

SELF-REFLEXIVITY IN AFRICAN FICTION: A STUDY ON COETZEE'S SUMMERTIME

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ABSTRACT

One of the things that distinguish postmodern aesthetic work from modernist work is extreme self-reflexivity. Postmodernists tend to take this even further than the modernists but in a way that tends often to be more playful, even irreverent. This same self-reflexivity can be found everywhere in pop culture, for example the way the Scream series of movies has characters debating the generic rules behind the horror film. In modernism, self-reflexivity tended to be used by "high" artists in difficult works. Post modernism, self-reflexive strategies can be found in both high art and everything from Seinfeld to MTV. In postmodern architecture, this effect is achieved by keeping visible internal structures and engineering elements (pipes, support beams, building materials, etc.).

In many ways, postmodern artists and theorists continue the sorts of experimentation that we can also find in modernist works, including the use of self-consciousness, parody, irony, fragmentation, generic mixing, ambiguity, simultaneity, and the breakdown between high and low forms of expression. In this way, postmodern artistic forms can be seen as an extension of modernist experimentation; however, others prefer to represent the move into postmodernism as a more radical break, one that is a result of new ways of representing the world including television, film (especially after the introduction of colour and sound), and the computer. Many date post modernity from the sixties when we witnessed the rise of postmodern architecture; however, some critics prefer to see World War II as the radical break from modernity, since the horrors of Nazism (and of other modernist revolutions like Communism and Maoism) were made evident at this time. The very term "postmodern" was, in fact, coined in the forties by the historian, Arnold Toynbee.

J. M. Coetzee, a South African writer, revealed himself as a writer in 1974 with his first novel *Dusklands*. It is a critique of the colonization of South Africa and of the American involvement in the Vietnam War. The international break through came in 1980 with the novel *Waiting for Barbarians*. This is an allegory of the oppressor and the oppressed. He writes of men and women doing their best to duck under history or simply float above it and this echo in *Waiting for the Barbarians*

and in *Life and Times of Michael K*. Coetzee's next novel, 1999s *Disgrace*, is a strong statement on the political climate in post-Apartheid South Africa.

Coetzee's *Summertime* opens and closes with journal entries, the only time the author (as character) speaks directly. The reader's temptation when reading *Summertime* is to try to work out what is brute fact, what is irony, what is something else, but it's a temptation which should be resisted. John Coetzee as he is called in the book is not flatteringly depicted. "He looked out of place, like a bird, one of those flightless birds; or like an abstracted scientist who had wandered by mistake out of his laboratory. There was an air of seediness about him too, an air of failure."(21). Even for his lover, Julia, "he had no sexual presence whatsoever."(24). She suggests, it because "his mental capacities, and specifically his ideational faculties, were overdeveloped, at the cost of his animal self." While Julia knew John Coetzee, he wrote and published his first novel, *Dusklands*.

The repeated conflict in *Summertime* is between the writer and the world, the writer and 'real people'. John Coetzee plans to move his father to "some rundown old ruin" in the backwater of Mercerville. He wants to be able to be alone when he chooses. Elsewhere, in the journals, John Coetzee wonders "where in the world can one hide where one will not feel soiled?" (48). The book emphasizes that for a writer, most alive when alone, even those who see him most often, who know him longest,

can't know him at all. This is a book where the writer is everywhere present in many different forms: the hand of Coetzee creating the biographer Vincent; the character of John Coetzee shaped by that biographer's selections and omissions. Nor is Coetzee's portrait of the autistic as a young man merely self-indulgent compliment-fishing, a rehearsal of a classic biographical device, the ugly duckling story. After all, the women of *Summertime* are not appraising John's thirty something self to contrast it respectfully with his present grandeur. They are talking now; they know his stature, the honours heaped upon him. Their words are as much obituary as biography, and the obituary is an unusually brutal one.

Coetzee does not seem to have a choice here. If he hadn't run the risk of seeming self-indulgent, he wouldn't have been able to capture an essential truth about "great men" - that the women who reject them in the early days are not necessarily blind to their potential. A woman who chooses not to sacrifice her life to the kind of selfish, cranky, vain, obsessive, unstable slob who tend to become "great men" may be making a wise decision. Books, like people, must be judged for what they are, not what they do, and *Summertime* is a sincere, unsparing attempt by a writer in his late 60s to imagine how a man like him would have appeared, in his early 30s, to women like the women he loved then; and how they might remember him now. The women's toughness towards their subject, their insistence that their reluctantly provided accounts of him are their own stories rather than Coetzee's, has the force of truth.

