Rape and Silence in J.M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace*

Linda Melkner Moser

D-essay

Supervisor: Anna Fåhraeus

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List of Abbreviations

ANC  African National Congress

FBI  Federal Bureau of Investigation (of the United States)

USDS  United States Department of State
Abstract

This essay discusses rape and silence in J.M. Coetzee’s novel *Disgrace*, with focus on how and why the characters Melanie and Lucy are silenced after being raped. Paying special attention to gender and race, as well as the novel’s South African context, an attempt is made to consider how rape is represented in *Disgrace*, and how this representation is related to the silence of Melanie and Lucy. The discussion’s theoretical framework is based on feminist theories on sexual violence and rape, as well as theory on cultural scripts, sexual scripts, and rape myths. This essay finds that the rapes in J.M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace* are representations of South Africa’s inverted racial power structures, and its traditional gender structures; structures that contribute to silencing Melanie and Lucy. This essay argues that Coetzee has deliberately activated South African cultural scripts in the text in an attempt to expose problematic viewpoints regarding gender and race in society, as well as in the reader.
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Introduction

Silence has long surrounded the violence suffered by women and children at the hands of men; the battered spouse claims to have fallen down the stairs, the beaten child maintains that his bruises are his own doing, and the rape victim tells herself it was probably her own fault, she never should have worn that skirt. As long as a society allows silence to shroud certain types of crimes, that society is, to a certain extent, culpable. Cultural response to sexual violence is related to the cultural scripts existent in the society in question. Cultural scripts are culturally determined cognitive schemata that function as prototypes for how events normally proceed (Ryan 774-775). This essay considers rape and silence, and their connection to cultural scripts, in J.M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace*.

*Disgrace* is an uncomfortable novel. It depicts rape and racial tensions, and it is focalized through a rather unsympathetic protagonist, David Lurie. The novel is unsettling, and it does not present enough clues about characters and events for the reader to draw indisputable conclusions about what happens. On many levels, there is a lack of narrative closure. The reader has to consider not only what can be found in the text, and between the lines of the text, but also what is left unsaid. Following the depiction of traumatic events, there is no justice, no fairness, and very little redemption. In analyzing *Disgrace*, there are times when a suspicion arises that the novel is a philosophical project disguised as a novel. Coetzee appears in complete control of his text; he has left things unsaid for a reason. One of the most fascinating aspects of *Disgrace* is how the reader fills in the blanks; this aspect is arguably also one of the main sources of frustration to readers and critics.

Following the rape of his only daughter, the protagonist of *Disgrace* considers how “over the body of the woman silence is being drawn like a blanket” (Coetzee 110), and this essay’s research questions focus on how and why the characters Melanie and Lucy are silenced after being raped. Additionally, by paying special attention to gender and race, an
attempt is made to consider how rape is represented in *Disgrace*, and how this representation is related to the silence of the victims. During the process of analysis, the significance of cultural scripts, and the interplay between the novel’s cultural scripts and those of the reader, became apparent. Hence, the discussion takes the interaction between reader and text into consideration, especially in relation to cultural scripts.

The main discussion begins with a chapter on the importance of the novel’s setting, and its connection to the rapists in *Disgrace*. Next, the discussion turns its focus on Melanie and Lucy. The rape of Lucy has received the most attention from critics, presumably because of its racial aspects. In previous criticism, the rape of Melanie is primarily discussed when analyzing David, and it is analyzed from David’s point of view, which is why the reader of this essay will find less input from scholarly sources in the section that analyzes the rape of Melanie. In addition, in the chapters that analyze rape and silence, a conscious attempt has been made to focus the discussion on Melanie and Lucy rather than on David. As a result, there are aspects of general importance to the novel that receive little or no attention in this essay, particularly aspects that pertain mainly to David. This should not be interpreted as an indication that I underestimate the relevance or significance of these events; it is rather a deliberate attempt to shift focus away from the perpetrating men onto the victimized women.

Furthermore, because of the limited scope of the essay, the complex issues of race and gender in a South African context are not discussed in the depth that they in many ways warrant and deserve. Similarly, the essay discusses sexual violence in general, and rape in particular, in abstract terms from a theoretical perspective. While this could possibly appear callous, it is not intended to deny the trauma suffered by victims of sexual violence; it is rather the result of the formality required of an academic text. Acknowledged is also that men can be victims of sexual violence, and women can likewise be the perpetrators. Nevertheless,
because the rapes in *Disgrace* are committed by men, and the victims are women, the discussion in this essay centers primarily on male sexual violence against women.

This essay begins with a theoretical section. It defines relevant terminology and introduces the theoretical framework used to discuss the rapes of Melanie and Lucy, a framework that has its foundation in feminist theory. The theoretical section is followed by a brief presentation of the characters and the plot in *Disgrace*. The first chapter of the main discussion explores the connection between the South African setting and the rapists. The main body of the essay focuses on Melanie and Lucy respectively and then considers them together. This essay finds that the rapes in J.M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace* are representations of South Africa’s inverted racial power structures, and its traditional gender structures; structures that silence Melanie and Lucy. This essay argues that Coetzee has deliberately activated South African cultural scripts in the text in an attempt to expose problematic viewpoints regarding gender and race in society, as well as in the reader.

1. Theoretical Framework

   This section introduces theory on rape, cultural scripts, and rape myths. Though several of the secondary sources used in this essay are South African, or are published in scholarly journals concerning Africa, most of the sources in this section are American. While this may appear arbitrary, there are connections between the two countries that make American research on sexual violence relevant in a South African context, and vice versa. Both the United States and South Africa are racially charged societies with a long and complicated history of subjugation of the black population. Furthermore, although the United States does not match South Africa’s extremely high occurrence of sexual violence, the United States has far higher numbers of recorded rapes per 100,000 inhabitants than other
Western countries, increasing the relevance of American research in a South African context (United Nations).

1.1. Rape

Historically, because women were considered property of their fathers or husbands, rape was long considered a crime against a man (Whisnant). Following rape, the girl or woman was considered less valuable, and the penalties for rape were compensation to the father or husband. A consequence of such reasoning has been, for instance, the failure to acknowledge rape within a marriage, as a married woman is thus recognized as her husband’s property, rather than an individual with rights of her own.

Today, rape is a concept with many contested definitions, but the World Health Organization (WHO) defines sexual violence in general as “any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, unwanted sexual comments or advances, or acts to traffic, or otherwise directed, against a person’s sexuality using coercion, by any person regardless of their relationship to the victim, in any setting, including but not limited to home and work” (Krug et al 149). In addition, the same organization defines rape, which is one form of sexual violence, as “physically forced or otherwise coerced penetration – even if slight – of the vulva or anus, using a penis, other body parts or an object” (149).

Legislation regarding sexual violence is starting to emphasize the importance of consent by the victim, rather than the amount of force used by the perpetrator, when defining what constitutes rape. Moreover, legal rape definitions are becoming more inclusive than they used to be, and long awaited updates of legislation have been made in several countries over the last decade. The FBI in the United States recently updated its definition of rape for the first time since 1927. The previous definition identified rape as “the carnal knowledge of a female, forcibly and against her will,” thus not including “oral and anal penetration; rape of
males; penetration of the vagina and anus with an object or body part other than the penis; rape of females by females; and non-forcible rape” (USDS). The updated definition identifies rape as “[t]he penetration, no matter how slight, of the vagina or anus with any body part or object, or oral penetration by a sex organ of another person, without the consent of the victim” (USDS). Similarly, in 2007, South Africa updated its Sexual Offences Act, and its definition of rape is now comparable to those of the WHO and the FBI (Mattheyse).

