J.M. Coetzee: *Life & Times of Michael K.*

: *Foe.*

: *Age of Iron.*

*Life & Times of Michael K* published in 1983 reflects and participates in the national unease about the future direction of South Africa. The social and political situation in the country grew increasingly unstable during the 1980s. Engaged in armed conflicts both within and without its national borders, subject to continued criticism and isolation from the world community, South Africa seemed mired in an ever deepening crisis. Gordimer in *The Essential Gesture* described the turbulent atmosphere of Johannesburg: “I live at 6,000 feet in a society whirling, stamping, swaying with the force of revolutionary change” (Clingman 262). While the third novel of Coetzee *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), was set in indeterminate time and setting, *Life & Times of Michael K*, was set in modern South Africa at a time of revolution. After the events of the Soweto uprising in 1976-1978, the level of violence in South Africa increased dramatically. The Soweto protests had occurred primarily in the black areas, but the growing waves of strikes and student boycotts in 1980 took place, for the first time, among the coloured population. The scenes of the novel evoke the social breakdown of post-Soweto South Africa during the 1980s, the novel’s theme represent the fears and concerns of the time. Besieged from within, the South African white minority was also conducting a virtual war with Mozambique, Angola and Zimbabwe that have newly won independence and raised the spectre of black border countries harbouring ANC guerillas.
South Africa became increasingly effaced from international discourse, by the “new dispensation” granted in November 1983, with white voters approving limited of the Indian and coloured races in the political process. But it did little to quell the turbulence of the beginning of the decade. Instead, violent protests, massive detentions, and iron fisted law enforcement continued throughout 1984 and 1985. However, with the state of emergency instituted in 1985, the world saw less and less of South Africa in newspapers and magazines. The silencing of dissent in South Africa reached perhaps its greatest effectiveness in 1984 and 1985 during the same period in which Coetzee ironically achieved his greatest international voice. As his land and its oppressed people were immersed in silence, Coetzee found himself asked increasingly to speak for that land and people. This is the historical position Coetzee occupied as he wrote Life & Times of Michael K (1983), Foe (1986), Age of Iron (1990) and compiled his non-fiction A Land Apart. While Life & Times of Michael K (1983) represents the apocalyptic South Africa, Foe (1986) appears radically removed from contemporary South African life. Foe’s focus on nature, narrative and imagination and on the question of who will remain silent are thoughtful responses to the questions of speech and silencing confronting Coetzee in his new role as a prominent South African novelist. Age of Iron (1990) shows Coetzee’s search for a form that facilitates truth-telling and presents an alternative to manipulation of history. In Age of Iron, Coetzee turns to a novelistic form more realistic than any of his previous books, but still employing a figurative or allegorical narrative technique.
Given the extensive military and guerrilla activity of the times, it is not surprising that discourse in South Africa at this time became increasingly concerned with war and revolution. South African fiction also apparently reflected the imagery and ideas of war and turmoil in critical and fictional writing. Andre Brink entitled the book of criticism published in 1983 *Writing in a State of Siege*, and Nadine Gordimer brought out *Something Out There* (1984) in which a fierce baboon and the threat of terrorists combine to create fear in a town. Other novels have overtly projected the fearsome end of the world: Karel Schoeman’s *Promised Land* (1978), Nadine Gordimer’s *July’s People* (1981) and Christopher Hope’s *Kruger’s Alp* (1984).

(i)

*Life & Times of Michael K* has as its protagonist one of South Africa’s disenfranchised majority and the novel avoids overt references to racial distinctions. The story is about the suffering of K’s indignities and deprivation of apartheid hardships intensified by the social disintegration of civil war. The primary narrator in the novel seems to answer the objections of those critics who had faulted Coetzee for not taking a clear political stance in his artistic writing, in the manner of his fellow South Africans such as Paton, Gordimer, and Fugard.

*Life & Times of Michael K* received England’s prestigious Booker McConnell Prize in 1983, apart from winning the Central News Agency (CNA) Literary Award (South Africa) and Prix Femina Etranger (France) in 1984. After convincingly depicting the obsessive and sometimes psychotic thought-processes of Eugene Dawn
and Jacobus Coetzee, the labyrinthine broodings of Magda, and the philosophical reflections of the magistrate, Coetzee has again demonstrated his versatility by revealing the awakening consciousness of a primitive mind in Michael K. In the writer’s workshop which Coetzee conducted on 6 March 1984, in Lexington, one of the participants observed that the primary narrator of Michael K employs “a very odd kind of omniscience, as if it were rooted in the individual’s [Michael’s] character.”

Coetzee responded by way of saying that:

> It’s a mixture. It’s a fluctuation in and out. There is a – if I can use an oxymoron – a limited omniscient point of view operating in part 1 of that book. That is to say, there is someone who is telling the story about Michael K, who looks like an omniscient narrator, but he doesn’t actually tell you very much. And….there is no guarantee that he knows very much. (Penner *Countries* 94)

Thus, the main narrator exercises a certain reserve, usually limiting narrative observations to those which Michael is capable of perceiving. Michael K along with the barbarian girl, is one of Coetzee’s two least articulate characters, after Friday in *Foe*, who cannot speak at all.

The novel is in three parts. In Part - I, Michael K escapes Cape Town with his mother, intending to take her to the safety of a remote farm where she spent her youth. She dies on the way and K proceeds to the farm with her cremated ashes. He is detained for a time in a labour camp, and then arrives at the farm, located near the town of Prince Albert. He buries his mother’s ashes on the farm, taking the earth as his symbolic mother, and begins his life as a vegetable gardener. This existence is disrupted by the arrival of a grandson of the farm’s owner, who attempts to make K
his servant. K hides in the mountains, barely surviving, by eating roots and insects. Near starvation, he walks to Prince Albert and is arrested and taken to Jakkalsdrif, a resettlement camp, where he becomes aware of the plight of other detainees. K escapes and returns to the farm in Prince Albert to cultivate a new crop of pumpkins and melons. This time his task of cultivation is disrupted by the arrival of a small revolutionary force from the mountains, though K remains undetected. He lives in a burrow in the earth, planting and tending his garden at night. Again near starvation, K is discovered and arrested by soldiers who mistakenly assume he has been supplying food to rebel guerrillas.

In Part II, K is interned in the Kenilworth camp and is taken care of by a military officer who works at the hospital of the rehabilitation camp where K is imprisoned. This part is narrated by the Medical officer who becomes obsessed with K and attempts to impose charity upon him. K passively resists until he escapes from the camp.

Part III is set in Cape Town in the war-torn ruins. Michael K encounters some pimps and whores who also treat him as an object of charity. Alone at the end in Life & Times of Michael K*, K envisions a scene in which he helps a derelict old man obtain water from a water puddle with the help of a spoon by saying “one can live” (184)*

Coetzee portrays realistically the conditions that existed in many of the war-torn areas of South Africa in the recent past and present. There are the smouldering remains of burnt-out buildings and overturned lorries and automobiles, smashed store windows, scattered gunfire by police and snipers, armed troop carriers, road blocks, crowds huddled under “Relocation” sign posts, the shrill wail of the curfew siren – in short, the milieu of violence that the world witnessed until the apartheid imposed strict news censorship in 1986.

Michael K is a grade 1 gardener for the parks service of the City of Cape Town and is thirty-one years of age. He abandons the job as his invalid mother is dismissed from a hospital and asks him to care for her. He takes her to an unventilated, unelectrified room beneath the stairs leading to the apartment of her former employers who have fled Cape Town for whom his mother worked as a domestic servant. In the social and economic turmoil of South Africa, they are required to carry a “green card” and a travel permit which he was not able to obtain. These implications suggest that they are not the members of the ruling Afrikaner tribe. The narrative steadfastly avoids any direct mention of race. Despite Coetzee’s fastidious silence about race, it becomes apparent that Michaela K is not “white” by any standards and even by the masterly way in which those in authority speak to him. Nadine Gordimer in her review of the novel “The Idea of Gardening,” says that the fact that Michael’s mother is a house servant in Cape Town indicates that in South Africa he would be classified as a “so-called coloured.” (Sue 139) As a result, the racial issue is muted in a way and
sets this novel apart from comparable works by Gordimer, Brink, Fugard and others. One tends to think of Michael K more in terms of his individuality rather than as a representative of any group.

In fact, Michel K’s deformity identifies him with a group of freaks. The first thing the midwife notices is Michael K’s harelip which represents him that he is not going to be Everyman.

The first thing the midwife noticed about Michael K when she helped him out of his mother into the world was that he had a hare lip. (3)

Coetzee here is drawing attention to something other than the colour of his protagonist. As the midwife says of Michael K to his repulsed mother, “You should be happy, they bring luck to the house-hold.” (3). On the issue that so resoundingly defines South Africa - its politics and its people - the issue of colour, Coetzee chooses to be silent. Coetzee deliberately omits mentioning Michael K’s colour precisely because he doesn’t want Michael K to be labeled or formulated. A person is a person, irrespective of his colour. One of the problems with the process of politicization particularly as it operates in South Africa is that it systematically reduces people into categories. It deindividualizes and dehumanizes them. By creating a protagonist who eludes classification Coetzee can be seen resisting this process.

While it is true, as Gordimer says, that Michael K “ignores” history, (Sue 140) it is also true that Michael K is the one figure in the novel who is able to compete to some extent, with history. Michael K’s desire to live as he wants is the source of his
strength. This forms the core of his peculiar kind of resistance. Michael K is “out of the war” (138) because his whole being is engaged in existing on his own terms. He is simply not responsive to being determined by anything outside of them. Those terms, however, make him vulnerable to others, particularly to those embroiled in and subject to the history of the regime.

There is a special allegorical meaning that can be drawn from Michael K’s deciding to build a shelter on the grounds of a farm forcing himself to live in a burrow underground leaving no trace of his living. In this dwelling he can relish his own kind of food, grown from the earth and tended by him, and it is a place in which he can enjoy the activity he is good at, gardening. And he speaks, in his garden, of the cord of tenderness stretching from his to the patch of earth he tends. The melons he grows are “his sisters,” the pumpkins, “his band of brothers,” (113).

Michael’s life reveals many truths about the oppressive systems of South African life in its evocations of future, present, and past. In situation after situation, Michael stumbles over his words, whispers a response from a dry throat, or simply does not answer a question. “You don’t talk,” says a man working with him to clear the railway tracks. “I thought you must be sick” (43). Michael’s silence frustrates the medical officer, who is himself an effusive talker; “I am not clever with words,” Michael tells him (139). Most of Michael’s silences occur when he is confronted by a person who wishes to exercise authority over him, which evokes a feeling of stupidity within him. After revelling in the freedom of the garden, Michael feels “the old
hopeless stupidity invading him: when the Visagie grandson appears and claims his position as master” (60). In the last section of the novel, Michael thinks, “at least I have not been clever, and come back to Sea Point full of stories of how they beat me in the camps till I was thin as a rake and simple in the head. I was mute and stupid in the beginning, I will be mute and stupid at the end” (182). The camps have not made Michael mute. When he is young, his mother took him to work with her because the smiles and whispers of the other children bothered her: “Year after year Michael K sat on a blanket watching his mother cleaning other people’s floors, learning to be quiet” (3-4). At Huis Norenius, not only did he learn to sit in the classroom with his “lips pressed tightly together” (68), but the first rule posted on the dormitory door was “there will be silence in dormitories at all times” (105). These rules were “his father,” he says, Michael has been born to be raised for silence. Michael’s race and position with respect to institution and his silences testify to the history of the silencing of Others in South Africa. As a physically handicapped, coloured, apparently simple-minded gardener who works for the Council and lives in a hostel, Michael epitomizes those at the margins of power and authority who have been repeatedly silenced in South Africa.

As one who has been silenced, Michael is unable to tell his own story, neither in the construction of the narrative nor in his encounters with people. Other characters in Life & Times of Michael K tell many stories. Michael’s mother tells the nostalgic story of her pastoral childhood; the Visagie grandson relays the events of his desertion
and his memories of Christmas on the farm; Robert narrates his family’s story with a political interpretation; the pimp and the prostitutes Michael K meets at the beach explain their urban survival skills. Michael thinks with longing about the stories of the guerrillas:

The stories they tell will be different from the stories I heard in the camp, because the camp was for those left behind….people who have nothing to tell but stories of how they have endured. Whereas these young men have had adventures, victories and defeats and escapes. They will have stories to tell long after the war is over, stories for a lifetime, stories for their grandchildren to listen to open-mouthed (109)

Throughout Michael K’s adventures, people continually attempt to get him to become a storyteller. The officials at the hospital where his mother dies, the Visagie grandson, the police in Prince Albert, all are curious about Michael K’s story. The medical officer is the most insistent, becoming obsessed with Michael K’s silences. Michael K wonders about the doctor’s concern that he eat. In a letter addressed to “Michaels,” (the medical officer calls Michael K as Michaels) the doctor responds: “…Because I want to know your story” (149). When Michael K watches the guerrillas leave the farm without him, he struggles to articulate why he has chosen to stay. Although he attempts to define himself as a gardener, he remains unsatisfied with this story:

Always, when he tried to explain himself to himself, there remained a gap, a hole, a darkness before which his understanding baulked, into which it was useless to pour words. The words were eaten up, the gap remained. His was always a story with a hole in it: a wrong story, always wrong. (110)
He experiences similar inadequacy when he attempts to tell his story to the pimp and the prostitutes. Much like the magistrate in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, Michael recognizes the incompleteness and silences that fill his story, even when he occasionally struggles to articulate it.

