middle class, a university professor of literature at a Cape Town university, David has for most of his life occupied a position of centrality in relation to the South African symbolic order—a world of white patriarchal distinctions, rules and logic” (84). As a scholar of British literature, it is no accident that he singles out the most British of the breeds at Lucy’s farm. The Bulldog Club of America terms the bulldog “one of the few breeds that are emblematic of a nation [Great Britain]” because of its reputation as a thoroughly British dog. The brutal Boer War, which lasted from 1899 until 1902, pitted the British and Afrikaner populations of South Africa against one another, further dividing the colonizing whites (Smith, *Imperialism: A History in Documents*; Thompson, *A History of South Africa*). Lurie’s identification with Britain and things British establishes him as an Anglophile and suggests that he would identify strongly with British-descendant South Africans over Afrikaners and their National Party.

Further, Coetzee implicitly categorizes Lurie as an inheritor of British imperialism because of his partiality for British culture.

Lurie exhibits his first substantial suggestion of possessing a sympathetic imagination in his encounter with Katy. Like Katy, Lurie is abandoned and relegated to Lucy's farm, where they both fight boredom. When Lurie visits the dogs soon after his arrival, he is drawn to Katy in particular. He rhetorically asks her, "Abandoned, are we?" (*Disgrace* 78), showing his awareness that they have both been discarded. His words might also be interpreted as dominance over her—in terms of the royal "we"—while demonstrating his alliance with her, which could be read as an act of identification and humility. Of Katy, Lucy remarks, "Poor old Katy, she's in mourning. No one wants her, and she knows it" (78); similarly, no one wants Lurie at this point in the novel, though he still possesses some degree of agency. He has been rejected by Soraya and Melanie, not to mention his previous wives, and his colleagues in academe find his subject matter out of date and his behavior unacceptable. Lurie falls asleep in Katy's cage during the visit where he acknowledges their mutual abandonment and imprisonment. This action literally puts Lurie on the same level as Katy, and for the first time in the novel, Lurie shows that he can imagine what it may be like to be another. Lurie feels sympathy for Katy: "A shadow of grief falls over him: for Katy, alone in her cage, for himself, for everyone" (79). Despite the other distressing events preceding this scene in the novel, such as the disciplinary hearing in which he could have shown emotion, this is one of Lurie's first substantial moments of sympathy. Derek Attridge asserts that Lurie's falling asleep in Katy's cage is a metaphor for the women he has slept with. He calls it an "ironic parallel" (107). Attridge's comparison of Katy to Lurie's

former lovers provides an alternative reading of this scene. Katy remarkably survives the attack during which the other dogs are killed, and thereafter, Lurie develops a friendly relationship with her. Thus, Katy and Lurie are connected through their British identities, their former elite statuses, and their subsequent abandonment. Lurie first begins developing a sympathetic imagination through the thoroughly British dog, which enables him to begin developing sympathy for other dogs, as well.

In direct contrast to Katy the bulldog, whose reputation as a pedigreed animal precedes her simply because of her appearance and position of privilege at a kennel, the dogs that Lurie serves at the Animal Welfare Clinic are “not Lucy’s well-groomed thoroughbreds but a mob of scrawny mongrels” (*Disgrace* 84). Despite the lack of discernable lineage, the dogs at the clinic, Lurie observes, are “very egalitarian” and have “no classes” (85), highlighting the differences between them and the upper-class dogs that Lucy boards. When Lurie first arrives at the clinic, he is approached by begging children and observes a line of people waiting with their animals (80). Thus, the clinic is a building for the lower class; it is a building where illnesses are addressed and death is administered. The clinic is a place of death precisely because of the dogs’ fertility; their deaths are a consequence of their life-producing nature. Fertility is therefore linked to illness and death in the case of the mongrel dogs; if the mongrel lower-class dogs are taken to represent the large number of black South Africans, Coetzee perhaps suggests here that Lurie links the fertility of many in South Africa to suffering and premature death. Similarly, the pure-bred dogs of higher-class whites represent elitism; these dogs are killed by the rapists for their representation of oppression and intimidation, and by

killing the pure-bred dogs, the attackers show their disdain for whites' material circumstances and oppression of blacks.

The dogs at the clinic suffer primarily because of their abundance, "*because we are too menny*" (*Disgrace* 146, italics original), thinks Lurie at one point, quoting from Hardy's *Jude the Obscure*. Lurie, being a literature professor, uses this line from the suicide note of Jude's son to connote the overpopulation of dogs in a country where starvation is not uncommon. Like Jude's illegitimate children, the dogs that Lurie encounters cannot survive in their society. Lurie explains that the dogs at the clinic suffer from many diseases, but ultimately, because of their own procreation: "The dogs that are brought in suffer from distempers, from broken limbs, from infected bites, from mange, from neglect, benign or malign, from old age, from malnutrition, from intestinal parasites, but most of all from their own fertility. There are simply too many of them" (142). For Lurie, too, a sexual drive gets him into trouble, yet Lurie's sexuality seems rooted not in procreation but in power and sexual gratification. His affair with and subsequent rape of Melanie cost him his job and his lifestyle as a womanizer. Similarly, the men who dominate Lucy via rape deprive her of a livelihood in boarding dogs, and their fertility, the reader finds out by the end of the novel, results in pregnancy for Lucy. Fertility and domination, in *Disgrace*, are problematic for many of the major characters: Lurie, Lucy, and the dogs.

In his use of purebred dogs to represent the upper classes and mongrels to represent the lower classes, Coetzee illuminates some of the issues that are important to whites in post-apartheid South Africa, and more importantly, this distinction between races and classes maps Lurie's developing sympathetic imagination as it shifts from well-

bred dogs to mongrels. The mongrel dogs outnumber the purebreds, just as black South Africans outnumber white South Africans. Coetzee, it seems, is revealing that elitism and racism no longer completely control South African society and that Lurie is becoming affected by this shift. Racist structures are being challenged, and the system in which Lurie operated is failing. The insistence on pure blood or pure breeding for dogs is similar to some of the ideas propagated by the whites who used to hold power, particularly those of the National Party, and an essay by Coetzee reveals his engagement with the National Party's preoccupation with interracial mixing. Coetzee examines the works of one of apartheid's architects, Geoffrey Cronjé, in his essay "Apartheid Thinking" from *Giving Offense: Essays on Censorship*. Coetzee reveals Cronjé's obsessive fear of racial mixing and maintains that Cronjé's writings are evidence of his madness—and the madness of the apartheid system's preoccupation with mixing. For Coetzee, Cronjé's madness is evidence of his repression of the desire to mix ("Apartheid" 165); he presents a psychoanalytic view of Cronjé in which the repressed—racial mixing—is a central desire. Coetzee demonstrates that Cronjé's position is actually that humans possess a natural desire to mix and that apartheid is a legislative response to the innate desire for mixture. This, of course, turns Cronjé's obvious position, primarily that mixture is unnatural, unsanitary, and degenerative, on its head. Cronjé's writings seem to declare that racial mixing is abhorrent, but Coetzee shows otherwise. In order to reveal Cronjé's desire for mixture, Coetzee discusses the imagery within Cronjé's texts. Cronjé uses the term "bloedvermenging" (cited in Coetzee, "Apartheid" 171), which Coetzee translates as "blood-mixing" to denote a mixing that is irreversible, utilizing the imagery of the essential bodily fluid, blood. Further, Coetzee highlights another key term that

Cronjé uses that also conveys the idea of fluid mixture: “seep in” (171). Thus, Cronjé employs body and fluid images to convey his other major symbol for the result of mixing: contagion (179). Cronjé lobbies for total segregation because, he claims, blacks pass infection onto whites by their mere presence among whites (180). Black bodies and all of their fluids—blood and semen—carry infection, so that “blackness itself becomes the infection” (181). The use of bodies and their fluids as metaphor by Cronjé allows for the symbol of the nation as body, a body that can be infected by blackness. The Afrikaner national body, therefore, becomes most important, more important even than the bodies of individuals. Cronjé goes so far as to say that ““the interest of the nation [volksbelang] always outweighs personal interest [eiebelang]”” (qtd. in Coetzee, “Apartheid” 172), which, to him, justified the need for legislation outlawing any interracial sex in order to preserve the purity of the national (white and Afrikaner) body. With this framework of institutionalized racism governing the lives of South Africans for generations, Coetzee uses the contentious trope of interracial sex within the novel *Disgrace* to highlight race and gender issues.

Interracial sex, or miscegenation, drives the novel; in the first two instances, Lurie sleeps with Soraya, a Muslim prostitute, and rapes Melanie, a Coloured⁵ student from one of his classes. In neither case is Lurie concerned with his lovers becoming pregnant, and

⁵ Though not stated specifically in the text, Coetzee describes Melanie as if she belongs to the Coloured population. Traditionally, the Coloured population has occupied an economic and social position between the ruling class whites and lower class black Africans. “In twentieth-century South Africa, the Coloured People became one of the four main racial categories recognized by the South African government, as distinct from the ruling class, which was deemed to be White; from the Bantu-speaking Africans, who formed the majority of the population; and from Asians, who had begun to be imported from India to Natal as indentured laborers in the 1860s” (Thompson, *A History of South Africa* 65).

in neither case does Lurie truly attempt to understand these women; he merely perceives his own projection on them. Lucy Graham points out that Lurie's actions fit into the story of colonialism and apartheid: "Lurie has a history of desiring 'exotic' women, and assumes that he has the right to purchase or possess their bodies without being responsible for them or respecting the lives they live" ("Unspeakable" 437). In Lucy's rape, she is overtaken by three black Africans, playing out the 'black peril' narrative in which whites fear rape by black men. Franz Fanon articulates whites' fear that black men pose the greatest sexual threat to whites, which appears throughout colonial discourse: "the Negro represents the sexual instinct (in its raw state). The Negro is the incarnation of a genital potency. . . . [and] is taken as a terrifying penis" (177). In *Disgrace*, white paranoia of black men raping white women comes to fruition, and Lucy becomes pregnant. As with the mongrel dogs, her fertility and the fertility of the attackers interact to create a mixed-race child. Lurie seems particularly worried about the possibility of Lucy becoming pregnant and encourages her to see her gynecologist, and "one may contrast Lurie's concern for Lucy's body after she is raped . . . to his lack of concern for Melanie Isaacs" (Stratton 438). Soon after she reveals her pregnancy to him, Lurie thinks, "They were not raping, they were mating" (*Disgrace* 199), focusing on the procreative element of the act of rape centered on semen. He further wonders what kind of child will result from that act of rape, from "seed driven into the woman not in love but in hatred, mixed chaotically, meant to soil her, to mark her, like a dog's urine" (199). Meant to mark territory and to claim property, the rapists' actions mark Lucy like a dog marks territory via urine.

Lurie's fears of miscegenation appear when he is concerned for his daughter and future grandchild, and his desire to suggest that she undergo an abortion may be understood symbolically as his attempt to resist a racially harmonious South Africa. However, he is not concerned with miscegenation when he himself sleeps with women of other races, and Coetzee uses this discrepancy to underline the attitudes that many white men have traditionally held regarding ownership of black women's bodies while holding white women's bodies sacred. Lurie's dog analogy for the rapists identifies dogs' instinctual desire to mark territory with urine and their biological need to procreate via semen, marking Lucy as their property and mate. To Lurie, the black Africans who rape Lucy are like dogs, and Coetzee animalizes them and designs their acts of violence to intimidate Lucy and to challenge her position on her land. Lurie considers his act of violence against Melanie, on the other hand, as seduction gone too far. Lurie's attitudes about 'exotic' women and black men conforms to colonialist notions of race and sex.

B. Lurie Becoming the Dog-Man

Because of the rape, Lucy also has to become like a dog; she must begin anew, in her pregnant state, as the wife of Petrus with his protection. She agrees that it is "humiliating," but she decides that it is something she must live with nonetheless, like the fate of a dog. She says,

'Perhaps this is what I must learn to accept. To start at ground level. With nothing. Not with nothing but. With nothing. No cards, no weapons, no property, no rights, no dignity.'

'Like a dog.'

'Yes, like a dog.' (*Disgrace* 205)

Here, Lucy recognizes her need to transform in order to survive on her farm. Coetzee seems to suggest that, unlike Lurie, Lucy has the ability to adapt and become dog-like more readily. With the ability to become dog-like, Lucy exhibits her propensity for placing herself in the position of another. In this passage, Coetzee shows that Lucy accepts the need to change and is willing to become like a dog; Lucy seems closer to obtaining a sympathetic imagination. Coetzee suggests that age and gender are factors in Lucy's ability to change: "*Du musst dein Leben ändern!*: you must change your life. Well, he is too old to heed, too old to change. Lucy may be able to bend to the tempest; he cannot, not with honour" (209). Here, Lurie quotes Rainer Maria Rilke's poem "Torso of an Archaic Apollo," calling to mind his own aging mind and body and Rilke's poetic admonishment to reform oneself. Lurie indicates that because of his age, he cannot change with the times as his daughter can. When speaking to Lurie, Bev Shaw suggests that Lucy's position as a young woman enables her adaptability: "Women are adaptable. Lucy is adaptable. And she is young. She lives closer to the ground than you" (210). Like Lucy, Lurie becomes dog-like as his circumstances change and he, too, begins to live closer to the ground, though his ability to sympathetically imagine is still developing. He takes over Petrus' role as "dog-man" (146), putting himself on the level of dogs once again. He is the man who takes care of dogs in life and death: the man who becomes like a dog without status or possessions. Lurie and Lucy are situated within a post-apartheid South Africa that requires them to adapt to political and material changes. They each must change by becoming more like dogs, and their sympathetic imaginations allow them to transform in this small way.

Early on in the novel, Lurie approaches animals with abstraction. He desires for people to be “kind” to animals, but he urges Lucy not to “lose perspective” because humans, he originally believes, “are of a different order of creation from the animals. Not higher, necessarily, just different. So if we are going to be kind, let it be out of simple generosity, not because we feel guilty or fear retribution” (*Disgrace* 74). Lurie speaks philosophically of animals as a city-dweller who does not have frequent contact with them, just as a white South African who does not have much contact with black South Africans might speak abstractly of them. However, once he stays with Lucy longer and works with Bev at the clinic, he views work with animals as dignified. Coetzee demonstrates Lurie’s newfound feelings in the scene in which Lurie must pull off the road after a session euthanizing dogs in order to cry uncontrollably—he is not “cruel or kind,” but he realizes that he does not possess the “gift of hardness” (143). Tom Herron explains that Lurie’s change in perspective is evidenced by the fact that “the animals cease to be fit objects for David’s theoretical and philosophical speculation” through “episodes of reciprocity” (485). It is precisely through his close contact with dogs at the clinic and his relationships with Katy and Driepoot that David Lurie begins to change, which can be seen by the “first flickerings of sympathy and of love [that] seem to ignite within him” (Herron 471).

This development of sympathy for dogs fits into a pattern in African literature that addresses whites in privilege who have sympathy for dogs but not for humans. Mphahlele’s “Mrs. Plum,” Thiong’o’s *A Grain of Wheat*, and Magona’s “Women at Work” contain instances of dogs being treated better than black Africans by whites. In Mphahlele’s story, Mrs. Plum fires her gardener because she fears that he might harm her

beloved dogs, who are meticulously groomed every day. In *A Grain of Wheat*, a white man shoots a black man because he had threatened the white's dog with a stone. In one of Magona's stories about female domestic servants, a woman complains that her employer spends more money to feed the family dogs high-quality meat than the servant earns in wages. This literary history of sympathy toward dogs becomes a marker of colonial power because these people can afford the luxury of animals as companions but choose not to befriend black Africans; this, in turn, shows an inability or unwillingness to sympathize with blacks so that the marginalized others who receive sympathy become not blacks, but dogs. Although Lurie's racism does not necessarily subside, his ability to sympathize begins to develop through working with animals. Travis Mason accurately understands the role of dogs in the novel as "both allegorical and realistic presences, bodies, embodied souls calling attention to themselves and humans' relations to them" (131). The dogs that Lurie encounters on Lucy's farm and in the clinic are physical reminders of Lurie's connection to other beings—beginning with dogs, which mark Lurie's power. He is able to first sympathize with dogs instead of humans who are unlike him in gender and race.

Much of Lurie's role in the latter part of the novel is to assist with the euthanasia of the dogs, and death and honor inform the choices he begins making. He does not want to "inflict such dishonour" (*Disgrace* 144) upon the dogs as to allow their corpses to be beaten "into a more convenient shape for processing" (146) at the incinerator. Decidedly, he "saves the honour of the corpses because there is no one else stupid enough to do it" (146); there is no one else willing to offer oneself to the "service of dead dogs" (146). His new duty in South Africa is to dispose of the remains of dogs, and his jittery reaction

reflects how difficult his new role is for him. Lurie has learned to give all of his attention to the dog they are killing, “giving it what he no longer has difficulty in calling by its proper name: love” (219). Thus, when he offers Driepoot to be euthanized, Lurie gives the dog love. Although he reflects that this act of love “will be little enough, less than little: nothing” (220), it is an act that he finds “cannot be evaded” (219). Though imperfect, Lurie’s final act in the novel to euthanize Driepoot reveals that his sympathetic imagination has begun to develop because he will not keep the dog alive for his own sake; he realizes that it may be more loving to euthanize the dog than to keep it as a companion. Of course, this could be Lurie’s own rationalizing, and by keeping the dog as a pet, Lurie may have developed his sympathetic imagination even more because of the companionship Driepoot would have offered.