It should be noted, however, that regardless of the progress made concerning legal definitions, rape is still an underreported crime. In South Africa, it is believed that only one in nine rapes is reported to authorities (Mattheyse). Moreover, rates of rape convictions are lower than for other types of violent crime, with some studies for instance estimating a conviction rape as low as 5% in the United States (Caringella, quoted in Whisnant).

Within feminist theory, there are ranges of views on the function of rape. Some feminists view rape as a “gender-neutral assault on individual autonomy,” thus focusing mainly on the harm done to individual victims (Whisnant). Others “see rape as arising from patriarchal constructions of gender and sexuality within the context of broader systems of male power,” emphasizing that sexual violence does harm to women as a group, not just to the individual (Whisnant). The model of explanation that frames the analysis in this essay is inspired by Lynn Higgins and Brenda Silver’s declaration from their book *Rape and Representation:*

[R]ape and the threat of rape are a major force in the subjugation of women. In ‘rape cultures’ such as the United States, the danger, the frequency, and the acceptance of sexual violence all contribute to shaping behavior and identity, in women and men alike. Within this culture, as in others, the nature and degree of oppression will vary with the historical moment and, within that, the permutations of racial, class, gender, and institutional relations of power. (1-2)
This essay aligns itself with the view that sexual violence can be used as a means to subjugate women in a patriarchal society. While the term ‘rape culture’ is a contested one, there is no denying the fact that the occurrence of rape in South Africa is not only high; it is increasing (BBC Survey 2009). Thus, whether post-apartheid South Africa is defined as a rape culture or not, it is arguably a culture where a degree of sexual violence has become normalized, making Higgins and Silver’s assertion relevant in a South African context. This essay considers the South African post-apartheid context; that is, its ‘historical moment’, and it also reflects on its racial and gender relations of power.

Over the past several decades, feminist scholars and activists have brought the connections between sexual violence and silence into the public discourse. Silence often surrounds sexual violence in many different ways. Victims are silenced to protect the perpetrator; they are silenced out of fear for repercussions; and they are silenced out of shame, guilt, or a belief that they are at least partially responsible for the violence to which they are being subjected. Feminist thought emphasizes the importance of speaking up against sexual violence, for example by reporting the crime. It also encourages women to speak openly about incidences of sexual violence, thus counteracting the silence. The aim is to decrease, and eventually end, sexual violence by breaking the silence surrounding it.

Silence is also the absence of voice. Having a voice in society means to be culturally empowered to make yourself heard. Women’s voices in society are related to the gender structures of the culture in question; the higher the level of gender equality in a society, the more balanced the male and female voices are, in the public sphere. In addition, Maria J. Racine mentions in her article “Voice and Interiority in Nora Zeale Hurston’s Their Eyes Were Watching God,” that when reflecting on female voices and silence, it is important to consider how the male voice affects the female voice (283). This essay considers how rape
affects the voices of Melanie and Lucy. It also discusses Western cultural expectations on the representation of the silence that surrounds sexual violence, especially in the case of Lucy.

1.2. Sexual Scripts and Rape Myths

Scripts are a form of cognitive schemata. In her article “The Relationship between Rape Myths and Sexual Scripts—The Social Construction of Rape,” Kathryn Ryan explains that, “[s]cripts are prototypes for how events normally proceed” (Schank and Abelson, quoted in Ryan 775). She defines sexual scripts as “culturally determined patterns of behavior that inform desire and influence sexual behavior” (774). A rape script is a prototype, a preconceived notion, of how a rape is believed to normally proceed. Research indicates that a victim’s rape scripts play a role in whether she identifies an experience as rape or not. In their article “Rape Scripts and Rape Acknowledgment,” Kahn, Mathie, and Torgler explain:

If a woman has a script of rape that is descriptive of a blitz rape—a situation in which woman is attacked, usually outdoors, by a stranger who is likely to have a weapon, threaten physical violence, and inflict pain while forcing intercourse—and instead is raped by an assailant who was known and trusted, indoors, in which there was little or no force, there would be a discrepancy between her rape experience in her rape script. Given this discrepancy, the victim may view the incident as something other than rape. (54)

In other words, it is possible to have been legally raped without being aware of it. Furthermore, law enforcement, legal institutions, educational institutions, as well as the public, have rape scripts. The rape scripts present in police officers’ mind may influence the way they treat a rape victim, and even whether they believe his or her story, or not (Edwards et al 763). In addition, research on sexual scripts among college students reveals that many young women do not conceptualize what has happened to them as rape; instead, they consider it a bad experience where they may be just as much to blame as the man (Kahn,
Mathie, and Torgler 54). An understanding of the importance of sexual scripts and their relation to the conceptualization of rape is especially important when considering Melanie’s experience in *Disgrace*, as it is conceivable that she does not realize that she has been raped.

As mentioned earlier, feminist thought encourages victims of rape to speak up as a way to break the silence surrounding rape. It is important to understand, however, that issues of gender inequality also surround the reporting of rape itself. Reporting rape can be problematic, in part because of prevalent myths surrounding rape, such as the belief that it is common for women to falsely accuse a man of rape. Furthermore, during investigation and trial, it is common for the behavior, intoxication level, and previous sexual habits of the rape victim to be scrutinized. Such focus on the victim reveals a belief commonly held in patriarchal societies; that fault lies somehow with the victim of rape, rather than with the perpetrator (Owens Patton and Snyder-Yuly 876). In *Disgrace*, neither Melanie nor Lucy report having been raped. Lucy’s decision not to report her rape is an issue that is frequently debated in criticism on *Disgrace*. While Lucy’s motivation is not clearly stated in the text, the patriarchal power structures that complicate the reporting of rape are still important to take into account when considering Lucy’s silence.

Rape scripts and rape myths are closely related. Rape myths are common beliefs about rape that have been proven untrue. Martha Burt, whose research on rape myths has been groundbreaking, defines rape myths as “prejudicial, stereotyped, or false beliefs about rape, rape victims, and rapists” (217). Examples of rape myths are: husbands cannot rape their wives, women enjoy rape, women ask to be raped, and women lie about being raped (Edwards et al 761). Rape myths influence sexual scripts; prevalent rape myths can play a role in forming sexual scripts, and thereby influence behavior. The function of rape myths is to “deny and justify male sexual aggression against women” (Fitzgerald and Lonsway 133). Sexual scripts informed by rape myths play a large role in *Disgrace*; for instance, they inform
both David and Melanie’s conceptualization of what happens between them. Furthermore, in the rape of Lucy, there are similarities to a rape myth called the ‘black peril’ myth.

