Questions and Proposals about J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* (1999)

(For future readers/ users of this website: Please note that the page numbers indicated below refer to the Viking 1999 edition of J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*.)

1.**David Lurie's habit of aestheticizing his experience:**
Pay attention to the way David Lurie thinks. He is in the (almost constant) habit of aestheticizing his experience, especially his experience of desire and sex. Sometimes this aestheticizing, as I am calling it, will take the form of his drawing an analogy between his experience and a work of art—a work of literature, or a painting, or a piece of music. An example of this comes on p. 19, right after he and Melanie have had intercourse for the first time. "*After the storm*, he thinks: straight out of George Grosz." (George Grosz, for those of you who don't know, was a German Expressionist painter known especially for his pen and ink drawings satirizing the German nation and—perhaps most relevant to *Disgrace*--Berlin nightlife, during and after World War I.) And sometimes Lurie's "aestheticizing" will amount to his referring away from his immediate experience to an established cultural understanding of what the experience *has* meant, for others, in the past (as contrasted with what it *is* meaning, for him, in the present.) An example of this tendency falls on page 12. Lurie is putting a Mozart recording on his stereo as a means to seduce Melanie.

> "Wine, music: a ritual that men and women play out with each other. Nothing wrong with rituals, they were invented to ease the awkward passages. But the girl he has brought home is not just thirty years his junior: she is a student, his student, under his tutelage. No matter what passes between them now, they will have to meet again as teacher and pupil. Is he prepared for that?"

How does this proclivity towards the "aesthetic" shape David Lurie's experience? Does it bring him closer to that experience, or does it act as a boundary to experience—or

are these (perhaps in David Lurie's view) not the questions to be asking? Lastly, do you feel that the changes that happen in his life across the novel—changes effected both by the scandal of his affair with Melanie, and by the events at his daughter's farm—shake him out of this "aestheticizing" tendency? If so, what do those changes leave in its place?

2. David Lurie's preoccupation with time, in particular with the "perfective" tense.

At several points in the novel, David Lurie will consider his experience in terms of verb tenses, in particular the "perfective" tense, which represents an action "carried through to its conclusion." *Live*, *drive*, *burn* and *usurp* are verbs that appear throughout the novel in the perfective tense, with ever broadening significance. The following excerpt shows Lurie thinking through this problem as it relates to his new life at his daughter's smallholding:

> "Two weeks ago he was in a classroom explaining to the bored youth of the country the distinction between *drink* and *drink up*, *burned* and *burnt*. The perfective, signifying an action carried through to its conclusion. How far away it all seems! I live, I have lived, I live." (p. 71)

How is this state—of being concluded, finished, "seen through to one's conclusion"—an adequate figure for the person of David Lurie? And how is this temporal structure embodied in the novel's larger story?

3**. Trials, Hearings, Public Declarations of Feeling or Personal Truth**

There are several "hearings" or "trials" in the novel, or, more precisely, several instances in which a character is asked to declare the contents of his or her private experience, feelings, motives, etc., in a public setting. To name a few examples: David Lurie is asked to deliver a convincing statement of penitence during a disciplinary hearing for sexual harassment at his workplace, the Cape Technical University, a request he ultimately refuses; Lucy is repeatedly urged by her father to press charges against the three men who raped her, a request she refuses; in an ironic turn, David then willingly submits a confession of motives for his sexual encounter with his student,

Melanie Isaacs, to her family, though not in a public setting, rather in the Isaacs's home.

Do you detect a theme here? It seems that the novel has something to say about our private selves versus our public and/or social selves, and, following from this, about the capacity of the public realm to house or to represent, with any fairness or adequacy, the contents of our private subjectivity. Does this proposal resonate with your understanding of the book?

Related to this issue is a trickier, more complicated one about the nature of language, in particular about the failure of language to unite individuals who are divided against one another in a single, continuous understanding. That is what we believe language ought to do—bridge misunderstanding, help us commune, and, in the communing, heal. But in a world as "burnt" as post-Apartheid South Africa, words, Coetzee seems to be saying, are just more weapons to be hoarded, foe against foe. A depressing estimation of the powers of language, coming from a novelist of the aesthetic and ultimately ethical ambition of J.M. Coetzee; and yet should we turn from the novel only in despair? A vexing question, if you believe, as many in our group do, in the power of stories to instruct and to heal; and therefore perhaps a good question to take up when we meet.

4. Dogs/ dog euthanasia

If the euthanizing of dogs stands for you as an appropriate destiny for David Lurie, why do you think it's appropriate?

5. David Lurie as outsider/ David Lurie as insider:

In almost every sphere of the novel's activity, David Lurie is an "outsider" (141). As a self-proclaimed "disciple" of William Wordsworth, he is an outsider to the "rationalized" view of language held by the Communications Department of which he is a faculty member (see pp. 3-4); after the revelation of his affair with his student, Melanie Isaacs, he becomes an outsider to academic life generally; he is an outsider to his daughter Lucy's experience of her rape and, more broadly, to female reproductive life and to female suffering; he is an outsider to the life—and death--of animals, as are we all; and he is an outsider to the logic informing Petrus's decisions as regards the securing and maintenance of a black-run agricultural economy in the Eastern Cape of South Africa. In smaller, more

immediately inter-personal ways, too, Lurie is an outsider: an outsider to the definition of friendship held by Bill Shaw, and an outsider as well to the Christian view of repentance held by the Isaacs family, in particular by Melanie Isaacs's father.

However, in one realm of his life, in one ultimately very substantial realm, David will become an insider, even a kind of master--and that is in the realm of art. By the last pages of the novel, he knows exactly how to write his opera; indeed, you'll notice that the subject of the first sentence of the last chapter in the novel is not a character in that novel—a novel that has taken David Lurie to the furthest extremes of his identity, nearly effacing that identity—rather a character in *David's* work of art, *David* being the writer now, David the one responsible for seeing souls, of his own creating, "through to their conclusion" (p. 71). What do you make of this development? If art is to function for David as a kind of salvation, how will it save him? Will it save him in a way that might matter to more people than just David? How do you think David would weigh in, here? Maybe he'd tell us that that's not the question to be asking.

6. Is it possible for a work of art to save but not to console?
Disgrace, we might argue, is one such work of art. Do you agree? Why, or why not?