Critics have interpreted Driepoot’s death in several ways. Louis Tremaine reads Lurie’s final act of giving up Driepoot as “not a defeat, but a liberation from delusion” (610). Mike Marais reads the scene as a sign that Lurie has ultimately failed in sympathizing with the other, whether human or non-human, and contends that this reveals that the possibilities of the sympathetic imagination are problematic at best. However, Lurie’s decision to euthanize can instead be read as a sympathetic, sacrificial act. Josephine Donovan attributes Lurie’s newfound “sensitivity” for animals to his “loss of status” (83). Though this reading is rather simplistic, it nevertheless suggests that Lurie’s move to the country, or banishment, forces him to change in small ways. Stratton interprets Lurie’s decision symbolically:

As the dog is not only male but also has “a withered left hindquarter” (215), the symbolism is quite explicit: David is sacrificing his already impaired sexuality, his power as a

white middle-class male in South Africa. By the end of the novel, David has been stripped of all of the conventional markings of identity: his job, his possessions, his sexuality, even his surname. (96)

With his position in South Africa in question, Lurie sacrifices the dog because he feels sympathy for the dog's plight and, perhaps, his own.

Although dogs and other animals may not be “on the list of the nation's priorities” (*Disgrace* 73), they become important to Lurie once his sympathetic imagination begins to develop, and they always were important to Lucy and Bev. As Herron explains, animals creep into the center of the book, becoming the “novel's matter; they become what matters” (474). Though Lurie's transformation is incomplete, the dogs in the novel initiate an imperfect sympathetic imagination, and he begins to change in very small ways because of the dogs in *Disgrace*. After all, he will soon become a grandfather, and even though he “lacks the virtues of the old” (217), he hopes that those virtues will come to him as he takes on his role as a grandfather (218). Lurie's lineage will continue, even if it continues without racial purity, for “with luck,” Lucy's child will be “just as solid, just as long-lasting” as she is (217). The future of South Africa is inscribed on a woman's body, and the intersection of race and gender power relations reveal ways in which Lurie could come to sympathetically imagine. Both old and new patterns of violence involve abuse of women in *Disgrace*, and as Elleke Boehmer asserts, “White dominance *and* the overcoming of white dominance are both figured as involving the subjection of the female body, as part of a long history of female exploitation of which the narrative itself takes note” (Boehmer 344). It is important to examine the ways in which Lurie's attitudes toward women feature in the development of his sympathetic

imagination, and his self-absorbed, male-centered life has privileged the agency of white women over women of color.

II. The Limits of the Sympathetic Imagination Across Genders

A. Lurie as a Womanizer: Race and Power Dynamics for an Aging Don Juan

At the novel's opening, the reader finds Lurie with Soraya, a prostitute, and Lurie's relationships with women are simple: he uses them for his own sexual desires. However, by the close of the novel, Lurie has become more sympathetic toward women, evidenced by his consideration of what it might be like to be a victimized female. First, however, the reader encounters Lurie as a misogynist and womanizer, and his relationships with women at the novel's opening indicate portrayals of male dominance to come: "That these opening scenes encode an allegory of colonialism becomes much more evident later in the narrative during the novel's second rape scene in which Lurie's daughter is sexually assaulted by three black men" (Stratton 85). Lurie's womanizing establishes a theme of female subjection, which will eventually enable Lurie to face an experience of the female rape victim, if not through his own victims, then through his daughter and his writing.

Lurie pursues women of color because of their exotic otherness. Critic bell hooks describes the phenomenon of white men desiring exotic women: "The commodification of Otherness has been so successful because it is offered as a new delight, more intense, more satisfying than normal ways of doing and feeling" (21), which fits into a pattern of European fascination with the bodies of people of color, particularly women (hooks 63).

Lurie uses Soraya because she has solved “the problem of sex rather well” for him (*Disgrace* 1). Their discussions remain superficial, and though he realizes that Soraya probably becomes different to please each of her customers (3), Lurie imagines that she must have an affinity for him (2). Lurie’s tone when thinking about Soraya is that of ownership and control. He merely sees what he wants to see in her until they exchange glances in a public street. As a result of the awkwardness that ensues, she stops seeing him. He, however, pursues her, and in a telephone call, she denies his offer to meet again. At the very moment when she accuses him of harassment and insists that he never again contact her, he criticizes her word choice and is surprised by her “shrillness,” which he had not seen before. Here, Coetzee shows readers that the protagonist considers people only insofar as they affect him; Lurie’s mental correction of Soraya’s words shows that he wishes to control her and suggests that he has not seriously considered Soraya’s agency. She has existed to serve him, in effect. He considers himself the “predator” and Soraya the “vixen” protecting the “home of her cubs” (10). Clearly, Lurie hardly takes Soraya’s feelings into account because he animalizes her with his categorization of her as a vixen, when she was plainly evading harassment and protecting her privacy. Lurie is a womanizer who cannot or will not sympathize with women, and he has been able to maintain this lifestyle of misogyny because of his powerful position as a white male in South Africa. Coetzee sets him up as a man who sees women as objects for sex, therefore portraying Lurie as someone who does not sympathetically imagine female experiences.

Just before this telephone conversation, Coetzee characterizes Lurie as a lifelong womanizer whose powers of seduction are perhaps fading. The reader learns of Lurie’s

success in wooing women and then his subsequent decline in prowess. Like Byron's Don Juan, Lurie could "count on a degree of magnetism" because of his looks, and this ability to lure women was "the backbone of his life" (7). Womanizing, then, served as the central feature of his existence; he existed, and sex followed. Yet, his aging looks disintegrated his magnetism, and he found himself working hard to obtain sex, leading to prostitutes and "an anxious flurry of promiscuity" (7). With a fundamental aspect of his life fading quickly, Lurie seems compelled to pursue younger women to remain powerful and in control of his own life, which has heretofore included sex. Thus, Coetzee offers the reader a sexual history of Lurie: from great success with many women to anxious failure. In the first chapter, Lurie is a man who strongly desires sex but must exert himself in order to obtain it, and he is discontented with his declining sexual prowess. At this point in the novel, Lurie does not possess a sympathetic imagination across gender, and his focus on sex, particularly from much younger women, proves problematic.

In the cases of Soraya and Melanie (women of color), Lurie exploits his historical position of power as a white man. Soraya, a Muslim with a "honey-brown body . . . long black hair and dark, liquid eyes" (1), and Melanie, a Coloured woman with "close-cropped black hair, wide, almost Chinese cheekbones, large, dark eyes" (11), represent a dark, exotic other. Clearly aligned with Britain and in a position of power, Lurie represents white male authority, and in South Africa, the sexual relationships between these women and Lurie would have been illegal under apartheid; even his relationship with Soraya is commodified as a weekly sexual ritual with an "exotic" woman (7). Now in a post-apartheid world, Lurie takes advantage of his position as a white man of privilege, with income sufficient to buy sex and the authority of a university professor.

Of his relationship with Melanie, he thinks, “if she has got away with much, he has got away with more; if she is behaving badly, he has behaved worse. To the extent that they are together, if they are together, he is the one who leads, she the one who follows. Let him not forget that” (28). Though Melanie may have something to gain from their relationship at this point, he reminds himself that he is the one ultimately at fault for exploiting his powerful position as her professor. Lurie recognizes the differences between himself and Melanie—“Meláni: the dark one” (18)—and remains unable to understand her experiences. Graham articulates the symbolism in the names of Melanie versus Lucy: “Playing on tropes of darkness and light, the names of the two women expose ‘black peril’ stereotypes and the residual threat of the ‘white peril’ that prevailed under colonialism and apartheid” (“Unspeakable” 437); since Lucy’s name “has associations with light” (Graham, “Unspeakable” 437), Coetzee clearly establishes the differences in the ways in which Lurie perceives the two women, one whom he victimizes, and the other who is victimized despite his attempts to protect her. In setting up Lurie to be a man whose concern for his daughter contrasts sharply with his attitudes toward his lovers, Coetzee shows Lurie as someone who interprets Melanie and Soraya as he wishes—as objects—and does not imagine what their lives might be like. For instance, his call to Soraya misfires because he fails to recognize the boundaries between her role as a prostitute and her role as a mother; his only thought is when he can sleep with her again (*Disgrace* 9-10). Likewise, when showing up unannounced at Melanie’s flat, he disregards her protest that her cousin will be home soon (25); his indifference toward the impact of his affair on Melanie’s other relationships is clear. Indeed, Graham draws attention to women’s position as objects controlled by men in the novel: “*Disgrace*

points to a context where women are regarded as property, and are liable for protection only insofar as they belong to men” (“Unspeakable” 439).

In both cases, Lurie imagines these women as he wants to imagine them; his perceptions of them are inaccurate and shallow. As a womanizer, Lurie sees women as objects at his disposal, though he recognizes his limits in seducing women. Interestingly, Coetzee creates Soraya and Melanie as women of color, and the reader’s first glimpses of Lurie are as a man who sleeps with non-white women and who does not truly understand them beyond surface-level perceptions. He creates his own image of Soraya’s identity and life outside the bedroom where their sexual encounters occur, and he must continually remind himself that Melanie is his student. Of course, both women may gain limited empowerment from their relationships with him—for Soraya, money and livelihood, and for Melanie, missed classes (28)—but his powerful position as a white professor with disposable income enables him to use these two women. He is ultimately unable to understand them accurately because his own shallow constructions of them prevent a deeper interpretation, and Coetzee depicts Lurie as a misogynist without a sympathetic imagination in order to situate Lurie as a man for whom change might benefit a post-apartheid South Africa.

Lurie’s position as a professor and Byron scholar allows Coetzee to establish Lurie as a character much different from Melanie: Melanie is *other* to Lurie, and Lurie is *other* to Melanie. Lurie then lures his student Melanie Isaacs to his apartment, where he makes her dinner and asks her to spend the night with him. He claims that it is her duty to share her beauty with him: “. . . a woman’s beauty does not belong to her alone. It is part of the bounty she brings into the world. She has a duty to share it” (16). He appeals

to her sense of duty and equates Melanie's beauty with her sexuality. He thinks to himself, "She does not own herself. Beauty does not own itself" (16), revealing his belief that Melanie, representing beautiful women, cannot control the power that her sexuality evokes. Just before this attempt at keeping Melanie in his home for the night, Melanie observes that there are many books on Byron in Lurie's library, which allows Lurie to explain that Byron is the subject of his latest scholarly project. Byron, therefore, is the subject of Lurie's attention, and Lurie's pursuit of Melanie parallels Byron's liaison with his lover Teresa, the "last big love-affair of his life" (15). While Melanie may not be the last affair Lurie has, she proves to be a major passion for him. Finally, this encounter ends through a miscalculation on Lurie's part as he recites lines from Shakespeare's Sonnet 1: "'From fairest creatures we desire increase,' he says, 'that thereby beauty's rose might never die'" (16). This attempt to woo goes awry, and Lurie surmises that what once worked to seduce "now only estranges. He has become a teacher again, man of the book, guardian of the culture-ward" (16). He miscalculates in that he fails to imagine how Melanie would be affected, and this scene underlines the generational and cultural gaps between them. Reciting the opening lines to this sonnet not only suggests that Melanie would be selfish to keep her sexuality to herself, but also reminds her of the power structure between them: Lurie is in a position of authority as her professor. At some level, Lurie may want to establish himself as the teacher, re-asserting his authority by the notion of sex as power-play. This relationship mirrors the colonial power structure of a white man exerting control over a woman of color, further establishing Melanie's otherness for Lurie, which allows Coetzee to show the extent to which Lurie does *not* possess a sympathetic imagination.

Coetzee includes Byron's poem "Lara" in Lurie's class to highlight the extent to which Lurie has acted without moral principle. Guiding his students through the poem, Lurie explains that Byron's character "doesn't act on principle but on impulse" and that "Good or bad, he just does it" (33). In his rape of Melanie, Lurie acted on impulse regardless of ethical implications; as if describing himself, the one with the "mad heart," Lurie explains that "we are not asked to condemn this being with the mad heart, this being with whom there is something constitutionally wrong" (33), which suggests that there is a flaw in the disposition of the character and that he should not be found guilty for his mad heart. Continuing, Lurie concludes that instead of criticizing, the reader of Byron's poem—and by extension, the reader of Lurie's actions—should try to "understand and sympathize" when the mad-hearted one acts on impulse instead of principle (33). Ironically, Lurie asks his students to use *their* sympathetic imaginations, yet he seems unable to do so in his personal life. However, the reader of Byron and the reader of Lurie face what Lurie terms "a limit to sympathy" (33). Thus, there are some actions and some people for whom sympathy and sympathizing are impossible. The reader of Byron's poem, and, in turn, of Lurie's actions, cannot possess full sympathy, and Lurie's declaration that sympathy has limits suggests his own limits in sympathizing with others. Coetzee seems deliberately to introduce the topics of sympathy and understanding to underscore Lurie's own deficiencies in his personal life. This scene demonstrates the irony of the subject matter Lurie teaches—Romantic literature, including the sympathetic imagination—while Lurie himself cannot embody the qualities extolled by the Romantics. One of the primary elements of the sympathetic imagination is that one must temporarily lose one's identity in order to gain a complete absorption

into the other (Bate 149), and a key characteristic of Lurie's dealings with others is his self-centeredness. At this point, Lurie does not shed his identity in order to understand the experiences of another.

Lurie's perception that forced sex with Melanie does not constitute rape further demonstrates his misogyny, racism, and lack of sympathy. Despite knowing that, for Melanie, the act is "undesired nevertheless, undesired to the core," Lurie classifies his actions as "Not rape, not quite that" (25). Melanie denies him, "but nothing will stop him" (25). Lurie considers only himself during the rape, and even though he realizes that "she had decided to go slack, die within herself for the duration" (25), this realization does not equate to sympathizing with her. In this situation, Lurie might have sympathized with Melanie beyond recognizing her aversion, but he fails to place himself in her position of victimization. The reader also never hears Melanie's testimony during the disciplinary hearing, further silencing her. Lurie feels "dejection" and "dullness" and concludes that it was a "mistake, a huge mistake" (25), and while he admitted that he is "guilty" of the charges brought against him by Melanie (48), he resists confession or repentance. Graham shows that his actions and attitude toward this encounter with Melanie not only fit into the pattern of his relationships with women, but they also fit into a pattern of colonial abuse: "Coetzee demonstrates very clearly that Lurie is blind to the history of his own actions and, during the disciplinary hearing in *Disgrace*, Farodia Rassool comments on Lurie's refusal to acknowledge 'the long history of exploitation of which [his treatment of Melanie] is a part' (53)" (Graham 437).

Lurie operates as Melanie's possessor, relying on fabricated Romantic notions to justify his abuse of power and position as professor:

Lurie's misuse of Melanie exposes power operating at the level of gender and at an institutional level. Rassool's comment at the disciplinary hearing could refer to a history where white men have sexually exploited black women, and it could also point to abuses of power in the university that are as old as the academic profession. Immersed in a falsifying Romantic tradition, David speculates that "beauty does not belong to itself" (16), and thus justifies his underlying assumption, as Melanie's educator, that she is somehow his property. (Graham, "Unspeakable" 437-438)

Melanie therefore falls into the role of woman-as-property, and even when Lurie sees her acting later in the novel, he "cannot resist a flush of pride. Mine! He would like to say to them" (191). Once he is denied reclamation of Melanie by her boyfriend, Lurie immediately seeks out a prostitute and feels "protective" toward her (194). He overlooks the possibility of growth by seeking sexual fulfillment and taking comfort in his social privilege. Furthermore, Lurie's visit to the Isaacs family demonstrates his hollow attempt at asking for forgiveness, and twice he desires Melanie's younger sister, Desiree (164, 173). At this meeting, the Isaacs and Lurie might have come to understand one another better, but they do not move beyond surface-level observations and judgments; both Mr. Isaacs and Lurie fail to sympathize in this encounter, and Lurie continues to think of Melanie as prey to his predatory sexuality (168). Despite the time that has passed between his relationship with Melanie, visiting her family, and seeing her perform onstage, Lurie feels possessive of Melanie, and with such agency over another, sympathetic imagination would be impossible. Lurie's self-centeredness makes him unable to lose his identity in order to embody and understand Melanie.

B. “[D]oes he have it in him to be the woman?” (160): Lurie’s Attempts to Imagine
Women’s Perspectives

On the other hand, Lurie does attempt to imagine what is happening outside his own experience trapped in the lavatory while Lucy is raped: he tries to imagine something he has not experienced as a victim. During the attack Lurie attempts to rouse himself to action to stop whatever is happening to Lucy beyond the lavatory door:

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.
Though he strains to hear, he can make out no sound from the house. Yet if his child were calling, however mutely, surely he would hear! (94, italics original)

Lurie’s actions here show his deep love for his daughter, though in the end he is unable to stop the men from raping her. Further, he is faced with the pain of being trapped, symbolically representing the pain of a woman trapped in a female body that can be raped simply because it is female. It is this moment in which Lurie attempts to understand what Lucy is enduring that makes him want to stop the attack, and this moment is one of his first attempts to imagine the experiences of another person—who happens to be a woman—in the novel. He seeks to know what happened to Lucy so that he can sympathize with her.

