

Maile Schoonover

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Russell Samolsky

**Justifying Acts of Violence: The Intersections of Human and Animal Oppression
and Exploitation in Coetzee**

The theme of human cruelty is one that runs deeply in the work of J.M. Coetzee. His fiction has engaged with the problems of this cruelty directed towards animals, as well as towards other human beings. He asserts his question of the treatment of animals and humans by writing his novels in the time of Apartheid South Africa in order to show how horrific acts of torture, debasement, and likening of humans to animals becomes a normalized part of the human condition. Furthermore, Coetzee's novels are inscribed with a kind of ecological and sociopolitical critique of the world, paying special attention to "otherness," both the othering of people—by race, gender, class or physical/mental deformity—and the othering of animals as a method of oppression. Coetzee's novels are both beautifully individual and yet seem to possess a shared consciousness that connects each novel. It is in this way that Coetzee is able to establish a broader sense of the interactions and interdependencies between the lives of humans and animals.

Modern society is characterized by an anthropocentric mentality, one in which humans are placed on the top of the species hierarchy. This kind of thinking is established by considering the human being to be special and individual from other non-human animals. Furthermore, within our own species, humans have a long and horrific history of committing atrocious acts toward one other and facilitating the oppression of those we deem to be "others." What is potentially more disturbing than atrocity in itself is our conditioned normalization of it.

Coetzee's writing digs deeply into these moments of horror and atrocity, to show how it is normalized into the fabric of our society and reveals the methods of "othering" we employ upon one another as well as non-human animals. His novels challenge us to look at the ways in which certain societal norms are perpetuated, particularly in acts of violence. Furthermore, Coetzee's writing also seems to suggest a rethinking of our human-centered society, by extending the ethical bounds of human community to include animals as fellow beings. While Coetzee himself does not use this term, one way to interpret the community he might imagine is in thinking of it as a biotic community. The principle of this idea is most thoroughly explored in his piece, *Elizabeth Costello*, in which animals are thought to deserve considerations and protections typically accorded only to human beings.

In *Elizabeth Costello*, Coetzee imagines his being into the persona of Elizabeth Costello, who gives a series of lectures on animal rights and the human-animal relationship. Furthermore, his protagonist questions the way in which the faculty of reason is elevated as the dominant measure of value in society to distinguish humans as superior beings. The most powerful comparison that Coetzee's protagonist makes is linking daily animal slaughter to the atrocious acts of killing during the Holocaust in order to show how human complicity can further perpetuate acts of violence. During her lecture, Costello makes reference to the daily slaughter of animals for consumption, making note that although "death is all around us" (7), we seem to be morally untroubled by this fact. Much like the way in which the Jewish people were rounded up in concentration camps, and deemed to be inferior to the Aryan race—which Nazis believed to be a pure and master race—Costello believes that we treat the mass slaughter of animals with the same kind of moral indifference. While we would like to think that the suffering of these victims is something that deeply troubles and haunts us, Costello notes that this is probably not the case.

Furthermore, much in the way that some countryside residing residents did not know of what took place in the camps, Costello draws attention to the fact that most people in today's society do not know of the atrocities that take place on factory farms and slaughter houses. However, she argues that their ignorance is a kind of willing ignorance, in which they "could not afford to know, for their own sake," (19). In other words, we comply with the horror of animal slaughter, and compartmentalize any feelings of guilt or responsibility so that we may still take part in the killing of animals for our usage and consumption.

