ANKARA SOSYAL BİLİMLER ÜNİVERSİTESİ
YABANCI DİLLER FAKÜLTESİ

WORLD LANGUAGE STUDIES

Cilt/Volume: V Sayı / Issue: II, Aralık / December 2025 / E-ISSN: 2791-7770

GAINING POWER AND JUSTIFICATION THROUGH OPERA IN J. M. COETZEE'S *DISGRACE*

J. M. COETZEE'NİN *UTANÇ* ROMANINDA OPERA YOLUYLA GÜÇ VE MEŞRUİYET KAZANIMI

Mehmet Ali ÇELİKEL

Prof. Dr., Marmara Üniversitesi, İnsan ve Toplum Bilimleri Fakültesi, İngiliz Dili ve Edebiyatı Bölümü, İstanbul, Türkiye

Prof. Dr., Marmara University, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Department of English Language and Literature, İstanbul, Türkiye

ORCID:0000-0003-0402-9858
Email: mehmet.celikel@marmara.edu.tr

Geliş Tarihi/Submitted: 16.10.2025
Kabul Tarihi/Accepted: 22.12.2025

Anahtar Kelimeler:
Güç, Meşrulaştırma, Irk, Toplumsal Cinsiyet, Müzik

Keywords:
Power, Justification, Race, Gender, Music.

Kaynak gösterme/Citation:
Çelikel, M. A. (2025). Gaining power and justification through opera in J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*. *World Language Studies, 5*(2), 121-141.

Abstract

J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*, published in 1999, touches on multiple issues spanning from sex, violence, rape, apartheid, animal rights, power, ethics to justification. David Lurie, the fifty-two-year-old protagonist, a literature professor, sexually abuses Melanie Isaacs, one of his undergraduate students. The novel traces the traumatic investigation over David's unethical relationship that, at times, gets closer to rape. David's unresponsive and indifferent attitude towards the matter invites the questions of power of his position as a professor. Through David's search for not only consolation and a quiet retreat, but also as result of unsettling isolation to write a chamber opera on the love story of Lord Byron and Teresa Guiccioli, Coetzee questions the issues of apartheid and power relations between white and black, women and men. David's refusal to defend himself against the accusations of seduction is both a reaction to justification and rejection of use of power. While David refrains from justifying himself through the investigation process, he draws a parallelism between his relationship with Melanie and Byron's relationship with Teresa in his opera. The purpose of this paper is to analyze the concepts of power and justification in David Lurie's seduction case and question his attempts to draw a thin line between Don Juanism and romanticism in Byron and Teresa relation in the opera. Through a musical reading, the concepts of power and justification in race and gender relationship will be discussed in terms of Weberian theory of power.

Öz

J. M. Coetzee'nin 1999'da yayınlanan *Utanç* adlı romanı, cinsellikten şiddete, tecavüzden apartheid'e, hayvan haklarından iktidara, etikten meşrulaştırmaya kadar birçok konuyu ele almaktadır. Elli iki yaşındaki edebiyat profesörü başkahraman David Lurie, lisans öğrencilerinden Melanie Isaacs'ı cinsel olarak istismar eder. Roman, zaman zaman tecavüze yaklaşan etik dışı ilişki ile başlayan öyküde, David'in ahlaki ve ideolojik konumlanmasını ve bu ilikini oluşturduğu travmayı sorgulamaktadır. David'in konuya karşı duyarsız ve kayıtsız tavrı, profesör olarak konumunun ona sağladığı gücün yarattığı sorunları da gündeme getirir. David'in sadece teselli arayışı ile değil, zorunlu olarak kendini yalıtması sonucu; yazmakta olduğu Lord Byron ile Teresa Guiccioli'nin aşk hikayesini konu alan bir oda operasını bitirmek için kızının yanına gitmesiyle Coetzee, apartheid, beyazlar ve siyahlar, kadınlar ve erkekler arasındaki güç ilişkileri konularını sorgular. David'in taciz suçlamalarına karşı kendini savunmayı reddetmesi, hem meşrulaştırmaya bir tepki hem de güç kullanımını reddetmesidir. David, soruşturma sürecinde kendini haklı çıkarmaktan kaçınırken, Melanie ile ilişkisi ile Byron'ın operasındaki Teresa ile ilişkisi arasında bir paralellik kurar. Bu makalenin amacı, David Lurie'nin taciz vakasındaki güç ve meşrulaştırma kavramlarını analiz etmek ve Byron ve Teresa'nın ilişkisinde Don Juanizm ve romantizm arasında ince bir çizgi çekme girişimlerini sorgulamaktır. Müzikal bir okuma yoluyla, ırk ve cinsiyet ilişkisindeki güç ve meşrulaştırma kavramları Weberci güç teorisi açısından tartışılacaktır.

1. INTRODUCTION

Lev J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*, published in 1999, is a complex and provocative novel that addresses a wide spectrum of social, political, and ethical issues, including sex, violence, rape, apartheid, animal rights, power, and the moral ambiguities surrounding justification and responsibility. The narrative centers on David Lurie, a fifty-two-year-old professor of literature at a South African university, who engages in an illicit and exploitative relationship with Melanie Isaacs, one of his undergraduate students in his Romantic poetry class. Coetzee meticulously traces the personal and institutional consequences of this unethical liaison, highlighting not only the legal and professional repercussions faced by David but also the psychological and emotional ramifications for both him and Melanie. David's largely unrepentant and emotionally detached response to his transgression raises critical questions about the misuse of authority, the intersection of desire and power, and the ethical obligations inherent in the professor-student relationship. The novel, set against the backdrop of post-apartheid South Africa, also engages with broader societal tensions, exploring the lingering effects of racial hierarchies, social inequality, and violence, thereby situating David's personal failings within a wider context of moral and social upheaval.