The official papers about Michael portray him as an arsonist who “was running a flourishing garden on an abandoned farm and feeding the local guerrilla population when he was captured” (131). In his eagerness to understand the significance of Michael’s life, the medical officer readily composes stories for Michael K. When he refuses to answer questions about the guerrilla operations in Prince Albert, the medical officer makes up a story to satisfy the police, telling Michael “by my eloquence I saved you” (142). Within his narrative the medical officer supplies a final story for Michael. Envisioning him as a new Adam who lives outside history, the medical officer understands his “persistent No” (164), his resistance to the life and food of the camp, as bearing an ultimate significance. “You are a great escape artist, one of the great escapees,” he tells in his journal,

> Your stay in the camp was merely an allegory….of how scandalously, how outrageously a meaning can take up residence in a system without becoming a term in it (166)

The novel depicts major changes of awareness that Michael undergoes. He finds the physical intimacy of his mother’s small, dingy room unpleasant:

> But he did not shirk any aspect of what he saw as his duty. The problem that had exercised him years ago behind the bicycle shed at Huis Norenlius, namely why he had been brought into the world, had
received its answer: he had been brought into the world to look after his mother. (7)

When his mother suggests that they should travel approximately 270 miles overland in a war-torn country without proper permits and, as it turns out, with no mode of transportation but a wheelbarrow, Michael “accepted without question the wisdom of her plan for them” (8-9). Coetzee also conveys Michael’s cognition through visual imagery:

He saw, not the banknotes spread on the quilt, but in his mind’s eye a whitewashed cottage in the broad veld with smoke curling from its chimney, and standing in the front door his mother, smiling and well. (9)

While slow of wit, Michael is a man of great patience who uses his imagination to invent solutions to the problems that confront him. An excellent event occurs early in the novel when he has to find a mode of transportation to carry his mother from Cape Town to Prince Albert. Michael remembers a wheelbarrow in a storage shed and breaks in and takes it. He persuades his mother to ride in it and is disconcerted to discover how unwieldy it is bearing her weight. He thinks the wheels from his bicycle would improve the balance, “but he could not think where to find an axle” (11). Several days later, he comes upon a scrapyard and buys a steel rod one metre long. He returns to his project and finds that while the rod fits snugly into the wheel bearings,
...he had no way to prevent the wheels from spinning off. For hours he struggled without success to make clips out of wire. Then he gave up. Something will come to me, he told himself. (16)

As the violence increases in Cape Town during the next few days, he returns to the problem of keeping the wheels on and finds a solution. This shows Michael K’s steadfast determination. Though he is slow-witted, he is not without invention.

Coetzee also develops Michael’s self-awareness, particularly with regard to ethics, cognition and being. Ethical considerations do not often concern Michael, but a few instances stand out. On the road alone after his mother’s death, he adopts an animal-like existence, scavenging what food he can, including half-spoiled fruit, “taking bites of good flesh here and there, chewing as quickly as a rabbit, his eyes vacant” (39). Coetzee tempers Michael’s creature-nature by having him reflect that taking the fruit from a farmer’s land may be stealing. In contrast to such double-thinking characters as Magda and the magistrate, Michael cuts through the ethical question quickly: “It is God’s earth, he thought, I am not a thief” (39). When a man befriends him, Michael suggests “people must help each other,” Michael reflects upon, but does not resolve the question: “Do I believe in helping people?” He wondered. (48). Thus, Michael perceives a category of ethical consideration but avoids accepting an absolute principle when the context of choice is not known.

When Michael must choose a path of action within a specific circumstance, he can act deliberately. The burial of his mother’s ashes that he has carried to the farm is charged with significance for Michael. He meditates,
…hoping that a voice would speak reassuring him that what he was doing was right – his mother’s voice, if she still had a voice …or even his own voice as it sometimes spoke telling him what to do. But no voice came. So he extracted the packet from the hole, taking the responsibility on himself, and ….he distributed the fine grey flakes over the earth. (59).

Coetzee’s slow-witted gardener thinks with more clarity and deliberateness than many of his more cerebral, thought-tormented characters.

Michael also reflects on the nature of cognition. After exhausting himself killing a goat, only to discover that the flesh repels him, he attempts to draw significance from the event:

The lesson, if there was a lesson, if there were lessons embedded in events, seemed to be not to kill such large animals. (57)

Similarly, toward the end of the novel, he considers the meaning of his experiences:

Is that the moral of it all, he thought, the moral of the whole story: that there is time enough for everything? Is that how morals come, unbidden, in the course of events, when you least expect them? (183)

Even more than questions regarding ethics and cognition, the nature of being preoccupies Michael. He considers the relation of life to death and perceives a duality. He hopes that his mother,

..who was in some sense in the box and in some sense not, being released, a spirit into the air, was more at peace now that she was nearer her natal earth. (57)
At the same time, he projects the disposition of his physical being after his death in a memorable image,

If I were to die here, sitting in the mouth of my cave looking out over the plain with my knees under my chin, I would be dried out by the wind in a day, I would be preserved whole, like someone in the desert drowned in sand. (67-68)

But it is life and nurturing that absorbs his attention most. Upon planting his mother’s ashes in the earth, he has an awakening concerning the essence of his being:

It is because I am a gardener, he thought, because that is my nature…There were times, particularly in the mornings, when a fit of exultation would pass through him at the thought that he, alone and unknown, was making that deserted farm bloom. (59)

He is no longer the kind of gardener he had been with the parks department in Cape Town, tending well-kept lawns, but a gardener, a parent of plants, one so closely allied with the earth that his nature is transformed:

I am becoming a different kind of man, he thought, if there are two kinds of man. If I were cut, he thought, holding his wrists out, looking at his wrists, the blood would no longer gush from me but seep, and after a little seeping dry and heal. (67)

Stephen Watson in “Colonialism in the Novels of J.M. Coetzee” pointed out that in Coetzee’s first four novels all of the protagonists except Michael K “beat against the shackles of their historical position in vain” (378). Eugene Dawn, Jacobus, Magda, and the magistrate are all trapped in insoluble dilemmas, they “begin succumbing to the attractions of a world of being as opposed to a world of becoming”
“Being” in this context means the capability of existing in oneself, as a stone exists, outside the forces of history and time; “becoming” is acting within the historical moment; as Watson says, to become a participant in “a world of event…in which there is direction and purpose” (386).

Coetzee, in each of his novels has placed his central characters in relationship with inanimate stones or sticks to illuminate the characters’ potential for being or becoming. The stone imagery associated with Eugene Dawn suggests sterility and impotence. He remembers as a boy growing a crystal garden which he observed through the glass walls of a jar, “stalagmites obeying their dead crystal life-force.” In contrast to Michael K, he is incapable of growing the “other kind” of seeds; the beans he plants rot (Coetzee Dusklands 30). Magda, who lives “in the dead centre of the stone desert” (Coetzee Heart 129), is torn between her desire for a life of “event,” or becoming, and its opposite. She goes so far as to contemplate entering a stone-like existence. Ultimately, her desire for human communication and understanding leads her to reject this possibility:

I hold the goats and stones….suspended in this cool, alienation medium of mine, exchanging them item by item for my word-counters….words alienate. (Coetzee Heart 26)

The magistrate in the end realizes that he “wanted to live outside history” (Coetzee Waiting 154). Unable to attain a life of being or to escape his role in the historical world of event, he attempts to decipher history by reading the enigmatic wooden slips he has discovered but fails to decipher their message.
Of the protagonists in Coetzee’s first four novels, only Michael K can be said to have escaped historical event to enter a realm of being outside of linear time. Rather than attempt to penetrate the mysteries of stones, as Jacobus does, or permute them, as Magda does, Michael from the beginning identifies with stones: “Perhaps I am the stony ground” (48). Michael is content to let things exist without meaning. Staring at the rust-tracings on the corrugated roof of his barrow,

...he would see nothing but the iron, the lines would not transform themselves into pattern or fantasy; he was himself, lying in his own house, the rust was merely rust, all that was moving was time, bearing him onward in its flow. (115)

Unlike Magda, who believes that “it is the first condition of life forever to desire” and who speculates that “only stones desire nothing” (114), Michael is described as having and at another point, as feeling “a deep joy in his physical being” (102). It is his physical being which sets the outer limits of his ability to be detached from all desire:

You are forgetting to breathe, he would say to himself, and yet lie without breathing. (118)

Michael achieves what the magistrate desires but could not attain – to live in the cyclical time of nature: “He lived by the rising and setting of the sun, in a pocket outside time” (60).

It is the medical officer in Part II who provides an external view confirming Michael’s unique existence.
He is like a stone, a pebble that, having lain around quietly minding its own business since the dawn of time, is now picked up and tossed randomly from hand to hand. A hard little stone…enveloped in itself and its interior life. He passes through these institutions…like a stone. Through the intestines of war. (135)

Nadine Gordimer in praises Coetzee’s moving depiction of “what white has done to black” in South Africa, but questions his putting such a passive individual at the centre of this novel: “For is there an idea of survival that can be realized entirely outside a political doctrine?” (Sue 142).

Beyond all creeds and moralities, this work of art asserts, there is only one: to keep the earth alive, and only one salvation, the survival that comes from her. (142)

Nadine Gordimer is right to conclude that one of the primary concerns of Life & Times of Michael K is humanity’s relation to the earth, to gardening, to the farm. In the Heart of the Country, a subversion of the idyllic farm novel is presented. In addition, Coetzee has evidenced considerable interest in and erudition concerning the farm in history and in fiction. Coetzee has published an essay entitled “Farm Novel and Plaasroman,” in which he focuses on the farm novels of Olive Schreiner and Pauline Smith but evidences a broad understanding of the fictional genre. In this essay Coetzee observes that one of the characteristics of the Afrikaans plaasroman and the novels of Schreiner and Smith is a “silence about the place of black labour,” which “represents a failure of imagination before the problem of how to integrate the dispossessed black man into the idyll….of African pastoralism” (Coetzee White 71-72). These silences, he observes, “speak more loudly to us than they did fifty years
ago. Our ears today are finely attuned to modes of silence” (White 81). Coetzee
credits Nadine Gordimer’s *Conservationist* (1977) with having laid the ghost of the
“pastoral solution to the question of how the white man shall live in South Africa…
that he should retreat into rural independence” (81).

Michael’s story depicts the rejection of the corrupt town and the embrace of
rural life. The Visagie homestead resembles both those farms being deserted on the
western border of South Africa in the 1980s and the future crumbling ruins of white
farms left following the revolution, such as those depicted in Schoeman’s *Promised
Land*. Michael’s return to the land offers a strategy for the future rather than a
mystification of the past. *Life & Times of Michael K* proposes the garden as a
millennial alternative to the cataclysm of the camps. Michael’s story rejects several
common South African versions of pastoral to explore an alternative way that human
beings might live in relationship to the land and to each other.

When Visagie’s grandson arrives at the farm, having deserted the army, he
immediately attempts to reinstate the peasant order, giving Michael orders and trying
to “turn him into a body-servant” (65). Michael rejects this program, fleeing the farm,
just as he also rejects the material and linear consciousness represented by the
Visagies and typical of the Afrikaner myth:

He was wary of conveying the Visagies’ rubbish to his home in the
earth and setting himself on a trial that might lead to the re-enactment
of their misfortunes. The worst mistake, he told himself, would be to
try to found a new house, a rival line, on his small beginnings out at the
dam. Even his tools should be of wood and leather and gut, materials
the insects would eat when one day he no longer needed them. (104)
This rejection of property rights and lineage, however, does not result in a purely savage or primitive relationship to the land. Without the capitalistic mechanisms of production and consumption, he thinks at first that the only way he can survive is by killing the wild goats roaming the farm. He spends the entire day hunting:

At such moments, closing stealthily in on them, K felt his whole body begin to tremble. It was hard to believe that he had become this savage with the bared knife. (52)

Repulsed by the goat’s carcass, nauseated by the act of cleaning the animal, he eventually eats the meat without pleasure. He does not discover his calling as a gardener nor the significance of the occupation until he has escaped the civil institution and reached the apparent freedom of the rural setting. Tossing on his cardboard bed when he returns to Sea Point, Michael continues to affirm his vocation: “It excited him, he found, to say, recklessly, the truth, the truth about me, ‘I am a gardener,’ he said again, aloud” (181-182).

Michael calls himself a gardener, not a farmer, and the difference between the farm and the garden is an important one, for the former suggests a social order, with South African implications of hierarchy, while the latter evokes a personal and religious order. He associates the land with a maternal deity. The childhood home of his mother, the tomb for her ashes, and the womb in which he engenders life, the land
provides both the maternal love and the transcendent meaning missing from Michael’s life.