The ‘black peril’ myth, sometimes called the ‘black peril and innocent white woman’ myth, or the ‘black beast’ myth, is a specific rape myth that is common in racially charged societies. It maintains that black men prey on white women and try to harm them. The myth depicts black male sexuality as uncontrolled and beastly, and it positions white women in the need for protection by white males (Davis, quoted in Owens Patton and Snyder-Yuly 862). The black peril myth has been used as a means of control and subjugation by white men; control over both black men as well as white women, and it continues to be reinforced, as it serves a purpose in the preservation of white hegemonic power (Owens Patton and Snyder-Yuly 862-3). In fact, research shows that intraracial rape is far more common than interracial rape, both in the United States and in South Africa (Owens Patton and Snyder-Tuly 864, Graham 435). Nonetheless, the black peril myth remains, and many societies have their own version of the myth, a version that in some way accuses the ‘other’ male of harming or stealing ‘our’ women.

The two rapes in Disgrace, as well as Melanie and Lucy’s silence, are representations of different sets of sexual scripts and rape myths. Moreover, the reactions that the rapes in Disgrace elicit in readers have their origin in each reader’s specific set of scripts regarding what rape is, and what is the appropriate response from a victim of rape. Therefore, these theories are relevant to the interpretations of the representations of rape Disgrace presented in this essay.
2. Characters and Plot in *Disgrace*

David Lurie is the novel’s protagonist, and *Disgrace* is focalized through him. He is a white South African man in his fifties. He works as a professor at a university in Cape Town. He is twice divorced, and as the novel begins, he does not appear to have a close relationship with anyone. Melanie Isaacs is a young woman in her twenties, and she is David’s student at the university. Lucy is David’s daughter and his only child. She lives alone with her dogs on a farm in the Eastern Cape. Petrus is Lucy’s neighbor. He is a black South African whom Lucy hires to do odd jobs around her farm. Petrus has bought land from Lucy, where he intends to build a home.

David seduces Melanie, and during one of their encounters, he has sex with her against her will; he rapes her. The relationship continues a while longer, but ends as Melanie files a sexual harassment complaint with the university. David is called to a disciplinary hearing, where he pleads guilty to whatever Melanie has accused him of in her statement, a statement that he refuses to read. The incident receives a lot of publicity, and David leaves Cape Town for the Eastern Cape, where he stays with Lucy.

After David’s relationship with Melanie disintegrates, Melanie virtually disappears from the novel. After Lucy is raped, David visits Melanie’s father to apologize for his failure to provide Melanie with what she needed. He claims his actions were the result of desire. David never acknowledges having raped Melanie, possibly not even to himself.

During David’s visit, three individuals gang rape Lucy, and physically abuse David. Lucy is impregnated by the rape. Nonetheless, Lucy reports the incident as a robbery, not as a rape, a decision that bewilders David. Petrus, who is related to one of the rapists, offers Lucy protection as his third wife.

David’s relationship to dogs, the opera he is writing, his obsession with Lord Byron, his realization that he is growing old, and his perspective on South Africa from a middle-
aged, white male position, are of general importance to the text. However, because these issues relate mainly to David as a protagonist, and not specifically to the rapes of Melanie and Lucy, they receive little attention in this essay beyond this recognition of their existence.

3. The Setting and the Rapists in *Disgrace*

   This section is not an all-encompassing analysis of the rapists in *Disgrace*; there is a lot more to be said about David, and the men who rape Lucy, as indicated by the already existent amount of scholarly texts on David, and on rape in *Disgrace*¹. Even so, this essay concerns itself with Melanie and Lucy’s silence, and to consider their silence, it is necessary to understand the context in which they are raped, and who the men who rape them are, as these things are interwoven. Therefore, this chapter attempts to view the rapists in *Disgrace* in relation to their context. While rape is a universal crime, the rapes in *Disgrace* are representations of two very different South African rapes. To understand *Disgrace*, it is important to understand this background, because it is in this context that the novel was composed, and on which the text is a comment. It should be noted, however, that the effort to explore the rapists’ context should by no means be interpreted as an attempt to make excuses for their actions.

3.1. The Novel and the South African Setting

   In 1994, the white Afrikaaner minority handed over power to the black majority, effectively ending decades of apartheid rule. The power transfer was peaceful. The ANC won the first general election, and Nelson Mandela became the first black South African president. In 1999, Thabo Mbeki, another member of the ANC, took over the presidency.

While the transfer of power from the Afrikaaners to the ANC was nonviolent, and South Africa has sought to come to terms with its past, for instance through hearings by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, there have also been struggles as the new democracy has tried to find its identity. Some controversy has surrounded President Mbeki, who has been accused of using racism as an argument against political opponents, and he has been criticized, both domestically and abroad, for not dealing forcefully enough with the spread of HIV in South Africa (The Economist 2005). However, in regards to sexual violence, South Africa has long suffered from an appallingly high occurrence of rape, something that cannot be blamed solely on any one person. While racial relations certainly have improved since the end of apartheid, sexual violence continues to be a major problem in South Africa. Helen Moffett states in her article “‘These Women, They Force Us to Rape Them’: Rape as Narrative of Social Control in Post-Apartheid South Africa,” that statistics reveal that “South Africa has higher levels of rape of women and children than anywhere else in the world not at war or embroiled in civil conflict” (129). According to Moffett, one third of South African women are raped in their lifetime (129).

Furthermore, Moffett points out that when considering rape in South Africa, it is important to understand that there are “narratives of normalisation” present in the South African sexual violence context; narratives that make the discourses of sexual violence in developing societies like South Africa somewhat different from Western countries (131). In other words, there are sexual scripts, ‘narratives of normalisation,’ in South African culture that normalize sexual violence and rape. Moffett explains that in South Africa, there is a tendency to discuss rape in relation to race rather than gender. She continues to suggest that in new democracies, “the rhetoric of equality and rights tends to mask the reconstruction of patriarchal power,” and that this is what has happened, and is happening, in South Africa (Meintjies, Pillay, and Thurshen, quoted in Moffett 133). As a result, anti-rape campaigners
have been accused of racism, with claims that their message stereotypes black males (Moffett 133). That is to say, allegations of racism have been used to silence those seeking to curtail sexual violence against women in South Africa. One of the most disturbing consequences of these accusations is that in a country with one of the highest occurrences of sexual violence in the world, focus is shifted away from the women and children who are the actual victims; instead, it casts men as victims.

Similarly, the response to Disgrace often centers on how the rapists are portrayed, rather than focusing on the women who are raped. Coetzee has even been accused of racism, because of the novel’s depiction of the rape of Lucy, which some scholars and politicians believe favors the white experience, whilst excluding and stereotyping the black South African. The novel was criticized by the ANC upon publication for its portrayal of black South Africans, and in 2000, the ANC even referred to the novel in a Human Rights Commission’s Inquiry into Racism in the Media (Attwell 331-332). Part of the explanation for this reaction can possibly be found in Moffett’s assertion that in South Africa, sexual violence is more often discussed in relation to race rather than gender.

However, there are also critics that argue that Coetzee should not be confused with his protagonist, and that writing about a racially charged episode is not equal to sympathizing with racist ideas. David Attwell also points out in his article “Race in Disgrace,” that “the main episode in Disgrace [the rape of Lucy], around which the contention turns, is actually rather mild in comparison with any number of episodes circulating in the daily crime reportage in the South African press” (332). In her article “Reading the Unspeakable: Rape in J.M. Coetzee’s Disgrace,” Lucy Valerie Graham agrees with Atwell, and she points out a problematic consequence of the ANC’s line of reasoning:

The ANC's arguments built on the idea that Coetzee's novel reflects society, that the views of the white characters in Disgrace may be equated with those of white South
Africans in general. Yet the corollary of this reading would mean that the black rapists in *Disgrace* are representative of most black people in South Africa, which is exactly what the ANC would like to refute. (435)

In other words, opinions on *Disgrace*’s representations of rape, and whether they are racist or not, vary greatly. It is worth considering, however, that many of those criticizing Coetzee’s construction of rapists appear to overlook the fact that the novel features two different representations of rape; such criticism always center on the rape of Lucy, who is raped by three black South Africans. However, the first rape in the novel is committed by David, a middle-aged, white male, who rapes a student of unknown race in a university setting.