Attempting to understand what is beyond one’s immediate, personal experience constitutes the very act of writing fiction, according to Coetzee. Lurie’s experience in the lavatory during his daughter’s rape echoes the subject of Coetzee’s essay “Into the Dark

Chamber,” in which Coetzee addresses the phenomenon of the torture chamber as the subject of many South African writers’ works.⁶ Lurie’s entrapment behind the lavatory door represents the writer’s position as an imaginer of events: “[T]he novelist is a person who, camped before a closed door, facing an insufferable ban, creates, in place of the scene he is forbidden to see, a representation of that scene, and a story of the actors in it and how they come to be there” (“Dark Chamber” 364). Lurie, like a novelist, must imagine a scene that he is forbidden to see. At this moment in *Disgrace*, Coetzee creates in Lurie a character who attempts to be more sympathetic, at least toward Lucy. For Coetzee, “The dark, forbidden chamber is the origin of novelistic fantasy per se” (“Dark Chamber” 364); imagining what goes on beyond a closed door or within another person’s mind is the very source of fiction. In *Disgrace*, Lurie embodies the act of writing fiction, the act of imagining, however fraught with difficulties Lurie’s understanding may be. There is, of course, an important difference between imagining others within a fictional frame and imagining real others in society. Further, an author of fiction can patiently imagine another, while Lurie anxiously and fearfully imagines what is occurring beyond his own lavatory door. The reader of this scene must also imagine what it might be like to be the characters Lurie and Lucy, just as Lurie calls for attempted imaginings by readers of Byron. Here, then, Coetzee creates layers of fictional and real imagining, plainly calling the reader to consider the possibilities of imagining.

⁶ The connection between Lurie’s imprisonment in the lavatory and Coetzee’s essay “Into the Dark Chamber” was first established by my fellow graduate student, Benjamin Carroll, in his paper “David Lurie: A Psychoanalytical Approach to David Lurie’s Shortcomings and Shortsightedness,” which he delivered at the British Commonwealth & Postcolonial Studies Conference in Savannah, Georgia on 16 February 2008.

Lurie cannot accurately understand Lucy's rape and subsequent feelings, demonstrating his incomplete sympathetic imagination, though he does make some attempt at sympathy. When talking about the attack and evading Lurie's questions, Lucy says, "I am not just trying to save my skin. If that is what you think, you miss the point entirely" (112), because Lurie fails to comprehend Lucy's motives for not pressing charges against the rapists. Lucy remains silent on the subject, and Graham identifies her silence as a decision that she is bound to make: "The predicaments of Lucy and Melanie point to a context where victims are compelled to be silent, and thus collude with perpetrators" (442). Lurie tries to fit Lucy's motives into his own notion of the motives of women, which center on "vengeance," "guilt and salvation" (112), and he thinks of Lucy's silence as a kind of reparation for past crimes committed by whites (112), for he "schematically conceives of the new South African society as a great circulatory system in which goods, which are always scarce ... explicitly include women as booty" (Boehmer 346). He conceives of South Africa as a place in which his daughter has become currency, and rather than allow her to decide whether to succumb to this circulatory system, he wishes to control her and compel her out of silence. Lucy concludes the conversation by asserting, "You keep misreading me" (112), noting Lurie's continual failure to understand. However, later in the novel when faced with the same charge from Lucy, Lurie explains:

'On the contrary, I understand all too well,' he says. 'I will pronounce the word we have avoided hitherto. You were raped. Multiply. By three men.'

'And?'

'You were in fear of your life. You were afraid that after you had been used you would be killed. Disposed of. Because you were nothing to them.' (157)

This first verbal statement of the word *rape* marks the juncture when Lucy sees that her father may understand a little of what happened to her. As one who had raped a woman in the past, Lurie does know “all too well,” and his sympathy for Lucy grows out of his parental role. Lucy concedes, ““you are right, I meant nothing to them, nothing. I could feel it”” (158). For the first time, Lucy confirms that Lurie understands at least one aspect of rape; he understands an aspect of Lucy’s experience. However, Lurie recognizes that his own privileged position and his daughter’s position are at stake in this new South Africa, as Stratton shows: “In *Disgrace* the historical trajectory of decolonization is completed and a post-apartheid South African nation is imagined. This is what the rape of Lucy signifies in the narrative—a shift from white to black power and authority in South Africa” (88-89). By coming to understand one aspect of Lucy’s experience, Lurie situates himself in a society that had privileged him but that now challenges his claim to power, and he begins to transform by beginning to reassess his fallen position.

Later, Lurie attempts to imagine himself in Lucy’s position, although he is unsure whether this is truly possible. He considers Byron and presumes that “among the legions of countesses and kitchenmaids Byron pushed himself into there were no doubt those who called it rape” (160). Through this reflection on the Romantic poet, Coetzee again invokes the notion of the sympathetic imagination. Like a writer, Lurie attempts to put himself in the situation, one that he has occupied as the male perpetrator of rape but not as the victim, and as Graham points out, Lurie becomes the rapists in some ways: “it is important to acknowledge that the novel dissolves clear boundaries of identity between

Lurie and the men who rape Lucy” (“Unspeakable” 443). From his perspective of male dominance, Lurie “can, if he concentrates, if he loses himself, be there, be the men, inhabit them, fill them with the ghost of himself. The question is, does he have it in him to be the woman?” (160). His question, according to Graham “suggests that ethical responsiveness depends on experiencing the narrative differently—not from the viewpoint of perpetrator or voyeur, but from the position of weakness and suffering” (“Unspeakable” 444). Understanding Lucy’s experience, therefore, relies on putting himself in a weaker position, one of submission, not dominance. As he focuses his energy on writing the opera from Teresa’s point of view, he begins to see Byron from a vulnerable perspective. The answer becomes increasingly clearer: he cannot become the woman, though he recognizes that he should try in order to represent Teresa faithfully.

Near the end of the novel when he realizes that he must change his life but cannot because of his age, he turns to Teresa: “That is why he must listen to Teresa. Teresa may be the last one left who can save him” (209). Until this point, Lurie expresses contempt for older and aging women (Lucy, Bev, his ex-wives) and for his own inability to change due to his age. Lurie identifies with Teresa in some ways: they are both aging and discarded by their lovers. However, these similarities do not result in a complete understanding of Teresa’s feelings, and when Lurie attempts to write Teresa’s experiences into the opera, little results in his attempts besides a focus on lamenting a past love. Indeed, though the opera “consumes him day and night,” Lurie admits to himself that “the truth is that *Byron in Italy* is going nowhere. There is no action, no development, just a long, halting cantilena hurled by Teresa into empty air” (214). As he attempts to give voice to a woman, Lurie recognizes that “he is failing her” (214), which

demonstrates Lurie's ultimate inability to inhabit a woman. His attempts to represent Teresa humble him as he realizes that achieving her voice is difficult, but the attempts themselves represent a progression toward sympathetically imagining a woman.

III. Conclusion

In *Disgrace*, Coetzee uses dogs for two important purposes: to highlight and discuss interracial mixing in post-apartheid South Africa and to create a way in which protagonist David Lurie can begin to develop the first hints of a sympathetic imagination. As an aging white intellectual who grew up in an environment in which racial separation was the norm, Lurie must face the fact that non-whites in South Africa have begun occupying positions of power and equality. While Lurie finds it difficult to sympathize with other people, Coetzee includes dogs throughout the novel as vehicles through which Lurie begins developing flickers of sympathy. As a result, Coetzee implicitly suggests that it may be possible for a character to sympathize, if not with a person, then at least with animals to an extent. Lurie goes from being a privileged professor to assuming the role of dog-man, someone without power and closer to the ground.

For Lurie, women first occupy a position of subjugation, but as the novel progresses, he begins to attempt to see things from a woman's perspective. His race and position of power inform his treatment of Melanie and Soraya, and the actions and thoughts Coetzee ascribes to him reveal his ultimately racist and sexist attitudes. The subsequent rape of his daughter and his project on Byron and Teresa start to develop in him the awareness that a woman's perspective may be unique. However, Coetzee stops short of suggesting that Lurie can actually imagine a woman's experience. In the end,

Coetzee seems to suggest that sympathetic imagination across gender is not possible, especially for Lurie.

Through Lurie's attempts at understanding the experiences of women and the existence of dogs, Coetzee suggests that the possibilities of the sympathetic imagination are limited. Lurie sees Lucy as the future of South Africa because she is able to adapt, whereas he sees himself as too old to change. Lucy points out that Lurie sees himself as the main character and Lucy as a minor character in the story of his life (198), reiterating Lurie's shortsightedness and selfishness. Of course, Lurie *is* the main character of *Disgrace*, but if this were not fiction, Lurie's outlook and conduct would be self-interested indeed. Lucy implores him to "be a good person," and although Lurie recognizes that this is "[n]ot a bad resolution to make, in dark times," he suspects that it is "too late" for him to change (216). Lurie reconsiders his role in society when he thinks about becoming a grandfather, and while he is skeptical of his abilities, he admits that "[t]here may be things to learn" (218). By moving back to the Eastern Cape to live with Lucy despite her protests, Lurie demonstrates a love for his daughter, risking danger and a life undoubtedly less exciting than one available to him in Cape Town. He further demonstrates his willingness to participate in the new South Africa in his role as a grandfather. With this admission, Coetzee implies that the sympathetic imagination may fail across species and gender in the end, but one might not be too old to adapt to new circumstances.

The next work Coetzee wrote is *Elizabeth Costello*, which is a collection of various writings and speeches with the character Elizabeth Costello as the protagonist, and it is not set in South Africa. Coetzee seems to move on to other current issues

outside the shadow of apartheid while still focusing on animal rights and gender issues. Throughout *Disgrace*, there is a continued focus on animals as candidates for sympathy. In *Elizabeth Costello*, the physical presence of animals is less prevalent, but Costello focuses on the possibilities of the sympathetic imagination using animals as examples of sites for her own sympathetic imagination. Unlike Lurie in *Disgrace*, Costello makes explicit claims about her ability to sympathetically imagine. She claims that this ability is what enables her to be an author. For Costello, the sympathetic imagination is central to authorship.

Coetzee also continues examining gender issues, as Costello is a woman whom the readers witness talking about writing. Characters in *Elizabeth Costello* make interesting and explicit claims about gender factoring into one's ability to sympathetically imagine another. Further, a trial pattern emerges from *Disgrace* and *Elizabeth Costello*. In both, the protagonists are put on trial. In the first, Lurie is put on trial for his involvement with Melanie, but the reader quickly witnesses Lurie express his thoughts about forgiveness and his resistance to sympathizing with Melanie. Likewise, in *Elizabeth Costello*, author Costello is on trial to express what she believes, and she turns the trial into a discourse on her views of authorship. By focusing on animals as sites for sympathy and using trial as a theme in both novels, Coetzee further contributes to clarifying his views on authorship and the possibilities of the sympathetic imagination. Also through these seemingly unrelated themes, Coetzee shows that authorship and the sympathetic imagination intersect in important ways.

Chapter 2

Elizabeth Costello: Authorship On Trial

I. Textual History and the Performative Qualities of Elizabeth Costello

It is important to briefly discuss the publication history of each of the lessons that comprise *Elizabeth Costello*, which Coetzee either delivered in lecture form or published separately. The novel *Elizabeth Costello* seems to be a loose amalgamation of events and philosophical ideas espoused by the author-character Costello and others whom she encounters. The “lessons” are disjointed in many ways, and a short textual history may provide clues about the novel’s messy structure and map out some of the issues regarding authorship in the novel. Furthermore, since several lessons were first presented as lectures by Coetzee, it is helpful to keep in mind one of the original audience’s reactions that the event was “disquieting” because it “was being mirrored, in a distorted representation, in the fiction itself” (Attridge, “Writer’s Life” 193). One negative reaction to *Elizabeth Costello* is that Coetzee uses fictional characters to advocate for certain philosophical positions that he would not take otherwise (Lee). However, as Derek Attridge points out, this approach treats the arguments in the lessons “*as arguments*” (“Writer’s Life” 197, italics original) instead of considering the exchanges as events of literature. Attridge’s assessment of the novel is valuable because he holds that what counts for Costello, for Coetzee, and for the audiences within the novel and readers of the novel is examining the events: “what has mattered, for Elizabeth Costello and for the reader, is the event—literary and ethical at the same time—of storytelling, of testing,

of self-questioning, and not the outcome” (205). Coetzee, too, seems to find the testing and questioning aspects of authorship and characterization more important than the outcome. This chapter considers how the notion of sympathy develops, shifts, and succeeds or fails within the events of Costello’s life and works.

The textual history of each of the lessons plays an important role in understanding the performative qualities of Costello and Coetzee since many lessons were first offered as lectures or talks in which Coetzee presented stories of his character, Elizabeth Costello, offering lectures herself. Further, Coetzee as male performing Costello as female highlights Coetzee’s opportunity for sympathetic imagination across gender in developing his own character. Coetzee performs Costello, and in order to understand Costello as a character created and performed by Coetzee, the reader of *Elizabeth Costello* must keep in mind the layers of performance embedded in the collection of lessons. Drawing on Judith Butler’s notion of the performative speech act in *Excitable Speech*, Laura Wright suggests that “the body of Coetzee the novelist who performs the lecture is never fully separable from the speech acts of Elizabeth Costello” (199). That is, Coetzee’s mouth conveys not only his story of Costello but also Costello’s words so that it becomes difficult to separate Coetzee’s performing body from Costello’s words. Wright continues: “In turn, it seems that a productive way of examining Elizabeth Costello is to posit her as the imagined body through which Coetzee enacts emotional speech, even as he examines the limitations of such sympathetic imagination” (199). In addition, “It is therefore worth noting that in critical debate about *Lives* [Lessons 3 and 4 of *Elizabeth Costello*], the more rational aspects of the animals rights argument are attributed to Coetzee, while the excitable speech inherent in the rant is attributed to

Costello” (209). As Coetzee performs his character Costello with excitable speech, he performs the other, one whom he might sympathetically imagine. The lectures in which Coetzee first developed Costello more clearly demonstrate the male performing as female. As Wright articulates, “The performance of a gendered position other than that of the performer . . . is an attempt to understand the un-understandable aspects—or alterity—of the other, and as such it illustrates enactment of the sympathetic imagination” (198). Just as Coetzee plays out the sympathetic imagination, he uses the text to investigate its limits.

Elizabeth Costello begins with the lesson “Realism.” An earlier version of Lesson 1 appeared in the academic journal *Salmagundi* (nos. 114-15, 1997) as “What Is Realism?” In this first chapter, John sees his mother, Costello, as outdated because she lectured on realism: “no one in this place wanted to hear about realism” (*Elizabeth Costello* 31). Yet Costello engages in an interview in which she discusses gender, and this exchange provides important insight into Costello’s views on the possibilities of the sympathetic imagination. Though she may be outdated, her views on authorship prove to be valuable to her literary audience, and the dialogue between Costello and other characters sets the stage for later discussions of the sympathetic imagination.

In “Lesson 2: The Novel in Africa,” Costello travels on a cruise to deliver a lecture on the future of the novel. More important, though, is the lecture delivered by fellow (fictional) author, Emmanuel Egudu entitled “The Novel in Africa.” Lesson 2 was originally delivered in 1999 as a lecture by Coetzee as part of the Una Lecture Series at the University of California at Berkeley. Coetzee delivers a lecture that is actually a short story that contains a lecture by a fictional—and in this case, African—author. By

presenting this lesson as a lecture, Coetzee could play with the idea of performance; as an author from Africa, like Egudu, Coetzee speaks to issues concerning African authors, such as essentialism and authenticity, but by speaking them through Egudu, Coetzee can construct a dialogue between Egudu and Costello, who contests Egudu's claims. The lecture by Egudu addresses an issue that Coetzee likely faces as a South African author. Egudu presents African novels as those that are rooted in oral traditions and seen as exotic by the West. Coetzee even has Egudu call himself a "native" on more than one occasion (*Elizabeth Costello* 47, 48). By identifying himself as a "native," Egudu seems to give his audience what he thinks they expect: an authentically African author who incorporates an oral tradition into his writing and his persona. Here, Coetzee addresses authorship in Africa and the public perception of a privileged, white African author versus that of a less privileged, black African author. As Egudu points out, novels are not consumed at the same rate in Africa as they are in Europe (40); his audience resides in Europe and in the United States. Like West Indian author George Lamming, Egudu finds that he must write largely to an audience outside his homeland, despite using his homeland as the subject of his writing. Lamming questions, "For whom, then, do we write?" (43), and the answer—for both Lamming and Egudu—is the foreign reader (Lamming 43; Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello* 42). Costello questions this notion of authentic writing and performance:

‘But the African novel is not written by Africans for Africans. African novelists may write about Africa, about African experiences, but they seem to be glancing over their shoulder all the time they write, at the foreigners who will read them. Whether they like it or not, they have accepted the role of interpreter, interpreting Africa for their readers. Yet how can you explore a world in all its depth if

at the same time you are having to explain it to outsiders?
. . . That, it seems to me, is the root of your problem.
Having to perform your Africanness at the same time as
you write.' (*Elizabeth Costello* 51)

As lecturers on the cruise ship, both Egudu and Costello are performers, but Egudu, as Costello thinks to herself, “has a stake in exoticising himself” (53). To the cruise passengers and other foreign readers, Egudu presents himself as a “native” black African who has the authority to speak on literature in Africa, and “he makes his living by talking. His books are there as credentials, no more” (53). Egudu is “happy to be a native” (47)—while unconvincingly—because it provides him a livelihood as an exotic other, and he appropriates terms used by colonizers to identify himself for his (Western) audience.