Michael’s return to the land also includes responsibility and ritual. His belief that someone must tend the garden while the guerrillas work to establish political and social freedom is based upon his recognition that human beings must live in harmony with the land and with other human beings. As long as he can remain outside of social history, Michael is content to live in natural history: “He lived by the rising and setting of the sun, in a pocket outside time” (60). But the arrival of the Visagie grandson prompts Michael to realize that he cannot live outside of history:

I let myself believe that this was one of those islands without an owner. Now I am learning the truth. Now I am learning my lesson. (61)

Coetzee in “Two Interviews with J.M. Coetzee, 1983 and 1987” with Tony Morphet says,

Nor, I think, should one forget how terribly transitory that garden life of K’s is: he can’t hope to keep the garden because, finally, the whole surface of South Africa has been surveyed and mapped and disposed of’ (1987 456)

When Michael returns to the garden for the second time, after his retreat to the mountains and his incarceration at Jakkalsdrif, he resolves, “I want to live here forever, where my mother and my grandmother lived” (99). However, to achieve that goal, he must hide from the world around him. Michael’s earthen burrow, then, is not the ultimate symbol of his penetration of and union with the earth but rather
demonstrates his inescapable historical situation. Living in fear of the return of the Visagies or the arrival of the police to send him into another camp, Michael tends his crop by night and camouflages the growing vines with cut grass. He chooses this beast-like existence over becoming entrapped in oppressive social structures again.

Michael’s pastoral is not pure idyll. He fears

...hefty men who would hold their sides laughing at my pathetic tricks, my pumpkins hidden in the grass, my burrow disguised with mud, and kick my backside and tell me to pull myself together and turn me into a servant to cut wood and carry water for them and chase the goats towards their guns so that they could eat grilled chops while I squatted behind a bush with my plate of offal. Would it not be better to hide day and night, would it not be better to bury myself in the bowels of the earth than become a creature of theirs? (106)

It represents a stubborn and difficult compromise with the realities of his historical situation. Michael himself realizes when his body weakens, he finds he does not know how to store the ripening pumpkins, and his burrow is flooded. In a dream an old man grips his shoulder and warns, “You must get off the land….You will get into trouble” (118-119). Even before the soldiers discover him, Michael has left his burrow and resolved, “One cannot live like this” (120).

Coetzee’s recasting of the myth of the return to the land, then, reveals both the oppressive patriarchy at the heart of the Afrikaner myth as well as the historical conditionality of Michael’s Edenic myth. The failure of Michael’s history does not necessarily imply its impossibility. Instead, his story provides a prophetic guideline
for the new order that will emerge from the ravages of the war. In keeping alive “the idea of gardening,” Michael posits a new history for his land.

In the final pages, the novel has intimations of the new heaven and new earth that could result from a chaotic South Africa. Michael’s last dream vision is of a return to the country with a companion, an elderly father-figure with whom he will share the bounty of the earth. He will plant many different kinds of seeds and scatter them across miles of the veld. The novel closes with an image of cleansing and communion, as the old man looks at the pump that the soldiers have blown up and wonders what they are to drink. Michael clears the rubble from the mouth of the shaft, and bends the handle of the teaspoon in a loop and ties the string to it. He lowers the spoon down into the earth, and he brings up water in the bowl with the lowered spoon “and in that way, he would say, one can live” (184). Hewson in “Making the “Revolutionary Gesture”: Nadine Gordimer, J.M. Coetzee and Some Variations on the Writer’s Responsibility” says

The conditional tense of the final line of the novel points to a possibility. One of the possibilities is that through creative, cooperative enterprise, a community can be founded. It need not posit a rural utopia, this idea of tending the earth, but suggests a means of achieving some personal power, independence and interdependence against a backdrop which denies individual integrity and privacy. (68)

As in Waiting for the Barbarians, Coetzee closes this novel with a spirit of tentative hope and affirmation.
Pain provides intriguing parallels to part of Michael’s story. After the purgatory of Anna K’s hospital stay, she begins to dream of leaving the city and returning to the countryside of her youth:

Lying in bed in her airless room through the winter afternoons with rain dripping from the steps outside, she dreamed of escaping from the careless violence, the packed buses, the food queues, arrogant shopkeepers, thieves and beggars, sirens in the night, the curfew, the cold and wet, and returning to a countryside where, if she was going to die, she would at least die under blue skies” (8)

Michael laboriously builds a cart out of two bicycle wheels and a box offering himself to drag on the wheel barrow and begins their trek to the farm. But when her health worsens, Anna finds herself again in an impersonal hospital, with Michael sleeping in an alley and wandering the cold streets at night until he is allowed to visit her. One morning he enters the ward to discover a strange woman in his mother’s bed; she has died during the night. Michael wears a black band on his sleeve after her death, “but he did not miss her, he found, except insofar as he had missed her all his life.” (34) her hair flaming, the cremated Anna K haunts Michael’s dreams, the ultimate manifestation of the lack of human love in Michael’s life, the dark underside of heroic independence created by a social and economic system that destroys the possibility of family relationships.

The relocation camp at Jakkalsdrif (jackals’ ford) reflects one of the hundreds of relocation camps into which black Africans were placed following their eviction from white areas and the prison camps that supply Afrikaner farmers with cheap
labour. Jakkalsdrif also ironically resembles the notorious British-run concentration camps of the Anglo-Boer War. Its thirty tents and seven iron-roofed unpainted buildings surrounded by a fence topped with barbed wire recall the camps at Bloemfontein, Kimberley, and Mafeking, among others. Like those often cited camps, Jakkalsdrif houses primarily women and children, most of the men having disappeared into the mountains to join the guerrillas.

There is no work available in the nearby community. In South Africa, Jakkalsdrif is also a “camp for people without jobs” (78), and offers running water, shelter, and food, but only to those who work as cheap labour for the railroad and for farmers with political influence. The inmates are in effect subject to enforced labour, but there are other camps offering harsher options: “penal servitude, hard labour, brickfields, guards with whips” (78), so that one inmate refers to Jakkalsdrif as “our Welfare” (79).

Soon after this, Michael begins to reflect on the ideas of the man named Robert, who became politicized after he and his family of eight were turned off of a farm where he had worked for twelve years. Robert explains to Michael that the police had arrested him and his family on the road for having “no fixed abode” (80) the day after he had been fired, and brought them to Jakkalsdrif. Robert believes that such camps exist for two reasons: because the people would otherwise join the guerrilla rebels in the mountains and

...because we look too terrible when we get sick and die. If we just grew thin and turned into paper and then into ash and floated away,
they wouldn’t give a stuff for us….They want to go to sleep feeling good. (88)

When Michael, inarticulate and apolitical, does not know how to respond, Robert castigates him:

You’re a baby….You’ve been asleep all your life. It’s time to wake up….Because they think you are harmless, your eyes aren’t opened, you don’t see the truth around you. (88-89)

After a violent sacking of the camp and attack on the inmates by the police, Robert predicts that the officials will starve them to death, “lock us up and wait for us to die” (94). Rather than developing political consciousness in Michael, Coetzee develops in him the resistance to manipulation by the medical officer. Near the end of the story, Michael opines that the tender of the earth prefer the company of plants, or solitude to that of people and causes.

There are numerous instances in which Michael K is associated by the narrator, by himself, and by other characters with a variety of creatures: a snail (3), an ant (83, 97), a worm (107, 182), a parasite (116), a stick insect (149), a coelacanth (151), a dog (30), a rabbit (39, 164), a beast (40), an owl (56), a lizard (114, 139), a duckling (142), a budgie, a mouse, a monkey (181), and a mole (182). At one point the narrator says that Michael can sense poisonous plants. “as though he had once been an animal and the knowledge of good and bad plants had not died in his soul” (102). Coetzee clearly wishes his gardener to be perceived in naturalistic terms, as a creature of the earth.
The earth itself figures as a protean element in the novel. The South African government troops as well as the rebel guerrillas are insensible and cause damage to the carefully nurtured crop of Michael. The troops improvidently squander the water that Michael has so carefully conserved, allowing it to flood the fields, “That is a mistake, thought K, that is a sign” (111). The government troops who arrest K at the end of part 1 are even more destructive of the earth. After cutting and tossing Michael’s pumpkins in a pile, they dig in the same earth to plant their crop, land mines, to prepare a harvest of death for whoever may step there.

Coetzee stresses the wastage and spoilage which inevitably results from an indifferent or destructive attitude toward the earth. Coetzee employs the images of surplus crops and the sprawling neglect in the fenced lands in Michael’s journey on the road to the farm. Dizzy with hunger, Michael climbs through a barbed-wire fence into “an apple orchard overgrown with grass and weeds. Worm-eaten fruit lay everywhere underfoot; the fruit on the branches was undersized and infested……He moved deeper into the orchard. Everywhere was evidence of neglect” (39). In the South African setting the cause of wastage within fenced lands seems to be the result of indifference. Michael at first thinks this land must be abandoned, but when he looks beyond the orchard, he sees an apparently prosperous and well-tended farmhouse and fields. Coetzee presents that the dispossessed who would care for the land are fenced out by those who own the farms.

Michael K’s experience in the vastness of South Africa is much the same:
He could understand that people should have retreated here and fenced themselves in with miles and miles of silence…. (though by what right he was not sure); he wondered whether there were not forgotten corners and angles and corridors between the fences, land that belonged to one yet (47)

He thinks he has found such a place when he reaches the abandoned Visagie farm, which seems to be inhabited only by wild animals and where nothing grows in the garden. Filled with a sense of “exultation…that he, alone and unknown, was making this deserted farm bloom” (59), he scatters his mother’s ashes on the earth, restores the dam, and plants his seeds. Michael K pursues his plan of becoming a secret gardener. He literally becomes a child of the earth, building his burrow. He becomes a “tender of the soil” (113) and understands the idea “From one seed a whole handful: that was what it meant to say the bounty of the earth” (118). He knows what the soldiers on both sides and many of the owners do not know:

…there must be men to stay behind and keep gardening alive, or at least the idea of gardening; because once that cord was broken, the earth would grow hard and forget her children. That was why (109)

Coetzee gives the message that the earth endures and life endures. The novel thus posits silent disapproval and resistance.

Part II of the novel is set near Cape Town in a former horse racing track that has been converted into a rehabilitation camp for capture rebels. After being arrested at the farm as a suspected rebel at the end of Part 1, Michael, near starvation, is an object of both imprisonment and charity as a patient in the hospital attached to the
camp. In this section, Coetzee shifts the narrative point of view to the first-person account of a “pharmacist turned makeshift medical officer” (162) who tends and becomes obsessed with Michael K.

As a representative of the Empire, colonialism, and white South Africans, the officer is disillusioned in the extreme. The Medical Officer sees the end purpose of his work in the hospital as absurd. His task is to nurture patients like Michael back to health, he observes,

...so that one day soon he can rejoin camp life and have a chance to march back and forth across the racetrack and shout slogans and salute the flag and practice digging holes and filling them up again. (133)

His commanding officer, ironically named Noel, although similarly disenchanted, can at least remember their official purpose: “We are fighting this war so that minorities will have a say in their destinies” (157) – minorities referring to South African whites. Coetzee forecasts a grim future for the Afrikaner cause as the already overtaxed medical staff receives a shipment of four hundred new patients, many of them in “a state of life-in-death or death-in-life” (159).

The medical officer’s shifting views of Michael K cover a spectrum ranging from compassion, to condescension and paternalism, to hostility, ending finally in idealization. Michael’s emaciated state stirs the officer’s compassion as he tries to nurse him back to health: he also offers to surgically correct his harelip. When Michael refuses both offers, the officer concludes that perhaps Michael “only eats the bread of freedom” (146), and he buys him food that Michael relishes, a squash, near
relative of the pumpkin. He also tries to persuade Noel to release Michael and eventually ends the force-feeding, concluding that Michael must be free.

The officer’s compassion is easily displaced by his feelings of condescension, as he regards Michael as “but one of a multitude of the second class” (136), or when he tells Noel that Michael is “a simpleton, and not even an interesting simpleton” (141), although his motive here may be to protect Michael from being interrogated. His paternalistic attitude is evidenced when the officer proclaims, “I am the only one who can save you” (151); coupled with a command, “yield!” (152).

A compassion that is grounded in condescension finds its way easily enough to hostile domination. Exasperated by Michael’s refusal to provide information, the officer resorts to threats: “You are going to learn to fill sandbags and dig holes, my friend, till your back breaks!.....and if you don’t survive, tough luck” (13*0. At one point he regards Michael as an “albatross about my neck” (146) and decides “It would have been better if his mother had quietly suffocated him when she saw what he was, and put him in a trash can” (155). Toward the end of his narrative, the medical officer apotheosizes his unyielding patient in an imaginary supplication:

    Michaels, forgive me for the way I treated you, I did not appreciate who you were until the last days. Forgive me too for following you like this. I promise not to be a burden....I have chosen you to show me the way. (162-63)

Finally, he speaks of Michael’s “sacred and alluring garden that blooms in the heart of the desert and produces the food of life” (166).
Coetzee’s inclusion of medical officer’s narrative in Part II has prompted Teresa Dovey in *The Novels of J.M. Coetzee: Lacanian Allegories* to point out that the primary narrator of Parts 1 and 3 often employs “free indirect speech, which combines the voice of narrator and character” (282) so that the two are in many instances indistinguishable. Stephen Watson sees the medical officer as a representative of the Empire, including him among those “colonizers who wish to elude at almost any cost their historical roles as colonizers” and who wish to escape “the intolerable burdens of the master/slave relationship” (378). However, it can be said that Coetzee included the voice of the medical officer since he felt the necessity to include a point of view other than that of Michal K in the novel.

The brief final section of the novel is a return to Cape Town, briefly to the room where Michael’s mother lived, but mostly to nearby Sea Point, the Sea Point which Michael K finds in Coetzee’s projection of the “nearer future” of South Africa is an incongruous mixture of holiday atmosphere amid the rubble of war: burnt-out cars and buildings, an ice-cream vendor, “a trio of girls in shorts and singlets….leaving a sweet smell in their wake” (171).