Through David's for not only consolation and a quiet retreat, but also as result of unsettling isolation in the countryside, where he attempts to compose a chamber opera on the tumultuous love affair between Lord Byron and Teresa Guiccioli, Coetzee interrogates complex questions of power, ethics, and social hierarchies in post-apartheid South Africa. David's withdrawal from the city and his immersion in artistic creation reflect not only a desire for personal refuge but also an implicit engagement with broader societal tensions, including the legacies of apartheid and the imbalances in power between white and black, men and women. His refusal to vigorously defend himself against the accusations of seduction can be read both as a rejection of institutional authority and as a conscious evasion of moral justification, highlighting his ambivalent relationship to accountability and self-awareness. While David abstains from rationalizing or excusing his conduct during the formal investigation, he simultaneously constructs a literary parallel between his own entanglement with Melanie and Byron's passionate yet socially complex liaison with Teresa Guiccioli. This parallelism functions on multiple levels: it allows David to intellectualize and aestheticize his personal transgression, frames his actions within a historical and literary context, and underscores the persistent tension between desire, power, and ethical responsibility. By intertwining personal narrative with literary creation, Coetzee situates David's individual ethical crisis within a

broader discourse on morality, gender, and social hierarchy, thereby inviting readers to reflect on the intersections of personal guilt, artistic imagination, and societal inequities.

There are many scholars like Tom Herron (2005) who studied the novel's "zoomorphism" (2005, p. 488), like Lucy Valerie Graham who focuses on the unspeakability of rape (2010), or like Gareth Cornwell (2010) who studies the relationship between realism and rape in the novel. Unlike those studies, this article undertakes a detailed analysis of the interplay between power and justification as exemplified in David Lurie's seduction of Melanie Isaacs, situating this examination in parallel with the historical and literary relationship between Lord Byron and Teresa Guiccioli. In *Disgrace*, Coetzee constructs a layered narrative in which David's retreat from public censure into the creation of a chamber opera functions as both a form of personal reflection and a subtle rationalization of his own transgressive behavior. The opera, which dramatizes Byron's affair with Teresa, mirrors David's real-life conduct, highlighting the thematic and psychological intersections between Don Juanism and Romanticism, as well as between historical literary paradigms and contemporary ethical dilemmas. Through this parallelism, Coetzee invites readers to consider the ways in which charisma, desire, and social negotiation operate within structures of power and domination, raising questions about the legitimacy of authority and the moral responsibilities it entails.

This study examines the concepts of power and justification within the novel, paying particular attention to the ways they intersect with race and gender in post-apartheid South Africa. Drawing on Weberian theories of power, this article analyzes how David's position as a white, male professor enables certain privileges while simultaneously constraining his moral agency, and how these dynamics echo in his artistic reenactment of Byron and Teresa's liaison. The musical reading of the chamber opera serves as a critical interpretive framework, revealing how Coetzee employs aesthetic creation to explore the ethical and social dimensions of domination, consent, and responsibility. By situating David's personal ethical crisis within both a historical-literary and socio-political context, this approach underscores the novel's interrogation of power as a multidimensional phenomenon—one that operates at the intersections of desire, institutional authority, and broader societal hierarchies. Ultimately, the analysis demonstrates how Coetzee uses the interplay of life, literature, and music to illuminate the persistent tensions between individual justification and structural inequality, emphasizing the moral complexities inherent in human relationships shaped by racial and gender inequalities, and social power.

2. POWER AND JUSTIFICATION

Disgrace is, in Derek Attridge's assessment, one of the few contemporary novels to provoke extensive and serious debate immediately following its publication, largely due to its depiction of morally and socially contentious turning points. These include "the seduction (and on one occasion near-rape) of a 20-year-old coloured female student by a man in his fifties, and the gang rape of his lesbian daughter by three black intruders" (Attridge, 2000, p. 315). The stark portrayal of these incidents, coupled with Coetzee's unflinching exploration of violence, desire, and power, challenged readers to confront uncomfortable ethical and social questions, making the novel a focal point of public and scholarly discussion. The content and the controversial nature of these events elicited strong reactions from South African audiences, some of whom accused the novel of perpetuating racial stereotypes by depicting local black South Africans predominantly as "intruders and rapists" (Attridge, 2000, p. 315).

One may claim that, by reading the novel, certain descriptions of female body as something to be "shared" (Coetzee, 2000, p. 16), may be disturbing when Melanie, though only hinted, is understood to be a black woman. In Aslı Çınar's assumption, the fact that "the colonizers are men, and the women are colonized" when colonized people were treated in the same way "males control females" (2019, p. 84). Then, the novel's content becomes rather humiliating not only in terms of gender relations but also in terms of racial relations when David's use of power as a white man is apparent. On the other hand, the controversy also stems from the violation of professional ethics in academia. *Disgrace* is not only a well-written novel to provoke controversial questions in terms of race and gender, but also a bald novel in depicting the culling of animals.

Additionally, the novel's frank engagement with the unethical seduction of a young female student by her professor sparked debates about morality, gender relations, and the abuse of institutional authority, raising further questions about the representation of consent, power, and responsibility. In this sense, *Disgrace* not only confronted issues of personal transgression and familial vulnerability but also intersected with broader societal anxieties surrounding race, gender, and post-apartheid social hierarchies, making its reception both politically and ethically charged.