In the novel, the comparison between animal slaughter and the Holocaust is deeply upsetting to Costello's audience. As a society, we tend to view the killing of humans to be far more horrific than the killing of animals, as the idea of a human-animal hierarchy has been deeply engrained within us. When making this comparison, Costello's audience is outraged at the disruption of this hierarchy. In this way, we can see that Coetzee is not satisfied merely to reorient the way in which humans interact with animals, he is also deeply interested in refocusing the way we think about animals by deconstructing human thinking itself. During her lecture, Costello traces the elevation of reason in philosophy as the measure of value in our society and as a tool for the creation of the animal-human hierarchy. As she points out, the antiquated argument of man's similarity to God—having been made in his image—has been used as a way to value humans over animals. The old philosophers Plato and Descartes argued that God himself and the rules of the universe are founded in reason. Since humans alone can understand these rules, and animals can merely live blindly by them, philosophers have found this to be justification enough for humans to have dominion over them. Costello argues against this philosophy, stating that reason merely comprises human thinking, not the entire being of the universe. Furthermore, if reason only occupies a small part of human thinking and human

consciousness, it can be argued that reason has been used historically to legitimate the abuse of animals as well as other human groups. In this way, Coetzee utilizes his protagonist to articulate how humans have capitalized on the notion of reason as a method of centering themselves in the universe. Furthermore, claims to reason have not only been denied to animals but also to human groups such as women or non-white races. Such othering of these groups has been used in order to deny rights and be made more vulnerable to oppression and violence.

In her lecture, Costello argues that sentience should be the sole consideration of value, rather than reason. In this way, hers is an argument that is grounded in the body, rather than the mind. She believes that problems of complicity are matters of the heart, and in slaughtering animals without care or feelings of guilt, we are essentially closing off our hearts and unable to extend empathy to other species. To emphasize the point of empathy, it is important to note that Coetzee imagined his being into a female character to deliver his message. One might interpret his choice of a female character as exemplifying his ability to imagine his being within another; to extend empathy to another being despite their radical distinctions. Indeed, Elizabeth Costello is a complicated character in that within her resides the ideas and opinions of Coetzee as well as the voices of exploited animals she fights for. Her very existence as a character seems to confirm that human and animal are, in Coetzee's line of thought and imagination, linked rather than distinct beings.

In order to further disassociate with reason and philosophical abstracts, Costello is very concerned with using precise language rather than making allegorical references to animals, or personifying them to evoke human traits. When comparing herself to Red Peter, she does so without irony and states, "It means what it says. I say what I mean." In other words, Costello's refusal to use sophisticated metaphor in speaking about animals is a further rejection of abstract,

human thinking. Instead, she is concerned with adopting a unifying perspective of sentient, bodily being that does not situate one species as superior to the other. For example, Costello describes sentience as “fullness, embodiedness” or “the experience of being alive to the world.” She imagines that this is an awareness we share with animals, a kind of being that is more valuable than the application of reason. It is when humans fail to be empathetic and engaged in this immersive fullness of being, that we commit violence and atrocity. The sort of abstract language that Elizabeth Costello attempts to avoid in her discussion of animals, is exactly the kind we can see in Coetzee’s later novel *Disgrace*.

The early pages of *Disgrace* are significantly marked by animal analogies that only serve to describe elements of David Lurie’s sex life. Analogies made to animals in most modern literary works, and in our everyday speech are casually made and merely serve to portray an aspect of human life. In discussing his sexual relations with Soraya, David Lurie describes it “rather like the copulation of snakes” (3), and later when their relationship is abruptly ended, David likens himself to a predator encroaching on a vixen “in the home of her cubs” (10). Such animal inscriptions in the text serve to remind us how animals often reside in the background of the human experience, and how easily we make analogies to animals in order to comment on our own lives. These analogies to animals are made frequently and casually, without any significant regard to the actual animal in question, and allow humans to evaluate their own condition through abstract metaphors.