Michael’s experiences carry an aura of sad sordidness about them. He is taken up by two pimps and their whores, to whom the emaciated and inarticulate Michael is a diversion. One of the pimps insists that he dirink wine and brandy, which causes Michael to vomit and get dizzy. One of the prostitutes seduces him, after which he feels shame. After the departure of the whores, Michael reflects “I have become an
object of charity….Everywhere I go there are people waiting to exercise their forms of charity on me” (181). More important is Michael’s realization that he has found his essence: “the truth is that I have been a gardener…The truth, the truth about me, ‘I am a gardener’” (181. His story ends with Michael imagining conditions under which he can succeed as a gardener, the primary condition being to have “plenty of seeds, a different packet of seeds for each pocket: pumpkin seeds, marrow seeds, beans, carrot seeds, beet-root seeds….Seeds in my shoes too, and in the lining of my coat. (182)

He envisions his future as a gardener, not in solitude, but in companionship, imagining “a little old man with a stoop” with whom he could share a bed and for whom he could obtain water from the demolished pumps expressing his earnest hope to survive by whatever the little means available by using a crooked spoon bent into a water puddle and filling the bowl with water and saying with his closing words “one can live” (184).

Thus, the narrative shows worshipping of the earth as a deity with the protagonist serving it as an ecological priest. As Nadine Gordimer’s review “The Idea of Gardening” states

J.M. Coetzee has written a marvelous work that leaves nothing unsaid – and could not be better said – about what human beings do to fellow human beings in South Africa. (Sue 143)

The Nobel committee in its citation for J.M. Coetzee commended

….he writes of men and women doing their best to duck under history or simply float above it.
Michael K is not a god or king, but a man who has to cling to his freedom like a plant to soil, against all odds. Andre Brink in “Writing Against Big Brother: Notes on Apocalyptic Fiction in South Africa,” provides a fitting conclusion. Michael K does not merely contemplate the world; he produces meaning through his existence; in the final analysis he becomes meaning. An almost unqualified artistic success, *Life & Times of Michael K* is an unforgettable portrait of South Africa and Michael K’s evolving consciousness and sense of being. Coetzee has successfully adapted the traditional farm and agrarian – protest novel to his purposes, evoking Michael K’s bonding to the earth and its harvest.

(ii)

*Foe*, Coetzee’s fifth novel was published in 1986 and was awarded Jerusalem Prize in 1987. It is very much a novel that reflects the time and place of its genesis. In the three years between *Life & Times of Michael K* and *Foe*, Coetzee became a more visible presence in the Anglo-American literary world as he conducted writing workshops and gave public readings in the United States during 1984 and was awarded an honorary doctorate from the University of Strathclyde, Scotland, in 1985. He was one of the fifty foreign guests of honour at the 48th International PEN Congress held in New York in January 1986. At home, he was appointed a Life Fellow at the University of Cape Town in 1983 and was promoted to Professor of General Literature in 1984. In 1985, Coetzee joined forces with Andre Brink to compile and edit an
anthology of South African literature for the general reader. *A Land Apart: A Contemporary South African Reader* was first published by Faber and Faber in Great Britain in 1986. With the state of emergency declared in 1985, the world saw less and less of South Africa in newspapers and magazines, or in debates of politicians and social activists. The silencing of dissent in South Africa reached perhaps its greatest effectiveness in 1984 and 1985 – during the same period in which Coetzee ironically achieved his greatest international voice. As his land and its oppressed people were immersed in silence, Coetzee found himself asked increasingly to speak for that land and people. This is the historical position Coetzee occupied as he compiled *A Land Apart: A Contemporary South African Reader* and wrote *Foe*.

*Foe* is a retelling of Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*, a commentary on the art of fiction, and an analogue of South Africa’s political and racial dilemmas. *Foe* provides the proper ingredients to recreate the adventure and pleasure of the eighteenth-century travel genre from which it is partially derived – the urgency of survival, mutinees, piracies, the abducted child, the castaway, the rumoured cannibal, all these are presented without eighteenth century’s obligatory moralizing. There is in place the modern passion for the self-reflexive narrative, the modern novel self-consciously appropriating the form of its fore-bearers, the novel commenting on the nature of the novel and on art reflecting on art. The novel is a meditation on how the narration of slavery and colonialism disavows its brutality, and it is also an examination of the writer’s relationship to language and to the text. Within the context
of South African literary criticism, *Robinson Crusoe* has been extolled by one of the leading black South African novelists and critics, Lewis Nkosi, as a central cultural text extolling a myth of civilization based on oppression. Nkosi in his *Home and Exile and Other Selections*, claims,

Englishmen, on the whole, cannot read *Robinson Crusoe* properly, just as they cannot read *The Tempest* for what it is, because they cannot read themselves into the book…… [as]…a member of the subject races. (154)

Nkosi reads the novel with sensitivity to its depiction of black-white relationships. His essays “Robinson Crusoe: Call Me Master” reveals the hidden oppression of *Robinson Crusoe* in a manner similar to Chinua Achebe’s well-known revisionary reading of Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, An Image of Africa (1977). Coetzee’s re-vision in *Robinson Crusoe* was to uncover the silence and oppression at the heart of the classic story and to suggest the power of discourse. Coetzee explores the silencing of the oppressed races of South Africa and moves on further to speak on their behalf. To do so from a position that eschews power and authority, he once again takes on the persona of a woman. Historically, “Foe” is the birth name of Daniel Defoe, who added the prefix “De” to his name in 1695, but the denotation of “enemy” also reveals the author’s adversarial stance to Susan.

Adrienne Rich in “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision” says that *Foe* is a true re-vision, “the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction” (18). This engaging story told by Defoe is retold again by the castaway narrator that Coetzee conceived as Susan Barton. Her
enlivening spirit creates a narrative tone quite distinct from Coetzee’s earlier works. By her own account, she was raised in England, descended from a French father and an English mother. Two years before her narrative begins, she had travelled to Bahia (now Salvador, Brazil) in search of her only daughter, who had been abducted by an English factor. After two fruitless years of searching, she boards a ship to Lisbon and becomes the captain’s mistress. The crew mutinies, kills the captain, and sets her adrift with the corpse, a spike sticking out of his eye. When she abandons the boat and swims to the island, she finds Cruso, a strange, moody castaway. The Cruso (Coetzee omits “e”) that Susan Barton encounters on the island resembles Defoe’s adventurer only in externals: in the sun-bleached hair and shaggy beard, the rough jerkin, cone-shaped cap, and sturdy sandals, all made of pelts. There the similarities end. Coetzee has drawn his Friday as silent, though not out of choice. His tongue has been cut out and who is the perpetrator of this mutilating act is not revealed and is never answered.

When the castaways are rescued, Cruso dies on board the ship to England, and Susan lands in London penniless with Friday. She resolves to sell their story to Daniel Foe, the famous writer who will recount their adventures and make them wealthy. Chapter II consists of her letters describing life on the island and attempting to persuade Foe to write a book about the island sojourn. But Foe is much more interested in the story of Susan’s lost daughter, so when a strange girl appears claiming to be that daughter, Susan suspects that she has been sent by Foe. When Foe goes into hiding in order to avoid being imprisoned for debt, Susan and Friday move
into his abandoned house, and she continues to plead with him to compose their story. In Chapter III, Susan and Friday visit Foe in his hiding place, and Susan has a long talk with him about his difficulty in writing the story. She then sleeps with him. At Foe’s suggestion, the next morning Susan attempts to teach Friday to write. The novel ends in a brief chapter containing a dream vision of an unnamed speaker who visits their room as they sleep and imaginatively descends into the sea.

Defoe’s Crusoe is a restless adventurer who tries his hand as a Brazilian plantation owner and slave trader before destiny casts him upon his island. He regards his survival as a result of both Providence and his own endeavour. He succeeds at bringing provisions from the ship, building the fort, making tools, hewing logs, teaching a parrot to speak, domesticating wild goats, making a goat-skin umbrella, and when visitors arrive, he establishes a community with religious freedom. At the end of his twenty-eight years on the island, Defoe’s Crusoe is still an adventurous and energetic man.

In Foe Coetzee’s Cruso has little of the vigour and none of the optimism of Defoe’s character. At the age of sixty, Cruso has settled into somber stolidity, grudging his energy and his attention. His efforts are a study in minimalism and are represented in agriculture, a patch of wild bitter lettuce, furniture and a narrow bed. Barton observes that he kept no record of the passing time. Cruso rejects Barton’s suggestion that he keep a journal, saying, “Nothing is forgotten…Nothing I have
forgotten is worth the remembering.” (17) * Barton observes that Cruso is non-conform to what he informs her: for Cruso tells Barton one day that he is the son of a wealthy merchant, the next, a poor lad with no family; one day that Friday had arrived as “a mere child, a little slave boy,” (12) the next that Friday had been an adult cannibal whom Cruso had saved from being roasted. Obviously, “truth” is a matter of complete indifference to Cruso.

Barton is vexed by Cruso’s refusal to indulge in progress. When she suggests that they make some candles, he retorts saying that it is easier to learn to see in the dark; when she proposes diving for tools in the wrecked ship, Cruso replies that salt and sea-worms would have done for the tools, and anyway, “We sleep, we eat, we live. We have no need of tools” (32)

For years Cruso and Friday have laboured to construct massive stone terraces that are twelve in number. The stone walls are “a yard thick and at their highest as high as a man’s head” (33). This structure comprised of a hundred thousand or more stones, the earth between the walls cleared and leveled. When practical-minded Susan asks what is to be planted in this monumental edifice, Cruso replies with “sorry dignity,” “we have nothing to plant – that is our misfortune….the planting is reserved for those who come after us and have the foresight to bring seed” (33). Cruso is

contented in telling “I will leave behind my terraces and walls...They will be enough. They will be more than enough” (18). Obviously, Cruso is the furthest extreme from the nurturing gardener Michael K; he is more akin to Magda in relating himself to stones.

Coetzee’s Friday is also a striking contrast to Defoe’s. The inaccessible silence of Coetzee’s Friday forces our attention on his masters, first Cruso, then Barton. Aside from terraces, Cruso manifests little interest in anything or anyone, including Friday. Cruso’s barren life is epitomized by his lack of sexual desire for Susan, with whom he couples only once, following a hallucinatory fever. When Barton asks Cruso how many words he has taught Friday, he replies tersely, “As many as he needs” (21). Friday knows the functional word “firewood” which he fetches, but does not know the broader category “wood”.

If Cruso and Friday are but grim shades of their eighteenth-century originals, Susan Barton has many facets to her personality, her essence is that she is a teller of tales, and as such, she carries the central theme of Coetzee’s *Foe*, the forces of oppressive nature of narrative art.

Susan Barton attempts to prompt Cruso’s recollections of his first emotions when he was cast upon the island. She asks,

What memories do you even now preserve of the fatal storm, the prayers of your companions, your terror when the waves engulfed you, your gratitude as you were cast up on the shore, your fear of savage beasts, the discomforts of those first nights.....?(17)
Such matters are of indifference to Cruso. Barton is able to fire Cruso’s imagination as she does in rousing sexual passion. They make love only once and it is apparently enough for him. After the three castaways are rescued by the crew of *John Hobart*, Cruso’s health begins to fail, despite Susan’s attempts to revive him. He dies three days before the ship makes port in Bristol. Undaunted, Barton knows that she alone has “disposal of all that Cruso leaves behind, which is the story of his island” (45).

Barton’s principal concern involves the relation of fiction to life. When the captain of *John Hobart* encourages Barton to sell the tale to booksellers, she replies, “A liveliness is lost in the writing down which must be supplied by art, and I have not art” (40). The well meaning captain assures her that the booksellers will hire a man to set her story to rights, and put in a dash of colour too, here and there. Barton responds that she “will not have any lies told,” which causes the captain to smile saying, “their trade is in books, not in truth” (40). The value of a story lies in its truth, its ability to record reality but also its ability to reveal meaning. Susan knows the events of her life’s story, but she longs to find out their larger significance:

> The waves picked me up and cast me ashore on an island, and a year later the same waves brought a ship to rescue me, and of the true story of that year, the story as it should be seen in God’s great scheme of things, I remain as ignorant as a newborn babe. (126)

At the end of the first section, the novel seems like an epistolary journal written by Barton to a “Mr. Foe.” From this point on, it is impossible to tell whether the events Barton relates really “happened” or if they were dreamed or imagined,
recalling Coetzee’s earlier blurring of “reality” in *In the Heart of the Country*. Barton soon begins to doubt the substantiality of her experiences, her story, and herself. She questions how she reached Bahia and how she survived there for two years; and then she turns the experience into a metaphor of solitariness: “Was Bahia an island in the ocean of the Brazilian forest, and my room a lonely island in Bahia?” (51)

In Part II Susan Barton’s earlier imagined presence of Foe dissolves into his real (or imagined) absence. Apparently, he has gone into hiding from his creditors while Susan and Friday occupy his vacant house in Clock Lane off Long Acres (47), posing as cook and gardener. Susan supplies their frugal needs by occasionally selling furnishings from the house while occupying her time talking to a mute and uncomprehending Friday and writing long, unanswered letters to Foe. When the letters return unopened, she continues to write to him, tossing the letters in a trunk. Here the momentum of the novel shifts, as theories of narrative displace events.

