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Unearthing the Human and Animal Relationship: Animality and Sentience in J.M Coetzee's *Disgrace*

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Abstract:
Interest in the study of animals has burgeoned recently with the emergence of works that call for a rethinking of humans' relationship with animals, among them the works of the South African writer J.M Coetzee. Tilted towards ecocriticismand drawing on the field of animal studies, the present article examines the way in which humans interact with animals in Coetzee's critically acclaimed novel *Disgrace.* Through the protagonist's experiences, the author prompts questions about the treatment of animals, the objectification of women, and the consequences of abuse of power. Ultimately, the novel suggests that the way humans treat animals is reflective of the way they treat fellow humans, and reveals that human beings and animals are connected due to their shared experiences and vulnerability.
Keywords:animal, animality, animal studies, human, sentience.

Introduction:

Ecocriticism is an emerging critical field that burgeoned in the twentieth century, stoked by the tradition of nature writing in the United States. It is an earth- centered approach in critical studies that investigates the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Since the animal is a fundamental part of man's physical environment, it grows into a prominent trope in ecocriticism; as Cheryll Glotfelty opines: "ecocriticismhas one foot in literature and the other on land; [and] as a theoretical discourse, itnegotiates between the human and the nonhuman" (Glotfelty, 2010,p.xix). Ecocriticism addresses not only issues of animal's representation in literary texts and animal- human interaction but also that of the killing of animals and animals' rights.

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Any discussion of the human-animal relationship requires an increasing attention to the definition of the term "animal". Etymologically, the animal is a term of Latin provenance. Deriving from "animale", it was initially introduced to signify "living being, being which breaths", and then used in the 17th C to refer to non- human creatures or beasts. It was also used figuratively to connote a bestial or brutish person. Despite the existence of more than sixty possible definitions of the word "animal", this word evolved in increasing distinction from "human". In fact, the origin of the dichotomy human/animal can be traced back to the Bible. Indeed, in the tale of Genesis, the creation of man in the sixth day in the image of God testifies to the pre-eminence and excellence of man above all other creatures on earth including animals.

This assumption is further expanded by modern philosophers like the extraordinarily influential René Descartes. In his famous text *Discourse on Method* (1637), Descartes established a distinction between the two notions of body and soul that represents, according to him, the leading cause of the dissemblance between man and animal. He claimed that God created man endowed with a body and a rational soul and that his existence depends entirely on his ability to reason and to think. The animal, conversely, is relegated to a self-operating machine or a moving mechanism and is devoid of reason. He goes on to state, that alongside a denial of the ability to think, the animal is also denied language. Yet, despite the fact that this Cartesian view is very influential for contemporary animal studies, it is berated for being a kind of "species solipsism", even "a wildly perverse view" (Waldau, 2013, p.146).

That is the case of the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben who counteracted Cartesian dualism in his famous book *The Open: Man and Animal* in which he investigates the dichotomy between humans, animals and the anthropological mechanism that created it. He also devoted a significant attention to Martin Heidegger's eco-philosophy mainly his account of animality that had been adapted and formulated in *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*. In this lecture, Heidegger delineates three types of entities depending on their relationship to the world: human beings, animals, and present- at – hand object. Whilst humans have access to world-formation, animals and present-at-hand objects are poor in the world [weltarm].This poverty of the animal raised another important question that of being. In fact, Heidegger proposed different ways of being that he explained through the use of the notion of Dasein. According to him, all beings (lizard, dog) live or "are", but do not exist. Hence, animals' poverty in world is a lack of Dasein

or in- the- world. Heidegger additionally maintains that entities are reduced to our knowledge and use of them. Thus, it is human beings' responsibility to let them disclose themselves, or letting them be in the space of our consciousness. This comportment is known as Gelassenheit which is both a letting be of entitiesand a letting go of modern technology. The mode of being or inhabiting the world that results from Gelassenheit is "dwelling".

Drawing from Martin Heidegger's eco-philosophy, Agamben asserted that, being nebulous, the border between human and animal is deeply imbricated with divisions within the human himself. Moreover, he argued that the humanity of man is contingent on man's openness to the closed world of the animal. In this sense, humanity's existence depends on the exclusion and concealment of animality (especially man's own animality). Through this act of exclusion man maintains his authority. Agamben concluded that there is a missing link, an "abyss" in Heidegger's words between man and animal, a third category in between. Consequently:"[It] is neither an animal life nor a human life, but only a life that is separated and excluded from itself only a *bare life"(*Agamben, 2003, pp37-38).