The linkages between the treatment of animals and the treatment of humans are also explored in Coetzee’s *Disgrace*, specifically in David Lurie’s treatment of women. His detached regard for animals and dark suggestive comments provide an insight into his relationship with other human beings. For example, when David is interacting with a dog, Bev Shaw inquires

into his interest in animals, to which he responds that since he eat animals, he must like “some parts” of them. It is interesting to note that David regards women with the same sort of detached compartmentalization as animals. When he describes his introduction to Soraya at the escort service, he mentions her listing under the “Exotic,” category—an overly simplified part of her that he finds alluring. His desire for Melanie is also marked with compartmentalizing language in the text, in which he often gazes on parts of her bodily ravishingly. He seems to fetishize her black hair, “almost Chinese cheekbones,” (11) her hips and breasts, down to the smallest drop of rain on her lips. One might argue that David likes parts of women in the same way that he likes parts of animals; interestingly enough, he also addresses himself as a womanizer very early on in the text.

The most troubling and unsettling characterization that David makes of Melanie is not of her body but of her name, often thinking of her as Melanie, “the dark one.” His pattern of sexual preference towards women of color carries with it a kind of white patriarchal overtone, one that is a part of his growing up with an ideology influenced by apartheid. From the very beginning we are told that David’s attitude about sex is one of control. We are told that he “has solved the problem of sex quite well” (1), reducing it to a kind of mechanism or calculation, in which he exerts a certain kind of mastery. Later, when David is brought in front of the university’s disciplinary hearing committee, he shows a disinterest in reading over Melanie’s statement, and merely accepts the charges against him. His colleagues interpret his behavior as “fundamentally evasive,” without showing any substantial remorse or guilt for his actions. Dr. Rassool, a professor and feminist woman of color, takes particular offense to David’s seeming nonchalance. Rather than handling the case as a matter of inappropriate student and faculty relations, Dr. Rassool sees this as an instance of political violations, or a kind of continued abuse

of a black female by a white man in their post-apartheid society. Indeed, David's seeming lack of guilt suggests that he is not considering the long and exploitative history of black females as objects of sexual violence, nor the ramifications of his actions. He only confesses to following an irresistible impulse, yet makes no mention of any abuse or harm inflicted upon Melanie. When asked to make a statement about the abuse, he refuses to write one of emotional guilt.

It is clear from his meeting with the committee that Lurie struggles to understand the dynamic of his relationship with Melanie. While he knows it is wrong in the perspective of student and teacher relations, he does not see his part as a kind of abuse. In the novel David asserts that his sexual relationship with Melanie "not quite rape, not quite that," but rather undesired on Melanie's part. He describes their sexual encounters and Melanie's response as follows: "As though she had decided to go slack, die within herself for the duration, like a rabbit when the jaws of the fox close on its neck."⁽⁶⁾ Again we see the comparison of the human to the animal, and in this case Lurie aligns himself as a predator and Melanie as his victim. It is interesting to note how sex and animality are aligned in this part of the text, especially when the sex can be read as a performance of power and control over another person. In thinking of Melanie as a rabbit, she becomes his prey. She is made animal-like, and therefore more vulnerable in his eyes. Given his disinterested opinion of animals, and only liking "parts" of them, it is easy to see how Lurie can justify his actions as "not quite rape," but perhaps merely using Melanie as he would any other animal. It is as if his relationship with Melanie represents a sort of performance of the human-animal hierarchy, in which the human not only feels superior to the animal, but also entitled to exploit it at his will.

After he is dismissed from the university for his conduct, David begins spending time on a farm with his daughter Lucy, an avid animal lover. When David and his daughter Lucy are

attacked by three black men, David muses that the decision to also shoot and kill her kenneled dogs is a response to the violence of apartheid, during which dogs were trained as attack dogs against black men and were seen as symbols of white power and oppression. In the eyes of the black men, these dogs still carried with them the memory of apartheid oppression and had to pay for the crimes of their keepers—an act of revenge and violence toward the animal, to symbolize vengeance against white oppression. In reference to his daughter Lucy's rape, David makes a similar remark stating that the violation of her body is a symbolical violent act—one in which her body is made into an object through which historical wrong doings can be avenged. It is as if Lucy's rape comes to symbolize a sort of compensation for the pain and torture of those victimized by her race. In this way, we can see that Lucy's rape and the killing of her dogs, is a complicated scene in that it reveals layers or intersectional oppression and violence. Animals are utilized in Apartheid violence in order to impose acts of human oppression on black peoples, and later, animals pay the price of human wrong-doing. Even after the violence towards animals is committed, it only perpetuates further acts of violence towards humans.

