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978-0-521-86747-4 - The Cambridge Introduction to J. M. Coetzee

Dominic Head

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*The Cambridge Introduction to  
J. M. Coetzee*

The South African novelist and Nobel Laureate J. M. Coetzee is widely studied around the world and attracts considerable critical attention. With the publication of *Disgrace* Coetzee began to enjoy popular as well as critical acclaim, but his work can be as challenging as it is impressive. This book is addressed to students and readers of Coetzee: it is an up-to-date survey of the writer's fiction and context, written accessibly for those new to his work. All of the fiction is discussed, and the brooding presence of the political situation in South Africa, during the first part of his career, is given serious attention in a comprehensive account of the author's main influences. The revealing strand of confessional writing in the latter half of Coetzee's career is given full consideration. This introduction will help new readers understand and appreciate one of the most important and challenging authors in contemporary literature.

Dominic Head is Professor of Modern English Literature at the University of Nottingham. His many publications include *The Cambridge Introduction to Modern British Fiction, 1950–2000* (Cambridge, 2002) and (as editor) *The Cambridge Guide to Literature in English*, third edition (Cambridge, 2006).

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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo, Delhi

Cambridge University Press

The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

[www.cambridge.org](http://www.cambridge.org)

Information on this title: [www.cambridge.org/9780521687096](http://www.cambridge.org/9780521687096)

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First published 2009

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

*A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library*

*Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data*

Head, Dominic.

The Cambridge introduction to J. M. Coetzee / Dominic Head.

p. cm. – (Cambridge introductions to literature)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-521-86747-4 – ISBN 978-0-521-68709-6 (pbk.)

1. Coetzee, J. M., 1940 – Criticism and interpretation. I. Title. II. Series.

PR9369.3.C58Z675 2009

823'.914–dc22 2009000060

ISBN 978-0-521-86747-4 hardback

ISBN 978-0-521-68709-6 paperback

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## Abbreviations

- AI *Age of Iron*. 1990; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991
- B *Boyhood: Scenes From Provincial Life*. London: Secker and Warburg, 1997
- D *Dusklands*. 1974; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983
- DBY *Diary of a Bad Year*. London: Harvill Secker, 2007
- Dis *Disgrace*. London: Secker and Warburg, 1999
- DP *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews*, ed. David Attwell. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992
- EC *Elizabeth Costello: Eight Lessons*. London: Secker and Warburg, 2003
- F *Foe*. 1986; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987
- GO *Giving Offense: Essays on Censorship*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996
- IHC *In the Heart of the Country*. 1977; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982
- LA *The Lives of Animals*, ed. Amy Gutman. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999
- MK *Life and Times of Michael K*. 1983; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985
- MP *The Master of Petersburg*. London: Secker and Warburg, 1994
- SM *Slow Man*. London: Secker and Warburg, 2005
- WB *Waiting for the Barbarians*. 1980; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982
- WW *White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988
- Y *Youth*. London: Secker and Warburg, 2002

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## Preface

The South African novelist J. M. Coetzee is one of the most highly respected – and most frequently studied – contemporary authors. His novels occupy a special place in South African literature, and in the development of the twentieth- and 21st-century novel more generally. They are widely taught, internationally, on undergraduate modules, and interest amongst post-graduate students is high. He was the first novelist to win the Booker Prize twice (for *Life and Times of Michael K* in 1983, and *Disgrace* in 1999), and has been awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature (2003). With the publication of *Disgrace* Coetzee began to enjoy popular as well as critical acclaim. Nevertheless, he is a difficult writer who engages with complex ideas, and it is the task of this book to explain the significance of Coetzee in an introductory spirit. This is a challenge, because his works can make an instant and impressive impact on readers, who are then sometimes uncertain as to how to understand, or account for that impact.

It is sometimes said that postmodernism arrived in Africa with the publication, in 1974, of *Dusklands*, Coetzee's first novel (although he is frequently discussed as a 'late modernist'). Presented as a pair of linked novellas, *Dusklands* associates its portrayal of eighteenth-century Dutch imperialism in South Africa with an anatomy of the terror that underpins US policy in Vietnam. These juxtaposed and bleak psychological fictions constitute an early instance of the contemporary 'internationalization' of the novel; and they raise questions that have become central to the academic study of the novel: how does literary writing bear upon critical definitions of modernism/postmodernism and colonialism/postcolonialism? How can 'history' be imagined in novels? As Coetzee's literary career has unfolded, in tandem with a distinguished academic career, his creative writing has repeatedly pushed at the questions that have been central to his life and times: what does it mean when an author pledges allegiance to the discourse of fiction (rather than the discourse of politics)? Is there a function for a literary canon? And what kind of ethical stance can be claimed for the novel, and by the academic-novelist?

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It should also be acknowledged that Coetzee is an accomplished essayist. His essays, written in a customary lucid and elegant style, cover a range of important contemporary debates, including: the modernist legacy; colonial identity; and the question of censorship. This book is principally concerned with Coetzee the novelist, so there is no extended discussion of the non-fiction in its own right. Reference is made to the essays, however, where they illuminate aspects of Coetzee's fiction.