David Lurie, the protagonist of *Disgrace*, is a fifty-two-year-old literature professor who has authored three "poorly received books" and teaches Romantic poetry at what Jane Poyner describes as a "third-rate university" (2000, p. 68). An ardent admirer of Lord Byron and a self-

proclaimed lover of women, David is depicted as "to an extent" (Coetzee, 2000, p. 7) a womanizer, whose romantic and sexual pursuits are intertwined with his intellectual identity and personal ego. Living alone in a modest campus flat, he regularly engages the services of Soraya, a Muslim woman employed by an agency that discreetly arranges companionship for men, reflecting both his desire for intimacy and his transactional approach to relationships. Tom Herron rightfully addresses David's approach to Soraya as predatory, because he depicts the sexual intercourse as "copulation of snakes", in what Herron calls as "the language of predation" (2005, p. 476).

Similarly, Timuçin Edman and Zeliha Işık consider Melanie as a "good young prey" for David and continue to argue that Melanie had to go through "a certain white ritual" to reach the level of wide classes (2018, p. 7). Edman & Işık point out that while David talks about music, painting and Byron, his "intellectual accumulation" raises him to a level where the age difference and ethical questions seem insignificant (2018, p. 7).

After Soraya ceases working for him, David, as a consequence of his predation, becomes infatuated with one of his undergraduate students, Melanie Isaacs, and seduces her, an act that triggers an official investigation into his conduct and ultimately leads to his dismissal from the university. Seeking both physical and emotional refuge, David relocates to the rural property of his lesbian daughter, Lucy, where he confronts the stark realities of country life, including labor-intensive chores and a sense of displacement from urban academic life. The rural retreat soon turns into a site of trauma: Lucy's home is violently invaded by three local youths who gang-rape her, leaving her physically and psychologically scarred, while David himself is brutally attacked. This chain of events forces David to confront vulnerability, powerlessness, and the ethical complexities of personal and familial responsibility, situating his individual failings within a broader context of social and racial tensions in post-apartheid South Africa. Until his fifties, he has married and got divorced twice and lived the life of a Don Juan. The fact that he is a "lover of women" shapes the tension in the novel:

> The company of women made him a lover of women and, to an extent, a womanizer. With his height, his good bones, his olive skin, his flowing hair, he could always count on a degree of magnetism. If he looked at a woman in a certain way, with a certain intent, she would return his look, he could rely on that. (Coetzee, 2000, p. 7)

After one of his classes, on his way back to his campus flat, David encounters Melanie Isaacs, a young coloured student enrolled in his Romantic poetry course. On impulse, he invites

her for a drink in his flat, where he opens a bottle of wine and plays some music, creating an intimate, seemingly casual atmosphere. David frames this encounter in his mind as "a ritual men and women play out with each other," yet he is acutely aware of the profound ethical and professional transgression involved: "the girl he has brought home is not just thirty years his junior: she is a student" (Coetzee, 2000, p. 12). This acknowledgment introduces a moment of self-reflection, as David questions whether he can continue to see Melanie in her role as his student after crossing a boundary that inherently compromises their academic and ethical relationship. Despite these reservations and the recognition of the imbalance of power between them, David finds himself unable to resist the allure of intimacy and asks her to stay, demonstrating both the tension between desire and moral responsibility and the complexities of consent and authority in the professor-student dynamic. This scene encapsulates David's internal struggle, exposing the collision between rational self-awareness and impulsive gratification, and it sets the stage for the ensuing investigation and the unraveling of his personal and professional life:

> 'Stay. Spend the night with me' … Across the rim of the cup she regards him steadily. 'Why?' … 'Because you ought to.' … 'Why ought I to?' … 'Why? Because a woman's beauty does not belong to her alone. It is part of bounty she brings into the world. She has a duty to share it.' (Coetzee, 2000, p. 16)

Lucy Valerie Graham observes that David Lurie's pattern of desire is deeply intertwined with notions of possession and control, noting that he "has a history of desiring 'exotic' women, and assumes that he has the right to purchase or possess their bodies without being responsible for them or respecting the lives they live" (2003, p. 437). This observation highlights the ethical and racial dimensions of David's sexual behavior, revealing a disturbing sense of entitlement grounded not only in gender but also in social and cultural hierarchies. Graham further emphasizes that David rationalizes his actions through a philosophical and aestheticized lens, as he "speculates that 'beauty does not belong to itself', and thus justifies his underlying assumption, as Melanie's educator, that she is somehow his property" (2003, p. 438). The idea that she becomes his property foregrounds an immediate reminiscence of colonial act. Female body is the property to be colonized and owned.

In other words, David frames his desire as an appreciation of beauty and artistic sensibility, which allows him to evade full moral accountability and perceive the student not as an autonomous individual but as an object through which his own pleasures and intellectual fantasies can be realized. This dynamic underscores the interplay between power, ethics, and

the commodification of bodies in Coetzee's novel, demonstrating how David's intellectual sophistication paradoxically masks a profound moral blindness. By situating his sexual pursuit within a framework of aesthetic and pedagogical reasoning, Lurie embodies a troubling conflation of erotic desire, authority, and justification, providing a critical lens through which the novel interrogates the intersections of gender, race, and institutional power.

From the perspective of Max Weber's conceptualization of power, David Lurie exercises authority in a manner that he internally legitimizes, effectively positioning himself as a figure whose influence over Melanie Isaacs is socially and institutionally sanctioned. In this dynamic, Melanie, as the subordinate or subject, comes under the effects of his legitimized power, highlighting the asymmetry inherent in the professor-student relationship. Weber sociologically distinguishes three distinct forms of legitimate authority: "charismatic authority," in which power is derived from the personal charisma and extraordinary qualities of the individual who commands it; "traditional authority," in which power is grounded in established customs, norms, and social practices; and "rational-legal authority," in which power is vested in specific offices or positions within a formally organized system, granting those who occupy them legitimate control over subordinate groups (Weber, 2008, pp. 54-56). In the case of David and Melanie, his authority can be most accurately classified as "traditional authority," wherein social conventions and institutional customs confer upon the teacher or tutor a measure of control over the student, often justified through longstanding academic hierarchies and normative expectations. This form of power relies not on personal virtue or formal legal position alone, but on the inherited and culturally reinforced expectation that educators hold a privileged position in shaping, guiding, and influencing their students. By exercising this traditional authority in the context of seduction, David transforms a socially sanctioned role into an instrument of coercion, demonstrating how institutional power, when coupled with personal desire, can blur ethical boundaries and raise profound questions about consent, accountability, and moral responsibility within educational settings.