In line with this, Jacques Derrida similarly probes into the philosophical problematic of the animal. He rejected the use of the lumping term 'animal' in the singular for being absurdly reductionist. Indeed, the category animal tends to encompass indiscriminately all living creatures that are not humans from lizards to cats .This assumption is common among philosophers who were accused by Derrida of misrepresenting the animal and misunderstanding the complexities of animal life. He instead recommended the term: *animot.* In his work *The Animal Therefore I am* (2008) which reflected Descartes 'dictum "I think therefore I am", he took to task philosophers such as Aristotle, Kant, Heidegger, Lacan and mainly Descartes. He set his sights not only on Descartes' distinction between mechanized animals and rational human beings, but also on his assertion that animals lack language and reasoning abilities. He also examined other philosophers' rejection of animals' ability to react, their awareness of mortality and existence, their ability to choose death, and most importantly their ability to mourn and suffer. According to Derrida, the prejudices directed against the animal are a key source of animal subservience and exploitation.

Other philosophers, like the bioethics' professor and philosopher, Peter Singer share this concern for animal suffering. In his groundbreaking book *Animal Liberation* (1975), he concludes that non-human animals do feel pain but a kind of pain different from that of humans. This capacity for suffering or enjoyment (sentience) is vital inensuring that all interests are

considered equally and for bringing about a revolutionary shift in how we treat animals. He additionally delved into the ethical dilemma surrounding the act of ending life and denounced the concept of human speciesism. A term first used by the British psychologist Richard. D Ryder in 1970 and popularized by Singer, who compared it to sexism and racism and reckoned it at the origin of animals' sufferings.

Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari brought the animal other to a new prominence. In their jointly authored book *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987), they addressed the concept of becoming-animal which they defined as neither a resemblance nor an imitation of the animal but rather : "a verb with a consistency all its own; it does not reduce to, or lead back to, " appearing" "being" " equaling", or " producing"(Deleuze,1987, p.239). According to them, the process of becoming: "sweeps up the human being with the animal into a relationship. But this is not a linking together of two distinct points. It results in the disappearance of these two distinct points, the freeing from fixed form"(Deleuze,1987,p. 238).

Stated slightly differently, becoming is a casting aside of the rigid or molar identity of both categories human beings and animal other, and an adaptation of a more flexible or molecular form. Furthermore, it is not an evolution or a regression but in the words of Deleuze and Guattari "an involution" that results from contagion and alliance with an anomalous individual. In short, the ubiquitous process of becoming is fueled by a desire for an interaction between human beings and the animal other. An interaction that takes place in a proximity zone and allows for a disintegration of identities and barriers.

These discussions on animals and their relationship to humans provided us with a real substance for literary works. In a special issue of the journal *Configurations* Richard Nash and Ron Broglio described the humanities 'enthusiasm for animal studies as "an animal moment" (Deloughrey, 2011, p.200). That is the case of J.M Coetzee's writings, which often explore the human-animal relationship. John Maxwell Coetzee is a South African novelist, literary critic and translator of Dutch and Afrikaans language. He wrote more than 20 books which riveting tales would get him to be shortlisted for or to win numerous awards. Indeed, in 2003, he received the Noble Prize of Literature and bestowed with the knighthood in 2010. Moreover, he was the first authorto achieve a double victory in the Booker Prize. In his fiction, Coetzee condemns the objectification and commodification of animals and highlights the resulting consequences. *Disgrace* is one of these works that examine how humans treat animals both

literally and metaphorically. Coetzee's highly praised book , *Disgrace,* recounts the experiences of the protagonist, David Lurie, a professor of Romantic poetry and Communications at Cape Town's Technical University. David Lurie's sexual liaisons mostly with his student Melanie Isaacshad a negative impact on his professional life. Indeed, he was accused of rape and decided to resign and left the urban landscape of Cape Town to the rural Eastern Cape. The disgraced David Lurie relocates to his daughter Lucy's farm situated in Salem in the Eastern Cape region. In that idyllic smallholding, where flowers blossomed, vegetables grew, animals were kernelled and the heavenly smells of baking wafted, his journey towards ethical awakening began.