3.2. David Lurie

David is a white South African, who has worked at the university in Cape Town for many years; that is, he worked there during the years of apartheid rule. He is unhappy at work, and he has a lonely private life. When he meets Melanie, he has recently been rejected by the prostitute from whom he has been buying sex on a regular basis.

When entering a relationship with Melanie, David activates several sexual scripts at once. He is a male professor, who seduces a female student, and he is an older man who approaches a younger woman; both are scripts that privilege male power. Melanie and David’s respective motives for entering the relationship are not stated explicitly in the text, but it is questionable whether they would have had a relationship in a different setting. If Melanie had been older, or if she had not been David’s student, it is doubtful if David had been able to assert his power over Melanie the way he does, or if it would have had the devastating result that it does in the novel.

Another important thing about David is that he does not match the sexual scripts commonly connected with the word ‘rapist’. He is not a stranger jumping out of the bushes; he is not a brutish man, or a criminal. He is a middle-aged white male with a prestigious
profession. He has been married and he has a daughter. Even so, he is also a man whose sexual habits include buying sex from a prostitute; something David thinks has “solved the problem of sex rather well” (Coetzee 1). David is a man concerned with satisfying his own sexual needs; the needs of others are of no interest to him.

David never acknowledges having raped Melanie, but he does have some awareness of that he has crossed a line. Sitting alone in his car after having forced himself on Melanie, he admits that he has made “[a] mistake, a huge mistake. At this moment, he has no doubt, she Melanie, is trying to cleanse herself of it, of him” (Coetzee 25). Moreover, David also appears to realize that he is the one who holds the power in the relationship: “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). However, in spite of such realizations, David never truly owns the fact that he raped Melanie; at least such an admission is never explicitly mentioned in the text. There is only one episode in the novel where David admits to being able to identify with the men who raped his daughter: “Lucy’s intuition is right after all: he does understand; he can, if he concentrates, if he loses himself, be there, be the men, inhabit them, fill them with the ghost of himself” (160). This eerie insight is as close to an admission of rape as David gets in the text.

It needs to be mentioned that in the response to Disgrace, there is disagreement about what happens between David and Melanie, whether David rapes Melanie or not. Lucy Valerie Graham mentions several reviewers who declare the incident an ‘affair,’ or a ‘seduction’ (440). However, this essay does not agree with such interpretations, but aligns itself with most critics on Disgrace, for instance Graham, David Attwell, and Carine Mardorossian, who classify the incident between David and Melanie as rape. The novel states that it was “not rape, not quite that” (Coetzee 25), but this statement is rather a result of the
text being focalized through David, who denies even to himself that he is raping Melanie, than an objective assertion.

In addition, Coetzee’s novel displays a strong awareness of the issues of sexual violence in South Africa, and it can be argued that the equivocal construction of the rape of Melanie is deliberate, especially when juxtaposing it to the explicit construction of the rape of Lucy. The rape of Lucy is brutal, racially charged, and undeniable; the rape of Melanie is forced without physical violence, her race is unclear, and it is possible that not even Melanie conceptualizes the incident as rape. When contrasting David to the men who rape Lucy, it appears as if Coetzee has constructed rapists who operate on different ends of a spectrum. There is a range between the insidious, ambiguous rape by David, and the brutal gang rape by the men who rape Lucy; most rapists operate somewhere within this range. It could even be argued that the two different rapes in Disgrace serve to expose this continuum.

The disagreement about whether David rapes Melanie or not also suggests that it can be more difficult to detect a rapist when he is a white, middle-aged male, operating within a setting, such as a university, where the white male has traditionally been privileged. As previously noted, there are several accepted sexual scripts, ‘narratives of normalisation,’ regarding older men and younger women, of male professors and female students, at play, which obscure the fact that David rapes Melanie. Considering the rape of Melanie raises important questions about what constitutes rape. Coetzee provides no answers to these questions, but leaves interpretation and judgment up to the reader.

In contrast to the rape of Melanie, the rape of Lucy is brutal and there is no ambiguity in the text about whether she is raped or not. The ambiguity of one rape and unequivocal representation of the second one is almost certainly not a coincidence, and neither are the settings in which the rapes take place. The rapists are each products of their environment;
their race, background, motives, and execution of rape are different, but their crime is the same.

3.3. Petrus and the Men Who Rape Lucy

The Eastern Cape is a rural, predominantly black, province of South Africa. The majority of the population is Xhosa. David’s daughter Lucy lives on a small farm in the Eastern Cape with her dogs. One day, after she and David have walked her dogs, three black strangers wait for them when they return. The strangers pretend to need to use the telephone. David and Lucy are wary, but Lucy allows them into the house, something that turns out to be a mistake. David is incapacitated, and Lucy is brutally gang raped. The rapists kill Lucy’s dogs; they attempt to kill David by splashing him with lightning fluid and lighting a match; they steal David’s car, and then disappear.

Not much is revealed in the text about the men who rape Lucy, aside from that they are two men and a boy, a boy who turns out to be Petrus’s brother-in-law. What little is revealed to the reader about the rapists come from Lucy. At first, she does not want to speak about the rapes with David, but later she tells him about the rapists:

‘[Y]ou are right, I meant nothing to them, nothing. I could feel it.’

There is a pause.

‘I think they have done it before,’ she resumes, her voice steadier now.

‘At least the two older ones have. I think they are rapists first and foremost. Stealing things is just incidental. A side-line. I think they do rape.’ (Coetzee 158)

As they continue their conversation, Lucy contemplates on whether rape is the price she has to pay to stay at her farm. She says, “I think I am in their territory. They have marked me. They will come back for me” (158). She sees a connection between the threat of rape, and her place in her community. She says to David:
What if…what if that [the rapists coming back] is the price one has to pay for staying on? Perhaps that is how they look at it; perhaps that is how I should look at it too. They see me as owing something. They see themselves as debt collectors, tax collectors. Why should I be allowed to live here without paying? Perhaps that is what they tell themselves. (158)

David suggests that this means the rapists want her for their slave, but Lucy tells him, “[n]ot slavery. Subjection. Subjugation” (159). This realization is most likely behind Lucy’s affirmative response to Petrus, who proposes marriage to him as a form of protection for Lucy.

