



**Great Books
bite size**
Disgrace

**Examine your
Humanity**

**Melbourne
Public
Humanities
Initiative**



**THE UNIVERSITY OF
MELBOURNE**

An introduction from Professor Deirdre Coleman

J. M. Coetzee is regarded as one of the world's most brilliant writers. Twice winner of the Booker Prize, Coetzee was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2004. Born in Cape Town, South Africa, Coetzee now lives in Adelaide, South Australia. Many say that the reclusive author left for Australia because of the controversy surrounding *Disgrace* (1999), a work which won the Booker Prize but which pleased very few in his native South Africa.

While the African National Congress denounced *Disgrace* as racist for depicting the gang rape of a white woman, white South Africans were shocked by what they saw as the novel's bleak vision of their post-apartheid future. Today, in our deeply polarised times, the novel continues to provoke and disturb its readers, resonating eerily with the #MeToo and Black Lives Matter movements.

This masterclass will focus on sex, race, and power in *Disgrace*, looking in particular at the symmetry between the two rapes – one committed by David Lurie, a conservative white Professor of Romantic Literature, the other a gang rape inflicted on his daughter Lucy. Their relationship is a fraught one. Lucy is a lesbian who has turned her back on the city and on her father's conventional aspirations for her. The gang rape she suffers, together with the absorption of her land into that of her black neighbour, are shocking enough but even more disturbing is her acceptance of all this as the price she must pay for her country's unjust history.

Coetzee is on record as saying that South African literature is a 'literature in bondage' because a 'deformed and stunted' society can only ever produce a 'deformed and stunted' inner life. Is *Disgrace* itself an expression of this 'bondage', imprisoned by the distorting history of apartheid?



[Deirdre Coleman](#) completed Honours in English at the University of Melbourne before going to Oxford University where she graduated with a BPhil in Victorian literature and a DPhil on Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Since returning to Australia she has taught at the Universities of Wollongong, Adelaide and Sydney. In 2007 she returned to the University of Melbourne as the Robert Wallace Chair of English, and served as Deputy Dean of the Faculty of Arts from 2010-2013.

Her most recent book examines the links between natural history, slavery, and empire, *Henry Smeathman, the Flycatcher* (Liverpool UP, 2018). Other research interests include 18th and 19th century literature and cultural history; abolitionism, women's writing, travel, colonialism (West Africa, West Indies, Botany Bay), the development of racial ideology, and the gothic.

Extra resources

[Lesbians are like that because they're fat](#), *The Guardian*, 1999

This review from 1999 by Adam Mars-Jones provides a perspective on how the book was received when it was first released.

[The 100 best novels: No 99 – *Disgrace* by J. M. Coetzee](#), *The Guardian*, 2015

The Guardian features *Disgrace* in their '100 best novels' list. Robert McCrum reflects on the book 16 years after its release.

[Reading J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* During the Harvey Weinstein Trial](#), *The New Yorker*, 2020

Jia Tolentino explores the disturbing parallels between *Disgrace*, Harvey Weinstein's trial and the #MeToo movement.

[Disgrace](#), 2008 (movie trailer, 2:20 min)

Watch the trailer of the film adaptation by director Steve Jacobs, starring John Malkovich, Jessica Haines and Eriq Ebouaney.



Image from J M Coetzee's *Disgrace* UK first edition book cover

Discussion questions

Private lives, public business

Questions of consent and power have always been central to both understanding and litigating rape allegations. Since the #MeToo movement, these questions have received a great deal more attention, evidenced in dramas such as *Anatomy of a Scandal* (Netflix). Intense scrutiny has led to a polarization in the debate, with some like David Lurie arguing that 'these are puritanical times. Private life is public business'. How does *Disgrace* position the public/private debate?

Literature as mirror

J. M. Coetzee once argued that South African literature is a 'literature in bondage' because a 'deformed and stunted' society produces a deformed and stunted inner life. Does the characterisation of Lurie portray a 'deformed and stunted' inner life? Do you see *Disgrace* as a 'literature in bondage'?

Power and voicelessness

Another farm novel by a white South African author won last year's Booker prize: Damon Galgut's *The Promise* (2021). There is a chorus of voices in this novel but they are all white. When quizzed as to why Salome, a rural, uneducated black woman has no voice, Galgut said that this was deliberate. Even in the new South Africa, he argued, women like Salome still have no voice, and he 'wanted that to register as almost a physical fact'. What do you make of the character of Petrus in *Disgrace*?

'Such thoughts to Lucy I will give'

David Lurie is a Professor of Romantic literature. One of his 'masters' is Wordsworth, and he is developing a research project on Lord Byron's final years. What does this add to Coetzee's characterization of Lurie and his relationship to both his students and his daughter, Lucy? Some of you might want to read [Wordsworth's five 'Lucy' poems](#).

The Human Animal

Instead of farming Lucy believes that her Professor father would prefer she were learning Russian or painting, leading a higher life. Against this she argues that there is no higher life: "This is the only life we have. Which we share with animals" (74). Lurie agrees that "this is the only life there is," but he cannot accept the proposition that humans and animals are the same or in any way equal: "We are of a different order of creation from the animals. Not higher, necessarily, just different." By the end of the novel, has Lurie changed his thinking about human/animal boundaries?