Barton reasons that the writer must find mystery in the mundane and work on the mysteries of the island. Acting as her own taskmaster, Barton attempts to explain to Friday the plight of a writer through an analogy: the paper is an island, and the words are stones which must be repeatedly dispersed day after day according to varying schemes. She is a slave to her task as Friday was to Cruso, and hers is particularly hard because Cruso and Friday lacked desire: “Without desire how is it possible to make a story?” (85)

Susan fears that she lacks the art to transform the story into writing that the liveliness and charm of the oral rendition will be missing. As Foe works on the story, he soon manifests his desire to control and direct it. Reading his questions and claims
through the medium of Susan’s epistolary replies, it seems that Foe is more interested
in what will sell than in the truth of the story. Foe finds the story lacking in exotic
circumstances; he wants to put some excitement into the account, such as a threat of
cannibals landing on the island. Susan persists:

What I saw, I wrote. I saw no cannibals; and if they came after nightfall
and fled before the dawn, they left no footprint behind. (54)

But to Barton it is the writer’s task to transform the dull subject through the
creative imagination, by highlighting colours, casting light against shadow, teasing
from episodes “their hidden meanings, braiding these together as one braids rope”
(89).

In Part III, Barton sets out on the road with the purpose of finding Friday’s safe
passage to Africa. Failing at that, Susan and Friday locate Foe in his Whitechapel
hideaway (113). Foe, as a professional writer mindful of his public’s tastes and the
booksellers’ profits, argues that the island story provides “novelty” but that it is not a
story in itself.

Foe constructs Susan’s story in a hierarchical manner in Five parts:

...the loss of the daughter; the quest for the daughter in Brazil;
abandonment of the quest, and the adventure of the island; assumption
of the quest by the daughter; and reunion of the daughter with her
mother. The scheme of the book is thus: loss, then quest, then
recovery; beginning, then middle, then end. (117)
The story that Susan prefers to tell is deficient in its genealogical connections. This is not neat enough for Barton who counters with her own plan: 1. The story of how she came to be marooned 2. The story of Cruso’s shipwreck and early years on the island (told by Cruso to Barton) 3. The story of Friday, which she says is “properly not a story but a puzzle or hole in the narrative” (121). Susan acknowledges that her narrative plan has a weakness in the middle section where Cruso spent too much time building terraces and she spending too much time tramping the shores. However, she rejects Foe’s invention of cannibals and pirates because they were not the truth and she rejects the story of her lost daughter.

Despite Barton’s reservations, Coetzee introduces an Absurdist lost daughter subplot, apparently stage-managed by Foe. In Part II, while Barton and Friday are staying at Foe’s house at Clock Lane, a strange young woman appears who claims that she too is named Susan Barton and that she is Barton’s daughter. Barton knows that she has been sent by Foe. The elements of the girl’s story have been the stock in trade of romances for centuries: she says that her father was an improvident brewer and gambler named George Lewes who fled his creditors and is rumoured to have perished in Low Countries. The girl is then left with her destitute mother and a servant named Emmy or Amy. In desperation, the mother abandons the child, who is stolen and raised by gypsies. The girl attempts the traditional recognition scene by saying that her mother’s hands and eyes are identical to hers. Barton observes that her hands and the girl’s are not alike, that the girl’s eyes are grey (later blue) (132), while Barton’s
are brown. The girl’s hair is hazel-brown, Barton’s black. To refute the improbability of the story, Barton appeals to the authority of fictional tradition: it is “only in books that children are stolen by gipsies” (78) and while there are many stories of mothers searching for lost daughters “there are no stories of daughters searching for mothers” (77). Thus, to be plausible, life must imitate art.

After the girl reveals that she knows the stories of Bahia and the island, Barton in a dream takes her on a journey in the darkest part of the forest to find her real mother. Throughout much of *Foe* Susan resists Foe’s authority and insists on telling her own story. Enacting the myth of the babes in the wood, she abandons the strange girl in the forest and tells her,

> What you know of your parentage comes to you in the form of stories, and the stories have but a single source…..You are father-born. You have no mother. (91)

Nonetheless, Foe again confronts Susan with the girl and her servant when Susan finds him in his hiding place. Susan embraces the girl in an attempt to judge her substantiality, but she still feels that the girl is not her daughter, pointing out that “ghosts can converse with us, and embrace and kiss us too” (134). Although earlier she had declared, “I am not a story, Mr. Foe” (131), his continued insistence that the mysterious girl is her daughter prompts her to feel that Foe is creating her very identity:

> …now all my life grows to be story and there is nothing of my own left to me. I thought I was myself and this girl a creature from another order speaking words you made up for her. But now I am full of doubt.
Nothing is left to me but doubt. I am doubt itself. Who is speaking
me? Am I a phantom too? To what order do I belong? And you: Who
are you? (133)

Foe’s response is to take her in his arms and kiss her and give her a
reassurance that only what is imagined is real. Susan’s concern is that her story
explores the way in which her existence is implicated by Cruso and Friday, not by the
imaginary daughter of Foe’s mind. Perhaps the greater significance of the scene lies
in its dramatization of the power of the pen. Susan’s existential dilemma is prompted
by an author who asserts omnipotent authority, by a man who attempts to determine to
write the story of a woman’s life. The differing morals that Foe and Susan draw from
the story of a woman who went on confessing and throwing her confession in doubt
until she was hung, suggest the different viewpoints of the one who speaks and the one
who is silenced: Foe claims,

…the moral of a story is that there comes a time when we must give
reckoning of ourselves to the world, and then forever after be content to
hold our peace. (124)

Susan responds,

To me the moral is that he has the last word who disposes over the
greatest force. (124)

Foe focuses on the power of the individual to make a decision about his or her story;
Susan demonstrates that social power can determine discourse, that in the politics of
competing interpretations, the power given by gender, race, or class can determine what story is told.

The central enigma of Coetzee’s tale is Friday’s silence. Cruso claims that the slavers cut Friday’s tongue out, perhaps because they were tired of his “wails of grief,” and “to prevent him from ever telling his story,” (23). Susan suspects that Cruso might have removed the tongue and perceives that he keeps Friday in silence, teaching him only the few words necessary for the black to follow his commands. Friday’s duty is to collect firewood and is reminiscent of Caliban’s assignment in The Tempest.

When Barton had first seen Friday casting white petals upon the waves, she rather unimaginatively dismissed the scene as some kind of “superstitious observance” to make the fish run plentifully (31). Friday may have scattered the petals in memory of someone lost in the wreck (87). When Foe introduces the metaphor of Friday rowing his log across a great eye in the deep, Barton modifies it to a great “mouth (since we speak in figures). It is open Friday’s mouth and hear what it holds: “silence, perhaps, or a roar, like the roar of a seashell held to the ear.” (142)

Since Friday is mute, Foe suggests that they unlock his thoughts by Susan’s teaching him to write. Here Coetzee’s linking of Caliban and Friday becomes inescapable. Both have language imposed on them. Friday is more imaginative. He chalks on the slate “eyes, open eyes, each set upon a human foot; row upon row of
eyes upon feet: walking eyes” (147). Friday’s drawing is not only artistically creative but developmentally realistic.

As Barton’s narrative draws to a close, she thinks she sees Foe at his desk writing, although it is not Foe, but Friday in Foe’s robe and wig, filling his second page with “rows and rows of the letter ‘o’ tightly packed together” (151-152). Barton cries out and moves to snatch the quill from Friday’s hand, but Foe admonishes her to let him be, disparaging himself as “an old whore who should ply her trade only in the dark” (151). The third section of the novel ends with Foe advising Barton that she should resume her instruction of Friday the next day; she must begin at the beginning: “teach him ‘a.’ ” (152)

Coetzee’s description of Friday reveals Friday’s kinship with the indigenous people of South Africa. Dick Penner in says,

Friday’s muteness can be read as a symbol of the inexpressible psychic damage absorbed by blacks under racist conditions (Countries 24)

As a symbol of oppression, Friday represents those who have been silenced because of race, gender, and class. Like the barbarian girl and Michael K, Friday’s textual reality speaks eloquently of the silences imposed throughout South African history on Others. In assuming the White Man’s burden, Susan begins to romanticize Friday, pleading that he be allowed to sleep near Cruso: “He would rather sleep on the floor at his master’s feet than on the softest bed in Christendom” (41). The loyal
servant that she depicts in this scene suggests the humble and subservient Friday of Defoe’s novel.

Susan thinks it would be an ideal situation, if Foe would only write their story, she理想istically thinks, she could return Friday to his life in Africa. But when Foe becomes caught up in the story of Susan’s daughter, she resolves to give freedom in another way. Funding their journey by selling some of Foe’s books, she travels to Bristol with Friday in a vain attempt to arrange his passage back to Africa. Susan soon discovers that those who will take him are secretly planning to sell Friday back into slavery. Like the magistrate, who returns the barbarian girl to her people, Susan attempts to atone for the sins of the past. Susan’s quest to achieve freedom by having his story told is eventually matched by her desire to give both freedom and voice to Friday, to return him “to the world of words” (60). Being herself a victim of Foe’s discursive manipulation, Susan perceives how Friday’s lack of words perpetuates his slavery:

…the [Friday] is neither cannibal nor laundryman, these are names, they do not touch his essence, he is a substantial body, he is himself, Friday is Friday. But that is not so. No matter what he is to himself (is he anything to himself? – how can he tell us?), what he is to the world is what I make of him. (121-122)

Labouring with words as Cruso laboured with stones, searching for incidents and words to flesh out her story, Susan understands for the first time the gaps in the story and the temptation to invent new and stranger circumstances. The unanswered questions are many, but all of the mysteries can be summed up in the loss of Friday’s
tongue. The silence at the heart of Susan’s story is the silence created by Friday. She tells Foe,

...many stories can be told of Friday’s tongue, but the true story is buried within Friday, who is mute. The true story will not be heard till by art we have found a means of giving voice to Friday. (118)

Cruso, like the most inflexible of Afrikaners, exhibits an insular insensitivity to the outside world. Susan notes that his most remarkable traits are “indifference to salvation, and habit, and the stubbornness of old age” (14). The most viable link to contemporary South Africa in this novel is the relationship between Susan and the sullen and enduring Friday. Barton evidences some racial biases: she finds Friday’s “woodsmoke” (144) smell repulsive, as well as his severed tongue, “closed behind his lips (as some other mutilations are hidden by clothing)….outwardly he was like any other Negro” (24).

Long before Barton’s advent on the island, Friday had carved a reed flute upon which he plays “a tune of six notes, always the same” (26). This is one of the African scales omitting the leading tone or seventh degree of the major scale which characterizes Western music. Much annoyed at Friday’s playing this unresolved melody while Cruso is in the throes of fever, Barton knocks the flute from Friday’s hands, startling him, as she says, “for I had never lost patience with him before, or indeed paid him much heed” (28). Later at Foe’s house, she finds a set of three recorders and gives Friday the smallest one to play. To her annoyance, he again plays the same six-note melody, which first leads her to think of him as a “savage.”
Toward the end of the novel, when she is frustrated in her attempts to teach Friday to write English, she tells Foe that she feels like the fellow in a story who took pity on an old man, carried the man on his shoulders across a flooding river, and then found that the old man would not release his good Samaritan, but turned him into a “beast of burden” (148). This echoes the medical officer’s view of Michael K as an “albatross” about his neck.

Shortly before Cruso’s death Susan’s impulses seem parental towards Friday, as she tells the captain of the John Hobart,

...inasmuch as Friday is a slave and a child, it is our duty to care for him in all things, and not abandon him to a solitude worse than death. (39)

At Foe’s house, Barton endeavours to keep Friday busy and enlarge his vocabulary to prevent idleness from destroying him. Still, she recognizes,

There are times when benevolence deserts me and I use words only as the shortest way to subject him to my will. At such times I understand why Cruso preferred not to disturb his muteness. I understand that is to say, why a man will choose to be a slaveholder. (60-61)

In her last conversation with Foe, Barton succinctly sums up her quandary, as well as South Africa’s:

He desires to be liberated, as I do too. Our desires are plain, his and mine. But how is Friday to recover his freedom, who has been a slave all his life? That is the true question. Should I liberate him into a world of wolves and expect to be commended for it? (148)
Thus have colonialists throughout the world expressed their dilemma since the beginning of the end of the colonial era following World War II.

The five page fourth section of *Foe* is a dreamlike evocation of the realm of the dead, a revisiting both on land and beneath the sea – the two major settings of this novel three hundred years afterwards (157). The narrator is not Barton, but an interloper who knows the text of Foe and who drifts among the shades that were the characters, perhaps the consciousness that breathed life into them to begin with.

The first scene occurs at the house of Foe. The “daughter” is lying on a stair landing, wrapped in an “endless” scarf. “She weighs no more than a sack of straw” (153). Inside are the figures of a man and woman in bed – the inference is to Foe and Susan – their taut skin “dry as paper.” They lie side by side, not touching and their faces are skull-like, smiling. Friday lies on the floor amid old dust. He is breathing, there is a faint pulse. The visitor puts an ear to Friday’s mouth and can hear

…the faintest faraway roar: as [Barton] said, the roar of the waves in a seashell; and over that, as if once or twice a violin-string were touched, the whine of the wind and the cry of a bird. (154)

As is the case with several scenes in *In the Heart of the Country*, the preceding is recapitulated, with slight variations, suggesting that there are multiple versions of reality. The visitor enters again, finds the couple in bed, this time with the woman’s head nestled in the man’s arm. He notes that Friday has a scar about his neck, as from a rope or chain. The visitor finds on a table the top leaf of a yellowed manuscript bearing the opening words of Barton’s narrative. “At last I could row no further.” As
she did, he “slips overboard,” but instead of finding the island, drifts “south toward the realm of the whales and eternal ice” (155) amid the white petals cast by Friday, then dives into the deep.