However, Costello notices how Egudu presents himself, and she thinks it is just for show. A key question from the interviewer changes into “Is language not a more important matrix than birth?” (*Elizabeth Costello* 44). This question morphs into a more pointed inquiry on the nature of writing in a colonized nation, informed by the choice of writing in colonizing languages. In Coetzee’s case, both English and Afrikaans are European-derived, as opposed to the various indigenous languages of South Africa. Still, a bit of Coetzee’s own history perhaps sneaks in here. Coetzee himself descends from Afrikaners, so his first language would have been Afrikaans. However, his mother insisted on him using the English language and English-medium education. Thus, Coetzee may be trying to show that his use of the English language in his own writing makes him a descendant of the English literature tradition and sets him apart both from Afrikaners of the ruling National Party and from black South African writers. In an

interview with David Attwell, Coetzee positions himself in the European traditions camp and as one who was supposed to have gained from white oppression: “I say that I represent this movement [European expansion] because my intellectual allegiances are clearly European, not African. I am also a representative of the generation in South Africa for whom apartheid was created, the generation that was meant to benefit most from it” (Attwell, Interview). Coetzee would have been aware of the claims set forth by Steve Biko, a leader of apartheid resistance, who asserts that, no matter how likeminded white liberals may be with their black counterparts, they cannot truly sympathize with blacks because they will never live in blacks’ material circumstances (Biko 23). Wary of being cast as one who attempts to speak for others with whom he cannot identify, Coetzee aligns himself with the European tradition because of his education and life experiences as a white man in South Africa. As a black African, Egudu speaks for other black Africans because he feels that they share “the intangibles of culture” (*Elizabeth Costello* 44). Here, Coetzee exposes terms of the colonial conflict in Africa, perhaps implicating himself as a descendant of European colonizers, and Coetzee himself might not espouse Egudu’s claims of authority and authenticity in order to avoid appearing as an impostor. Of course, Egudu is by now far removed from his “native” origins, making his own claims to authenticity problematic.

Lessons 3 and 4 (entitled “Lesson 3: The Lives of Animals: ONE: The Philosophers and the Animals” and “Lesson 4: The Lives of Animals: TWO: The Poets and the Animals”) were first delivered as lectures by Coetzee in the Tanner Lectures at Princeton University in 1997. Again, Coetzee delivers lectures within lectures. What is interesting about Coetzee’s use of the Tanner Lectures to first present these two short

stories about giving lectures is that he discusses what Amy Gutmann calls “an important ethical issue—the way human beings treat animals,” but as Gutmann points out, the “form of Coetzee’s lectures is far from the typical Tanner Lectures, which are generally philosophical essays” (3). Coetzee uses an unusual form to deliver messages about an otherwise usual issue; however, it becomes clear to the reader that, even if Coetzee were to possess the same ideas about ethical treatment of animals as Costello, he would likely present his argument in a sounder way. Costello, after all, argues with loose reasoning, making rather unsound analogies, while Coetzee’s non-fiction works are well reasoned and well researched. The character Elizabeth Costello may be serving as a way for Coetzee to show how an author is received and regarded by the academy, even when she violates the expectations that the academy has for her by delivering lectures on animals rights instead of literary criticism. The lectures that Coetzee delivered at Princeton were published in a volume called “The Lives of Animals,” which is composed of an introduction by Amy Gutmann, the texts of Coetzee’s lectures, and “Reflections” by Marjorie Garber, Peter Singer, Wendy Doniger, and Barbara Smuts.

The earliest version of “Lesson 5: The Humanities in Africa” was also delivered as a lecture by Coetzee, but in this case, the venue was slightly different from those at American universities. Coetzee delivered his lecture version in 2001 in Munich, funded by the Carl Friedrich von Siemens Stiftung (Carl Friedrich von Siemens Foundation). The text was published in print form as *The Humanities in Africa/Die Geisteswissenschaften in Afrika*, with the transcription of the introduction by Heinrich Meier preceding Coetzee. Meier’s introduction explains (in German) Coetzee’s impact, biography, and

publication history, and Meier positions Coetzee's intellectual influence as rooted strongly in Erasmus—in skepticism and irony, especially.

Like the first lesson, “Lesson 6: The Problem of Evil” appeared in *Salmagundi* in 2003 as a short story. They show Costello's mind at work, deepening the reader's understanding of her writing and revising processes. This lesson tells the story of Costello's talk at a conference in Amsterdam on evil, and her talk centers on a book by Paul West, *The Very Rich Hours of Count von Stauffenberg*. West's book deals with the executions of Hitler's would-be assassins, and Costello thinks that, by reading the book, she has been exposed to a kind of Nazi evil that should not have ever resurfaced because reading and writing about that degree of evil can harm a person. Coetzee skillfully weaves Costello's weak reasoning with her inner desires to escape her embarrassment at criticizing another author's journey to a place of evil. She doubts her contentions that object to West's portrayal of evil and recognizes, perhaps, the hypocrisy in her position regarding the abilities and responsibilities of authors to use sympathetic imagination in order to understand characters.

The first entirely new lesson in *Elizabeth Costello* is “Lesson 7: Eros.” This lesson is rather short (only nine pages) and is entirely comprised of Costello's thoughts. For the first time, there is no lecture involved. The lesson begins with Costello recalling a reading by American poet Robert Duncan, and she links the themes in his poem to Susan Mitchell's “Eros.” Costello wonders why Americans are concerned with Psyche and continues to think about copulation between gods and humans, including Greek gods as well as Mary of Nazareth, Jesus' mother. It primarily contains Costello's reflections

on love, sex, and bits of philosophy and religion. Interestingly, though, the lesson ends with Costello's thoughts on her visions as an old woman:

A vision, an opening up, as the heavens are opened up by a rainbow when the rain stops falling. Does it suffice, for old folk, to have these visions now and again, these rainbows, as a comfort, before the rain starts pelting down again? Must one be too creaky to join the dance before one can see the pattern? (*Elizabeth Costello* 192)

Here, Coetzee shows that she indeed can still be an intellectual, even if those thoughts come intermittently between bouts of bitterness or unsound reasoning. Coetzee continues to show Costello as an old woman, and this lesson bridges the gap between her embarrassing conference appearance in Amsterdam, where her mind seems to falter because of her illogical thesis on the problem of evil, and her arrival in purgatory. The seventh lesson shows her mind at work, as a rainbow in the storm of aging and death.

“Lesson 8: At the Gate” is also entirely new, and it tells the story of Costello entering a kind of purgatory in which the days are hot and dry and everyone in the town is seeking entrance past the gates. Costello thinks to herself that the scene is “so Kafkaesque” (*Elizabeth Costello* 209), and indeed, it feels like a scene reminiscent of Kafka's “Before the Law” (Ankersmit 84). Costello is instructed to write what she believes, a statement of belief, in order for a panel to allow her entry. Her first two attempts at writing, that is, professing, what she believes do not satisfy the authorities because she writes that she, as an author, should be exempted from the requirement of believing. She calls herself a “secretary of the invisible” (*Elizabeth Costello* 199); here, Coetzee may be portraying one view of authorship, that is, the idea that authors merely relate what is happening or what other voices say. In this way, Costello does not have to

believe anything. She can remove herself from holding onto something ideological so that she can inhabit the minds of nearly anyone, including both murderers and victims, depending on which of them would speak to her (204). Coetzee is perhaps showing how this is a dangerous position for authors to hold; viewing themselves as ones who do not believe in anything so that they can get inside the minds of others and write from any perspective is a slippery slope. In any event, Costello's statement that she is exempt from believing is not accepted, and she must draft another statement for another panel. Her statements will be considered in further detail below.

The "Postscript: Letter of Elizabeth, Lady Chandos" was first published by Intermezzo Press. This is Coetzee's fictional letter composed by Lady Elizabeth Chandos to Sir Francis Bacon on the topic of her husband's inability to write, presumably based on Hugo von Hofmannsthal's "The Lord of Chandos Letter," in which Lord Chandos conveys to Bacon that he can no longer write. In Coetzee's letter, signed "Elizabeth C." (*Elizabeth Costello* 230), Lady Chandos begs Sir Francis Bacon to attempt to communicate with her husband who has lost his ability, or perhaps more aptly, his inspiration to write. It seems to address again the nature of authorship, which intersects with many of the issues that concern Costello. By including this postscript and adding together all of his lectures or short stories of Costello, Coetzee offers a more rounded, albeit sometimes obscure, view of his heroine, Elizabeth Costello. In all, he did not change much of what he had already written in the first versions of each lesson, but the substantial additions to the original texts added to the depth and breadth of Costello's character. She became less a woman involved in various intellectual episodes and more a woman at the end of her life trying to offer some semblance of intellect. Each is so

different in topic (from realism to animal rights to evil) that they could afford to stand alone as lectures of short stories about lectures, but the underlying similarity of Costello the author-turned-elderly-and-illogical woman ties them sufficiently together.

II. Possibilities of the Sympathetic Imagination: Literary Characters and Animals

In 2003, the same year in which he was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature, J. M. Coetzee published *Elizabeth Costello*. Protagonist Costello is author of the (fictional) novel *The House on Eccles Street*. Here Coetzee begins to weave the web of intertextuality: Costello's most famous book is principally about Marion (Molly) Bloom, wife of Leopold Bloom, the protagonist of James Joyce's *Ulysses*. Not only is Coetzee's protagonist of *Elizabeth Costello* a fictional author named Elizabeth Costello, but Costello's most well-known work also tells the story of the wife of the protagonist of one of the twentieth century's most renowned books. Further deepening intertextuality, Coetzee writes about Costello's forays into the public as an intellectual through Costello's own discussions of other actual and fictional authors. In many cases, the lessons contain an account of Costello's lectures at academic events, in addition to narration that often reveals Costello's aging mind but sometimes lucid observations. A central theme in these stories centered on Costello is the idea that authors may and, in Costello's case, do possess a sympathetic imagination. Through Costello's own claims, her audiences' reactions to her writing and lectures, and her behavior, Coetzee questions the extent to which authors of fiction accurately represent the other. Further, he utilizes Costello's femaleness to investigate the assertion that women may sympathetically

imagine better than men, calling into question an author's abilities as influenced by gender.

To best understand the possibilities of Costello's sympathetic imagination, her views on her own abilities to write another will be examined first, and in the spirit of Attridge's conception of the event of literature, what will matter will be the "testing" and "self-questioning" of Costello's claims (205). In her lecture titled "The Philosophers and the Animals," Costello explicitly claims that the sympathetic imagination is not only attainable, but also that her own writing was possible because she could think her way into someone who never existed. To make this point, Costello discusses the lack of empathy the Nazis had for the Jews of the Holocaust, and explains that the Nazis lacked the ability to imagine what it might have been like to be one of their victims. She then expounds upon the origin of sympathy by invoking Thomas Nagel's essay "What Is It Like to Be a Bat?":

'The heart is the seat of a faculty, *sympathy*, that allows us to share at times the being of another. Sympathy has everything to do with the subject and little to do with the object, the "another", as we see at once when we think of the object not as a bat ("Can I share the being of a bat?") but as another human being. There are people who have the capacity to imagine themselves as someone else, there are people who have no such capacity (when the lack is extreme, we call them psychopaths), and there are people who have the capacity but choose not to exercise it.' (79)

Here, Costello's description of sympathy is rooted in Keatsian Romanticism because it stems from the heart, not the mind. Costello calls her audience to consider the object of sympathy as a human because the object matters little compared to the subject, the imaginer. For Costello, the success of the sympathetic imagination seems to hinge

entirely on the subject's abilities, not on the qualities shared with the object.

Accordingly, the qualities that the object would not have in common with the subject—its small size, wings, and nocturnal lifestyle, for example—apparently matter little to Costello. In this passage, she formulates the concept of the sympathetic imagination as an ability that rests with the subject, regardless of the object and its similarities or dissimilarities with the sympathetic imaginer.

After establishing this formula for the possibilities of the sympathetic imagination, Costello applies her principle in several examples, continually claiming that the sympathetic imagination has no limits, regardless of the differences between the objects:

‘Despite Thomas Nagel, who is probably a good man, despite Thomas Aquinas and René Descartes, with whom I have more difficulty in sympathizing, there is no limit to the extent to which we can think ourselves into the being of another. There are no bounds to the sympathetic imagination.’ (79-80)

Here, Costello suggests that philosophers who existed in the past, with whom she might have difficulty sympathizing, may propound differing views regarding the capabilities of sympathy; Nagel, for instance, “seems to be in accord with a certain deconstructive respect for the alterity of the other and an admirable restraint against the pitfalls of projection” (Durrant 127). Costello maintains that the possibilities of the sympathetic are limitless by speculating that the commonality between humans and bats—joy—is deconstructible (Durrant 128). Costello, unlike Nagel, does not profess restraint against projection. Costello then provides supposed evidence that the sympathetic imagination is

possible, based on her ability to imagine her way into a character that author James Joyce created:

‘If you want proof, consider the following. Some years ago I wrote a book called *The House on Eccles Street*. To write that book I had to think my way into the existence of Marion Bloom. Either I succeeded or I did not. If I did not, I cannot imagine why you invited me here today. In any event, the point is, *Marion Bloom never existed*. Marion Bloom was a figment of James Joyce’s imagination. If I can think my way into the existence of a being who has never existed, then I can think my way into the existence of a bat or a chimpanzee or an oyster, any being with whom I share the substrate of life.’ (80, italics original)

Costello therefore attributes her success as a writer to her alleged ability to imagine sympathetically with Marion Bloom. Because Marion Bloom never existed as a real person, Costello suggests that it would be more difficult to imagine her way into Bloom than it would be to imagine her way into the being of an actual person. This reasoning is problematic, however. One could easily claim to think her way into a being that never actually existed as a flesh-and-blood human, but might it not be more difficult to think one’s way into the being of a person who exists independently of an author’s imagination? A person who exists independently could, after all, contradict or reject the imaginer’s interpretation. Costello’s characters cannot, for example, express their disagreement with her inhabitation of them. There is a major difference between thinking oneself into a fictional other and an actual other, but Costello holds that her ability to imagine the fictional other equates to imagining any living being. For Costello, it is easier to imagine sympathetically when life is a shared characteristic, but the examples she offers are voiceless even when they have life in common with Costello. Her

hypothesis is not tested here with others who have voice and could potentially speak up if she interpreted them incorrectly, identifying one key flaw in her argument. She believes she can sympathetically imagine with a literary character or animal, but her claim that the sympathetic imagination has no limits is untested in her lecture and in her own life when considering others who might contest her interpretation, such as her characters and her own children.

Costello later espouses that individuals can embody animals through poetry in a talk with the English department at Appleton College. Poet Ted Hughes has enabled his readers to become, in a sense, a jaguar:

‘Writers teach us more than they are aware of. By bodying forth the jaguar, Hughes shows us that we too can embody animals—by the process called poetic invention that mingles breath and sense in a way that no one has explained and no one ever will. He shows us how to bring the living body into being within ourselves. When we read the jaguar poem, when we recollect it afterwards in tranquility, we are for a brief while the jaguar. He ripples within us, he takes over our body, he is us.’ (97-98)

Here, Costello proposes that poetry makes it possible to enter into the being of another, but yet again, the jaguar as object is fictional and a non-human animal without voice. This fictional jaguar comes alive when the reader allows it to enter into being with the reader. Thus, poetry and fiction, to Costello, provide prime opportunities both for the writer sympathetically to imagine their characters and for the reader to embody the characters. In these lectures, Costello has defined the sympathetic imagination as a quality that is possible through the acts of writing and reading, and while she claims to be able sympathetically to imagine any being with whom she shares the “substrate of life” (80), her demonstration of the sympathetic imagination’s possibilities is restricted to

writing and reading others who, whether they ever actually existed, remain voiceless. To consider whether Costello's sympathetic imagination is successful in her writing, as she claims, other characters' perceptions of her must be examined.

First, Costello's son John reflects on her writing, and with his unique position as her child, his perspective is valuable because of his shared life experiences with Costello while growing up when she wrote her most important works. One of the first glimpses of Costello occurs through John's eyes, and through his reflection, he links his mother to a literary master: "A face without personality, the kind that photographers have to work on to lend distinction. Like Keats, he thinks, the great advocate of blank receptiveness" (4). Here, the reader learns that while Costello's appearance may not be particularly memorable, her unremarkable face permits receptiveness in the same manner as Keats, whose description of the sympathetic imagination fits within Costello's own framework for writing. By aligning his mother with Keats, John invokes a certain notion of the sympathetic imagination while also situating Costello within the ranks of renowned authors. She is further portrayed as an aging woman by John's thoughts on her body, deciding that he could not have come from that old body. Most worthy of note, however, is John's reflection that he really does not know the truth about his mother, a woman who struggled to support two children by writing. The elusive truth about an author is a theme to which Coetzee alludes throughout *Elizabeth Costello*, and another facet of the notion of Keatsian negative capability is that the author's mind becomes unavailable to the reader (Keats, "To George and Tom Keats" 60). What is the truth about an author and what she really believes? She provides many and varied answers, and in "Lesson 8: At the Gate," she must write her own statement of belief in order to pass out of purgatory.