I. Animals as inferior creatures:

David Lurie's relationship with animals at the outset is based on a denigration of animals through displaying humans' superiority rather than recognizing the value of animals. This sense of dominance over animals is revealed in a significant conversation with his daughter Lucy: "The Church Fathers had a long debate about them, and decided they don't have proper souls,' he observes. "Their souls are tied to their bodies and die with them" (Coetzee, 1999, p.78).He additionally claims that he belongs to a higher order than animals:"We are of a different order of creation from animals"(Coetzee,1999,p.74). Lurie thus epitomizes the widely held Cartesian belief that humans are inherently separate from and superior to animals due to possessing a soul and the ability to reason, as Peter Singer opines: "normal humans have capacities that far exceed those of nonhuman animals, and some of these capacities are morally significant in particular contexts" (Singer,1999,p.87). In fact, Lurie cannot identify with the animal that he perceives as Derridian "absolute other", when Bev Shaw asks him if his work in the animal clinic stems from his love for these creatures, his answer is trenchant: "Do I like animals? I eat them, so I suppose I must like them, some parts of them" (Coetzee, 1999, p. 81). His answer attests to his lack of affinity with and empathy towards non-humans considered consumable objects. This proclivity to relegate animals to the status of objects is further exemplified in his description of dogs as: "part of the furniture, part of the alarm system"(Coetzee, 1999,p.78).Historically, dogs were brought in by Europeans in the 17th century and were trained during the apartheid to protect whites' properties and the apartheid system. Indeed, Coetzee introduced the dogs at the outset of the novel by underscoring their significance as a means of deterrence, which testifies to the fact that in South Africa after the end of apartheid, similar practices are perpetuated, and dogs fulfill the same

function: "dogs are bred to snarl at the mere smell of a black man "(Coetzee,1999, p.110).

David Lurie's daughter, Lucy, is rather an animal enthusiast, she is the one who introduced her father to: "this other, unfamiliar world"(Coetzee, 1999, p.71) of animals. Therefore, it is unsurprising that her entrance into the novel occurs concurrently with the dogs'. While spending his first night at Lucy's small farm, Lurie was awoken by the dogs barking:"One dog in particular barks insistently, mechanically"(Coetzee, 1999,p.67) . Lurie's use of the term mechanical here evokes Descartes' analogy between animals and machines. In contrast to her father, Lucy acknowledges the fact that dogs are sentient beings rather than automata. She further expresses her profound empathy towards animals and highlights our shared existence with these creatures: "This is the only life there is. Which we share with animals" (Coetzee,1999 , p.74).

Similarly, Bev Shaw shows a close connection with animals mainly dogs. While David Lurie and his daughter Lucie breed dogs for the protection of their homestead, Bev treads them carefully in her Animal clinic.She unlike David Lurie is utterly convinced that animals share some human attributes, she believes, for example that animals can smell human's thoughts: "They can smell what you are thinking" (Coetzee, 1999, p.81). A claim that Lurie loathed for the simple reason that endowing animals with sentience would place them above humans.Women characters in Coetzee's fiction like Bev Shaw, Lucy in *Disgrace* or Elizabeth Costello in *Elizabeth Costello* are portrayed as closer to nature and animals than their male counterparts.

II. Lurie's Animality:

This middle–aged and twice divorced charming man has a reputation for being a womanizer. In the midst of his midlife crisis, he engaged in sexual relations with women who were younger than him. At the university, he strove to impress his female students with references to renowned Shakespeare and Mozart, even though such outdated efforts were conspicuously inappropriate. The novel is hence replete with allusions and direct quotes from various literary and artistic figures such as Byron, Wordsworth, Flaubert, and Verdi. In fact, David attempts to justify and legitimize his sexual desires by interpreting them within the framework of European culture, and divine providence. He explains to his daughter Lucy that he is an acted-upon object rather than a free-willed subject.

Despite Lurie's attempts to dissociate himself from the animal other by asserting his superiority, he is not as thus distinct from it. Indeed, his numerous impulsive affairs are depicted as animalistic, as he is unable to

control his drives and instincts. When his latest affair with his student Melanie Isaacs sours and he has to justify himself before a committee of inquiry, he avows that this liaison is simply: "an impulse he cannot resist" (Coetzee,1999, p. 53). He further draws a parallel between his sexual impulses and the instincts of a dog: "But desire is another story. No animal will accept the justice of being punished for following its instincts"(Coetzee,1999 , p.90). What is surprising is that as an excuse for his coercive behavior, he relates himself to the subservient animal. This heightens the fact that humans are not separate from animals. Beyond that, these primal and uncontrollable impulses and desires are at odds with his ostensibly civilized nature as professor causing him to experience feelings of shame and disgrace.