The images Coetzee employs here are darkly dreamlike. The diver finds the wreck of a huge ship, its timbers black, in its hull, an oozing mudlike quicksand. “There are no swarms of gay little fish” (156) as Foe fancied. In the cabin the water is “still and dead,” as it was the previous day, as it was three hundred years ago. Inside there is an eerie scene, held constant for centuries. Susan Barton and her dead captain-lover “float like stars,”

...fat as pigs in their white nightclothes, their limbs extending stiffly from their trunks, their hands, puckered from long immersion, held out in blessing, (157)

In this enigmatic ending, so gracefully written, the themes of narrative art and colonialism coalesce. At one point Barton asked herself, if Friday “was not a slave, was he nevertheless not the helpless captive of my desire to have our story told?” (150). Foe offers another explanation: “it is possible that some of us are not written, but merely are; or else (I think principally of Friday) are written by another and darker author” (143). In terms of both the narrative and colonial themes, it is significant that Friday is submerged, unresolved, and that of all the characters, he is the only one still apparently alive. Fancis King in a review in Spectator, “Telling Stories, Telling Tales, Telling Fiction,” considers Friday as one of those characters who
…represent that bedrock of the individual personality to which no novelist, however piercing his intuition, can ever hope to tunnel deep enough to reach. (33)

The “slow stream” emerging from Friday’s mouth and running “to the ends of the earth…..dark and unending” (157), may well foreshadow the impending outrage of all of the silent ones waiting to break their bonds.

Coetzee’s prose style is as graceful and incisive as ever. Dennis Donoghue in the review “Her Man Friday” speaks of the “radiance of the style.” Susan Barton is one of Coetzee’s most memorable and vibrant characters, clearly overshadowing the three principal male figures, Cruso, Foe, and Friday. While the interactions between imaginative, energetic Susan and stolid Cruso are engaging, they end with his death one-third of the way into the novel; her aesthetic exchanges with pragmatic Foe are thought-provoking, but do not begin until the last third of the novel; and silent Friday does not communicate with Barton at all, remaining throughout more a symbol than a character. The idea of placing Barton, Cruso, and Friday on the island is brilliant. The two London sections in the novel comprise two-thirds of the novel and little happens in these sections. In the first section, Barton is sequestered in Foe’s Clock Lane house with mute Friday, whom she periodically attempts to teach words, manners, and gardening. Much of the rest of her time is spent thinking about the nature of narrative, either by herself or in her correspondence to Foe, which he may or may not have answered. The epistolary mode is by nature reflective.

“The days pass on and no word from you” (61)
“Days pass. Nothing changes” (87)

The result is that there is a rather long section of the novel in which stasis seems to be the controlling element. Dennis Donoghue notes that Foe “has evidently been reading Jacques Derrida’s *De la Grammatologie*” (27). In a brief, thoughtful, and informed essay, George Packer sums up the successes and failures of *Foe*. He notes that *Foe* continues the theme of oppression that pervades all of Coetzee’s works, and that the agency of oppression here is language, which also plays an important part in *In the Heart of the Country*. In George Packer’s reading, there is a dichotomy:

On one side are the island, Cruso and Friday, the hidden truth, and the muteness which goes along with victimization; on the other side, London, Foe, illusion, and speech which is linked to power. Susan tries to mediate between these, to bring Friday to Foe and silence to speech; but there is no mediation. (404)

*Coetzee’s Foe* grants voice to the silenced through writing and the word. Susan Barton in Coetzee’s fictional world appears and relates her own story. Susan’s story fills the silence of *Robinson Crusoe*, uncovers the hidden colonialism and oppression. As a mediation on imagination, storytelling, writing, and silence, *Foe* addresses an aspect of oppression in South Africa different from the issues of torture, institutional violence, social injustice, and Afrikaner history and myths broached in his earlier novels. *Foe*, written when Coetzee was increasingly seen in the international community as a literary spokesperson for South Africa, the issue of authority of the storyteller has become his primary concern. Susan’s frustrations as an author suggest the dilemma faced by Coetzee as a South African novelist in the 1980s. Words can
liberate, but they also can oppress, as Magda discovers. Susan’s struggles demonstrate the difficulty at the heart of the fictional process for South African writers.

_Foe_ appears to be an unmediated record of a voice speaking in the first person suggesting both the origins of English literature in the oral tradition and an apparently artless rendition of Defoe’s _Moll Flanders_ and _Robinson Crusoe_. The first chapter relates the story of Susan’s adventure on the island. Each paragraph opens with a quotation mark, indicating that Susan is speaking to someone. The impression that Susan is the storyteller is further reinforced by her characterization as a storyteller, eager to tell and retell her life history. The chapter ends with a final closing quotation mark indicating that the narrative is concluded.

In chapter–II, the text moves into the next stage of the history of the novel: the epistolary narrative, with echoes of another “master” and “father” of the novel, Samuel Richardson. In the opening of this chapter, it is revealed that the previous chapter actually is Susan’s written account which she is sending to Foe in order to give him the facts from which to construct the story he is writing. Written in the present tense, in the middle of her experience, the letters of chapter II are made up solely of Susan’s side of her correspondence with Foe. Susan’s actions and thoughts are in continual flux; she does not create a coherent plot out of these fragments of her life.

By chapter – III, Susan has assumed more narrative control and no longer feels that it is necessary to remind us that she is writing the account. Much like a nineteenth century novelist, she employs a first person narrative written in the past tense. In the
final chapter, the narrative undergoes a Shakespearean “sea change.” Climbing the staircase to Foe’s room in the night, an unmanned “I” stumbles over the body of a woman, whose face is wrapped in an endless grey woollen scarf. The speaker then finds Susan and Foe in bed, illumined by moonlight; their skin, “dry as paper, is stretched tight over their bones” (153). They appear to be dead laid out in the alcove. Friday has a faint pulse, “as if his heart beat in a far-off place” (154). The speaker pries open Friday’s mouth and lies next to him, with an ear at his mouth:

At first there is nothing. Then, If I can ignore the beating of my own heart, I begin to hear the faintest far away roar: as she said, the roar of waves in a sea shell. From his mouth, without a breath, issue the sounds of the island. (154)

_Foe_ embodies a concern for the silenced Other along with an examination of the benefits and dangers of storytelling. Susan affirms the psychological and social value of storytelling, as Coetzee himself does, but she nonetheless struggles with the unreliability and corruptibility of the authority of the author, the uncertainty embodied in language itself, and the influence that power has on discourse. Coetzee speaks of the silences and “white spaces” of South African society, in which newspapers appear with blank spaces where stories have been censored. Foe addresses the issue of how one can write in support of the Other without assuming power over the Other.
Age of Iron, published in the fall of 1990 demonstrated Coetzee’s continued search for a form that facilitates truth-telling and presents an alternative to manipulations of history. In this novel, Coetzee while turning more realistic in his narrative still employed a figurative or allegorical narrative technique. Written in the form of an extended letter, Age of Iron contains the final thoughts of Mrs. Curren, an elderly Cape Town resident. In an allusive, impressionistic monologue, the narrator relates the circumstances of her last days, her suffering from bone cancer, her encounters with South African injustice, and her struggle to redeem her soul. Her story reveals her personal odyssey but also suggests the hopeless situation of her country. Full of apocalyptic images of fire and references to other stories about death, Age of Iron, is an elegy, mourning the end of South Africa even as it tells the story of the death of its narrator. The novel both suggests how the idea of childhood has been perverted in contemporary South Africa and implies that the hope for the future embodied in children has been obliterated.

Age of Iron is linked to a particular historical moment in South Africa. This connection is made apparent by the dates recorded on its final page – 1986-1989 – which represent Coetzee’s writing the novel and the specific time in which it is set. These were the years of unparalleled violence as the crisis in the townships worsened. The number of those killed in incidents of black protest reached thousands. The distortions of personal life wrought by the apartheid system became more widespread,
and both parents and children found themselves unable to function in their traditional roles. In both the fight for freedom and the system of oppression, the very notion of childhood was being destroyed. Although students had been on the forefront of activism ever since the Soweto uprising of 1976, in 1985 student-led educational boycotts became one of the most important battlegrounds of black protest. Thousands of students stayed away from school for months, boycotted university entrance exams, and marched in the township streets, demanding the withdrawal of military and police units from campuses. The youth movement adopted slogans such as, “Liberation now, education later” and “Liberation before Education.” Although the boycotts primarily affected black high schools, children as young as nine or ten also participated in the protests.

Amid the increasing press restrictions of 1986, the youth protest continued. In August, the government estimated that one lakh black students had not registered for school as required. Boycotts by children, lock-outs by the authorities, lessons in the presence of armed police, saw the schools at the epicentre of the political storm raging in South Africa. With a youth movement at the forefront of protest, it is not surprising that the vulnerable children also became a new target for state authorities. Although the Republic of South Africa had long mistreated non-white children by denying them not only basic human rights but also basic human necessities such as decent food, shelter, clothing, and education – a cruel new development in official systems of oppression emerged in the years 1985 and 1986 as the government instituted new
measures were dubbed by some human rights experts as “the war against children.” Thousands of children for the first time were included among the political detainees, held without charges and without trial. The violence in the townships also took its toll on children. This war against children represents the final outrage in the self-destruction of South Africa and is the context that informs both the substance and the rhetoric of Coetzee’s novel.

*Age of Iron* concerns both children and death, and is played out against the background of the school boycotts and township violence of 1986. A retired classics’ Professor, Mrs. Curren, has lived alone in her Cape Town house since her only daughter emigrated to the United States in 1976, as a protest against her country’s racial policies. The day Mrs. Curren hears that medical science can do nothing to defeat the cancer that is steadily eating away her bones, she encounters a derelict sleeping next to her garage. At first repulsed by him, she later befriends the man, named Mr. Vercueil, who becomes her unlikely confidant. In a significant and deliberate omission in *Age of Iron*, Mr. Vercueil’s race is never identified, although it can be assumed that he is black or coloured. Mrs. Curren asks Mr. Vercueil to mail her narrative to America after her death. Fearful that the unreliable alcoholic might fail in his task, she quotes several lines from Virgil on “the unquiet dead,” explaining that the Latin means, “…if you don’t mail the letter to my daughter I will have a hundred years of misery.” (192)*

*J.M. Coetzee, *Age of Iron*, London, Secker & Warburg, 1990. All subsequent references to the text are to this section*
The text she cites speaks of the restless souls who wait for the boatman Charon to transport them across the Styx to the land of the dead. The reference to Virgil suggests the importance of her manuscript to Mrs. Curren; its delivery is equated with her bones resting in a grave, and her soul achieving a final resting place.

As Mrs. Curren’s life ebbs away, she encounters an outer world that reflects her own inner reality. As the cancer gradually turns her into a hollow woman, so the cancer of violence and injustice crumbles South Africa from within as the country moves inexorably towards its death. Mrs. Curren’s meditations on death are both interrupted and further stimulated by the violent events unfolding in the outlying townships of Cape Town and spilling over into the quiet harbour of her decaying house in the centre of the colonial city. In an attempt to escape the chaos resulting from the school boycotts, Mrs. Curren’s maid, Florence, brings her fourteen-year old son Bheki back with her from the township of Guguletu. The police follow the boy, and Mrs. Curren witnesses them pushing Bheki and his friend John up against a parked van. When Bheki disappears back into Guguletu, Mrs. Curren accompanies Florence on an eerie journey into the underworld of the violence-torn township. Led by a black Virgil through water and fire, Mrs. Curren, like Dante, enters hell, witnessing the burning of a squatter camp and finding Bheki’s body with a neat bullet hole in the boy’s forehead. Finally, she protests impotently as the police storm her servant’s quarters and shoot John, who has hidden there following his release from the hospital.
In the last section of the novel, Florence and her daughters, Hope and Beauty, disappear back into the inferno of Guguletu, and Mrs. Curren moves closer to her own death. Increasingly reliant on pain-killing drugs, she inhabits a shadow world of dreams and hallucinations. Her relationship with the elusive Mr. Vercueil deepens, and he moves into the house to care for her, becoming the “shadow husband” who sleeps by her side and is the sole remaining object for her love. Her story concludes with a chilling account of her final embrace with death, represented by Mr. Vercueil:

I got back into bed, into the tunnel between the cold sheets. The curtains parted; he came in beside me. For the first time I smelled nothing. He took me in his arms and held me with mighty force, so that the breath went out of me in a rush. From that embrace there was no warmth to be had” (198)

Mrs. Curren on the brink of death begins to explore ultimate issues telling her daughter, “This was never meant to be the story of a body, but of the soul it houses” (185). Her deathbed confession reveals her changing attitudes towards her country and her conviction of her own historical responsibility. Her story records an attempt “to keep a soul alive in times not hospitable to the soul” (130). Coetzee locates the progress of the soul in the context of both the material and the historical, the body and the times. Speaking often of her “metamorphosis,” Mrs. Curren witnesses to the terrible emotional and spiritual struggle of one facing death, attempting to give birth to “the soul, neophyte, wet, blind, ignorant” (186). In that struggle, *Age of Iron* traces the efforts of liberal white South Africans to find an ethical position in the paradoxes
and contradictions of their history. As his diction and allusions suggest, Coetzee is not afraid to address these issues in transcendent as well as material terms.