John's glance and early characterization of Costello informs the reader's developing perception of Costello, which would provide context for Costello's subsequent comments on the sympathetic imagination and her career as a celebrated author.

III. Gender and the Sympathetic Imagination

A. Costello Writing Men

Her son's perceptions of her works are also informative because they show that he finds her books believable—startlingly so. To him, Costello is a successful author because she seems accurately to capture personalities and emotions; in short, Costello represents the sympathetic imagination: “Other people too he recognizes; and there must be many more he does not recognize. About sex, about passion and jealousy and envy, she writes with an insight that shakes him. It is positively indecent” (5). Beyond her ability to write people well, her son reflects that “she shakes him; that is what she presumably does to other readers too” (5). Costello is memorable and successful because she unsettles her readers, and perhaps like Coetzee, “she is by no means a comforting writer” (5). However, unlike Coetzee, Costello's gender allows her to write ruthlessly: “She is even cruel, in a way that women can be but men seldom have the heart for” (5). Only a few pages into the novel, Costello's son, an apparently trustworthy source, characterizes Costello beyond simple classification as an aging woman, but as a woman whose gender and abilities sympathetically to imagine have resulted in a successful career as a writer and interpreter of others.

John's perceptions of his mother's abilities are complicated by a woman who interviews Costello, and Coetzee uses the interviewer's involvement to develop further

the idea that an author's gender influences one's skills at sympathetically imagining. During a radio interview, Susan Moebius asks a question about writing from the perspective of a different gender: "do you find it easy, writing from the position of a man?" to which Costello responds, "Easy? No. If it were easy it wouldn't be worth doing. It is the otherness that is the challenge. Making up someone other than yourself" (12). Clearly, then, Costello identifies a major part of her writing process; imagining and creating an other is especially arduous when the other is male. Despite Costello's difficulty, her son finds her male characters convincing, which he views as evidence that Costello succeeds at her profession:

‘But my mother has been a man,’ he persists. ‘She has also been a dog. She can think her way into other people, into other existences. I have read her; I know. It is within her powers. Isn't that what is most important about fiction: that it takes us out of ourselves, into other lives?’

‘Perhaps. But your mother remains a woman all the same. Whatever she does, she does as a woman. She inhabits her characters as a woman does, not a man.’

‘I don't see that. I find her men perfectly believable.’

‘You don't see because you wouldn't see. Only a woman would see. It is something between women. If her men are believable, good, I am glad to hear so, but finally it is just mimicry. Women are good at mimicry, better at it than men. At parody, even. Our touch is lighter.’ (22-23)

Moebius challenges John's assessment of Costello's sympathetic imagination and argues that Costello can never relinquish her female perspective, no matter how well she may enter into the being of another. Moebius, in effect, contends that while writing another, Costello—or any author—writes from a certain gendered, subjective position. Instead of the romantic notion of the sympathetic imagination in which an author loses her identity in some ways in order to embody another, Moebius suggests an alternative concept of

authorship in which an author can never completely shed herself. Gender, for Moebius, remains a permanent attribute despite an author's imaginative skills. Authorship becomes a form of mimicry or imitation of another, not a mysterious process in which an author's being and a character's identity merge. Moebius's contention that women are better than men at impersonating others perhaps reflects Moebius's role as a feminist critic; her recent book is titled *Reclaiming History: Women and Memory* (29), which she offers to Costello, and her view of subjectivity as fixed is more contemporary and challenges the idea of the sympathetic imagination. Moebius, then, as a literary critic, offers the reader a new interpretation of women authors, and her suggestion that authorship is simply mimicry offers a divergent understanding of writers and their writing rooted, perhaps, in a newer version of feminism.

B. Coetzee Writing Women

As critic Dominic Head suggests in "A Belief in Frogs," gender representation and evil present themselves as important themes in *Elizabeth Costello*, as they do in many of Coetzee's novels. Head briefly proposes that while Costello may be qualified to speak about the implications of writing about evil because of her own experience in a violent attack, the fact that a man wrote the story of the attack—an attack of male-instigated violence against a woman—complicates matters: "[Costello's] own experience of violence, when she was savagely beaten by a man at the age of nineteen, appears to give her some authority on the topic of evil. However, the reflection, that this is a male author imagining female victimhood, is a complicating factor" (Head 114). As in *Disgrace*, Coetzee presents violence against a female character, and Head begins to

question whether or not the portrayal of female victimhood can be trusted because of Coetzee's own gender. Head seems to call upon Susan Moebius's contention that an author cannot completely shed his or her own gendered perspective, but it seems that, instead, what Coetzee is doing here is testing Moebius' assertion that authorship is finally just mimicry against Costello's assertion that the sympathetic imagination is limitless. Coetzee, by writing female victimhood into his novels, demonstrates that there is a middle ground: while the sympathetic imagination has limits, authorship involves more than mere imitation. Throughout Coetzee's novels, characters run up against limits of the sympathetic imagination (Durrant 118-120), yet he writes from the perspective of a woman in four of his works of fiction (Magda in *In the Heart of the Country*, Susan Barton in *Foe*, Elizabeth Curren in *Age of Iron*, and *Elizabeth Costello*).

In "Textual Transvestism," Lucy Graham identifies Coetzee's writing from the perspective of a woman as a pattern of "female articulation," and more importantly, she points out that, like Costello, Coetzee's female protagonists are "women who write and reflect on the processes of writing" (219). Furthermore, Graham detects the theme of writing as a form of childbirth by Coetzee's women writers. These characters view their written work as children and themselves as empty husks after giving birth to their texts (Graham 220-222). Costello is concerned with the immortality of her textual offspring (*Elizabeth Costello* 16-17), but, as Graham shows, Costello as an author is portrayed as a medium and not as an authority: "rather than being a site of authority, the writer is presented as a 'medium' between one sphere of existence and another" (223). As a medium, Costello seems to serve as a transmitter or a means for another to speak through her. Indeed, "In an image first articulated by her son, Costello is rendered as a

‘mouthpiece,’ but not for Coetzee. In the first lesson of *Elizabeth Costello*, John describes his mother as a ‘mouthpiece for the divine’” (Graham 223). This notion of giving voice to another—an unknown—establishes Costello as the kind of writer who would utilize a sympathetic imagination in order to allow another’s voice to pass through her.

Moreover, serving as a mouthpiece to give voice to another calls into question the gender of the author plus the gender of the other for whom the author speaks. Who can speak for whom? Within *Elizabeth Costello*, Costello giving voice to Joyce’s Molly Bloom highlights the issue of the author’s gender and his or her speaking for characters: Coetzee as a male writes Costello, who in turn gives voice to Molly Bloom, a female character in James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, itself a retelling of Homer’s *Odyssey* (Graham 220). Of course, Coetzee’s readers cannot examine the ways in which Costello gives voice to Molly Bloom since *The House on Eccles Street* fails to exist. So, the voices of Costello that the reader can examine are limited to her lectures, interactions with other characters, and thoughts, themselves crafted, obviously, by Coetzee.

While it may seem difficult to discern whether Coetzee uses Costello to speak his own positions (on animal rights, in particular), the questioning itself removes the power of Costello’s voice. Laura Wright underscores this issue: “We are placed in another either/or dilemma—either this argument is Coetzee’s or it is *not* Coetzee’s—that denies Elizabeth Costello the power of signification within Coetzee’s text” (Wright 203). Costello’s position as signifier slips into one that is signified by Coetzee, and in an interview with Joanna Scott, Coetzee speaks to the issue of gender in writing Magda’s

voice in *In the Heart of the Country*. When asked what it means for him to take on a female voice, Coetzee responds:

A complicated question. One way of responding is to ask, is one, as a writer, at every level, sexed? Is there not a level where one is, if not presexual, then anterior to sex? First anterior to sex, then becoming sexed? At that level, or in that transition between levels, does one actually “take on” the voice of another sex? Doesn’t one “become” another sex? On the other hand, I must ask myself, who is this “one” who is anterior to Magda? (“Voice,” 91)

Clearly, then, Coetzee considers the implications of writing from a female perspective. His answer, however, evades the question of embodying a female other. Wright reads his response as “his ability to question, if not state a firm belief in, the notion that the writer must be able to embody and perform ‘another sex’” (204) and continues by questioning what other factors must be considered beyond gender when considering the character of Elizabeth Costello, with whom he shares other characteristics:

The question arises, does Coetzee have it in him to be the woman, and more significantly, what does it mean to be the woman in the context of aged, feminist author, ex-colonial, and current vegetarian? Do we as critics have it in us to let Coetzee perform the woman, or do we call for Costello’s position—or something like it—in Coetzee’s own voice or in a voice that we can more easily and comfortably distinguish from Coetzee’s? (Wright 204)

The attempt at teasing out when Coetzee speaks through Costello or when Coetzee allows Costello’s voice to be heard on its own terms is complicated by their difference in gender and the performative quality of the novel.

The similarities between Coetzee and Costello suggest that Coetzee may find it easier to “become” another sex when his age and cultural background correspond to those

of his female character. Graham suggests that culture fills the position anterior to gender when articulating the voice of another:

Yet the challenge of otherness is clearly not reducible to gender difference. What would 'taking on' the voice of an other mean, if that other were not merely of another sex but outside the writer's cultural inscription, or even outside language altogether? What is at stake in 'becoming' such an other? Is there even an act of writing that is anterior to the cultural inscription and literary tradition in which a writer finds her- or himself? (232)

After all, Coetzee's other female protagonists are white and hold positions of relative privilege, while there is a marked silence from many of his characters who are post-colonial subjects, but in the case of Costello, there is "no such cultural other" over whom Costello holds a position of authority (Graham 232). Coetzee presents Costello as a transmitter, a medium through which other voices stream. By doing so, Graham states, "Coetzee stages an abdication from a position of authorial power" (233).

As a woman, Costello seems to sympathetically imagine well, at least to some. Others, like Moebius, suggest that Costello is not sympathetically imagining but that she is mimicking. Though Coetzee writes from the position of a man, he writes female protagonists with whom he shares cultural characteristics. Coetzee resists Costello's claim to the sympathetic imagination by suggesting that her role is a mouthpiece for her characters.

IV. Imposing Limits on the Sympathetic Imagination

A. Evil and Self-Censorship

Later in the novel, Costello articulates her idea of authorial responsibility in the face of writing about evil, and because of her beliefs in the possibilities of the sympathetic imagination, an author is responsible for the subject matter and the depths into which writing can lead both the writer *and* the reader. Therefore, according to Costello, an author may be capable of completely entering into the being of another, but when that other is evil, the author endangers himself by bringing evil to the surface when it could have otherwise remained buried. In her lecture on Paul West's book *The Very Rich Hours of Count von Stauffenberg*, Costello states that her thesis is that "certain things are not good to read *or to write* . . . I take seriously the claim that the artist risks a great deal by venturing into forbidden places: risks, specifically, himself; risks, perhaps, all. I take this claim seriously because I take seriously the forbiddenness of forbidden places" (*Elizabeth Costello* 173, italics original). So, Costello maps out appropriate places into which the author should venture, claiming that some places are prohibited by nature, and that the author risks losing himself if he ventures too far into the evil of forbidden places. Here, then, Costello articulates a kind of limitation that the sympathetic imagination should obey, regardless of an author's ability to inhabit evil, forbidden places. This contradicts her earlier statement that "there are no bounds to the sympathetic imagination" (80); by imposing bounds on authors, by suggesting that authors should self-censor the subjects about which they write, Costello's stance seems inconsistent. Though an author may be able sympathetically to imagine, he should comply with

Costello's code of authorial responsibility, which imposes bounds on an author and promotes a version of self-censorship in the interest of the author and the reader.

When questioned by someone in the audience regarding whether it might not be beneficial to learn from such evil, Costello holds that there is nothing to learn from such encounters. Importantly, too, the author's abilities have little to do with writing about evil; it does not matter whether the author is "a weak vessel" or "made of sterner stuff" (175). What matters to Costello is that an author has the responsibility to shield himself and his readers from evil because, according to her, no good can come from these occurrences:

'The experience that writing offers, or reading—they are the same thing, for my purposes, here, today— . . . real writing, real reading, is not a relative one, relative to the writer and the writer's capacities, relative to the reader . . . Mr West, when he wrote those chapters, came in touch with something absolute. Absolute evil . . . Through reading him that touch of evil was passed on to me. Like a shock. Like electricity . . . It is something that can only be experienced. However, I am recommending to you that you do not try it out. You will not learn from such an experience. It will not be good for you.' (175-176)

The conclusion to her lecture offers a harsh prescription for authors which imposes limits on the sympathetic imagination. As an author who operated in apartheid South Africa and whose works gained approval by censorship boards, Coetzee is uniquely suited to discuss censorship. The idea that an author must impose boundaries on writing because it is best for the writer and the reader would be a familiar concept to Coetzee. Costello acts as a censor stating that nothing can be learned from something she deems inappropriate and dangerous, just as a censorship board might.

However, after the lecture while she is alone, Costello questions her thesis by considering the role of the novelist in general. She realizes that her own work has approached similarly dangerous scenes. She asks herself, “What is the business of the novelist, after all, what has been her own lifetime business, but to bring inert matter to life; and what has Paul West done . . . but to bring to life, bring back to life, the history of what happened in that cellar in Berlin?” (177). She concludes that “Paul West was only doing his writerly duty” (178), yet she blames him for exciting her into reading further: “*I do not want to read this.* But what right had she to refuse? . . . What was it in her that wanted to resist, to refuse the cup? And why did she nonetheless drink—drink so fully that a year later she is still railing against the man who put it to her lips?” (178, italics original). By reconsidering the position she offers in the lecture, Costello suggests that her ideas of authorship are not fixed. She herself has written scenes that may have brought readers in touch with evil: “Until she thought better of it, she had no qualms about rubbing people’s faces in, for instance, what went on in abattoirs . . . She, no less than Paul West, knew how to play with words until she got them right, the words that would send an electric shock down the spine of the reader. *Butcherfolk in our own way*” (179, italics original). In a sense, Costello aligns herself with West as a fellow author who has brought readers into the realm of evil through writing, and the limits she suggested that authors impose on their own sympathetic imaginations underline Costello’s hypocrisy, or at the very least, her fluid ideas of censorship and authorship.

B. Costello's Version of Authorship on Trial

Costello's final description of authorship comes as she attempts to pass out of a purgatorial state, and again, her characterization of the roles and capabilities of authors change in different circumstances in the final lesson, "At the Gate." She first suggests that her role is simply to allow her sympathetic imagination to channel others in order to write them: "I am a secretary of the invisible, one of many secretaries over the ages. That is my calling: dictation secretary. It is not for me to interrogate, to judge what is given me . . . I refer to my ideal self, a self capable of holding opinions and prejudices at bay *while the word which it is her function to conduct passes through her*" (199-200, emphasis added). Costello explains to the judges that she is a conduit of others: words pass through her, and she writes them down. By approaching writing in this manner, she surrenders most responsibility for the characters she creates, and more importantly for her purposes before the board of judges, she surrenders responsibility for lacking beliefs. Ankersmit states that Costello "finds herself compelled to give an account, or a moral justification, of her life *as a writer*" (94) in which she holds fast to the idea that she cannot afford belief. An exchange between a judge and Costello reveals the judges' problems with her system of unbelief:

'But as a writer? You present yourself today not in your own person but as a special case, a special destiny, a writer who has written not just entertainments but books exploring the complexities of human conduct. In those books you make one judgement upon another, it must be so. What guides you in these judgements? Do you persist in saying it is all just a matter of heart? Have you no beliefs *as a writer*? If a writer is just a human being with a human heart, what is special about your case?' (203)

To which she responds,

‘ . . . I am open to all voices, not just the voices of the murdered and violated . . . If it is their murderers and violators who choose to summon me instead, to use me and speak through me, I will not close my ears to them, I will not judge them.’

‘You will speak for murderers?’

‘I will.’

‘You do not judge between the murderer and his victim? Is that what it is to be a secretary: to write down whatever you are told? To be bankrupt of conscience?’ . . .

‘ . . . Do you think they do not call out from their flames? *Do not forget me!*—that is what they cry. What kind of conscience is it that will disregard a cry of such moral agony?’

‘And these voices that summon you,’ says the pudgy man: ‘you do not ask where they come from?’

‘No. Not as long as they speak the truth.’

‘And you—you, consulting only your heart, are the judge of that truth?’

She nods impatiently. (204)

Costello clings to her notion that her role as a writer—and her role in life, it seems—is to serve as a sympathetic imaginer. Unfortunately for her, this role as a medium for others proves insufficient for the panel of judges because, at the very least, Costello is being asked to serve as an authority on her own life and work. There is an inconsistency between what is expected of Costello and what Costello maintains: if questions of stepping down from a position of authority and responsibility are “framed by putting the author on trial—either for what she/he does, or for what she/he fails to do,” then criticism informed by “traditional notions of authorship and origin may not be best qualified to conduct such a trial” (Graham 233). Costello’s notion of authorship—serving as a medium or a mouthpiece for others—is problematic when put on trial, either by the novel’s panel of judges or by literary critics.