Petrus is never openly revealed to have had anything to do with the rape of Lucy. However, *Disgrace* is a novel that functions on multiple levels. Many things are implied rather than stated, and thus open to interpretation, and the possibility that Petrus was at least aware of the plan to attack Lucy and David, and perhaps even orchestrated it, can be inferred from the text. Supporting such a reading is the fact that Petrus is missing for several days in connection with the event, and that later he is quick to offer Lucy his ‘protection’ by marrying her. Lucy would bring her land into the marriage, and Petrus is the one who has the most to gain from the subjugation of Lucy. The rapists can always rape another woman; two of them are strangers, who have no personal interest in Lucy. Petrus, on the other hand, acquires land, a third wife, and presumably increased status in his community. Furthermore, one of the rapists, the boy who Lucy thinks was there to learn, is Petrus’s brother-in-law, something that could be a coincidence, but could also be interpreted as a message to Lucy, especially considering Petrus’s forgiving attitude toward the boy.

Lucy appears to believe that Petrus is involved in the rape to some extent. When David asks her what marrying Petrus would entail, she replies: “Do you mean, would Petrus expect me to sleep with him? I’m not sure that Petrus would want to sleep with me, except to drive home his message” (Coetzee 203). The message Lucy refers to is likely ownership; she,
and her land, will belong to Petrus, something Petrus presumably would not want her to forget. Nevertheless, Petrus’s complicity in the crime is only mentioned in the novel as other characters’ suspicions; it is up to the reader to interpret the events.

If Petrus is indeed the instigator of the rape of Lucy, then who is to blame, the men who rape Lucy, or Petrus? If Petrus is not the instigator, but had previous knowledge of the event, and did nothing to prevent it, is he culpable? If a society knows that a crime is happening, but does little or nothing to prevent it, is it responsible? The philosophical issues that surround Petrus’s inferred involvement are larger than the man is; they echo questions of guilt and complicity in history and in society. Is a person only guilty of a crime if they commit it, or is the person who did nothing to stop it also to blame? To what extent can a society be held responsible; a society that knows what is happening, but does not act forcefully enough to stop it? These inferred questions surround Petrus, and make him the male character in Disgrace that is the least connected to the South African setting, and the most universal. It may be a testament to Coetzee’s courage that he leaves the answers to these questions open rather than answered. It is a shame that his detractors are so focused on how the men who rape Lucy are portrayed, that they fail to notice that Coetzee may be suggesting that the rapists are not the only ones to be blamed. Perhaps blame lies also on those who know, but do nothing.

4. Analysis of the Rape and Silence of Melanie

Melanie is a young student at the university where David teaches, and she is taking David’s class on the Romantics. The reader receives very little information about Melanie and her life outside of her relationship with David. In fact, Melanie’s voice is virtually non-existent in the novel. David’s voice, on the other hand, is ever present. Although it can be argued that this is a natural result of the text being focalized through David, it should be
noted that Lucy’s voice is stronger than Melanie’s, especially in relation to David, which indicates that the absence of Melanie’s voice is not only related to focalization. It can instead be considered a marker of the relationship of power between her and David. Melanie is a young woman; David is a middle-aged man. Melanie is a student; David is her professor. David’s voice and interiority, his position in relation to Melanie, are so strong, that there is no room for her voice at all.

The relationship to Melanie changes David’s life and he spends quite a bit of time in the novel dealing with its consequences; the disciplinary hearing, losing his job, and reflecting on what went wrong with him and Melanie. Nevertheless, the real Melanie is barely a fleeting presence in the text. When David considers what happened between them, he is considering his own idea of Melanie, not the real woman. It could be argued in David’s defense that being unable to have an objective view of others, and of your own actions, is an inability that David shares with most people. Even so, considering the novel’s South African context, it can also be argued that not reflecting upon how his behavior affects others is a luxury that a middle-aged white man in post-apartheid South Africa can no longer afford.

It is also important to note that Melanie’s lack of voice is an accurate reflection of the experience of countless raped women all over the world. By filling the text with David’s voice, and thereby silencing Melanie, Coetzee constructs a silence around Melanie that is similar to the silence that so commonly surrounds rape in society. Interestingly, the pattern that places David as the male subject and Melanie as the female object is further perpetuated among critics of Disgrace. There are countless scholarly texts on a variety of issues in Disgrace. The majority of these texts are focused on David, perhaps a natural extension of the novel’s focalization. However, when placing David’s experience, thoughts, and actions at the center, Melanie is further objectified. It is most likely not a coincidence that the scholarly
texts that do consider Melanie’s experience are often analyses done by female critics rather than male.

The rape of Melanie does not follow a traditional rape script. In their article “Tenuous Arrangements: The Ethics of Rape in Disgrace,” Kim Middleton and Julie Townsend explain that the novel “interrogates contemporary Western expectations of rape. By disrupting the viability of our culturally accepted ‘rape narratives,’ the novel calls us to develop alternative ways of reading” (117). In the rape of Melanie, examples of disruptions of culturally accepted rape narratives are that the rape happens within a relationship, and that after the rape, Melanie returns to David and they have consensual sex. Additionally, it is not clear in the text whether Melanie conceptualizes herself as a rape victim. As previously mentioned, research on sexual scripts among female college students reveals that rape victims whose rapes do not follow traditional rape scripts are less likely to conceptualize their rapes as such (Kahn, Mathie, and Torgler 54). This suggests that since her rape does not align with traditional rape scripts, one of the possible interpretations for Melanie’s silence following her rape is a lack of awareness that she was raped.

Rape myths are also at play in Melanie’s rape; for instance the myth that men cannot control their sexual desire, which is David’s own defense; he claims to have been a “servant of Eros” (Coetzee 52). In other words, David declares it was not his fault; he was merely acting on desire. Activating this myth as his defense, David denies responsibility for his actions. As previously mentioned, one of the consequences of rape myths, for example the myth that rape cannot happen within a relationship, is that they contribute to silence and doubt around a victim and the victim’s experience. The primary functions of rape myths are to cast doubt, silence the victim, and further aid the perpetrator, who is usually a man. A victim who does not even conceptualize her rape as such is effectively silenced in an appallingly simple way. This is what happens to Melanie: David rapes her; he has sex with
her against her will, but it may not be conceptualized as rape by David, the law, or even by Melanie, because the rape does not align with accepted rape scripts. Instead, what follows the rape is silence. Thus, the rape myths have served their function as silencers. The only consequence of the rape that occurs outside of David and Melanie’s relationship is the disciplinary hearing at the university, but the hearing is not about rape, it is about sexual harassment.

The male members of the committee conducting the disciplinary hearing do not appear interested in the inquiry resulting in the termination of David. Before the hearing, Aram Hakim tells David: “Speaking personally, David, I want to tell you you have my sympathy. Really. These things can be hell” (Coetzee 42). The inquiry takes place without Melanie present. She has made her statement to the committee the previous day. Instead of reading her statement, David pleads guilty:

‘I have stated my position. I am guilty.’

‘Guilty of what?’

‘Of all that I am charged with.’

‘You are taking us in circles, Professor Lurie.’

‘Of everything Ms Isaacs avers, and of keeping false records.’

Now Farodia Rassool intervenes. ‘You say you accept Ms Isaacs’s statement, Professor Lurie, but have you actually read it?’

‘I do not wish to read Ms Isaacs’s statement. I accept it. I know of no reason why Ms Isaacs should lie. (Coetzee 49)

Although it could certainly be argued that David is being gracious toward Melanie by not contradicting her statement, his refusal to even hear what she has said effectively silences her. David’s choice not to meet the allegations is one of the reasons he loses his job.

However, what is also clear is that David actively chooses not to meet Melanie’s allegations;
it is his line of defense. By reporting David to the university, Melanie tries to speak up, but her voice is silenced as David refuses to read her statement.