Melanie does not spend the night with David on their initial, so-called "date," signaling the tentative and morally ambiguous nature of their early interactions. The following day, however, David offers to give her a ride to a restaurant for lunch, and afterwards, he drives her back to his flat, where they engage in a sexual encounter. While the sequence of events may appear casual on the surface, it is underscored by a profound imbalance of power: David, as her professor, occupies a position of authority that Melanie, as a student, cannot easily challenge. Derek Attridge emphasizes this dynamic, noting that David's "seduction" of Melanie Isaacs "is

seen as a wholly improper exercise of male institutional power that deserves the name he avoids giving it" (Attridge, 2000, p. 15). In other words, Coetzee presents the seduction not merely as a personal moral failing, but as an ethical transgression deeply rooted in structural inequalities, highlighting the ways in which institutional and gendered power can be manipulated to serve individual desire. The narrative thus forces readers to confront the entanglement of personal will, professional authority, and social norms, emphasizing that acts of seduction within hierarchical relationships carry ethical weight far beyond the private sphere, and challenging any attempt to minimize or aestheticize the consequences of such transgressions (Attridge, 2002, p. 317):

> Not rape, not quite that, but undesired nevertheless, undesired to the core. As though she had decided to go slack, die within herself for the duration, like a rabbit when the jaws of the fox close on its neck. So that everything done to her might be done, as it were, far away. (Coetzee, 2000, p. 25)

Following their initial encounter, Melanie begins to avoid David's classes, signaling both her discomfort and the disruption of the student-teacher relationship. Despite this, David visits her once more in her student flat, and during this encounter, she ultimately yields to his advances, further complicating the dynamics of consent, power, and desire. A few days later, a young man who introduces himself as Melanie's boyfriend comes to David's office to confront and threaten him, demonstrating the social consequences and communal awareness surrounding David's actions. In the days that follow, Melanie refuses to attend one of her scheduled examinations, asserting a quiet but firm resistance to David's authority. Despite his repeated calls to his office and insistence that she complete the exam, she remains silent and unyielding. Ultimately, David resolves the situation by marking her exam with a score of seventy, as though she had participated, reflecting both his personal judgment and the ethical ambiguities in his role as an educator. David continues to attempt contact with Melanie, but these efforts are interrupted when her father comes to the faculty to speak with him. The encounter is marked by tension and confrontation, with David experiencing the father's shouts and authoritative presence as he moves through the corridors behind him, emphasizing the repercussions of his actions and the encroachment of familial and societal oversight into what he had perceived as private affairs. This sequence of events underscores the interplay of institutional authority, personal desire, and social accountability, highlighting the cascading effects of unethical behavior within hierarchical relationships:

> 'Professor,' he begins, laying heavy stress on the word, 'you may be very educated and all that, but what you have done is not right.' … 'We put our children in the hands of you people because we think we can trust you. If we can't trust the university, who can we trust? We never thought we were sending our daughter to a nest of vipers.' (Coetzee, 2000, p. 38)

David increasingly imagines himself as Lord Byron and Melanie as Teresa Guiccioli, framing his own illicit desires and actions through the lens of Romantic literary history. While composing his chamber opera, he channels his emotional experiences into the creative process, using art both to process his guilt and to aestheticize his transgression. The scene in which Melanie's father confronts him in the faculty building bears a striking resemblance to a moment in Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, highlighting the thematic interplay of seduction, authority, and moral reckoning. As Burkholder et al. note, "Mozart, for the first time in opera, took the character of Don Juan seriously" as "a seducer," "a rebel against authority, a scorner of common morality," and "unrepentant to the last" (Burkholder et al., 2006, p. 562). In the opera, after Don Giovanni seduces Donna Anna, "The Commendatore, Donna Anna's father, rushes in to protect her and challenges Don Giovanni to fight" (Burkholder et al., 2006, p. 562), a dramatic confrontation that mirrors the authority and protective instincts of Melanie's father as he challenges David in the university corridors. David's scandalous affair with Melanie, therefore, is paralleled not only with Byron's historical relationship with Teresa but also with archetypal narratives of seduction and paternal confrontation. In Poyner's words, "Lurie is in the process of imagining his operetta [called] *Byron in Italy* which, ironically paralleling his own life, recounts Byron's flight to Italy to avoid a scandal, and his 'last big love-affair', with Teresa" (Poyner, 2000, p. 68). Through this intertextual and operatic framework, Coetzee emphasizes the ways in which Lurie negotiates his desires, rationalizations, and ethical failures by situating them within a historical-literary narrative, drawing ironic and emotional parallels between the transgressions of Byron and his own, and simultaneously inviting reflection on the recurring dynamics of power, seduction, and authority across time and art forms.

Mike Marais regards Coetzee's use of opera as "a *mise ada abyme* of fiction-writing" and points out that this description "suggests the inability of the text to represent otherness" allowing the possibility of such and unethical act (2000, p. 60). Thus the inset opera, as Marais argues, raises "the possibility that the text may inspire ethical action" and acknowledges "the other's otherness" (2020, p. 60). This, in a sense, helps David justify his unethical act as he reimagines himself inside the opera.