Highly regarded as Coetzee's most popular novel, *Waiting for the Barbarians* explores oppression, animality and othering specifically through acts of torture. In this novel, the reader has an insight into the perspective of the colonial side, through the character of the Magistrate and looks deeply into the relationship between oppressor and oppressed. Additionally, this novel lays out the foundation for understanding human thinking in relationship to animals as a way to inflict violence and oppression on other human groups. The justification to torture the Barbarians in this novel is made by an othering of this human group that entirely relies on comparisons to animals. In this way, *Waiting for the Barbarians* provides an insight into how the human hierarchy has been historically relied upon and enforced in human history to commit atrocity.

When the barbarian prisoners are first brought back to the town to be detained until Colonel Joll returns, the narrator says that he and the men who work for him “stand watching them eat as though they are strange animals” (18). The barbarians are kept in a yard and locked in by a gate as if they were animals in a zoo. They are described as having habits that are “frank and filthy” (18), many of the prisoners becoming ill from the unclean environment, and being fed by the prison staff who “toss them their food from the doorway as if they were indeed animals” (19). The imperial officials attempt to handle the issue of the barbarians whom they deem a threat to the empire with the use of torture and military excursions. The likening of these so-called Barbarian people to animals illustrates one way in which the normative human-animal hierarchy is put into practice. By likening these humans to animals, the imperial officials feel a sense of superiority and authority to dominate over them. In this way, we can see how comparisons of animality in Coetzee’s work are used to justify atrocity. The Magistrate is no less guilty of this practice of othering as we see on page fifty-two, “Do I really look forward to the triumph of the barbarian way: intellectual torpor, slovenliness, tolerance of disease and death?” (52) While his actions towards the barbarians are far more passive than his countrymen, his attitude towards the Barbarians is no less still steeped in othering and stereotyping.

The use of animals as a tool for othering can be seen in his relationship with the barbarian woman. There is a strange relationship in which the magistrate shows both strange empathy, and struggles with an internal desire to dominate her. The magistrate is fascinated by the barbarian girl’s scarring—her “othering” physical deformity—and attempts to better understand her by interpreting these marks. In this way, the magistrate takes on the role of torturer, although not physically, to interrogate the girl into giving up her story. His othering of her forces her to relive her torture, nevertheless he feels compelled to do so, stating “it has been growing more and more

clear to me that until the marks on this girl's body are deciphered and understood I cannot let go of her" (31).

Furthermore, there are several moments over the course of their relationship in which the barbarian girl is likened to an animal as a means of othering. When the magistrate takes in an orphaned fox, he jokingly tells the barbarian girl "People will say I kept two wild animals in my rooms, a fox cub and a girl" (34). While the magistrates feelings of empathy toward the girl throughout the novel, moments such as these reveal the deep seeded propensity for humans to liken other humans to animals as a means of asserting control over them. The magistrates likening the Barbarian girl a wild animal seems to suggest that she is a sort of pet figure in his life, keeping him company, or perhaps a wild animal in captivity.

It is unclear whether or not the magistrate feels curiosity for the girl out of empathy, or rather, if he is taken with her due to a deep desire to dominate her. There are moments in which he caresses the girl, much like one would a pet, and it seems as though her presence gives him comfort. However, in their relationship there is a constant struggle of power, a dynamic between the oppressor and oppressed, or a master and a slave. Throughout the novel, the magistrate seems to be in conflict with his desire to care for her, and his desire to obliterate her, as seen in the line, "the girl lies in my bed, but there is no good reason why it should be a bed. I behave in some ways like a lover—I undress her, I bathe her, I stroke her, I sleep beside her—but I might equally well tie her to a chair and beat her" (46). The magistrates conflicted thoughts of the barbarian girl derive from a colonial mind-set as a member of the Empire that influences his behavior. In this manner, his internalization of colonial attitudes ultimately leads him to treat and think about the barbarian woman as his inferior. However, by taking in and caring for this girl, the magistrate seems to show a desire to undo some of the atrocity that the empire has inflicted upon