Further adding to the silence that Coetzee constructs around Melanie is the fact that David apologizes to Melanie’s father instead of Melanie. Among critics analyzing David, the incident where he seeks out Melanie’s father to apologize is sometimes viewed as one of the first signs of atonement from David. However, David’s thoughts do not exactly reflect regret as he, during the same visit, encounters Melanie’s sister Desiree: “he thinks: fruit of the same tree, down probably to the most intimate detail. Yet with differences: different pulsings of the blood, different urgencies of passion. The two of them in the same bed: an experience fit for a king” (Coetzee 164). David is not apologizing for hurting Melanie, raping her, and silencing her. He regrets that what he has done has made a relationship with Melanie impossible. He is not sorry for Melanie’s sake; he is feeling sorry for himself. Meanwhile, Melanie is once again left out of the equation.

Furthermore, focusing on Melanie instead of David, it can be argued that this episode echoes the days when raping a woman was viewed as a crime committed by one man against another. David’s apology thus further silences Melanie because by turning to her father instead of her, she is excluded from the exchange. Thus, he does not acknowledge Melanie’s sovereignty, but views her instead in relation to her father, revealing his staunchly patriarchal view of women.

Related to this incident is an event earlier in the novel where Melanie’s father seeks out David when he is worried about Melanie; he asks David, in David’s capacity as Melanie’s teacher, for help. The reader knows that David is the cause of Melanie’s trouble, but Mr. Isaacs is as of yet unaware of this. The reader’s sympathies fall easily on Mr. Isaacs, who is trying to help his daughter, and ends up asking the wrong person for assistance. However, it is possible to read this event as a precursor to the scene where David apologizes.
The pattern of the two men discussing Melanie without her presence is established here, albeit in a much less obvious way. By evoking reader sympathies for Mr. Isaacs, the incident easily slips by the reader’s consciousness, and is read simply as an event where David is dishonest to Melanie’s concerned father. What is also happening, though, is that Mr. Isaacs and David are discussing Melanie without her being present; a display with disturbing undertones of ownership that later is exposed in full when David seeks out Mr. Isaacs to apologize.

5. Analysis of the Rape and Silence of Lucy

The rape of Lucy is found by many to be provocative. As previously mentioned, the novel was criticized by the ANC upon publication, and prominent South Africans, such as politician Jeff Radebe and author Nadine Gordimer, have voiced their concerns about the novel’s representation of rape. The main complaint from various sources contends that the interracial rape of Lucy needlessly activates the black peril rape myth, and that such stereotypes do not have a function in modern South African society. It could be argued, however, that something lacking a positive function in society is an issue that is, or at least should be, separate from the question regarding what an author may or may not depict in a novel.

It is also worth considering if perhaps this interpretation of the text is a bit too simplistic. For instance, it does not take into account that the same text has previously portrayed a rape committed by a white male, a rape also sinister in execution, if not as brutal. Furthermore, a reading that focuses solely on the racial perspective of the rape of Lucy ignores some of the rape’s consequences for Lucy. In her article “Reading the Unspeakable: Rape in J.M. Coetzee’s Disgrace,” Lucy Valerie Graham states, “Disgrace seems to suggest that female bodies may not fare better in the new order [post-apartheid], as after Lucy is
raped she becomes pregnant, gives up her land and retreats into the house” (439). This is an important aspect of the rape of Lucy. Even in the new South Africa, where racial power structures have become inverted, patriarchal privilege remains the same. The rape restricts Lucy and functions as a silencer; a silence imposed on Lucy by her rapists and sustained by Petrus. Controlling Lucy, and possessing her land, asserts Petrus’s status in his community.

Lucy’s silence is a topic widely discussed in criticism of Disgrace. Why does Lucy choose to be silent? Her silence negates Western cultural scripts for rape victim behavior, and many readers and critics find her silence provoking. In the novel, Lucy’s silence makes David concerned. He realizes that because of Lucy’s absence of voice, her rapists own the narrative, and it bothers him. When Lucy does not want to go to the market on the first Saturday after the rape, David thinks, “[I]ke a stain the story is spreading across the district. Not her story to spread but theirs: they are its owners. How they put her in her place, how they showed her what a woman was for” (Coetzee 115). While David realizes that Lucy is silenced by her rapists, he does not seem to recognize how male voices relate to female silence in general, and how his own voice relates to the women in his life; to Melanie, and to Lucy, who is his daughter. Lucy attempts to make him understand when he returns to the Eastern Cape and realizes that Lucy is pregnant. He admonishes Lucy for not telling him about her pregnancy. Lucy’s response, while directed to David, also mirrors Lucy’s frustration of living in a society that privileges the male experience. She says:

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

Lucy cannot make this assertion in society anymore; she has to settle for making it to her father. Nonetheless, this is Lucy’s voice. Lucy is aware that she is being silenced.
Kim Middleton and Julie Townsend make a suggestion of interpretation of Lucy’s silence in their elaborate reading of the rape of Lucy, which involves juxtaposition to Genesis’s Dinah. They propose that Lucy chooses silence in an attempt to make her rape the starting point for negotiation about her place in the community; her silence opens up the possibility of forming social bonds with Petrus and the local population. “Lucy gives up justice in favor of peace,” Middleton and Townsend suggest, even though they admit to being uncomfortable with such a reading (134).

While Middleton and Townsend’s desire to make sense of Lucy’s silence is understandable, their reading does not take into consideration that Lucy is silent from the very beginning. Immediately following the rape, Lucy instructs David: “You tell what happened to you, I tell what happened to me” (Coetzee 99). David and Lucy have not even tended to their wounds, and Lucy’s mind is already made up. Although Middleton and Townsend’s suggestion possibly makes some sort of sense of Lucy’s silence, it does not make sense of Lucy as a human being, as a woman. Are social bonds and kinship really the first thing on Lucy’s mind, on any woman’s mind, directly following a gang rape in her home? Even if she realizes that not accusing her rapists is the only viable option if she wants to remain in the Cape, considering social bonds and peace over justice seems abstract for a traumatized mind. While the reading makes an earnest attempt to provide a viable explanation, if not defense, for Lucy’s choice, the reading betrays Lucy by transforming her experience into an abstract allegory for kinship and land trade. Such an interpretation shies away from the real trauma of rape, which is especially problematic when considering that Middleton and Townsend are feminist scholars. The reading is too focused on finding a theoretically acceptable solution to the issue of Lucy’s silence. In the process, it has lost focus on the horror of the crime itself.
Another commonly suggested model of explanation is that Lucy suffers from white guilt; that is, guilt stemming from belonging to the white South African minority that enforced apartheid for decades. Silence would thus be the price she pays in contemporary South Africa. Lucy herself discredits this interpretation in the text during an exchange with David as he tries to understand her silence:

‘Then help me. Is it some form of private salvation you are trying to work out? Do you hope you can expiate the crimes of the past by suffering in the present?’

‘No. You keep misreading me. Guilt and salvation are abstractions. I don’t act in terms of abstractions. Until you make an effort to see that, I can’t help you.’ (Coetzee 112)

Thus, according to Lucy, guilt and salvation are not the reasons she chooses to remain silent about having been raped. However, just a few moments earlier, Lucy has acknowledged that her decision not to report the rape is at least related to her living in South Africa. She says:

‘The reason [behind not reporting the rape] is that, as far as I am concerned, what happened to me is a purely private matter. In another time, in another place it might be held to be a public matter. But in this place, at this time, it is not. It is my business, mine alone.’