David's affair with Melanie inevitably sparks controversy among the student body, leading many to stop attending his classes and creating a tense atmosphere within the university. In response, the administration launches a formal investigation focusing on two specific offenses: his seduction of Melanie and his unilateral decision to mark an absent student's exam. Rita Barnard observes that at the heart of *Disgrace* lies a crisis of "definitions, relationships, and responsibilities," a crisis that Coetzee examines not only through narrative events but also "on the level of fundamental structures" in language, including grammatical and lexical choices (2003, p. 206). Throughout the investigation, David is deliberate in his choice of words, carefully navigating the procedural and ethical terrain without offering apologies or rationalizations. At the very outset of his hearing before the committee, he declares that he has "no defence" (Coetzee, 2000, p. 41), signaling a selfhood that neither seeks to justify nor to denounce his actions, but instead asserts a measured, almost detached acknowledgment of the accusations. His stance reflects a complex interplay of pride, autonomy, and moral ambivalence; for David, the act of confession, defense, or apology is transformed into a matter of personal dignity rather than ethical reckoning. He articulates this position explicitly: "I am sure the members of this committee have better things to do with their time rather than rehash a story over which there will be no dispute. I plead guilty to both charges. Pass sentence, and let us go on with our lives" (Coetzee, 2000, p. 48). In this statement, David minimizes the procedural and moral weight of the hearing while simultaneously asserting control over the narrative of his transgression, revealing his complex negotiation of authority, accountability, and self-perception. Coetzee thus frames the institutional investigation not merely as a legal or administrative matter, but as a stage for exploring the subtleties of personal pride, ethical ambivalence, and the social dynamics of power and responsibility within academic hierarchies.

Yet, as Barnard observes, "confession never becomes apology" (2003, p. 200), and this distinction is crucial in understanding David Lurie's response to the charges against him. Much like in his relationship with Melanie, David exercises his position of power as a professor not to engage in dialogue, negotiation, or moral reckoning, but to assert a form of controlled detachment. The issue at hand is complex, involving not only sexual misconduct but also the racial dynamics inherent in his exploitation of Melanie, a young black student, which underscores the intersection of gendered and racial hierarchies in post-apartheid South Africa. Poyner further emphasizes the symbolic dimension of David's behavior, arguing that "Lurie's sense of guilt for his exploitative attitude towards women symbolically configures a sense of collective responsibility of oppressors generally" (2000, p. 67). In this sense, David embodies

the figure of the historical oppressor: he acknowledges wrongdoing but refrains from rationalizing or justifying his actions, reflecting a conscious avoidance of accountability that resonates with Weber's concept of "rational-legal authority" (Weber, 2006, p. 55), in which those who occupy positions of institutional power operate within established structures and rarely consider themselves subject to scrutiny or investigation. Despite this, the head of the committee attempts to temper the proceedings, seeking to bring the matter to a level that mitigates David's sense of threat or indignity. This effort reflects a negotiation between institutional authority and individual prerogative, highlighting the tension between formal mechanisms of accountability and the ways in which entrenched social and professional hierarchies shape the administration of justice. Coetzee thus positions the hearing as both a legal and ethical arena, where the interplay of power, race, and gender is scrutinized, and where David's self-perception as an autonomous, rational actor comes into direct contact with the expectations and moral imperatives of the wider academic community:

> "We want to give you an opportunity to state your position."
>
> "I have stated my position. I am guilty."
>
> "Guilty of what?"
>
> "Of all that I am charged with."
>
> "You say you accept Ms Isaacs's statement, Professor Lurie, but have you actually read it?"
>
> "I do not wish to read [her] statement. I accept it. I know of no reason why Ms Isaacs should lie." (Coetzee, 2000, p. 49)

Barnard characterizes these issues as "uncomfortable, unanswerable questions" that challenge even the author's own ethical and narrative frameworks (2003, p. 199). The questions raised by David's actions—concerning sexual misconduct, the abuse of authority, and the intersection of power and desire—resist simple resolution or moral closure. In Attridge's view, they generate a "self-destructive opposition to a new collective insistence upon accountability and moral rectitude, of the unhappy consequences of sexual frustration and uncontrolled impulse, of the terrible aftermath of the use of sex as a weapon" (2000, p. 105). In other words, the novel foregrounds the collision between individual impulses and societal expectations, exposing the destructive consequences that arise when private desire is enacted without ethical consideration. Within this framework, David's interaction with the faculty committee becomes a performative space in which these tensions are articulated and scrutinized. He recounts to the

committee how his relationship with Melanie began, presenting the narrative of their initial encounters while carefully managing the language he uses, neither offering a full apology nor attempting to justify his behavior in conventional moral terms. This retelling simultaneously functions as an act of self-representation, a subtle assertion of his perspective, and a demonstration of the intricate interplay between confession, power, and ethical responsibility. By structuring this narrative within the procedural confines of the committee hearing, Coetzee highlights the complex and often uncomfortable negotiation between personal accountability and institutional judgment, illustrating how acts of transgression reverberate beyond the immediate sphere of the individuals involved to encompass broader social and ethical considerations:

> "Let me confess. The story begins one evening, ... I was walking through the old college gardens and so, it happened, was the young woman in question, Ms Isaacs. Our paths crossed. Words passed between us, and at that moment something happened which, not being a poet, I will not try to describe. Suffice it to say that Eros entered. After that I was not the same." (Coetzee, 2000, p. 52)