"I really was the main character. John really was a minor character," (44) insists Julia. Her story is, to her, an account of her escape, at the age of twenty six, from erotic triteness, a dull marriage and the cynical mores of middle-class white Cape Town in the seventies, where husbands "wanted the wives of other men to succumb to their advances but they wanted their own wives to remain chaste - chaste and alluring". John may, she admits, have allowed her to glimpse "the possibility of growth without end in the realm of the erotic", but he is only a portal, and she walks through it. As lovers, they are truly together, body and soul, only once. "John was not my prince ... how very unlikely it was that he could have been a prince, a satisfactory prince, to any maiden on earth." (80)

Adriana, the dancer, has a more visceral reaction to John's attempts to woo her and to his intellectual seduction of her daughter (he teaches her English at a

local school). John's hopeless courtship includes an abortive barbecue - it rains - and efforts in Adriana's dance classes. She rejects the very language of his body. "He moved as though his body were a horse that he was riding, a horse that did not like its rider and was resisting." (186)

Remembering the time of John - "a brief, one-sided infatuation that never grew into anything" - Adriana expresses loathing for his efforts to win her, and contempt that he gave up so easily. She is so vehement that the reader forgets the real Coetzee is in control of it all; piling on the invective against his alter ego until it seems, finally, that Adriana protests too much, and that the mooncalf did, after all, leave a faint mark on her heart. Of John's women, the tenderness towards him is his cousin, Margot, who provokes a kind of tenderness in return that Julia, Adriana and Sophie did not see. But even Margot has to endure John quoting *Waiting for Godot* at her when she asks him to tell her a story; and even Margot cannot imagine her cousin giving himself wholeheartedly to anyone.

Coetzee has been interested in the concept of the double. One of the requirements for a novelist is to be able to split his consciousness, to simultaneously be the fabricator of a character and that character's observer. It is a short step from there for the writer to see his own worldly persona, his striving, compromised social self, as a character distinct from the shy, confused, guilty recluse who takes up occupation in his head when he is alone. When Coetzee was awarded his Nobel prize in 2003, instead of making a speech, he read out a short story, a strange, allusive tale called "He and His Man", ostensibly about *Robinson Crusoe* and *Daniel Defoe*, but really about doubles, about a character and his creator, a recluse and his busy, worldly reflection; how they were close, yet could never meet. The Nobel performance itself was a sort of doubling.

Certainly Coetzee's novels are about love between men and women, but so are most novels. The common thread that leaps out of Coetzee's work is not so much the gulf between men and women as the gulf between two compatible life paths, the path of surrender and the path of appetites. Again and again, his books put these two ways of living in opposition: one character will be passionate, lusty, engaged, hungry, while the other will be austere, self-denying, detached, finding virtue in deserts and silence and small things. One way of reading *Summertime*

is as a confession, an acknowledgement to women Coetzee has loved, of this double nature.

In his interview with Sophie Denial, Vincent is similarly puzzled by John's estrangement from the institutions of Afrikaans culture and yet his willingness "to embrace an Afrikaner identity." (238). Sophie suggests that, "under the gaze of history", John believed it impossible to "separate himself off from the Afrikaners while retaining his self-respect, even if that meant being associated with all that the Afrikaners were responsible for, politically". Nonetheless, Sophie regards him as having been inadequately politicized at a critical moment in South African history, dismissing what she reports as his romanticized views of Africans as inherently more embodied than Europeans.

Embodiment, and John's own physical awkwardness, especially in his relations with women, is a recurring and determinedly unsettling motif. In Adriana's account of their acquaintance, John's unwelcome interest in her culminates in his desperate attendance at her dance classes. "You know the word disembodied?" she says to Vincent: This man was disembodied. He was divorced from his body. To him, the body was like one of those wooden puppets that you move with strings. You pull this string and the left arm moves, you pull that string and the right leg moves. And the real self sits up above, where you cannot see him, like the puppet-master pulling the strings. (198)

Self – reference occurs in natural or formal languages when a sentence or formula refers to itself. The reference may be expressed either directly; through some intermediate sentence or formula; or by means of some encoding. In philosophy, it also refers to the ability of a subject to speak of or refer to himself or herself, or itself; to have the kind of thought expressed by the first person pronoun, the word "I" in English. Self-reference is related to self- reflexivity and apperception.