‘This place being what?’

‘This place being South Africa.’ (112)

It is up to the reader to interpret Lucy’s statements; it is possible that Lucy is in fact driven by guilt, whether consciously or not, in spite of her claims to the contrary. It is also possible that her decision is related to the South African context, without being related to a sense of guilt. Lucy’s actions may be informed by the complex interplay between South African racial discourse and a gendered crime like rape.
David implores Lucy to report the rapists, but she does not relent. Carine Mardorossian suggests in her article “Rape and the Violence of Representation in J.M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace*” that,

> [h]er [Lucy’s] unwillingness to rationalize her decision [to be silent] also reflects the fact that she knows she is caught between a rock and a hard place when it comes to representing herself as a rape victim in postapartheid South Africa. If she presses charges, the gendered dimension of the rape will immediately be recuperated by a racially motivated reading and reify social hierarchies that have historically been produced precisely through the link between rape and the construction of race. (75)

Mardorossian thus suggests that Lucy is aware of that even though the crime committed against her is also a gendered crime, a crime committed by men against a woman, it would be interpreted, or rather transformed, into a racial crime in the South African context. Because of the racial discourse in South Africa, the rape would not be read as a crime by men against a woman, but instead as a white woman accusing black men, an accusation that activates the ‘black peril’ rape myth. Lucy, thus, has no recourse, and this is a possible reason why she chooses to remain silent. Such an interpretation appears plausible; it resonates Helen Moffett’s assertions that sexual violence in South Africa is more often considered in relation to race than gender (133).

Looking outside of the text, a similar thing has happened as other readers react to the rape of Lucy. As noted previously, some critical response to the rape of Lucy, as well as the ANC’s reaction to *Disgrace*, has centered on its alleged activation of the black peril rape myth. Such a response echoes the way that patriarchal forces in South Africa prefer to focus on the racial aspects of sexual violence, while ignoring the gender aspects. The reaction redirects the spotlight away from the actual victim, in this case Lucy, while casting the perpetrators as victims of stereotyping.
Moreover, it ignores the fact that the function of the black peril myth is subjugation of black men and white women by white men. No white male gains anything from the rape of Lucy, or her silence. The only ones who benefit from Lucy’s silence are the black men in the novel, Petrus and the rapists. Thus, it is possible to argue that Coetzee, rather than activating the black peril rape myth, has inverted the power relations of the myth; an inversion that reflects South Africa’s inverted racial power structures following the end of apartheid rule. Important to note, however, is that Lucy is still subjugated, regardless of the racial power structure. Responding to the rape of Lucy by arguing that her rape is a racist characterization of black males ignores and diminishes Lucy as a woman, and it mirrors the response that Lucy expects in the novel, if she had reported the rape to the police. Whether Coetzee had foreseen this interplay between text and context is difficult to know; however, his novel displays an acute awareness of the sexual violence discourse in South Africa, suggesting that accusations of racism may have been less surprising to Coetzee, than to many others.

6. Juxtaposition of the Rapes

In this section, the rapes of Melanie and Lucy are juxtaposed to emphasize connections and differences between the two rapes in Disgrace. Each rape tells an important story in its own right, but comparing and contrasting the two makes certain aspects of each incident clearer, such as the women’s respective trajectories in the text. Furthermore, the two rapes in Disgrace are representations of two very different rape scripts. Melanie is raped by a man she knows, a man who is her professor, and with whom she has previously had consensual sex, whereas Lucy is raped by three strangers in her own home. Although David does not appear to see the connections between what he has done to Melanie, and what Lucy’s rapists have done to her, the fact that both these narratives of rape appear in the same
short novel suggests that Coetzee does. Therefore, a juxtaposition of the two events can increase an understanding of both rapes.

One of the main differences between Melanie and Lucy is Lucy’s presence in the text, while Melanie’s presence and voice in the beginning is vague at best. She speaks very little and the reader knows nothing about her that is not filtered through David. During the majority of the novel, there is no mention of Melanie. Lucy, on the other hand, has a stronger presence and a voice of her own. In relation to David, she makes her voice heard, and she stands her ground. Perhaps the age difference between the two women plays a role in this distinction; Lucy is older and has already found herself and her place in life, whilst Melanie is just at the onset of her adult life. Melanie is seemingly insecure about who she is, what she wants, and what she owes herself, the latter a presumption made considering her choice in men. However, the difference also echoes their importance and place in David’s life. Lucy is David’s daughter, and in spite of his flaws, he genuinely loves and admires her. Melanie, on the other hand, has no place in David’s life, except as a fantasy of what could have been.

Both rapes are assertions of power. Melanie is raped as David is trying to resist the insight that he is ageing. He wants to boost his ego by proving he can still bed a woman who is in her twenties. He positions himself as the seducer, but it is clear even the first time they have intercourse that Melanie far from enjoys having sex with David. The intercourse has been on David’s terms alone. Melanie is still wearing her shirt, and David’s pants are around his ankles. She is “passive throughout,” and afterwards she leaves in haste (Coetzee 19). The next time David wants her, she says no, but he takes her anyway, because he can. He uses her to make himself feel better. Similarly, the rape of Lucy also relates to power, especially if, as is implied, Petrus is behind the rape. She is being put in her place. She is made aware that she can only stay in her house because Petrus allows it. It may be her house, but with the threat of recurrent rape, he can scare her away.
However, while it is almost impossible to know how the rapes will affect the women psychologically long term, the two women’s trajectories are moving in different directions. Melanie appears to have been able to continue with her life. Her voice is still not present in the novel toward the end, but there are indications that she is finding her way, and possibly even herself. She acts in a play, and her father informs David that she has resumed her studies. Lucy’s world, on the other hand, has become significantly smaller and permanently altered. Whether she suffers from post-traumatic stress or not, her freedom has been greatly reduced. Lucy has been claimed. She has been impregnated, and to be allowed stay in her own house, she has to marry Petrus and give her land to him. Hence, while Melanie seems to be moving forward in life, Lucy is retreating; she is withdrawing from her existence as a subject, to become Petrus’s woman. She is giving up her independence.

Race plays a large role in the rape of Lucy and it is likely a factor in her silence. In contrast, Melanie’s race is never openly revealed to the reader. Many critics, among them Middleton and Townsend, appear to assume that she is white, an assertion inferred by a complete absence of discussion of the racial aspects of the rape of Melanie in much criticism on *Disgrace*. Lucy Valerie Graham mentions that it is possible to argue that Coetzee reverses the ‘black peril’ myth “by simultaneously scripting what Sol T. Plaatje referred to as ‘the white peril’, the hidden sexual exploitation of black women by white men that has existed for centuries” (437), a statement that suggests that Graham at least considers it a possibility that Melanie is a woman of color. Derek Attridge and David Attwell point out that several details in the text indicate that Melanie is not white (Attridge 106, Attwell 337). Attridge asserts that she is “Coloured,” a term referring to a specific South African ethnic group of mixed ethnicity (106). In other words, the text does not clearly state Melanie’s race, and there is no consensus about her race among critics.
If Melanie is black, the rape of her is not only a representation of gender and institutional power relations; it is also a representation of racial power relations. Throughout history, black women have been systematically raped by white men as means of control. If Melanie is black, that history has to be taken into consideration when reading the rape, as well as her silence. Reading Melanie as black pushes the gendered aspect of the rape into the background. However, if Melanie is believed to be white, the focus of the interpretation of the rape of her is on the gendered aspect of rape, a feature that is not more or less important than the racial characteristics, just different. Two interracial rapes give the text a balance, whereas reading Melanie as white makes the rapes in *Disgrace* a little less tidy, and thus increases the complexity of the text. Melanie’s race consequently affects how the text as a whole is interpreted, because depending on Melanie’s race, different rape scripts are activated as the reader tries to decode what has happened to her.