Though Costello holds that “her books teach nothing, preach nothing: they merely spell out, as clearly as they can, how people lived in a certain time and place” (207), she must rethink her role and her beliefs in order to pass through the gate. She finally states to the board of judges that “I believe in what does not bother to believe in me” (218), the frogs of her childhood in Australia. Dominic Head reads this final statement as a comment by Coetzee on the “enduring power or value of fiction,” linking the frogs’ rebirth to “greater tolerance and freedom for the writer” (115), which perhaps assigns too much allegory to Costello’s beliefs and roots the episode firmly within historical circumstances, an eager interpretation which Coetzee would likely resist. Costello concedes that “*I am an other*” and that there is more than one version of herself (221). Finally, Costello attempts to understand whether her position as an author ultimately presents difficulties:

‘But as a writer,’ she persists—‘what chance do I stand as a writer, with the special problems of a writer, the special fidelities?’

Fidelities. Now that she has brought it out, she recognizes it as the word on which all hinges

‘Do you see many people like me, people in my situation?’ . . .

She has a vision of the gate, the far side of the gate, the side she is denied. At the foot of the gate, blocking the way, lies stretched out a dog, an old dog, his lion-coloured hide scarred from innumerable manglings. His eyes are closed, he is resting, snoozing. Beyond him is nothing but a desert of sand and stone, to infinity. It is her first vision in a long while, and she does not trust it, does not trust in particular the anagram GOD-DOG. *Too literary*, she thinks again. A curse on literature!

The man behind the desk has evidently had enough of questions. He lays down his pen, folds his hands, regards her levelly. ‘All the time,’ he says. ‘We see people like you all the time.’ (224-225)

In her vision of the afterlife, there is a dog immediately on the other side of the gate; dogs continue to be a site for sympathy or act as one who can sympathize, like the divine. This ending suggests that Costello is not unique in her stubbornness to believe in something—or even that other authors come to this purgatory and also have trouble passing the gate. There is nothing unique in Costello, Coetzee seems to be saying; there are many authors who, even when they are great observers of behavior and interpreters of feelings, do not or cannot allow themselves to simply believe. They are the ones, it seems, who can afford unbelief. A woman Costello meets explains that “Some of us would say the luxury we cannot afford is unbelief . . . Unbelief—entertaining all possibilities, floating between opposites—is the mark of a leisured existence, a leisured existence” (213). Authors have a leisured existence, Coetzee implies to readers, compared to the scores of people who cannot afford *not to believe* in anything. Attridge reminds us of the literary event by suggesting that Costello’s final lesson “does not present us with an argument about the place of belief in fiction but enables us to participate in Elizabeth Costello’s believing about believing” (205). Evoking the idea of the performative speech act, Wright points out that “What emerges from Coetzee’s conversation with Costello is the recognition of a kind of textual slippage, an uncomfortable acknowledgment of the parody at work, the mimetic nature of both writing and performance” (212). Even at the novel’s close, the reader is reminded of performance: Coetzee performing Costello and Costello performing for the panel of judges. Though Costello’s sympathetic imagination may serve her as an author, her authorship offers no exemptions from the panel’s requirement for beliefs, and she must become one of the many “singing-birds” who “sing for the boards, for their delight” (*Elizabeth Costello* 214).

V. Conclusion

By understanding *Elizabeth Costello*'s textual history, the reader can better identify the performative nature of each lesson. It is in the performance that Coetzee highlights some of the possibilities and limits of the sympathetic imagination. Costello claims that there are no limits to the sympathetic imagination, but she uses examples of others who are voiceless against her interpretations: literary characters and animals. Costello's claims about her own sympathetic imagination, therefore, are problematic. Coetzee next calls gender into question as enabling the author's sympathetic imagination. The character Moebius states that Costello is not sympathetically imagining; instead, Costello is just mimicking, and she is good at mimicry because she is a woman. Coetzee, who writes female victimhood into *Disgrace* and *Elizabeth Costello*, shows that there is perhaps a middle ground between the sympathetic imagination model of authorship and the model of authorship that holds that authors are merely mimics or skilled craftsmen. By writing women who come from similar cultural backgrounds as himself, Coetzee suggests that writing across gender is easier when other factors such as age and background are similar. Finally, Costello's claim that authors should impose limits on themselves hypocritically reveals that although she finds it possible to imagine evil, authors should not lead themselves or their readers to places where evil persists. In the end, Costello's vision of authorship is put on trial, and Coetzee demonstrates in the final scenes that serving as a mouthpiece is ultimately an insufficient explanation for authorship.

In his brief essay, "What Does it Mean, 'To Understand?'" Coetzee discusses verbal and demonstrative ways of understanding, using tennis strokes as an example.

Just as a tennis coach teaches a player how to perform a stroke with verbal commands and demonstrations so that the player can eventually “do” the stroke and make the stroke his own, so does a storyteller “do” characters and allow audiences to do or enter characters. Coetzee explains that

A storyteller telling a story about a fox who thinks crafty thoughts and does crafty things knows, in some sense, that he has no access to the fox’s mind, that he is merely performing an imitation of what a fox, as conventionally understood within human culture, would “think” if foxes could think. The same storyteller nevertheless finds it convenient to think to himself that he is telling his story from within the fox’s mind. (134)

Here, Coetzee explains what Costello is doing when she makes claims about her ability to enter the beings of others: she may know that she is merely imitating, but she convinces herself that she is writing from within the mind of another. Coetzee points out that, as a society, we entertain the paradoxical position of allowing authors to enter the mind of another but also to create beings out of nothing and turn them into characters (134). This highlights the differences between the convenient claim of the sympathetic imagination and the rhetorical model of writing in which authors are crafty. Costello clings to the model of authorship that espouses the possibilities of the sympathetic imagination.

Elizabeth Costello, like *Disgrace*, shows both possibilities and limits of the sympathetic imagination. Animals evoke sympathy in *Disgrace*, all while Lurie’s sympathetic imagination does not extend across gender to many women. In *Elizabeth Costello*, however, Costello claims that it is possible to imagine sympathetically across gender boundaries, just as it is possible for her to do so across species boundaries. Costello imposes her own limits on sympathy and suggests that authors, although they

may be able, should not sympathetically imagine oneself into the mind of a truly evil person. Further, Costello makes explicit claims about authorship, and she ultimately shows that this fabrication, in the dual sense of both making and lying, of the sympathetic imagination is ultimately the writer's greatest challenge

In the next novel Coetzee published, *Slow Man*, the character Costello appears. In the novel bearing her name, many of her lectures directly address the sympathetic imagination. There are no lectures in *Slow Man*, which is written as a typical novel. Costello's suspicious imagination enables the novel to provide an alternative reading of protagonist Paul Rayment's actions in *Slow Man*, despite her sometimes fumbling assertions. Though Rayment resists Costello's interpretations of him, she serves a useful purpose in providing the reader more than one perspective. Additionally in *Slow Man*, Coetzee brings in the new issues of disability and immigration. Through these issues, Coetzee shows Rayment grappling with new and old aspects of his identity by bringing in other characters with whom Rayment compares and contrasts himself. In this way, Coetzee demonstrates how easy it is to other others.

Chapter 3

Opposition to the Sympathetic Imagination in *Slow Man*

In the 2005 novel *Slow Man*, the themes of otherness via disability, immigration, and eroticizing the other seep through the story of Paul Rayment, recently debilitated by a bicycle accident. His new identity as a disabled man challenges his notions of self, which he then uses to “other” others. Rayment’s encounters with fellow immigrants, the Jokić family, and with the author Elizabeth Costello are the situations in which Coetzee explores further the nature of the sympathetic imagination. Rayment views Costello as an observant predator and distrusts her motives and her writings, and the various roles that Rayment assigns to Costello point perhaps to the ways in which Coetzee views—or contests views of—authorship. Costello’s subject Rayment challenges her implicit claims to a sympathetic imagination. The characters’ opposition to her observations show that, when given the chance to voice resistance to her interpretations, those with a voice speak out. Coetzee demonstrates that authorial sympathetic imaginations may prove inaccurate, as evidenced by the voices of their subjects and authorial disregard for accuracy.

I. Otherness Throughout the Novel

A. Disability as Otherness

The novel begins with protagonist Paul Rayment sailing through the air after a car has struck him while riding his bicycle. His leg is amputated, and much of the novel

addresses his new identity and how he accepts or refuses to come to terms with his new self. In “Shape Structures Story,” Rosemarie Garland-Thomson proposes that “the configuration and function of our human body determines our narrative identity, the sense of who we are to ourselves and others” (113). Since Rayment’s bodily change, he begrudgingly adjusts to having only one leg, refusing a prosthetic limb and making his nurses’ tasks difficult. His disabled body enables the story. Garland-Thomson explains that “shape or body is crucial, not incidental, to story. It carries story; it makes story visible; in a sense it is story” (114). Rayment’s disability *is* the story—it begins the story, it carries the story, and it makes Rayment’s story visible. Rayment’s new shape informs his new identity, and the novel itself shows Rayment acknowledging a new kind of otherness: disability.

Rayment’s new identity includes disability, and his new shape is an element that drives the novel. Rayment encounters a blind woman, Marianna, with whom he is intrigued. Coetzee juxtaposes Rayment’s disability with Marianna’s own disability. Garland-Thomson identifies disability as part of identity studies in critical discourse (“Integrating Disability” 1), which fits within the ability/disability system that uses gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, and class to identify (2). Rayment situates himself as a heterosexual white male, but he finds it more difficult to accept the categories of disability and immigrant as integral parts of his identity. Coetzee offers characters to whom Rayment compares himself, and it seems that Rayment considers himself less “other” than them. For instance, Rayment thinks much about Marianna’s blindness and the logistics of her daily, private life, while he himself grapples with accepting his own disability. To Rayment, Marianna almost seems more disabled than himself because it

becomes easier for Rayment to categorize another as disabled than it is to categorize himself as such. For Rayment, losing his leg disables his identity, and the novel examines the ways in which Rayment succeeds or fails in coming to grips with his new identity. Garland-Thomson identifies one aspect of disability as a “way of describing the inherent instability of the embodied self” (5), just as Rayment’s own embodied self is destabilized. Rayment’s identity is in flux because of his new body—a body with new limitations requiring new accommodations.

The position of the disabled bears on Rayment’s resistance to accept his new dependency; Rayment develops a new sexual identity which informs his attitude toward his own and other disabled bodies. Rayment eroticizes the blind Marianna the first time he sees her. Unaware of her blindness, he considers her body and its parts, assigning to her the role of a colonial princess: “soft-fleshed, petite, big-bosomed, the kind of woman he imagines slumbering till noon and then breakfasting on bonbons served on a silver platter by a little slave-boy in a turban” (*Slow Man* 36). Rayment seems aware that his own disabled body has become an object of the gaze, and he recoils from the thought that a woman might see his fragmented body during sex. Thus, while he feels free to gaze upon and eroticize Marianna’s disabled body, he is unwilling to be gazed upon. Like a colonial subject resisting an oppressor, Rayment resists being seen as other, “to expose [himself] to the gaze of an outsider” (38). He later learns from Costello that, despite being blind, Marianna can sense others looking, “conscious of the gaze of others like fingers groping her, groping and retreating” (96), just as Rayment has become more sensitive to the gaze of others. During their sexual encounter, neither Marianna nor Rayment sees each other, and both must rely on their memories and their sense of touch

for a mental image of the other's appearance. In this rendezvous, Rayment considers Marianna more adapted to her disability than he is because her blindness makes her more "attuned" (111) and therefore more highly developed as a disabled person. To Rayment, she seems better suited to disability.

The novel addresses Rayment's coming to an awareness about disability as a new kind of other. Though Rayment eroticizes Marianna by thinking of her as a dark, exotic, fragmented body, he also recognizes her potential repulsiveness because of her disability—her damaged eyes. Like Marianna who insists on keeping her eyes hidden, Rayment resists being either repulsive or dependent; he resists being an othered body. Because he recognizes that the public will see his body as hideous, he resists his new identity even when his physical therapist admonishes him: "The old chapter is closed, you must say goodbye to it and accept the new one. Accept: that's all you need to do" (59). Rayment holds onto the idea of his former intact body, which formed part of his identity, and "he is trying to remain a man, albeit a diminished man" (32-33). Garland-Thomson explains that "disability attenuates the cherished cultural belief that the body is the unchanging anchor of identity. Moreover, it undermines our fantasies of stable, enduring identities in ways that may illuminate the fluidity of all identity" ("Integrating Disability" 20). Rayment had subscribed to the belief that his body anchored his identity. Coetzee shows him struggling with the possibility that his identity is fluid. After his accident, Rayment's body and identity are fragmented, and neither are stable any longer.

As an extension of his disability, Rayment falls into a dependent position as a patient in the caregiver/patient relationship. He must submit to Marijana and other health care professionals, which bothers him because he can no longer take care of himself.

Rayment resists being categorized as disabled, the limitations on his physical movement, his aging body, and requiring assistance from nurses. His further resistance to a prosthetic leg—“He shudders at the thought of it” (58)—and a refashioned bicycle—“Of course he will never put it to use” (256)—demonstrates his reluctance to become a member of the disabled public. Rayment does not want to use tools of disability perhaps because doing so would both mark him as disabled and force him to acknowledge this new part of his identity. Rayment’s new body forces him to be dependent on other people, which, in turn, disempowers him as a formerly able-bodied masculine man. He struggles to recognize that his identity is changeable, and the novel shows how Rayment comes to grips with the new reality that he is other on a physical level.

B. Immigrant as Other

Another facet of his identity is that of immigrant, but Rayment also resists being considered an immigrant on the same level as the Jokićs, a Croatian immigrant family with whom he becomes acquainted through his nurse, Marijana Jokić. Rayment may be more other than Marijana because of his injury, but he others her as more immigrant than he is in order to deal with his own new disabled identity. Rayment’s otherness is rooted in his early emigration from France to Australia as a child with his mother and step-father. Throughout the novel, Rayment recollects fragments of memory from his childhood in France and his early experiences in Australia, and as a young adult, he returned to France where he continually felt like an outsider. He explains, ““I was always the odd one out, the stranger in the corner at family gatherings”” (196), echoing perhaps the feelings of Coetzee himself as a child. In his memoir, *Boyhood*, Coetzee “thinks of

himself as English. Though his surname is Afrikaans, though his father is more Afrikaans than English, though he himself speaks Afrikaans without any English accent, he could not pass for a moment as an Afrikaner” (124). Just as Coetzee would not have been able to pass as an Afrikaner in his native South Africa, Rayment laments his situation between Australia and France: “I can pass among Australians. I cannot pass among the French. That, as far as I’m concerned, is all there is to it, to the national-identity business: where one passes and where one does not, where on the contrary one stands out. Like a sore thumb . . . ” (*Slow Man* 197). Here Coetzee purposefully plays with the language of appendages considering Rayment’s one remaining leg, but more importantly, he points to the issue of passing as a member of a community. Not only does Coetzee indicate Rayment’s trouble fitting into the family fabric in his native France, but Coetzee also highlights his own past as an English-speaking Afrikaner growing up in South Africa who has lived in England, the United States, and most recently, Australia. Like Rayment, Coetzee is situated as an outsider both within Australia and his own native community.

Coetzee seems to use names to underscore otherness in *Slow Man*. First, Rayment’s name brings authenticity in question. Costello remarks that Rayment is “Such a proper Anglo-Adelaidean gentleman that I forget you are not English at all. Mr Rayment, rhyming with *payment*” (192). Rayment corrects her and points out that his name rhymes with the French *vraiment*, meaning truly or genuinely. Here, through an immigrant protagonist with a foreign name, Coetzee brings genuineness to mind amid a conversation about Rayment’s immigrant status. Further, the similarity between Rayment and raiment—meaning clothing or to put on clothes—must not be accidental.

There is a sense in which Coetzee shows Rayment donning an identity that is not entirely Australian yet not French, either. Creating characters is similar to dressing them, making them appear to readers as the author wishes. Likewise, Coetzee differentiates between the names Marijana and Marianna first to highlight their different linguistic backgrounds: “He says *Marianna*, she says *Marianna*, but it is not the same name. His *Marianna* is still coloured by *Marijana*: it is heavier than hers, more solid. Of her *Marianna* he can say only that it is liquid, silver” (105). Second, Coetzee may be using variations on the name Mary to connect Rayment’s Catholic background to Marijana’s. While lamenting that he did not have children, Rayment thinks of arriving in heaven to encounter St. Paul, and immediately, Rayment thinks to himself that “Marijana would have set him right . . . Marijana from Catholic Croatia. . . . A woman built for motherhood. Marijana would have helped him out of childlessness” (34). Rayment sexualizes Marijana and situates her as an ideal mother, full of “mother-love” (34), like Mary, the mother of Jesus. Rayment wants to have qualities in common with Marijana and Marianna. Through their names, he is able to find similarities between himself and Marijana of European, Catholic origins, and he also wishes to share a French identity with Marianna. Unfortunately, hers is not “the French *Marianne*. . . . No. Not French. A pity. France would be something in common, like a blanket to deploy over the pair of them” (105). Through such names, Coetzee builds layers of identity on and among the characters, and in many ways, the novel is about discovering and determining the true identity of characters.

Rayment’s nurse Marijana has recently immigrated to Australia from Croatia, and her awkward turns of phrase sprinkle the dialog between herself and Rayment, constantly reminding the reader of her status as an outsider to Australia and the English language.