An avowed liberal, Mrs. Curren frequently lashes out at the Afrikaner government and its tactics. One target of her scorn, reminiscent of Coetzee’s earlier treatment in *Dusklands*, is the media. Well aware that the South Africa portrayed in the government-controlled media is a fiction, she complains,

> Of trouble in the schools the radio says nothing, the television says nothing, the newspapers say nothing. In the world they project all the children of the land are sitting happily at their desks learning about the square on the hypotenuse and the parrots of the Amazonian jungle. (39)

Only through Florence does she learn the truth of the school boycotts and the township violence. The South African media show only “a land of smiling neighbours” (54) as the government struggles to maintain its master myth. But like the Americans held spellbound by the images of Vietnam, Mrs. Curren continues to consult her radio and television, despite knowing their distortions. White South Africans, she says, are obsessed with the ritual parade of Afrikaner politicians nightly appearing on the television screen:

> We watch as birds watch snakes, fascinated by what is about to devour us. Fascination: the homage we pay to our death. Between the hours of eight and nine we assemble and they show themselves to us (29)

As the reference to snakes suggests, the indirect or ironic condemnation of Afrikaner thought in Coetzee’s earlier novels becomes, in *Age of Iron*, a scathing and
bitter attack upon the Afrikaners themselves. Mrs. Curren claims that they have cast off both legitimacy and reason. She epitomizes their corruption in scathing terms:

What absorbs them is power and the stupor of power. Eating and talking, munching lives, belching. Slow, heavy-bellied talk. Sitting in a circle, debating ponderously, issuing decrees like hammer blows: death, death, death. Untroubled by the stench. Heavy eyelids, piggish eyes, shrewd with the shrewdness of generations of peasants. Plotting against each other too: slow peasant plots that take decades to mature. (28-29)

Mrs. Curren views the Afrikaners as “boars that devour their offspring” (30). The policies that they have instituted and attitudes that they have instilled in the next generation can have only one result: extinction. Fully aware of the corruptions of her country, she still is unable to show genuine concern, or charity, for those caught in its death throes. Initially she thinks more of her own death than of the boycotts, riots, and brutality that fill Florence and Bheki’s world:

The country smoulders, yet with the best will in the world I can only half-attend. My true attention is all inward, upon the thing, the word, the word for the thing inching through my body. An ignominious occupation, and in times like these ridiculous too, as a banker with his clothes on fire is a joke while a burning beggar is not. Yet I cannot help myself. ‘Look at me!’ I want to cry to Florence: ‘I too am burning!’ (39)

The references to fire suggest the apocalyptic fervour of the times as well as the stark reality of her own imminent return to dust and ashes.

Mrs. Curren, like most of her peers, has seldom personally witnessed the human cost of such policies. Only once before has she considered the difficult life of
the township family, when she gave Florence a ride to the place where her husband worked butchering chickens. But as her body weakens, she sees the realities of her country with a new clarity. Her journey to Guguletu, during which she encounters the brutal conditions of township life that are by now familiar to American and European observers, is for her a stunning revelation. Looking upon Bheki’s body, neatly laid out with four other dead children, Mrs. Curren thinks,

This is the worst thing I have witnessed in my life…Now my eyes are open and I can never close them again (102-103)

Throughout the narrative, her newly opened eyes look upon many aspects of South African life: the chaotic turbulence of the townships, the black-on-black violence, the tragic consequences of the children’s movement, the corruption of the South African police, the inadequate medical treatment given to a black child, the cruel and calculating attitude of the security forces patrolling the townships, and the numb despair of the homeless who sleep on the streets of Cape Town.

Mrs. Curren fully recognizes her own economic and historical complicity in the system that perpetuates such injustices. Some of the chickens that Florence’s husband labours six days a week at a miniscule wage to kill probably end up in Mrs. Curren’s kitchen, stuffed with bread crumbs and sage. “A crime was committed long ago,” she writes, “so long ago that I was born into it. It is a part of my inheritance. It is part of me. I am part of it (164). The guilt resulting from being born a privileged white South African is not unlike the Calvinist notion of original sin: one cannot
escape responsibility and must find atonement. Mrs. Curren acknowledges that her
guilt lies not only in her social position but also in the consequent ease with which she
can forget the injustices kept so well hidden by her government:

It seems like a bad dream. Something presses, nudges inside me. I try
to take no notice, but it insists. I yield an inch; it presses harder. With
relief I give in, and life is suddenly ordinary again. With relief I give
myself back to the ordinary. I wallow in it. I lose my sense of shame,
becomes shameless as a child…..That is why I must take hold of
myself, point myself down the path. Otherwise I am lost. (119)

Consequently, Mrs. Curren fights to retain her sense of urgency about
injustice, battling the distractions provided by her own relentless progress towards
death and the blinders established by her social position.

“I want to rage against the men who have created these times,” she
explains to Mr. Vercueil. “I want to sell myself, redeem myself, but am
full of confusion about how to do it” (117)

Attempting to save herself, in a moral sense, she explores numerous ways to
make amends, all of which fail. One option she briefly considers is a public display of
her condemnation of both herself and her country: she plans to set herself on fire in
her car as she drives down Government Avenue, in the public centre of Cape Town.
She gives up this plan realizing that such public shows of expiation are seldom clearly
understood. Another more practical means of atonement is to practice charity, and she
attempts to do so by rescuing Mr. Verceuil from the streets, by assisting Florence in
finding Bheki, by criticizing the behaviour of the police and security forces, and by
attempting to force herself to love John. These attempts at contrition, however,
continually fail. Mrs. Curren cannot earn her own salvation, Mr. Vercuil does not want to be rescued: Bheki is dead; government officials pay little attention to a “mad old do-gooder” (105); and John, ironically named after the apostle of love, is supremely unlovable.

Despite Curren’s acknowledgments that she feels no love for this black child, she admits that she played a part in making him unlovable. This paradox, so typical of the dilemma of the white South African, adds to her feelings of impotence and guilt. In what she terms her “confession” to her daughter, Mrs. Curren writes about her feelings toward John:

I do not want to die in the state I am in, in a state of ugliness. I want to be saved. How shall I be saved? By doing what I do not want to do. That is the first step: that I know, I must love, first of all, the unlovable. I must love, for instance, this child. Not bright little Bheki, but this one. He is her for a reason. He is part of my salvation. I must love him. But I do not love him. Nor do I want to love him enough to love him despite myself. (136)

Again she is caught in an endless circle of will and volition, of intellect and feeling. Like the magistrate in Waiting for the Barbarians, she finds herself “wandering in a fog” (136) convinced that “God cannot help me” (137). Once again Coetzee has graphically rendered the plight of many white South Africans. As Mrs. Curren tells Mr. Vercueil:

The spirit of charity has perished in this country. Because those who accept charity despise it, while those who give with a despairing heart. (22)
Mrs. Curren clings to her sense of shame as a means of salvation. Only after she leaves the comfort of her home and spends a night on the streets of Cape Town with Mr. Vercueil does she recognize the limits of such guilt. Earlier, she had argued that the black youth movement was ill-directed; the children should save themselves, not mouth grand slogans such as “freedom or death!” (163). But awakening on the ground next to Mr. Vercueil, she asks him,

*who am I* to have a voice at all? How can I honourably urge them to turn their back on that call? What am I entitled to do but sit in a corner with my mouth shut? (164)

Her former rages against the men who did the dirty work and against her own complicity were carried out to maintain her sense of honour:

I strove always for honour, for a private honour, using shame as my guide. As long as I was ashamed I knew I had not wandered into dishonor. (165)

Symbolic public demonstrations, individual acts of charity, a classical sense of honour and shame – in recognizing the limits of these attempts at atonement, Mrs. Curren undergoes the metamorphosis of her soul. She writes to her daughter,

This struggling with sickness, the gloom and self-loathing of these days, the vacillation, therambling too…all part of the metamorphosis, part of shaking myself loose from the dying envelope. (129)

Mrs. Curren wonders whether there is a metaphoric connection between cancer and cannibalism, arguing at one stage she says:
That is how cancer comes about: from self-loathing the body turns malignant and begins to eat away at itself. (132)

Elizabeth also juxtaposes her cancer with pregnancy, reading the latter in terms of a cannibalistic invasion of “self” by an “other”:

...children inside me eating me more every day, not growing but bloating, toothed, clawed, forever cold and ravenous. (59)

Elizabeth Curren sees her cancer as not only a personal indictment but also as public event; a broader sign of South Africa’s “illness” in the wake of apartheid. She refers to her cancer as a contagion which will soon take over the white population of the country: a plague to wipe out the sinners. Using her terminal illness as a threat against the police officers and as proof of their common corruption, Curren tells them:

“You will probably catch it too one day. It is hard to escape.” Cancer! What a pleasure to fling the word at them! It stopped them in their tracks like a knife. (142)

The immediacy of the power to threaten provides a contrast to her otherwise politically ineffectual self-positioning. Elizabeth repeatedly refers to her lack of moral authority with her liberal humanist posture expressing her opinion in a vacuum. This feeling of political isolation is related in part of her membership of the English-speaking intelligentsia, a community which, Stephen Watson in “Colonialism in the Novels of J.M. Coetzee,” (1986) argues,

Deprived of a role, the intelligentsia, like any other social organ, decays and begins to exhibit every type of morbid symptom. (381)
Elizabeth Curren, a member of the English-speaking intelligentsia, who casts herself in the mould of the terminally isolated, with her “opinions in a vacuum, opinions that touch no one” (148). Mrs. Curren expresses her sense of isolation in terms of excessive interiority and inwardness manifested by the cannibalistic ravaging of her body by cancer:

I am hollow, I am a shell. To each of us fate sends the right disease. Mine a disease which eats me out from inside. (103)

Coetzee manipulates the cancer metaphor to provide a commentary on South African race relations. In the novel the connection between the body and the body politic in South Africa is made clear in the collision of the two events which change Mrs. Curren’s life forever: the coming of Vercueil and the diagnosis of cancer. Just as Mrs. Curren’s body is being “colonized” by, or playing host to, cancerous cells, she is visited by Vercueil, a homeless black man who becomes Curren’s confidante and messenger. On the day that Elizabeth is told that she has cancer, she stumbles across Vercueil in the laneway, and the connections she forges between her “news” and her new “visitor” is instantaneous.

For a while I stood staring down on him, staring and smelling. A visitor, visiting himself on me on this of all days.

This was the day when I had the news from Dr Syfret. (3)
Elizabeth goes on to describe Vercueil and other homeless people in Cape Town as inhuman, parasitic, endemic and possessing superhuman skills of survival, “out” in the streets:

How long can I fend them off? The scavengers of Cape Town, whose number never dwindles. Who go bare and feel no cold. Who sleep outside and do not sicken. Who starve and do not waste. Warmed from within by alcohol. The contagions and infections in their blood consumed in liquid flame. Cleaners up after the feast. Flies, dry winged, glazened eyed, pitiless. My heirs. (4)

Quick to assess the street people on the quality of their blood, which she finds full of contagions and infections, Elizabeth makes a metonymic shift in her interpretation and begins to read the people themselves (rather than the germs in their blood) as infectious, multiplying “scavengers” which need fending off.

The individual’s resistance to infectious thought is an idea which permeates much of *Age of Iron*. When Mrs. Curren asks herself,

Am I mad? Yes, I am mad...when madness climbs the throne, who in the land escapes contagion? (97)

She affirms her madness on the basis of the madness of the state. The agency of the individual is compromised, and the shame which Elizabeth feels as a white liberal in South Africa is seen as less the result of intellectual reflection but of infection. Elizabeth Curren is repulsed by apartheid and its wake, and yet in her readings of the people around her she re-inscribes its power. This leaves her in a position in which her words are unheard by those around her, particularly John and Bheki, whose
language is one of fire, burning and purging of the old system ready for the new.

When she tries to express her concern over John’s allegiance to the struggle, though in place of “struggle” she reads “violence”, she realizes:

My words fell off him like dead leaves the moment they were uttered. The words of a woman, therefore negligible; of an old woman, therefore doubly negligible; but above all of a white. (72)

Like “dead leaves,” her words are fit only for fuelling fire. John and Bheki and the millions of other school children like them fight against apartheid by setting fire to schools which educate them only to serve it. Elizabeth complains to Florence: “In my day we considered education a privilege” I said, “Parents would scrimp and save to keep their children in school. We would have thought it madness to burn a school down.” (36) Elizabeth fails to realize that it was not so much her “day” that made her education a privilege, but her colour. While she describes the burning of schools as “madness” and cannot understand the lack of control that parents have over their children, it is once again her cancer, or the continuing discourse of her body which re-establishes the parallel between her condition and the condition of the country. Reading her cancer as a “misbirth” and “monstrous growth,” she yearns to cleanse her body by fire, in the same way that John and Bheki fought to cleanse their part of the country by fire:

Death by fire the only decent death left. To walk into the fire, to blaze like tow, to feel these secret sharers cringe and cry out too, at the last instant, in their harsh unused little voices; to burn and be gone, to be rid of, to leave the world clean. Monstrous growths, misbirths: a sign that
one is beyond one’s term. This country too: time for fire, time for an end, time for what grows out of ash to grow. (59)

The apocalyptic nature of Elizabeth’s narrative suggests that South Africa will only grow again after it goes through a type of radiation treatment, thereby destroying the infection, the infectious, and the infected. Though Elizabeth links her own death to the death of the old South Africa, there is no assurance that her death will lend society its “cure.” As Elizabeth suggests throughout her narrative, she “caught” cancer and she also transmitted it; the ills of the social body will not die with her.