Under the influence of Eros, David Lurie frames his desires and actions through the prism of Romantic literary ideals, most notably by comparing himself to Lord Byron. In doing so, he interprets his relationship with Melanie—a girl thirty years his junior—not merely as a personal attraction but as something almost inevitable, a manifestation of a natural and historically validated pattern of male desire. This framing allows him to aestheticize and rationalize his transgression, situating it within a lineage of celebrated, if morally ambiguous, figures of literary and sexual notoriety. In a further, more overtly masculinist re-evaluation, David positions his actions as a matter of right rather than mere desire. When speaking to the faculty committee, he invokes the concept of traditional authority, emphasizing the inherited and socially sanctioned power that a professor holds over a student. In Weberian terms, this appeal to authority reflects the logic of "traditional authority," in which power is legitimized through longstanding customs and hierarchical relationships rather than through personal charisma or formal legal structures. By articulating his actions in these terms, David attempts to satisfy the committee on procedural and rhetorical grounds, asserting that his position as an educator endows him with a form of moral and social legitimacy, even as the ethical and legal dimensions of his behavior remain highly problematic. Coetzee's narrative thus exposes the tension between self-perceived entitlement and genuine accountability, highlighting how intellectual sophistication and literary imagination can be mobilized to mask the exercise of coercive and

gendered power: "Very well. I took advantage of my position vis-à-vis Ms Isaacs. It was wrong, and I regret it. Is that good enough for you?" (Coetzee, 2000, p. 54)

Although David Lurie's acknowledgment of having exploited his position over Melanie may initially appear as a confession, it is strategically framed to maintain his authority and self-image. During the committee hearing, he challenges their moral judgment by asking if his statement is "good enough for them," a rhetorical move that transforms what could be an act of repentance into a subtle assertion of dominance. This protest reflects an authoritarian approach to accountability, in which he avoids genuine contrition by reasserting control over the narrative and the evaluative authority of the committee. In essence, David's confession becomes performative rather than transformative, signaling awareness of wrongdoing without engaging in the ethical labor of true remorse. After leaving the hearing, his interactions with journalists further illuminate this stance: when asked whether he regrets his actions, he responds in a measured and noncommittal way, carefully managing public perception while continuing to withhold personal moral judgment. Coetzee thus highlights the ways in which individuals in positions of power can manipulate both institutional processes and social scrutiny to mitigate consequences, framing confession as a negotiated, rhetorical act rather than an ethical reckoning. This behavior underscores the tension between self-interest, pride, and the societal demand for accountability, revealing how authority and charisma can be mobilized to obscure responsibility even in the face of clear transgression:

> 'No,' he says. 'I was enriched by the experience.'
>
> 'Repentance is neither here nor there. Repentance belongs to another world, to another universe of discourse.' (Coetzee, 2000, p. 56-58).

When the investigation concludes, David Lurie is formally dismissed from the university, marking a dramatic rupture in his professional and personal life. Seeking refuge and perhaps a sense of consolation, he retreats to the rural home of his daughter, Lucy, his child from his first marriage. Lucy, a lesbian, lives alone on a remote farm situated in a sparsely populated rural region predominantly inhabited by black South Africans. She sustains herself by cultivating and selling vegetables, fruits, and flowers at local markets, leading a life characterized by independence, resilience, and a direct engagement with the land. While David initially hopes to find uninterrupted time and space to continue composing his chamber opera, he is quickly drawn into the practical demands of rural life, assisting Lucy with laborious tasks such as loading her produce onto lorries and helping at market stalls in the days following his poetry

classes. These experiences confront him with a way of life radically different from his academic and urban existence. He is particularly struck by Lucy's ease in communicating with the local population, even speaking in the local indigenous language, which prompts him to interrogate her relationship with Petrus, a local black man who provides assistance on the farm. David's attitude toward Petrus, however, is tinged with prejudice and paternalistic suspicion. As Attridge notes, his response "represents the all-too-typical white consciousness of his time: by no means an apologist for apartheid, he nevertheless exhibits on occasions attitudes complicit with racist ideology" (2002, p. 317). Through this juxtaposition of David's urban, academic, and culturally insulated worldview with Lucy's embeddedness in rural, racially and socially diverse networks, Coetzee explores themes of power, racial consciousness, and social transformation, compelling David—and the reader—to confront the lingering legacies of privilege, authority, and ideological complicity in post-apartheid South Africa.

David and Lucy continue their daily routines on the rural farm, engaging in the labor-intensive tasks of cultivation, market selling, and household management, creating an appearance of calm and pastoral stability. However, this fragile sense of security is violently shattered when an intrusion occurs, signaling the eruption of the underlying racial and social tensions that permeate the novel. Three passers-by stop at Lucy's house, ostensibly asking for permission to use the telephone, but their intentions quickly turn hostile. Once inside, they brutally attack both Lucy and David. David is beaten severely and locked in the bathroom while the intruders attempt to set him ablaze with gasoline, leaving him unconscious. During his blackout, they rape Lucy, an act she refuses to name explicitly, never using the word "rape" herself, thereby highlighting her stoic, private handling of trauma that strengthens its effect when she realizes that she is pregnant after the sexual intercourse. Ayşe Ece Derelioğlu Şen finds affirmation of this violence in Lucy's attitude towards the rape as "the only way" for white citizens to live in new Africa "is to make sacrifices" (2020, p. 577).

In time, as Kubilay Gedikli states, David realizes that dogs which "have been associated with the power of the colonizing white mans's power" turn into a metaphor "for a country's tragic past" and raise "questions about the very notion of disloyalty" (2023, p. 118). Reading from Geçikli's point of view, while animals are used as a metaphor for power distribution, the attacks coming from the black Africans towards white citizens are consequences of the tragic past of the country. Similarly, Carine Mardorossian reads Lucy's inactive silence upon her attackers as acceptance of her "fate as a symbol of redistribution o fewer in postapartheid South Africa" as she sees her rapists as collecting their "apartheid debts" (2011, p. 74).