He thinks “she speaks a rapid, approximate Australian English with Slavic liquids and an uncertain command of *a* and *the*, coloured by slang she must pick up from her children” (27), evidenced by her Australian colloquial response ““No worries”” (63, 93). He recognizes her incorrect word choices and verb conjugations:

‘You want I dust your books? . . . I clean them good.
You are book saver, don’t want dust on books. You are
book saver, yes?’

A book saver: is that what they call people like him in
Croatia? . . .

‘A book collector, that’s what we say here.’ (47)

By recognizing and correcting Marijana’s inexact English, Rayment situates her language as more other than his, even though he often forms his own thoughts in French. Even when he admits to Costello that he is ““not unfamiliar with the immigrant experience”” (192), Rayment continues to identify the Jokićs as more immigrant than he is.

He romanticizes Marijana’s past and her connections to Europe to suit his notions of her, imagining her childhood in the rustic Balkans. Indeed, each member of the Jokić family occupies the position of outsider in varying degrees simply because of the family’s recent arrival, though the Jokić children effectively seem to be assimilating into Australian culture and language. Most notably, Drago attempts to fit into Australian society in a symbolic way: he inserts an image of his grandfather Jokić into one of Rayment’s antique photographs of Australian settlers. By using modern computer technology, Drago symbolically introduces a member of his Croatian family into an image that portrays Australian history. The photo itself serves as a symbol of Australia’s national past that documents the former colonial reality. In doing so, Drago imagines his family as part of Australia’s history, and the technology he utilizes creates a forgery that

nearly fools the adults. However, as Rayment realizes, Drago adds a Jokić to the photograph to create a family history in Australia: ““He must be feeling his way into what it is like to have an Australian past, an Australian descent, Australian forebears of the mystical variety. Instead of being just a refugee kid with a joke name,”” and though angered at Drago’s actions, Rayment sympathizes with Drago’s desire to belong because Rayment felt similarly as a young adult (192). Drago has, through youthful skills, imagined his family situated in the national past. Costello reminds Rayment that the photographs represent Australian history and that Drago wishes to see himself in it. She says, ““you did tell him, rather loftily I thought, that the pictures were not yours, you were merely guarding them for the sake of the nation’s history. Well, Drago is part of that history, too, remember. What harm is there, thinks Drago, in inserting a Jokić into the national memory, even if somewhat prematurely—grandpa Jokić, for instance?”” (221). However, Drago’s act can be read as a parody or challenge to Rayment, mocking not only Rayment’s collection but also the notions of belonging and national history. If Drago is parodying or, perhaps, both wishes to parody *and* to belong, Coetzee may be turning on its head the very idea of imagining one’s immigrant family as part of a national historic fabric. In a larger sense, Coetzee indicates that it may be ridiculous to imagine oneself anywhere one does not belong.

C. Eroticizing the Other

To further make Marijana an other, Rayment eroticizes her and puts himself into a position of power by imagining being her benefactor and lover. When he offers to pay for Drago’s schooling, Rayment is “drunk with the pleasure of having her back, excited

too by the money he is about to give away” (92). Rayment enjoys being in a position of authority and being able to control via the power of his money. In his mind, Rayment merges the pleasure of Marijana’s presence with financially providing for her. He sees himself as a kind of husband who enjoys watching her, thinking of his gaze as an extension of his body “caressing her thighs, her breasts” (93). Rayment wants to hold onto whatever influence or power he might have since his body no longer allows him to be a sexually desirable man, so he makes himself a benefactor to Marijana and a paternal figure to Drago. As a former photographer, Rayment would have viewed women through his camera, framing them as the subjects of his photographs. Despite his declining sexual prowess, he cannot let go of his old ways of seeing women as objects. Coetzee suggests a parallel between Rayment and David Lurie of *Disgrace*: both men continue to exoticize and eroticize women over whom they have some power despite their respective descents from powerful positions. Further, they focus on female bodies and body parts, subjugating and objectifying women as others. Each finds normalcy in their newly-changed identities when they other women. By creating characters like Rayment and Lurie who previously enjoyed positions of privilege and control, Coetzee remarks that it takes little to other others who have not enjoyed the same degree of power or authority.

By establishing the main characters as immigrant others, Coetzee highlights their otherness in relation to the writer Elizabeth Costello. Within the post-colonial setting of Australia, these European immigrant characters become characters in a second sense by being the subjects of Costello’s interest. Rayment and the Jokićs are others as immigrants in Australia, but this novel is about more than their otherness as immigrants. Coetzee utilizes their immigrant positions to invoke their positions as subjects of

Costello, and Coetzee seems to be suggesting that to Costello, and perhaps to any author, the subjects in fiction are always other because of their relation to the author. Critic B. Kite identifies Costello's presence and interference with the characters as an "allegory of authorship," while noting that there is also at play "subsidiary parables of national identity" (16). The national identity issue, as identified by Rayment, concerns "where one passes" (197)—in other words, otherness—so that the allegory of authorship that dominates the novel also addresses otherness. Coetzee indicates that to an author, characters are others, and he uses their struggles with national identity to highlight their otherness in relation to the author Costello.

II. The Allegory of Authorship and the Sympathetic Imagination

It is important not to conflate Coetzee and Costello, while it is apparent that Coetzee uses the allegory of authorship via Costello to test notions of authorship. Reviewer John Banville dubs Costello "the oddest alter ego a male author ever invented for himself" (32) and claims that "Coetzee indulges in mordant self-mockery by bringing himself into the book in the shape of a dowdy, aging Australian female who takes over and directs the plot" (33). Indeed, Coetzee takes the risk that including Costello will backfire, but there seems to be something cleverer behind Costello's presence. Coetzee does not project himself into the Costello character as much as he utilizes her role as a fumbling, intrusive author character to investigate the position and methods of an author. Terry Eagleton's characterization of Costello as a "secret emissary of the author himself" (1917) seems more accurate. Reviewer Pankaj Mishra offers the best assessment of Coetzee's purposes for including Costello: "Coetzee provides a closer

view of the authorial power of manipulation by bringing Elizabeth Costello into Rayment's placid life" (40). The allegory of authorship operating in the novel does not involve Coetzee using the text to show his frustrations as an author, and as Mishra suggests, "such metafiction is by now a commonplace form of artistic narcissism, one that Coetzee seems unlikely to endorse" (42). As such, Costello will be considered a character who allows Coetzee to play with the role of author and not the mouthpiece of Coetzee himself. Costello's character serves as an opportunity for Coetzee to play with and test notions of authorship.

As the focus of Costello's writing, Rayment resists her attempts to understand him in order to write him. However, Costello views writing as a mysterious process in which she does not choose the characters about whom she is to write, and she advocates the view that writing is intuitive. Costello denies Rayment's assumption that she chose him as the subject of her latest work, and she insists that the writing process is intuitive:

'You came to me. You—'

'I came to you? You came to me!'

'Shush, don't shout, the neighbors will think you are beating me.' She slumps into a chair. 'I'm sorry. I am intruding, I know. You came to me, that is all I can say. You occurred to me—a man with a bad leg and no future and an unsuitable passion. That was where it started. Where we go from there I have no idea. Have you any proposal?'

He is silent.

'You may not see the point of it, Mr Rayment, the pursuit of intuitions, but this is what I do. This is how I have built my life: by following up intuitions, including those I cannot at first make sense of. Above all those I cannot at first make sense of.' (85)

Here, Costello denies a purely active role in finding Rayment, suggesting that she, as an author, follows up on the subject that comes to her. As in "A Note on Writing" in which

Coetzee seeks to move beyond the dichotomy of the active and passive voice, he advocates for retaining the middle voice of the verb “to write” through the character of Costello and her conversations about writing. Costello, as an author, both *does* writing and is *affected* by writing; she writes and is written. Through the middle voice, an author is drawn into the writing on the same ontological level as the characters, and in a sense, the author becomes a character by being both writer and written. In *Slow Man*, Rayment continues to challenge Costello’s formulation of authorship, but just as Costello is a character in Coetzee’s novel, it may be said that she also becomes a character in her own writing of Rayment. It seems that the intuitive process of writing means that, at least as Costello defines authorship, it is not up to Rayment whether or not Costello is in his life, living in his house, and writing about him (*Slow Man* 87).

Rayment characterizes Costello in various ways, all of which indicate that her authorship is involved in that she aggressively attempts to learn more about Rayment in order to write him. Twice Costello urges Rayment to ““Push!”” (83, 204), both when she first arrives at his apartment and after he tells her much more about himself. While attempting to determine why Costello has descended upon his house, Rayment asks ““What story would make me worthy of your attention?”” to which Costello answers ““How must I know? Think of something. . . . Push!”” (83). Here, Costello demonstrates that she relies on Rayment to provide material for her writing, and more importantly, it is not enough for him to relate a few details about himself. He must push himself, as a “woman in labour” (83) must in order to deliver a child, and there is a sense that revealing himself for the purposes of Costello’s writing would be like giving birth to his story. Coetzee uses the imagery of childbirth to suggest the gestation of Rayment’s story

and the difficulty with which his story will be delivered to Costello. In the second instance of Costello demanding that Rayment push himself, Costello relates that she is waiting for him (203). In response, “He shakes his head helplessly. ‘I don’t know what you want,’ he says. ‘Push!’ she says” (204). Even after recounting events in his life, Costello relies on him for his deeper story. Though Costello depends on intuition to find Rayment, she shows that, as an author, she must follow up on her intuition and push her characters.

Rayment portrays Costello and her role as author as an indefensible force of nature that is both sneaky and omnipresent. In another round of Costello’s attempts at persuading Rayment, she assures him that “‘It does not have to be this way, Paul. I say it again: this is your story, not mine. The moment you decide to take charge, I will fade away. You will hear no more from me; it will be as if I had never existed’” (100). After a lengthy exchange, Rayment feels that Costello is “‘like a sea beating against his skull . . . he could already be lost overboard, tugged to and fro by the currents of the deep’” (100). Like the sea, Costello pulls Rayment into a new world in which he is not entirely in control, and his helplessness is brought out by her constant badgering. Rayment’s identity has become fluid, and Costello further unsettles him so that his identity begins to change. Rayment is falling into a new phase of his life, propelled by Costello and his new disability. He has been washed out to sea, lost his bearings, and must learn to survive in a new environment. His disability has disoriented him as if he has been thrown overboard. By using the sea as a metaphor, Coetzee demonstrates that Rayment feels he cannot control the direction in which he is being pulled by Costello, nor can he really control the directions in which his new body takes him.

Later, Rayment describes Costello as an animal sneaking around to observe him. First, he thinks of Costello as a dog: “the feeling has not left him that he need only reach down and his fingers will encounter Elizabeth Costello, stretched out of the carpet like a dog, watching and waiting” (112). By associating Costello with a dog, Rayment thinks of her as a kind of companion, albeit one that he would rather not have around. Her constant observations unsettle him, and after reading what she has written about him, he realizes that “It is as he feared: she knows everything, every jot and tittle. Damn her! All the time he thought he was his own master he has been in a cage like a rat, darting this way and that, yammering to himself, with the infernal woman standing over him, observing, listening, taking notes, recording his progress” (122). At this point, Costello is less a companion than a predator observing her prey. As she continues to unnerve him, he begins to link her with the cunning of foxes, “aware of a certain quality about her, vulpine rather than canine . . . prowling from room to room in the dark, sniffing, on the hunt” (123). These characterizations suggest that Costello’s talents may be instinctive and that her authorship results from keen observation, but notably, she remains involved with her characters, actively pursuing them. Rayment clearly cannot escape Costello’s vigilance, and through Rayment’s descriptions of Costello as a force of nature, Coetzee remarks that authorship, in some sense, is natural.

Coetzee validates Rayment’s skepticism of Costello’s formulation of authorship by showing Costello as an author who moves beyond intuition, interfering with her characters. As in *Elizabeth Costello*, some of her arguments seem to be founded upon faulty logic, and other characters challenge her claims about authorship. Rayment’s characterizations of Costello as author continue to suggest that her authorship is both

intuitive and involved, and given Costello's prodding, it seems that authorship, for her, involves interaction with characters. Her interrogations suggest that her sympathetic imagination does not stop at instinct; through Costello, Coetzee suggests that the sympathetic imagination is not a trait that simply occurs naturally in authors—or anyone else, for that matter. Furthermore, Rayment resists Costello's interpretations, suggesting that her sympathetic imagination is flawed. According to Walter Jackson Bate, the sympathetic imagination seeks to perceive the "essential character and reality" of the subject through "instinctive but sagacious thought" (161). By characterizing the sympathetic imagination in this manner, Bate suggests that one may assume one is using instinct but is actually doing so unwisely. Thus, sympathetic imagination is natural or instinctive but must be tempered with wisdom. In *Slow Man*, Costello uses her judgment when interpreting her sympathetic imagination. According to Bate's formulation, Costello is using her sympathetic imagination properly because she is applying her own wisdom to her interpretations. Since Costello utilizes more than her intuition to reach Rayment, and since Rayment charges her with imperfect perceptions, Coetzee indirectly suggests that Rayment's "essential character and reality" may not accurately be represented by Costello's sympathetic imagination. Simply, though Costello seems to be adhering to Bate's description of a sympathetic imagination, her supposed wisdom may be incorrect or inaccurate. Coetzee shows that an author's alleged wisdom may lead the sympathetic imagination astray.

A. Layers of Characters

One must bear in mind, however, that the novel is a fiction that Coetzee has written within which characters debate and challenge notions of authorship. By using this fictional frame, Coetzee is able to present and test common ways in which readers view authorship and characters. If Rayment is indeed a creation of Costello, her representation of him may not be anything but accurate, including his voiced opposition to the ways she characterizes him. Costello, of course, is not a living, breathing person but an author character whom Coetzee has created and uses as a pseudo-mouthpiece to test the idea that authorship involves sympathetic imagination. Costello serves as a representative of the middle voice, both writing and being written into fiction. Rayment likewise occupies an interesting layer, for he is a character in both Coetzee's novel and Costello's work. He objects not to Coetzee's novel but to Costello's interpretations; Rayment voices opposition to Costello's characterization of him—the only characterizations that the reader sees him witness. Coetzee has created an illusion of characters objecting and calling into question notions of authorship. It is an illusion suggesting that these characters are self-aware, when instead, their autonomy is merely a façade.

Without making explicit claims about her ability to imagine sympathetically, as she does in the novel bearing her name, Costello demonstrates elements of the authorial process and discusses with Rayment the kind of character he should become. While it is difficult to discern whether the voice discussing authorship is Coetzee's or merely Costello's, Coetzee creates a dialogue between Costello and Rayment that tests perceptions of the authorial process. Rayment challenges Costello's claims about

impulse and passion, suggesting that as an author, she should recognize the value in careful revision: “‘Surely you don’t scribble down the first thing that comes into your head and mail it off to your publisher. Surely you wait for second thoughts. Surely you revise. Isn’t the whole of writing a matter of second thoughts—second thoughts and third thoughts and further thoughts?’” (228), with which Costello agrees. However, Costello further charges Rayment with living a life void of passion, making him a difficult and uninteresting character to write. Here, then, Costello suggests a balance between careful composition while writing and characters who act on their passions. She refers to characters from classic literature, Don Quixote and Emma Bovary, who come to act with abandon. Don Quixote and Emma Bovary both imitate other characters from literature, so Costello is suggesting that Rayment act like a character, not merely that he just act with abandon. Here, Coetzee builds layers of intertextuality, showing that Costello suggests to Rayment that he imitate other literary imitators. Rayment simply sees Costello’s suggestion as a ploy to develop him into a character interesting enough to include in a book, while Rayment recognizes that his actions, while they might be worthy enough to include in Costello’s work, will affect him and others in his life. Costello does not refute his accusations and continues to encourage him to become more interesting for the purposes of including him as a character:

‘So that someone, somewhere *might* put you in a book. So that someone might *want* to put you in a book. Someone, anyone—not just me. So that you may be *worth* putting in a book. Alongside Alonso and Emma. Become major, Paul. Live like a hero. That is what the classics teach us. Be a main character. Otherwise what is life for?’ (229)

By calling on classic literature once again, Costello seems to suggest using characters in literature to serve as a moral compass, conflating real life with fiction. Of course, Rayment is not an actual person: he is first a character in Coetzee's novel, becoming secondly a character within the work of Costello, also Coetzee's character. To Costello, Rayment merely exists to serve as her character.

With Costello established as an authorial figure, Rayment becomes aware of how he might be perceived, leading him to think of his life as a performance for Costello's gaze. Coetzee invokes the language of theatre to demonstrate the relationship of power between Costello and Rayment, between author and subject. As a photographer, Rayment is familiar with staging and composing a scene. He reflects upon his encounter with Marianna as if they were subjects in a photograph, "A one-legged man and a partially disrobed woman waiting for what? For the click of a camera shutter? Australian Gothic" (107). Here, Rayment thinks in terms of framing and thematic categorization. For Rayment, Costello's role as author leads to other comparisons of her as an authority figure with power over him:

'You treat me like a puppet,' he complains. 'You treat everyone like a puppet. You make up stories and bully us into playing them out for you. You should open a puppet theatre, or a zoo. . . . Rows and rows of cages holding the people who have, as you put it, *come to you* in the course of your career as a liar and fabulator. You could charge admission. You could make a living out of it. Parents could bring their children at weekends to gawp at us and throw peanuts. Easier than writing books that no one reads. . . . I am not a hero, Mrs Costello. Losing a leg does not qualify one for a dramatic role. Losing a leg is neither tragic nor comic, just unfortunate.' (117)

In this passage, Rayment likens Costello as author to puppet master and zookeeper, one who controls others within a confined space created for spectators to gaze upon them. He resists her manipulation of him into a character or spectacle for her purposes of writing, of putting him on display. This passage relates to the way in which Lucy resists Lurie treating her like a character in his life story in *Disgrace*. Lucy accuses Lurie of treating her like a minor character (*Disgrace*, 198), and in both novels Coetzee uses layers of metafiction to show characters resisting the very characterization in which Coetzee engages. In these two passages, Coetzee implies that characters who object to being written assert their autonomy and reject the so-called sympathy of the writer. As the subject of her observations, Rayment opposes Costello's formulations of his character, and perhaps most of all, he opposes what he sees as her misrepresenting his life: "This is not a comedy, Mrs Costello" (130). This begs the question: what is it, then, if not a comedy? For Coetzee's readers, the events in the novel likely appear comedic, but it seems that Rayment resists an author turning his life into a dramatic sequence of events, whether comic or tragic.