Coetzee, the South African novelist and Noble laureate, significant among the contemporary writers engaged in exploring the ontological and other issues crucial to the fictional discourse. This engagement is primarily for marking his "authorial position", choosing his own voice of articulation and, in particular, locating himself in the complex historical past and in the fractured social present of post- Apartheid South Africa. For a novelist like Coetzee the stakes are very high as in per Waster's words: To write is to awaken counter voices

within oneself, and to dare enter into dialogue with them. The dangerous attraction of the inner self is John Coetzee's them. To imagine the unimaginable" is the courtier's duty. As a post- modern allegorist, Coetzee knows that novels that do not seek to mimic reality best convince us that reality exists" (from the presentation speech at the Nobel Prize ceremony): Hence self- reflexivity is the only mode and fiction the only medium through which he has to more beyond the paralyzing effects of history, in the words of Attwell "by searching for ways in which the novel might recover an ethical basis... (Attwell 4).

Although all three voices active, middle and passive are available to him he makes a preference for middle voice that is "between the active and the passive." (Baral 13). As his "writing self" is constantly under suspicion and interrogation, writing in the middle voice is strategic as it is both self-reflexive and self- referential. It is strategic because it allows him a position outside history. This outsideness helps him to explore the otherness of his authorial self within and beyond "complicity marginality" an identity that has assumed significance for him in the given history of setter colonialism, racism and other forces that are part of the socio-political reality of south Africa.

The concept of this metafiction sets up as sires of interviews between a biographer of Coetzee and four women and one man who may have had an influence on his work. *Summertime* is an experiment in the questionable narrator. In it is Coetzee, writing as a interviewer wanting to know about Coetzee . The women declare he is unlovable and distant, unsuited to marriage, but they are to love him in their special way.

Julia believes a key recurrent theme in Coetzee's novels "the woman who doesn't fall in love with the man" (81) is a reflection of Coetzee's life experiences. She describes their "erotic entanglement" as "two automata having inscrutable commerce." (59) This accomplished writer is reluctant to reflect on the genesis of his work. Yet over the course of the memoirs, he has been reflecting on the genesis of his work. He has been explaining how he came to be a writer. Rather, he has been writing about the impossibility of explaining how he came to be a writer. As Martin observes, John is reluctant "to probe the sources of his inspiration, as if being too self – aware might cripple him." (209).

With all the paraphrases and interruptions and hasty judgments that fill the interviews of summertime, Coetzee seems to be leading his readers farther from the subject he purportedly set out to explore. Mr. Vincent is supposed to be investigating an important yet neglected period in the life of a major writer. *Summertime* is self-portraiture, of Coetzee's real life. Even if the book isn't strictly autobiographical, it is by an author named J.M. Coetzee and at least pretends to be about him.

On the other hand, this same lover says Coetzee had an innate Calvinistic fatalism coupled with a utopian political romanticism. On top of that, he tells one of the women he has a platonic philosophy of learning that is all about recognizing and desiring truth, which seems so elusive in this story. So part of the fun of the book is trying to figure out the complex personality of the author's persona. One ends up feeling a sort of pathetic affection for him, an odd man out who never fit in, who cuts himself off from what he loves and so has to live with a wrenched heart, who seems to fail to live up to what others expected of him, a man who isn't made for love, and thus in all of his books, so claims one of his lovers, the women never love the men.

Adriana cannot understand how someone who appeared to be so inhuman could be "a great man", or how, being ignorant about love, he could possibly be (as Vincent plainly thinks he was) "a great writer". Placing this awkwardness in the context of the fictional John's creative project, Julia Frankl sees him as someone who, "in the most intimate of human relations, cannot connect, or can connect only briefly, intermittently". "Yet how does he make his living?" she asks: "writing reports, expert reports, on intimate human experience. Because that is what novels are about – isn't it? – intimate experience". (128) Suggesting that this is what a novel is a "report" on "intimate experience" explicitly unites the political and the personal. South African writing has long been marked by a tension between conceptions of literature as reportage, and as aesthetically autonomous. For Julia, the fictional Coetzee stands as a kind of reporter on intimacies he appears not wholly to understand. His fragmentary notebook entries, which bookend the interview transcripts and return to the third-person voice of *Boyhood* and *Youth*, are, however, emphatically both

political and personal, as if indirectly answering the charges leveled against him by some of Vincent's interviewees.

Since Coetzee was awarded the Nobel Prize in 2003, he has seemed unwilling to write in any but the metafictional mode. With *Summertime*, the impulse appears to be to kill off Coetzee the celebrity author as much as to examine, through the filter of fiction, his own life at a specific stage. As it refers to its predecessors, complicating our sense of their reliability as accounts of the historical Coetzee's young life, *Summertime* might ideally be read as the final installment of the trilogy. It is not essential; however, that one should know anything about *Boyhood*, *Youth*, or his other works, to appreciate its rich offerings as an imaginatively distorted and distorting portrait of the artist as outsider.

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