III. Lurie's Animalizing of Women and Blacks:

Lurie's demeanor towards animals is reflective of his treatment of women as Don Randall contends: "gender and animality are, in Coetzee's new line of thought and imagination, linked to rather than distinct concerns" (Randall,207,p.213). Indeed, Lurie considered women like Melanie and Soraya as mere objects of lust that should be compliant and pliant, which manifests his conviction that men were inherently superior to women. These women were not only disrespected and undermined but also animalized. Indeed, he compared women to sheep, claiming that they do not own their lives: "She does not own herself. Beauty does not own itself" (Coetzee, 1999,p.16), which parallels his previous statement in the novel that "Sheep do not own themselves, do not own their lives" (Coetzee,1999,p.123). Undoubtedly, he equates women with animals, specifically on a metaphorical level. That is evident throughout the novel, which is abounding in animal metaphorical references, such as: ""bull's eye", "chickens come home to roost", and"dogged silence", "little creature".In fact, Lurie's association of animals with women he deems inferior to humans constitute a justification for their subjection.

David Lurie animalized not only women but also blacks. At the outset of the novel, Petrus introduced himself to David as follows: "I look after the dogs and I work in the garden. Yes.' 'I am the gardener and the dog-man.''The dog –man" (Coetzee,1999, p. 64). Petrus is hence a black laborer in Lucy's land which evinces his low social status. David is, indeed, quite at ease with that description of blacks as inferior beings, a description that conforms to colonial and apartheid discourse. That colonial "habitus" (Mozes,2018, p. 137) stepped to the fore in another scene where he spoke disparagingly to Pollux, who was caught ogling his daughter Lucy: "*You*

swine! [David] shouts. *'You filthy swine!'"(* Coetzee, 1999,p.206*)*.Furthermore, when Lucy was sexually abused, Lurie animalized the black perpetrators: "dog" (Coetzee,1999,p.131), and "jackal boy" (Coetzee, 1999, p202).David Lurie's frequent associations of hatred and violence with animality not only aim at degrading these humans and animals but also at justifying their oppression and exploitation: "casting of a hated or despised human into the role or image of an animal is […] a very frequent and effective means of stereotyping them, of objectifying them, and rendering them inferior" (Baker, 1993, p.113).

Lucy Lurie was raped and her father David burnt by anonymous black aggressors that sunk into a state of disgrace. Even dogs were gruesomely killed, an act that Lurie qualified as revenge, the revenge of blacks against these white- owned dogs that symbolize the apartheid. This jarring rape event is significant for both Lucy Lurie and her father. Indeed, Lurie was deeply affected by the sight of the brutal and vicious shooting of the dogs and particularly by his immurement by the assailants, which recall the locking up of dogs in kennels at the outset of the novel. This shared experience with the animals prompted him to reflect on his relationship with them: "the extension of human awareness to include animals is urged not by rational argument but by immediate acquaintance with animal suffering" (Singer, 1975, p.10).After the rape, Lucy, who was once a landowner, is disempowered. Indeed, she had lost confidence and authority and became vulnerable. She described her life, after the rape incident, as being comparable to that of a dog: "Such high hopes, and to end like this. It is humiliating.[…] To start at ground level. No cards, no weapons, no property, no rights, no dignity. Like a dog." (Coetzee, *1999, p.*205). Moreover, her acceptance of losing all the privileges a human being possesses and marrying the black Petrus relegated her to the status of an animal. Lucy does indeed experience a becoming animal, that will transform her into a minoritarian, a beast. Indeed, she is stripped of her humanity as she, akin to a dog, is deprived of her rights, possessions, and dignity. A painful process whereby she acknowledges rape as a necessary sacrifice for a transition in the post-apartheid era of South Africa.

IV. Lurie's Acknowledgment of Animals 'Sentience:

David Lurie's work, alongside Bev Shaw and her dogs, in the Animal Welfare Station at Grahams town marks a significant turn in David Lurie's life and his relationship with animals. Indeed, through his job in the animal clinic, Lurie undergoes a fundamental transformation in his relationship with the animal other, which is on the list of the country's leftovers: "On the list of the nation's priorities, animals come nowhere" (Coetzee,1999, p.73). The job

in the clinic does not only consist of feeding, doctoring, and caring, but also of mercy killing the bad cases which often involves intimate interaction with dogs.