It could be argued, that reading Melanie as white makes the text less provocative; that it shies away from the complicated history of systematic rape of black women. However, considering again the interplay between text and context, and the fact that Coetzee appears to prefer to write representations of rape that mirror actuality, rather than adjusting the text to conform to reader expectations of how rape should be responsibly represented in a novel, it can also be argued that such a reading is not shying away from anything. Intraracial rape is far more common than interracial rape. If Melanie is black, the text lacks a representation of intraracial rape, the most common form of rape; a deficiency that it could be argued would be equally provocative.

Neither Melanie, nor Lucy, report having been raped to the police. In Melanie’s case, it is even unclear whether she recognizes that she has been raped, but there is no doubt that Lucy does. However, if they had reported the rapes to the authorities, would that have given them a voice? It is unlikely that the rape of Melanie would have been considered rape by
South African law in the 1990s. Furthermore, in a rape trial, the burden of proof is often on the victim. The rape of Melanie diverges too much from common rape scripts to ever lead to a conviction of David, even if what he did was illegal. Hence, in Melanie’s case, reporting the rape would not have broken her silence; it would more likely have emphasized her lack of recourse and silenced her even further.

Conversely, it would not have been difficult for Lucy to prove that she has been raped. A medical examination would reveal sperm and signs of forceful penetration. Considering that Lucy is a lesbian, her rapists would have a hard time claiming that the intercourse was consensual. Yet, Lucy’s mind is made up from the beginning. She will not tell. She retreats; she learns that to stay on the Cape, she has to give her land to Petrus. She also has to pose as Petrus’s woman; it is unclear to what extent, but Lucy has no illusions of what is happening. She realizes that she is submitting to Petrus. Like so many other women before her, she has resigned to her fate. She says, “[y]es, I agree, it is humiliating. But perhaps that is a good point to start from again. Perhaps that 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” (205). Thus, Lucy accepts her fate; not willingly, far from it, but she accepts it nonetheless.

Lucy’s silence subverts Western cultural expectations and scripts on how a rape victim should act and behave. Whether caused by defeat or defiance, Lucy’s silence is provocative because it challenges the reader’s expectations on the text, and her silence is contrary to culturally accepted reactions and behavior by a victim of rape. It may be important to ask why readers and critics alike find Lucy’s silence infuriating. Carine Mardorossian suggests that Coetzee’s representation of Lucy’s rape results in that “readers are forced to come to terms with their own investment in normative representations of gender
and race” (78). One of the things that appear to provoke readers of *Disgrace* is the fact that neither Melanie’s nor Lucy’s rape are normative representations of rape.

In addition, Lucy’s response to rape is not normative either. She is refusing to play according to the rules; the rules that society has created for the appropriate response to crime, and the rules that dictate that to eliminate rape, the silence surrounding it must be broken. As the author of the novel, Coetzee has likewise been accused by readers, as well as critics, fellow authors, and politicians, for not depicting rape and its consequences in the way the reader thinks rape should be portrayed, but instead representing rape the way it actually does happen, every day, all over the world. Rape is an underreported crime, and victims of rape are often silent or silenced following the crime (Whisnant). Lucy’s silence is not normative for a character in a novel, but it is common in real life. Coetzee is portraying rape as it appears in life. Confronted with representations of rape that do not match accepted scripts for the expected behavior of rape victims following rape, the reader is challenged into reaction.

Conclusion

This essay has considered rape and silence in J.M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace*. It has reflected on the connection between the rapes and the rape scripts that they represent. A deliberate attempt to focus on Melanie and Lucy instead of David has been made, with the intention of highlighting the victims of rape rather than the perpetrators of the same. The first part of the main discussion has nonetheless presented the South African setting and the rapists. The chapter has discussed sexual violence in South Africa, and it has attempted to place both the novel and the rapists in relation to this context. The main function of this chapter has been to increase understanding of the environment in which Melanie and Lucy are raped, as well as to consider the rapists’ relation to said context.
The next part of the main discussion has focused on Melanie. The analysis suggests that the rape of Melanie diverges from accepted rape scripts, and that this contributes to her silence. Furthermore, the analysis has reflected on Melanie’s silence in the form of the absence of her voice in the text. The way David and Mr. Isaacs discuss Melanie without involving her, and the patriarchal patterns displayed by such behavior has also been mentioned.

The third part of the main discussion has focused on Lucy. The analysis has presented several possible explanations for Lucy’s choice not to report being raped, and it has argued against a few of these explanations. The analysis has found that Lucy’s decision to be silent after being raped contradicts accepted cultural scripts on the appropriate response from a victim of rape; scripts that encourage speaking out and reporting rape as a means to end sexual violence against women. The analysis has found that the fact that Lucy’s response to rape does not follow the culturally determined appropriate response to rape is one possible reason why Lucy’s silence is so provocative to many readers and critics. Furthermore, the analysis suggests that while Lucy’s rape has been claimed to stereotype black males by invoking the black peril myth, Lucy’s rape is not a typical version of the black peril rape myth, as there is no white male benefitting from Lucy’s silence.

The final part of the main discussion has juxtaposed Melanie and Lucy’s rapes in an attempt to understand the rapes in relation to each other. Like the previous parts of the discussion, the juxtaposition suggests that the representations of rape in Disgrace provoke readers as their own sexual scripts are activated, especially when events in the novel contradict culturally accepted, and expected, forms of reactions and response. Coetzee’s point does not seem to be to present scenarios that make sense; his aim appears to be to activate the reader’s own rape scripts, and confront these with the scripts presented in the novel, to make the reader aware that the scripts exist.
This essay argues that Coetzee has deliberately activated South African cultural scripts in the text in an attempt to expose problematic viewpoints regarding gender and race in society, as well as in the reader. The essay asserts that Coetzee’s portrayals of the rapes of Melanie and Lucy do not mean that he argues against the validity of the importance of breaking the silence surrounding sexual violence. On the contrary, Coetzee likely aims to expose the large gap between reality and ideal, a gap that reveals that society has a long way to go to break the silence and eliminate the crime. The imperative question is not why Lucy, or for that matter Melanie, is silent; the question is how to make the gap between reality and ideal smaller. Coetzee, true to form, does not reveal an answer or a solution, but he challenges the reader to further consider the gap, and its implications and consequences.

Thus, the primary function of the representations of rape and silence in Disgrace is likely not to be normative and model an ideal; the primary function could be to expose the complexity of the issues, especially in the South African context, and to highlight the existent gap between reality and ideal.
Works Cited