For the first part of his career, up to and including the publication of *Age of Iron* (1990), it was inevitable that Coetzee's writing would be received as a response – usually, though not always, an oblique response – to the era of apartheid in South Africa. Coetzee occupied an interim position in a very particular branch of postcolonial writing: the literature of the 'post-colonizer'. This transitional site between Europe and Africa can be articulated by appropriating Coetzee's own comment on selected pre-apartheid writers of the 1920s and 1930s: 'white writing is white only in so far as it is generated by the concerns of people no longer European, not yet African' (*WW*, p. 11). That implication of a natural transition, as yet to come, carries its own censure of apartheid society where both biological and cultural hybridity were artificially policed and prevented.

There is also a broader colonial resonance in the theme of 'European ideas writing themselves out in Africa' (*DP*, pp. 338–9); but in Coetzee's work this has inevitably attracted censure from those impatient for political change in late- and then post-apartheid South Africa, who felt that the novelist had a duty to engage *overtly* with the world of history and politics. That sense of pressure in South African literary culture, to make writing serve a political purpose, has waned somewhat since the demise of apartheid and the democratic election of 1994. Yet Coetzee has continued to be a target of criticism where he has been perceived to be failing in his public 'duties'. Coetzee's writing – perhaps internalizing the sense of constraint in South African society – has been dominated by specifically literary questions, and does not produce the more obvious gestures of engagement and commitment that some commentators called for. (Coetzee's fellow South African novelist – and fellow Nobel Laureate – Nadine Gordimer, was one.) Yet Coetzee's apparently oblique engagements embody their own gesture of resistance, specifically a resistance to the idea that literature must supplement – and so be in thrall to – an agreed history 'out there'. Coetzee works on the principle that the novel should not supplement history, but establish a position of rivalry with it. This is one of the ways in which his emphasis on questions of textuality is a deployment of postmodernist (or late modernist) and post-structuralist concerns fitted to his context.

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In his more recent phase of writing – and especially since the publication of *Disgrace* (1999), that groundbreaking second Booker winner – his concerns have reached a wider readership, in an exemplary instance of how the burning issues of professionalized academia can be made relevant to a non-academic audience. His readers can expect to be required to reflect on public morality and personal responsibility, the problems of the regulated society, mortality, and the function of the reader. As the shadow of apartheid recedes, so has Coetzee's writing struck out in vital new directions. His novels have all had a power and a resonance beyond the narrow concerns of academia, though this tendency to reach beyond the constraints of intellectual life has become more pronounced. For his entire output, however, the same critical problem obtains: how to treat the gap between the surface lucidity and the underlying complexity of Coetzee's work, how to indicate his intellectual importance without leaving the non-specialist behind. This book is an attempt to bridge that gap.

In a related sense, 'bridging' is one way of defining Coetzee's overall appeal and achievement. In the work preparatory to his book *The Lives of Animals* (1999), later incorporated in the novel *Elizabeth Costello* (2003), Coetzee gave a series of public lectures which were actually extracts from this fictional work-in-progress. One such was his Dawson Scott Memorial Lecture 'What is Realism?', given at the PEN International Writer's Day at London's Café Royal in 1996, which was finally to form the opening chapter of *Elizabeth Costello*. Presenting this piece of fiction as a lecture, which incorporates a fictionalized lecture also entitled 'What is Realism?', Coetzee struck upon a form of performance which simultaneously cultivated 'the realist illusion' while reflecting self-consciously upon it. This is the essence of Coetzee's 'bridging' – bringing together the concerns of academic and non-academic readers, in a mode that puts a heavy burden on the realist bridge upon which it still depends.

This is an astonishing duality, a mode of writing that combines a sophisticated control of fictional time and space with a self-consciousness that continually threatens to disrupt it, but without ever quite doing so. At its best, Coetzee's fiction generates a beguiling, elegiac yet brooding resonance. The result is a series of poetic and elusive novels which, like the characters they contain, wilfully resist any critical attempt to master or reduce. This means that the element of misrepresentation that is evident in all criticism is, perhaps, highlighted most especially in criticism of Coetzee's novels. And this may sound like a particular hostage to fortune at the beginning of an introductory volume of this kind; but it does give me the opportunity to place stress on the need for openness in the reading of a novel by Coetzee, even while acknowledging the acute difficulty of sustaining that openness.

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The various elements of ambivalence that surround Coetzee's work – the implicit debate about representation, his sense of contextual constraint as a writer, and the cultivated elusiveness of the novels themselves – are suggestively caught in this remarkable statement by Coetzee from an interview with David Attwell, which I will leave unglossed. I hope it will resonate in the mind of the reader consulting the pages that follow:

I am not a herald of community or anything else . . . I am someone who has intimations of freedom (as every chained prisoner has) and constructs representations – which are shadows themselves – of people slipping their chains and turning their faces to the light. (*DP*, p. 341)