The first time David Lurie starts to feel a kind of sympathy toward the animal was when Bev soothed him following the rape incident, he instantly recalls a wounded goat that he saw at the clinic and ponders the animal's feelings: "He recalls the goat in the clinic, wonders whether, it felt the same peacefulness" (Coetzee,1999, p106). This diligent attitude toward animals becomes more apparent when he sees goats tethered outside Petrus' homestead on the bare ground without grazing, which shocks him: "Those sheep', 'don't you think we could tie them where they can graze?'[…]. An hour later the sheep are still tethered. Exasperated, he unties them and tugs them over to the damside, where there is abundant grass" (Coetzee, 1999, p.123). David was more preoccupied by Petrus' appalling method of slaughtering the goats and condemned it. He even hesitated to consume the meat from the slain sheep, at the celebration of Petrus' property purchase. His first display of fondness for animals was directed towards the elderly bulldog Katy, whom he tenderly caressed and even shared a sleeping space with within her cage. His affection for Katy appears to stem from their mutual experience of loneliness and abandonment: "Abandoned, are we?" (Coetzee, 1999, p. 78).The new life that Lurie is experiencing is not a result of logical thinking; instead, it spontaneously arises from an emotional response, and revolves around developing a newfound appreciation for and understanding of animals.

As the novel unfolds, Lurie develops a growing sense of empathy toward animals which culminated in his moral elevation, being deeply affected by the dying animals in the clinic and repelled by the way workers of the incinerator dispose of the corpses. The workers, in fact, leave deceased canines throughout the whole weekend to decompose alongside medical garbage. Later, they strike the sacks with the rear of their shovels to fracture the stiff limbs. He proposed loading them by himself separately and propelling them into the flames. This scene draws attention to the atrocities inflicted on animals in post-apartheid South Africa.

The new, mixed feelings of compassion Lurie experienced, made him perplex:

> The more killings he assists in, the more jittery he gets. One Sunday evening, he actually has to stop at the roadside to recover himself. Tears down his face; his hands shake. He does

> not understand what is happening to him. Until now he has been more or less indifferent to animals.(Coetzee, 1999,p. 143)

Lurie eventually acknowledges the animals' sentience when he realizes that the poor animals can smell their impending death: "… the dogs in the yard smell what is going on inside. They flatten their ears, they droop their tails, as if they too feel the disgrace of dying" (Coetzee, 1999, p.143). In fact, death is something we share with animals, as Derrida elucidates: "mortality resides there, as the most radical means of thinking the finitude that we share with animals, the mortality that belongs to the very finitude of life, to the experience of compassion" (Bartosch,2013, p.269).This shared experience and vulnerability is what connects humans to animals and propels humans to feel compassion for them.

It is striking to see Lurie, who initially refuses to identify with animals, forge a special bond with a dog that Bev Shaw names Driepoot, which means "three-legged" in Afrikaans and refers to his physical deformity. Despite Lurie's reluctance to name the dog, which suggests a refusal to grant him agency, he had a strong affection for the dog and vice versa. But this affinity did not spare the dog in the novel's final scene from euthanasia: "The dog wags its crippled rear, sniffs is face, licks his cheek. He does nothing to stop it.' Come' Bearing him in his arms like a lamb.' I thought you would save him for another week', says Bev Shaw.' Are you giving him up?''Yes, I am giving him up" (Coetzee,1999, p. 220). Lurie decided to sacrifice the dog to relieve him from further suffering because he is utterly convinced that dogs have no prospects in post- apartheid South Africa. This symbolic act heralds a significant step in Lurie's ethical awakening and his relationship with animals. The closing scene of the novel is very significant in the sense that that it not only insinuates hope in a possible redemption for David, who thinks positively about the future for the first time , but also constitutes a fundamental breakthrough towards a more ethical relationship with animals: "There is a moment of utter stillness which he would wish prolonged for ever: the gentle sun, the stillness of mid- afternoon, bees busy in a field of flowers; and at the centre of the picture a young woman, lightly pregnant, in a straw sunhat. A scene ready-made for a Sargent or a Bonnard" (Coetzee, *1999,p.*217)

Conclusion:

The major focus of this article is to examine the human and animal interconnection in Coetzee's novel *Disgrace* through the protagonist's journey towards self- redemption and ethical awakening and his interactions with animals. David Lurie cannot relate to animals who are conferred an inferior

status and are treated accordingly. Furthermore, women and blacks are not only associated with animals but also relegated to their status as they were disrespected, undermined and animalized. Indeed, the author lays bare humans 'brutality against animals, which is reminiscent of the cruel treatment and discrimination against black Africans, women, and indigenous communities during apartheid and colonization. The writer reveals that being with animals impels humans to acknowledge the sentience of these creatures. Through exploring the theme of animality and sentience, the author prompts readers to rethink their relationship with animals and encourages a more compassionate attitude towards animals.

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