As Mrs. Curren recognizes her own shortcomings and begins her metamorphosis, she looks for assistance to Mr. Verceuil, a former sailor resembling “one of those half-mythical creatures that come out in photographs only as blurs,” (193) a messenger who must carry her story across the water. Not only is he entrusted to mail her last testimony to the United States, but she hopes that he can also show her the way across the Styx to a final resting place:

All the days you have known me… I have been standing on the riverbank awaiting my turn. I am waiting for someone to show me the way across. Every minute of every day I am here, waiting. (179)

When she first meets the homeless man, she has been reading a story by Tolstoy about an angelic visitor, and she wonders if Mr. Vercueil was similarly sent. The reference to Tolstoy not only underscores the novel’s discussion of charity but also sheds further light on the ambiguous Mr. Vercueil. For the angel in Tolstoy’s story “What Men Live By” is one who transports soul at death; sent by God to take the
soul of a mother with two small children, the angel refuses to let her die and so is condemned to live as a human until he learns the lesson of what men live by. Mr. Verceuil acts as a guide and messenger more in what he hides than in what he reveals. Playing with various forms of his name, Mrs. Curren wonders,

Vercueil, Verkuil, Verskuil….I have never come across such a name before. (37)

The Dutch stem Kuil means “hole in the ground,” suggesting Mr. Vercueil’s affinity with Dostoevsky’s underground man, while verskuil means “to hide” in Afrikaans. In this postmodern version of Tolstoy’s overtly didactic story, the angel does not speak, does not deliver a clear message or moral. Instead, the message is made manifest in his silences. As he listens, he prompts and facilitates the story. And while telling and writing that story, Mrs. Curren saves her soul.

By giving her confession to Mr. Vercueil to deliver and by relying on his physical care in her final days, Mrs. Curren puts her life into the derelict’s hands. Without understanding the paradoxes involved, she says,

I give my life to Vercueil to carry over. I trust Vercueil because I do not trust Vercueil. I love him because I do not love him. Because he is the weak reed I lean upon him. (131)

In doing so, she is no longer the guilt-ridden liberal; rather, she is a child in need of care, just like Mr. Verceuil.

It is not he who fell under my care when he arrived, I now understand, nor I who fell under his: we fell under each other, and have tumbled
This implausible partnership between the dying woman and the decrepit man offers a glimpse of the harmony that might one day be possible in South Africa. In Curren’s “mutual election,” she finds a final peace for her soul. She no longer fears that the day of wrath will reduce the age to ashes as described in the traditional requiem mass. Instead, her death will bring release, and she envisions herself becoming ash that would blow away.

As a representative of white South Africa, Mrs. Curren prophetically and allegorically speaks of the future of the country. Mrs. Curren’s body will crumble and turn to ash. Similarly, the day of wrath for South Africa will usher in change with apocalyptic fire. An overtly allegorical passage from Mrs. Curren’s letter uses the images of parent and child:

Father can’t you see I’m burning? Implored the child, standing at his father’s bedside. But his father, sleeping on, dreaming, did not see.

Mrs. Curren’s use of parent-child imagery in this passage is typical of her entire account; writing to her daughter and meditating upon their relationship, she finds that everything reminds her of children. Mrs. Curren speaks about the importance of children in a beautiful passage about her daughter:

How I longed to be able to go upstairs to you, to sit on your bed, run my fingers through your hair, whisper in your ear as I did on school mornings, ‘Time to get up!’ And then, when you turned over, your
body blood-warm, your breath milky, to take you in my arms in what we called ‘giving Mommy a big hug,’ the secret meaning of which, the meaning never spoken, was that Mommy should not be sad, for she would not die but live on in you. (5-6)

Children as the continuation of life – it is this understanding that has been destroyed in twentieth-century South Africa. While the appearance of children and the innocence of childhood had been a sign of hope in Coetzee’s earlier novels, Age of Iron laments the death of South Africa by lamenting the death of the notion of childhood. Neither the roaming gangs of the townships nor the sheltered children of the suburbs offer the country a future: the gangs are

…children scorning childhood, the time of wonder, the growing time of the soul. Their souls, their organs of wonder, the growing time of the soul. Their souls, their organs of wonder, stunted, petrified. And on the other side of the great divide their whiter cousins soul-stunted too, spinning themselves tighter and tighter into their sleepy cocoons. (7)

Instead of life, children now represent death. In her depiction of white South African oppressors, Mrs. Curren continually emphasizes their youth. She describes a policeman who visits her home in terms of both his youth and his heritage;

A young man, solid, raw-boned. Son to someone, cousin to many. Many cousins, many aunts and uncles, standing about him, behind him, above him like a chorus, guiding, admonishing. (153)

The childhood of black children has also been destroyed. Florence admits,

I cannot tell these children what to do…. It is all changed today. There are no more mothers and fathers. (39)
Although Mrs. Curren insists, “There are always mothers and fathers,” her story reveals how many black children have become “children of death,” (49) meting out their own bloody forms of retribution and justice. Living in a time “when childhood is despised,” in an age of iron, Mrs. Curren can only wonder,

How long, how long before the softer ages return in their cycle, the age of clay, the age of earth? (50)

But in the apocalypse envisioned by Mrs. Curren those made of iron will survive. White people like herself burn well, Mrs. Curren tells Mr. Vercueil,

...whereas these people will not burn, Bheki and the other dead. It would be like trying to burn figures of pig iron or lead. They might lose their sharpness of contour, but when the flames subsided they would still be there, heavy as ever. (124)

The children of iron may survive the apocalypse, but they are also in danger of losing their most vital human characteristic: their ability to love and nurture a future generation.

South Africa’s mutilation of the parent-child bond is also starkly rendered in Mrs. Curren’s own relationship with her absent daughter. Although her account testifies to her overwhelming love and longing for her child, Mrs. Curren refuses to tell her daughter about her terminal illness.

“When I lie in bed at night and stare into the black hole into which I am falling,” she tells Vercueil, “all that keeps me sane is the thought of her. I say to myself: I have brought a child into the world, I have seen her to womanhood, I have seen her safely to a new life” (72)
She visualizes her daughter’s daily routine, drawing a simple picture of her peeling onions in her kitchen. But most of all, she longs to touch her daughter, hoping to find comfort and salvation in the face of death from her child’s love. Mr. Vercueil advises,

> Phone her in America. Tell her you need her here, [and when Mrs. Curren refused, warns,] “Then don’t tell her afterward, when it is too late. She won’t forgive you” (74)

Once again South Africa has caused parents and children to act unnaturally. Mr. Curren knows that her daughter will not come back until the political situation of South Africa has changed: “She is like iron. I am not going to ask her to go back on her vows,” “You are like iron too,” Mr. Vercuil replies. (75)

Mrs. Curren’s inability to see or touch her child as she dies parallels her inability to see or grasp a future for her country. And instead of the life represented by her daughter, her new offspring brings death and destruction:

> To have fallen pregnant with these growths, these cold, obscene swellings; to have carried and carried this brood beyond any natural term, unable to bear the, unable to sate their hunger; children inside me eating more every day, not growing but bloating, toothed, clawed, forever cold and ravenous…My eggs, grown within me. Me, mine: words I shudder to write, yet true. My daughters death, sisters to you, my daughter life. (64)

Mrs. Curren sees herself as emblematic of her country, itself destroyed by the children of violence it harbours, like the cancer destroying her from within.
The broken connections between parents and children also are manifested in Mrs. Curren’s reminiscences about her own mother. Throughout her life, she had clung to a story about her mother travelling to the seaside by ox-wagon as a girl. High atop Prince Alfred’s Pass, the wagon stopped for the night, and her mother slept underneath it with the other children. Mrs. Curren tells Mr. Vercueil:

> If each of us has a story we tell to ourself about who we are and where we come from, then that is my story. That is the story I choose, or the story that has chosen me. It is there that I come from, it is there that I begin. (120)

This story of origins reveals Mrs. Curren’s close attachment to the land but an uncertainty and fear about her relationship to the changing world. The disruption of Mrs. Curren’s natural bonds with her daughter and her love for her country suggest the dead end of the liberalism she represents. Similarly, the older generation of non-whites, represented by Mr. Vercueil, will not provide a future for South Africa:

> There is an air of childlessness about him. Of having no children in the world but also of having no childhood in his past. (11)

Mr. Vercueil will leave no progeny. He is an observer, not an actor; one who suffers but does not judge. Since neither Mrs. Curren nor Mr. Vercueil will leave descendents in South Africa, the offspring of the “marriage” between the sick woman and the alcoholic man in the final section of the novel is death.

Mrs. Curren can first speak to Mr. Vercueil, she then can write her account to her daughter. Rehearsing her account to Mr. Vercueil during the day, she then
inscribes it on paper at night. The final delivery of the text is also dependent upon Mr. Vercueil, who must mail the lengthy letter to America. Mrs. Curren speaks of her account as a child: her words “come from my heart, from my womb,” (145) and are living inside her.

If children represent hope for the future, Mrs. Curren’s child-story represents her last measure of hope and reaffirms Coetzee’s belief in the value of storytelling, even in a place such as South Africa. But as in all of Coetzee’s previous works, Mrs. Curren’s account also includes a great deal of self-reflection on the limits and pitfalls of storytelling. During the course of her narration, Mrs. Curren falls in shifts of writing, struggling to relay her deepest thoughts and emotions to her child. She eventually realizes that the cancer eating away her country is a more important reason to record her account. The first pages of her letter concern Mr. Vercueil, but those descriptions have a selfish motivation:

When I write about him I write about myself. When I write about his dog I write about myself; when I write about the house I write about myself. Man, house, dog: no matter what the word, through it I stretch out a hand to you. (9)

Yet after visiting Guguletu and gazing upon Bheki’s body, Mrs. Curren writes with a new purpose to let her daughter know how things are in South Africa that includes her own complicity and suffering. Verbally assailing the security forces patrolling the township in armoured troop carriers, she wants
…to make them see it with their own eyes: a scar, any scar, the scar of all this suffering, but in the end my scar, since our own scars are the only scars we can carry with us. (106).

The witness she bears unavoidably includes her own self as it implicates herself.

A classicist, Mrs. Curren loves words. She ponders over their etymology, crafts puns, and playfully manipulates their levels of meaning. In the chaotic circumstances of South Africa, words no longer seem to have a place. Pleading with John to be “slow to judge,” Mrs. Curren is not even sure about herself and what her words mean. They have even less authority for the black child:

My words fell off him like dead leaves the moment they were uttered. The words of a woman, therefore negligible; of an old woman, therefore doubly negligible, but above all of a white. (79)

The novel shows how the time for words has already passed. The uncertainty of words also lies in the possibility that they may never even find an audience; they may remain dead leaves. Whether pleading with John, questioning reticent Mr. Vercueil, or writing to her absent daughter, Mrs. Curren finds that her words enter a void. If Mr. Vercueil does not mail her letter, her words will not reach anyone:

These papers, these words that either you read now or else will never read. Will they reach you? Have they reached you? Two ways of asking the same question, a question to which I will never know the answer, never. To me this letter forever be words committed to the waves a message in a bottle. (32)

Her voice is uncertain, doubtful of its reception and existence, as well as fully cognizant of its own failure to communicate accurately. For a story is always
presented through its storyteller’s eyes. The terrible realities of Guguletu can be recorded only as she sees them, never in complete objectivity, and the danger is that too much attention thus is paid to the teller of the tale:

…the storyteller, from her office, claims the place of right. It is through my eyes that you see; the voice that speaks in your head is mine. Through me alone do you find yourself her on these desolate falts, smell the smoke in the air, see the bodies of the dead, hear the weeping, shiver in the rain. (103)

Mrs. Curren, like many of Coetzee’s protagonists, recognizes the uncertain nature of language and the tendency of writers to insert their own prejudices and errors into their compositions. She also realizes the apparent dichotomy between words and action. Merely writing her story is not the act of heroism, she knows, required of contemporary South Africans. She recognizes the justness of the radical’s question:

What is the point of consuming yourself in shame and loathing? I don’t want to listen to the story of how you feel, it is just another story, why don’t you do something? (145)

Mrs. Curren answers this impatience with words and storytelling, by speaking of her words as a child:

You do not believe in words. You think only blows are real, blows and bullets. But listen to me: can’t you hear that the words I speak are real? …..What is living inside me is something else, another word. And I am fighting for it, in my manner, fighting for it not to be stifled. (145)
Mrs. Curren’s frustration may mirror Coetzee’s own experiences as a South African writer. His novels all map the uncertain terrain between rigid points of view. Like Mrs. Curren, he may say:

These are terrible sights….They are to be condemned. But I denounce them in other people’s words. I must find my own words, from myself. Otherwise it is not the truth. (98-99)

The novel powerfully renders the dissolution of South Africa similar to the final perversion of the relationship between parents and children. David Plott in “A Deathbed Letter from Cape Town,” says

What makes the novel so powerful is how skillfully Mr. Coetzee weaves the tale Mrs. Curren tells of South Africa with the old woman’s tortured love of her own daughter. (1990: A 13)

*Age of Iron* makes clear the limits of its own authority and power. Mrs. Curren is careful not to claim too much.

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