B. Limits of the Sympathetic Imagination

As one whose subject perceives her as a manipulative observer, the ways in which Costello urges others to apply a sympathetic imagination demonstrate her views about its possibilities; however, the results of her influence show that the sympathetic imagination can meet resistance by the imaginer. The most telling conversation about the limits of the sympathetic imagination occurs when Costello attempts to make Drago understand what it would be like to be in Rayment's position:

‘Imagine: you are sixty years old and suddenly one morning you wake up head over heels in love with a woman who is not only younger than you by a quarter of a century but also married, happily married, more or less. What would you do?’

Slowly Drago shakes his head. ‘That’s not a fair question. If I’m sixteen, how do I know what it is like to be sixty? It’s different if you’re sixty—then you can remember. But . . . It’s Mr Rayment we are talking about, right? How can I be Mr Rayment if I can’t get inside him?’ (138)

First, Costello instructs Drago to *imagine*, presumably meaning to clear his mind of his own thoughts and feelings and to allow himself to have qualities projected upon him. Age is the first quality that Drago should imagine: that he is sixty years old. Secondly, she tells him to think of what it would be like to be in love with a woman, and while Drago may be able to understand having strong feelings for a woman, he is further instructed to imagine what it would be like to be in love with a much younger woman who is happily married. It is unlikely that Drago would have had experiences similar to those that Rayment has had, except possibly being in love. Drago’s response answers precisely this: he cannot imagine the experiences of a much older man—he cannot imagine age. For Drago, the sympathetic imagination is limited to experiences held in common, and Drago cannot imagine himself into Rayment. Here, Costello may be showing how she comes sympathetically to imagine her characters, yet her methods are not accepted by Drago because he cannot see how one can imagine another’s experiences if a characteristic such as age remains so dissimilar. In contrast with the formulation of the sympathetic imagination that Costello sets out in *Elizabeth Costello*, in which the success of the imagination depends entirely on the subject/imager, Drago suggests that the success of imagining another has everything to do with common traits the subject

shares with the object. As Costello leads Drago through this hypothetical exercise, perhaps modeling how an author would conjecture what a character's feelings, thoughts, or actions would be, Drago resists speaking for Rayment because they have little in common. In this way, Coetzee emphasizes the inevitable failure of Costello's formulation of authorship and sympathetic imagination.

Costello clearly attempts to get more out of Rayment through the course of the novel, and Rayment recognizes that Costello, as an invader other who has intruded upon his life, takes a position as predatory confidant. Her persistence wears him down:

Why then does he lay himself bare before the Costello woman, who is surely no friend to him? There can be only one answer: because she has worn him down. A thoroughly professional performance on her part. One takes up position beside one's prey, and waits, and eventually one's prey yields. The sort of thing every priest knows. Or every vulture. Vulture lore. (157)

As an author skilled in gleaning stories from subjects, Costello becomes like a priest, close but untouchable and powerful, while also like a bloodthirsty vulture, feasting on anything available. Costello is a stranger, a guest in the lives of her characters, and Coetzee shows similarities between author and colonizer through Costello. She enters the life and living space of a man who never invited her, and her observatory habits get under Rayment's skin. She is an outsider looking in on her subjects who are the other in relation to her (158-160). Like a colonizer, Costello seems to think that she knows all about her subjects, but like many colonized, Rayment voices opposition to her interpretations. Her authorial skills in the sympathetic imagination, it appears, prove faulty.

C. The Author as Colonizer

Throughout his writing, Coetzee attempts to examine the workings of relationships between colonizers and colonized. Coetzee creates situations in which one character has real or imagined power over another in order to examine how some characters accept the role of colonizer and others either resist or accept the role of the colonized. In *Slow Man*, Costello acts as a kind of colonizer, taking up residence in Rayment's home and attempting to tell his story. In a way, she uses him for her own ends. However, Rayment resists Costello's presence and her interpretations of him. He feels like he is always being observed. In *Black Looks*, bell hooks identifies the power that colonizers have in looking at others and the opposition that colonized people show in response to the gaze: "The 'gaze' has been and is a site of resistance for colonized black people globally. Subordinates in relations of power learn experientially that there is a critical gaze, one that 'looks' to document" (116), just as Rayment resists the critical, documentary gaze of Costello. While hooks explains the oppressive gaze through a racial lens, Coetzee uses this idea to show that any unwanted gaze can make a person feel objectified and documented. Frantz Fanon describes the feeling of the colonized being under the gaze of white colonizers in *Black Skin, White Masks*: "... the glances of the other fixed me there, in the sense in which a chemical solution is fixed by a dye. I was indignant; I demanded an explanation. Nothing happened. I burst apart. Now the fragments have been put together again by another self" (109). As Fanon describes, Rayment is fixed by Costello's gaze. He is indignant and demands an explanation, but Costello continues observing him. Rayment even begins to see himself from Costello's perspective, and as a result, Costello becomes the writer of Rayment. Costello attempts

to put the pieces of Rayment together in her writing of him. Fanon describes in predatory terms the life lived under the gaze of the colonizer: “I move slowly in the world. . . . I progress by crawling. And already, I am being dissected under white eyes, the only real eyes. I am fixed. . . . they objectively cut away slices of my reality. I am laid bare” (116). Costello cuts away slices of Rayment’s reality through observation and documentation, and she lays bare some his private thoughts.

Similarly, Coetzee examines how Lurie takes up the role of colonizer in *Disgrace* and Costello lays claim to the minds of others, particularly her characters, in *Elizabeth Costello*. In *Disgrace*, Lurie assumes the role of a kind of male colonizer by appropriating the women Melanie and Soraya. In contrast, Lucy resists Lurie’s writing of her; she resists being colonized and her voice appropriated. Costello makes many claims about her ability to imagine sympathetically in Elizabeth Costello, and in doing so, Coetzee suggests that Costello, too, occupies the role of colonizer inside the minds of those to whom she lays claim. Costello occupies the mind of Molly Bloom, a character who first existed in the mind of James Joyce, and she maintains that she can enter the minds of animals as well. Coetzee uses these varying levels and different types of colonization to underline the power struggles occurring between characters. In each novel, various characters voice their opposition, and as a result, Coetzee demonstrates how problematic authors’ claims can be in appropriating others.

The literary characters in Coetzee’s novels appear to resist, but their resistance is only an illusion created by Coetzee. Coetzee creates the illusion of autonomy and self-awareness in order to expose and examine the ways in which authors create worlds of conflict and challenge in their fiction. By doing so, Coetzee exposes a typical

explanation of authorship: mysticism of the sympathetic imagination. Coetzee creates situations in which characters express their autonomy in order to challenge common authorial notions of control and power, both by the author of the novel and by the writer-character. The examination of the power plays between the characters serves to expose conflict within many power relationships. One critical difference between Coetzee's construction of his characters' power over other characters and the power of a colonizer is that characters are fictional, whereas colonizers and colonized people are human beings. As Rayment points out, authors are puppetmasters in many ways because they have complete control over their characters. Authors can create situations in which characters either resist or acquiesce, but in the end, those situations and characterizations are controlled by authors. On the other hand, colonizers may like to believe that they possess complete control over colonized people, but by all measures, colonized people are real flesh and blood human beings with minds of their own. Colonized people can exhibit real resistance that is not controllable by colonizers, yet resistance typically comes at a great loss of life. By creating situations in which characters express their autonomy, Coetzee gives voice to people who may typically remain voiceless in fiction. Further, he underscores sites of resistance among existing human beings.

Rayment resists Costello's assessment of him as *cold*, and his suggestion that she become more charitable reveals that Rayment does not view Costello as an author whose sympathetic imagination always works well. "*Not cold*, he will say, *and not French either. A man who sees the world in his own way and who loves in his own way. And a man who not too long ago lost part of his own body: do not forget that. Have a little charity*, he will say. *Then perhaps you may find it in you to write*" (162). Here, Rayment

determines that Costello cannot write, or at least cannot write well, because she lacks sympathy. Thus, Rayment views sympathy, or charity, as a necessary quality for an author to possess in order for the author to write accurately while representing characters faithfully. However, Costello challenges Rayment's assumptions about truthfulness in writing by questioning whether or not truth is essential in writing. In this way, Costello can assert that her sympathetic imagination functions accurately enough to tell a story—no matter how faithful to the original subject of the sympathetic imagination the author may be. Perhaps Coetzee suggests here that, despite Costello's attempts to imagine sympathetically, she and, indeed, all authors will come up short.

The question of honesty in Costello's words and writing arises more than once, and Rayment remains skeptical of the author in his midst because he is aware that she is observing him in order to write him while he mistrusts her faithfulness. The first major instance of Rayment questioning Costello's honesty occurs after his liaison with Marianna; he wonders if he has the "true story" about her (115). In wondering about Marianna's true identity, Rayment faces a "deeper question: Does it matter who the woman really was; does it matter if he has been duped?" (117). Despite his indignation at what he perceives as Costello's dishonesty, he comes to hint that the truth about Marianna may not matter because he cannot change his prior actions, and Costello will take from his encounter with Marianna what she will—regardless of the truth. At this point, Rayment may begin to question the integrity of Costello's potentially misleading stories and anecdotes. Coetzee seems to be asking: does it matter whether an author tells the truth, as long as there is a story that readers believe? Echoing Rayment's inner thoughts, Costello poses the rhetorical question to him later after he relates a story about

an affair with an employee: “Of course it is true. But does it matter if it is true? Surely it is not up to me to play God, separating the sheep from the goats, dismissing the false stories, preserving the true” (202-3). Here, Costello makes known that she does not necessarily strive for truthfulness because it may not matter ultimately; her claim that it is not up to her to decide what is true and what is false fits with her statement to the board in “At the Gate” in *Elizabeth Costello*. Coetzee reveals that, for Costello, truthfulness matters less than serving as a storyteller.

III. Conclusion

Rayment resists the new facet of his identity as a disabled person but comes to accept his otherness to some extent by the end of the novel. Coetzee brings to light the issue of immigrant identity and uses Rayment to suggest that immigrants may feel that they are always sticking out, like a sore thumb. Coetzee further portrays Rayment as someone who finds it easy to other others who do not possess power or authority.

Costello relies on her characters to push themselves so that she may write them, but several of the characters resist her suggestions that the sympathetic imagination is possible. Throughout *Slow Man*, Coetzee suggests that authors will always somehow come up short in writing characters.

In sum, Costello is able to claim that her observations enable her sympathetic imagination to function so that she can write because she is indifferent to the accuracy of her imagination. By demonstrating that truthfulness and fidelity to characters do not matter to her in the end, Costello is deaf to the objections voiced by her subjects. In each situation in which she misinterprets Rayment, Costello discounts his protests. Coetzee

uses Costello to show that authors may feel that their sympathetic imaginations allow for accurate, delicate understanding and representation in writing while simultaneously ignoring the voices that challenge their prose. The immigrant positions of Rayment and the Jokićs highlight their otherness to Costello, the outsider looking in, and the allegory of authorship within the novel offers questions about the nature of writing and the role of the author.

In *Slow Man*, Coetzee creates a staged metaphysical meeting place in the middle voice. In that way, Costello is both *writer* and *written*. She serves as an intermediary for the reader, providing alternate interpretations of Rayment and challenging him to be a better character, ostensibly for her own work as well as for Coetzee's work. Costello does not speak directly to the *Slow Man* reader, nor does she function as a mouthpiece for Coetzee's notions of authorship. However, Costello claims to be on the same metaphysical level as Coetzee, but this is only a staged level that Coetzee has created in order for Costello to lay claim to authorial prowess. She also claims to be on the same level as her own character, Rayment:

‘No, rest assured, a poor forked creature, that is all I am, no different from yourself. An old woman who scribbles away, page after page, day after day, damned if she knows why. If there is a presiding spirit – and I don't think there is – then it is me he stands over, with his lash, not you. *No slacking, young Elizabeth Costello!* he says, and giving me a lick of the whip. *Get on with the job now!* No, this is a very ordinary story, very ordinary indeed. . .’ (233)

In the very unordinary story of *Slow Man*, Coetzee writes to find out what he wants to say about authorship, opposing common notions of what it means to write fiction and the

possibilities of the sympathetic imagination. In *Slow Man*, Coetzee layers fiction upon fiction, creating anything but a very ordinary story.

Conclusion

In *Disgrace*, *Elizabeth Costello*, and *Slow Man*, J. M. Coetzee has constructed a fictional frame in which he presents a metaphysical meeting place. By doing so, Coetzee creates an illusion of autonomy and self-awareness so that some characters can resist others' readings and writings of them. It is as if Coetzee is having conversations with his characters, and he constructs conversations in which the characters resist the very creation Coetzee offers in his writing. This metaphysical frame allows Coetzee to show problems with some common notions of authorship, particularly claims that authorship is a mystical or spiritual process and that good authorship is touched by genius or the divine. Coetzee demonstrates a mediated success of the sympathetic imagination, showing that the possibilities of the sympathetic imagination are limited. However, Coetzee does not discount the possibilities of the sympathetic imagination altogether. Instead, he demonstrates situations in which the sympathetic imagination succeeds to some degree, including sympathy with animals, but eventually runs up against limits, particularly when gender, disability, and ethnicity or race are involved. As a result, Coetzee indirectly challenges the cult of authorial genius to which some authors subscribe. At the same time, he refrains from suggesting that the rhetorical model of authorship, in which the author is a craftsman and manipulator, is a viable alternative.

Without openly stating an alternative notion of authorship, Coetzee navigates the waters between mystical sympathetic imagination where the author is genius and calculated rhetoric where the author's success is a matter of technique. Though he shows some of the limits of the sympathetic imagination, Coetzee stops short of suggesting that

society has no place for the sympathetic imagination; he also fails to advocate the complete failure of the sympathetic imagination. Instead, in Coetzee's novels, there is a sense that the sympathetic imagination is indeed necessary in order for society to function, even if it remains imperfect.

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Curriculum Vitae

Christine Sego Caldwell

Education

Indiana University School of Law—Indianapolis
Juris Doctor, expected December 2012

Indiana University—Indianapolis
Master of Arts in English, May 2011

Indiana University—Indianapolis
Certificate in Professional Editing, December 2010

Indiana University—Bloomington
Bachelor of Arts in English and Anthropology, Minor: Germanic Studies, May 2004

Honors, Awards, Fellowships

- Recipient, IUPUI University Fellowship
- Member, Phi Beta Kappa
- Recipient, Indiana University College of Arts and Sciences Palmer-Brandon Prize
- Recipient, Indiana University James A. Work Undergraduate Award for the outstanding senior English major
- Recipient, Indiana University Hutton Honors College Professional Experience Grant
- Recipient, Indiana University Hutton Honors College International Experience Grant
- Recipient, Indiana University Hutton Honors College Thesis Award

Research and Training Experience

- Student Note Editor, *Indiana International and Comparative Law Review*, 2010-11
- Student Note Candidate, *Indiana International and Comparative Law Review*, 2010-09
- Research Assistant, Santayana Edition, Institute for American Thought, IUPUI, 2007-08
- Research Assistant, Center of Excellence in Leadership of Learning, University of Indianapolis, 2006-07
- Book Review Editor Intern, *Africa Today*, Indiana University, 2003
- Writing Tutor, Writing Tutorial Services, Indiana University, 2002-04

Professional Experience

Lead International Credentials Analyst

Office of International Affairs, Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis

Aug. 2009-present

- Issue visa documents for F-1/J-1 student visa applicants in accordance with USCIS regulations
- Advise incoming international students in compliance with federal legal and university requirements
- Train academic department faculty and staff on admissions procedures
- Update internet and paper application materials
- Evaluate international graduate applications and credentials, including degree programs and university accreditation

Student Administrative Law Judge

Indiana Department of Workforce Development

June 2009-July 2009

- Conducted unemployment appeal hearings with claimants and employers
- Made findings of fact and conclusions of law regarding claimants' eligibility for benefits
- Wrote appellate decisions and applied state case and statutory law

International Credentials Analyst

Office of International Affairs, Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis

June 2004-Aug. 2006

- Issued visa documents for incoming international students
- Evaluated international graduate applications and credentials

Conferences Attended

British Commonwealth and Postcolonial Studies Conference, Savannah, GA, Feb. 16, 2008

- Presented paper: "It's a Dog's Life: Dogs as a Window on Race and Transformation in J.M. Coetzee's Disgrace"