her, and the barbarians like her. Yet on the other hand, throughout the novel, the magistrate becomes fascinated with the practice of torture and the existence of evil. As such, the barbarian girl figures into his contemplations on his relationship to his society, its evils, and its issues of passivity. He states, “he is, at his age, increasingly concerned about what makes life worth living, about how and if one can resist torture or evil or complicity with evil.” In this way, we see the magistrate questioning the views upheld by the imperial culture and in particular the acts of torture.

The magistrate later decides to return the girl to her tribe, an act of sympathy that the magistrate is made to pay for at the hands of the Empire. The magistrate suffers confinement, humiliation, and ultimately torture for his sympathizing with the Barbarians. At the novels beginning, he was a loyal member of the empire and the imperial culture, but by the end he has undergone a kind of othering. In documenting his torture, the magistrate utilizes animal analogies to describe the humiliation and dehumanization he endures:

“I, the old clown who lost his last vestige of authority the day he spent hanging from a tree in a woman's underclothes shouting for help, the filthy creature who for a week licked his food off the flagstones like a dog [...] I live like a starved beast at the back door, kept alive perhaps only as evidence of the animal that skulks within every barbarian-lover.” (124)

The magistrate recounts his submission to torture, saying that his torturers aim to demonstrate “what it mean[s] to live in a body, as a body”, and thus to show him “the meaning of humanity.” In this case, the meaning of humanity resides in the ability to have it stripped away by others, that acts of violence and humiliation can reduce you to something less than human. This passage is particularly telling in that it accounts for multiple intersections of othering. The reference to

being dressed in woman's underclothes shows how women are another human group deemed to be inferior in this society. The passage underscores the pattern of domination and othering of all who are deemed uncivilized from the perspective of patriarchal imperial authority: women, feminized men, barbarian tribes, and animals. By making an example of the magistrate in this passage, the novel reveals how acts of violence and humiliation are not only justified by othering, but also normalized by society.

In *Waiting for the Barbarians*, what differs significantly from themes in later Coetzee fictions is the unshaken belief that animal existence is one that is inferior to human existence, and additionally, that humans can be reduced to an animal state by means of violence. The novel measures the value human life in relation to animal life, weighing humanity with greater value. Animality is merely the state of being that remains after humanity has been destroyed by torture and humiliation. In the later works, such as *Disgrace* and *Elizabeth Costello*, Coetzee challenges the position of the human in relation to the animal. *Elizabeth Costello* specifically is interested in the concept of bodily being, but unlike *Waiting for the Barbarians*, does not reduce bodily being to an animal condition. Rather, it is a universal condition of being in the body, and the foregoing of abstract philosophical thinking. Animality is a condition that we are introduced to in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, but do not fully experience until reading Coetzee's later works. In this way, *Waiting for the Barbarians* provides the foundation on which to build a better understanding of the human-animal relationship.

Coetzee's imagination works to discern the relationships human beings establish with the non-human world and to understand and evaluate humanity in terms of these relationships. Animal being—the living presence of the animal in the periphery of our lives, as well as the animal within us—is a major concern in many of his texts. His fiction is rich with animal

imagery and references in a way that recognizes the animal as a significant presence in the structuring of human society—how we position ourselves in the world, and how we relate to one another, particularly in analyzing acts of violence. In this way Coetzee's works serve as a sort of post-colonial/ post-apartheid critique of the world to advocate for non-human animal oriented ethics. His works can be thought of as a long stream of critique against modern political regimes and how they are able to dominate other beings—both human and non-human.