As Barnard observes, the farm—initially depicted as a pastoral utopia—transforms into a "dystopia" despite its physical enclosure and relative isolation (Barnard, 2003, p. 204). The violence shatters the illusion of rural safety and exposes the precariousness of personal and social boundaries in post-apartheid South Africa. Unlike Lucy, David does not hesitate to identify the crime as rape, framing it in legal and moral terms, and uses this recognition to assert his protective authority, seeking to remove his daughter from the site of danger and exert control over the aftermath of the assault. This contrast between David's explicit naming of the violence and Lucy's refusal to verbalize it underscores the novel's exploration of differing responses to trauma, the complexities of victimhood, and the intersections of gender, power, and race in the rural context, highlighting how personal and social histories shape perception, agency, and ethical action in the wake of violence:

> 'I will pronounce the word we have avoided hitherto. You were raped. Multiply. By three men.'
>
> 'But isn't there another way of looking at it, David? … what if *that* 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.' (Coetzee, 2000, p. 157-8)

Petrus, who was notably absent during the violent intrusion into Lucy's house, is later revealed to be a relative of one of the attackers. In the aftermath, he assumes a protective role, particularly toward the younger intruder, and proposes to marry Lucy as a means of securing social and material protection for the child she carries following the rape. While this proposal initially outrages David, who perceives it as an unacceptable compromise and a challenge to his own authority, Lucy ultimately decides to remain on the farm and accept Petrus's terms. Derek Attridge observes that through this unfolding dynamic, David's "experience of changed times grows stronger" as Petrus assumes a more central role in their daily life and in shaping Lucy's future (2000, p. 104). The calculated absence of Petrus during the attack, Attridge suggests, "was no coincidence," but rather a strategic act designed "to reduce Lucy to a condition of dependency, a bywoner on his expanding farm" (2000, p. 104), illustrating the intersection of power, familial obligation, and social manipulation in the rural context.

David is forced to confront the transformation of power relations, recognizing that authority "is no longer underwritten by racial difference, and the result is a new fluidity in human relations, a sense that the governing terms and conditions" must be renegotiated

(Attridge, 2000, p. 105). The attack not only exposes him to the harsh realities of post-apartheid social restructuring but also destabilizes his assumptions about control, privilege, and moral responsibility. He is deeply troubled by the sexual violation of Lucy, an event that, as Graham notes, "highlights a history tainted by racial injustice" (2003, p. 437), situating personal trauma within a broader socio-historical framework. Simultaneously, this violent encounter mirrors and intensifies his reflections on his own prior actions—most notably his seduction of Melanie—forcing him to confront the ethical dimensions of desire, consent, and power in both private and institutional spheres. Paradoxically, this traumatic experience provides David with inspiration for his libretto, as he channels the intensity of his emotional and ethical confrontations into artistic creation. Coetzee thus intertwines personal transgression, historical consciousness, and creative expression, demonstrating how extreme circumstances compel a reconsideration of morality, authority, and the aestheticization of human experience:

> That is how he had conceived it: as a chamber-play about love and death, with a passionate young woman and a once passionate but now less passionate older man; as an action with a complex, restless music behind it, sung in an English that tugs continually toward an imagined Italian." (Coetzee, 2000, p. 180)

As Poyner suggests, David Lurie "simultaneously finds inspiration for Byron" while reflecting on his own experiences, particularly the complex intersections of desire, authority, and vulnerability that he has witnessed and endured (Poyner, 2000, p. 71). This process allows him to reimagine Byron not simply as a figure of Romantic excess, but as a conduit for exploring broader questions of power, gender, and social responsibility, including the fraught implications of white authority in a changing sociopolitical landscape. At the same time, David undertakes the delicate task of reformulating "the project to accommodate [Teresa's] voice" (Poyner, 2000, p. 71), signaling a conscious effort to balance the historically dominant male perspective with a recognition of the female subject's agency, perspective, and emotional reality. This dual focus—on both Byron's passions and Teresa's voice—will ultimately shape the opening scene of his opera, establishing the thematic and emotional framework for the entire work. Through this process, Coetzee underscores the interdependence of personal experience and artistic creation, illustrating how David's engagement with trauma, ethical reflection, and the shifting dynamics of power informs not only his self-understanding but also the imaginative and structural dimensions of his art. The opera thus becomes a site where narrative, historical precedent, and contemporary moral dilemmas converge, allowing David to negotiate both the literary and ethical challenges posed by his life and by the figures he seeks to represent:

> He comes back to what must now be the opening scene. The tail end of yet another sultry day. Teresa stands at a second-floor window in her father's house … The end of the prelude; a hush; she takes a breath. *Mio Byron*, she sings, her voice throbbing with sadness. (Coetzee, 2000, p. 182)

In response to Teresa's voice, Byron's aria is deliberately interrupted by the string instruments, whose sharp, precise tones cut through the melodic line to convey a sense of clarity, tension, and emotional definiteness. This musical intervention serves multiple purposes: it not only punctuates Byron's expressive outpouring, asserting the presence and agency of Teresa within the narrative, but also reflects a broader thematic negotiation between authority and resistance, desire and restraint. The strings' incisive interruptions create a sonic representation of ethical and emotional boundaries, suggesting that Byron's - or David's - passions cannot proceed unchecked without encountering the counterforce of conscience, societal expectation, or the voice of the Other. By employing the strings in this manner, the composition mirrors Coetzee's literary strategy, in which the assertive presence of female agency - embodied by Teresa - is recognized, acknowledged, and integrated into a structure otherwise dominated by male desire and authority. The interplay between the lyrical expansiveness of the aria and the pointed interventions of the strings thus encapsulates the tension between assertion and accountability, pleasure and moral reckoning, highlighting the layered complexity of both the historical figures and their fictional counterparts in David's operatic imagination:

> *Out of the poets I learned to love*, chants Byron in his Cracked monotone, nine syllables on C natural; *but life, I found* (descending chromatically to F), *is another story*. *Plink-plunk-plonk* go the strings of the banjo. *Why, O why do you speak like that*? Sings Teresa in a long reproachful arc. *Plunk-plink-plonk* go the strings." (Coetzee 2000, p. 185)

3. CONCLUSION

Coetzee's *Disgrace* generated significant controversy due to its depiction of an unethical professor–student relationship, animal culling, racial violence, apartheid, the racial attribution of rape, and Melanie's identification as coloured. Yet, it raises profound and enduring questions regarding race, equality, and the exercise of power. Within the novel, David Lurie's position as a university professor allows him to wield authority in what can be understood as the Weberian sense of traditional power, grounded in established social and institutional hierarchies. This

authority manifests not only as a masculinist sexual power over a younger female student but also as a reflection of "white" dominance over the "other," highlighting the racialized dimensions of coercion and privilege in post-apartheid South Africa. David's intention to compose a chamber opera appears, in part, as an artistic and intellectual justification of his authority, a means of aestheticizing and rationalizing his desires within a socially sanctioned framework. Under the influence of Eros, he experiences a force that he perceives as beyond his control, compelling him to act in ways that intertwine passion with transgression. In the process of writing the opera, David draws upon his own experiences, which he regards as "enriching," and consciously compares himself to Lord Byron, framing his desires and ethical lapses within the Romantic literary tradition. Yet, this self-fashioning as a Byronic figure comes at a cost: his Don Juanism, once a source of pleasure and self-assertion, ultimately isolates him, transforming him into a lonely and enigmatic figure. Through this trajectory, Coetzee interrogates the interplay of personal desire, institutional power, and social hierarchy, showing how the pursuit of erotic and intellectual gratification, when entwined with unexamined privilege, can result in both moral reckoning and profound existential solitude. The novel thereby underscores the complex ethical landscape of desire, authority, and responsibility, compelling readers to consider the implications of power exercised across gender, race, and social structures.

To conclude briefly, for Coetzee's David Lurie, the act of justifying or defending oneself is not a means to establish innocence. Instead, by rejecting conventional forms of repentance, he simultaneously acknowledges that his actions were ethically wrong while refusing to categorize them as criminal, reflecting a nuanced distinction between moral transgression and legal culpability. When read through the lens of music, one can argue that David's creative process—particularly his composition of the chamber opera—becomes the only avenue through which he attempts to rationalize or give meaning to his behavior. By comparing himself to Lord Byron and embedding aspects of his own life into the operatic narrative, David effectively transforms himself into a character within his art, achieving a form of self-reflection and partial moral justification that is mediated through aesthetic expression. In this way, Coetzee's novel moves beyond a simple critique of individual moral failure, instead interrogating the broader structures of authority and power. The narrative raises critical questions not only about the exercise of male power as a form of masculine authority, particularly in sexual relationships, but also about the persistence and influence of racialized power—how the privileges of the white male, historically reinforced under apartheid, intersect with social, cultural, and institutional hierarchies. Ultimately, *Disgrace* presents a complex meditation on ethical

responsibility, desire, and the negotiation of authority, showing how personal, racial, and gendered power relations shape both private transgressions and their broader social consequences.

REFERENCES

Attridge, D. (2000). Age of bronze. State of grace: Music and dogs in Coetzee's *Disgrace*. *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction, 34*(1), 98-121.

Attridge, Derek. (2002). J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*: Introduction. *Interventions, 4*(2), 315-320. doi:10.1080/1369801022000013752.

Barnard, Rita (2003). J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* and the South African pastoral. *Contemporary literature*, *44*(2), 199-224.

Burkholder, J. P., Grout, D. J., Claude, V. P. (eds.). (2006). *A History of western music*. (7th ed.) New York & London: W. W. Norton & Company.

Coetzee, J. M. (2000). *Disgrace*. London: Vintage Books.

Cornwell, G. (2010). Realism, rape, and J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*. *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction, 43*(4), 307-322, DOI: 10.1080/00111610209602187.

Çınar, A. (2019). The quest for self, searching for a new identity in J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*. *International Journal of Media Culture and Literature*, *5*(2), 83-90.

Derelioğlu Şen, A. E. (2020). Changing geographies, changing mindsets: J. M. Coetzee's South African and Australian Years. *Journal of the Human and Social Sciences Researches*, *9*(1), 564-582.

Edman, T. & Işık, Z. (2018). The few and far between symbiosis of black and white: Never intermixed. *European Journal of Educational & social Sciences, 3*(1), 1-9.

Geçikli, K. (2023). The anti speciesist stance in J. M. Coetzee's novels: An analysis of animal standpoint. *Litera: Journal of Language, Literature and Culture Studies*, *33*(1), 107-124. DOI: 10.26650/LITERA2022-1085724.

Graham, Lucy Valerie. (2003). Reading the unspeakable: Rape in J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*. *Journal of Southern African Studies*. *29*(2), 433-444. DOI: 10.1080/03057070306207.

Herron, T. (2005). The Dog Man: Becoming Animal in Coetzee's *Disgrace*. *Twentieth Century Literature*. *51*(4), 467-490.

Marais, M. (2000). The possibility of ethical action: J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*. *Scrutiny2: Issues in English Studies in Southern Africa, 5*(1), 57-63. doi:10.1080/18125440008565955

Mardorossian, C. M. (2011). Rape and violence of representation in J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*. *Research in South African Literatures, 42*(4), 72-83.

Poyner, Jane. (2000). Truth and reconciliation in J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace, 5*(2), 67-77. doi:10.1080/18125440008565972

Weber, M. (2008). *Max Weber's complete writings on academic and political vocations* (J. Dreijmanis, Ed., & Intro.; G. C. Wells, Trans.). New York, NY: Algora.