

“‘Your stay must be a becoming’: Ageing and Desire in  
J.M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace*”

*Billy Gray, Luleå Technical University*

You think it horrible that lust and rage  
Should dance attendance upon my old age;  
They were not such a plague when I was young;  
What else have I to spur me into song?  
— W.B. Yeats, “The Spur”, 1939

In a letter to Freud, dated May 20<sup>th</sup>, 1927, Andrea Salomé makes an intriguing comment about her own experience of old age as a woman:

I had feared that old age might set in too late [. . .] and that in this way I might be cheated of what old age specifically has to offer. Fortunately, I was able to capture something of it. And certainly, it did bring happiness – indeed, if I had to choose between the two phases of life, I am truly not sure on which my choice would fall. For when one leaves erotic experience in the narrower sense, one is at the same time leaving a cul-de-sac, however marvellous it may be, where there is only room for two abreast; and one now enters upon a vast expanse. (Woodward 1991: 203)

Salomé’s description of old age as an opportunity to embrace both emotional equanimity and a fulfilling sense of detachment from the vicissitudes of sexual desire, has been echoed by other female writers such as Jean Rhys, Doris Lessing and Germaine Greer.<sup>1</sup> They suggest that, as sexual desire allegedly assumes decreasing importance during the later stages of life, it therefore becomes possible for interpersonal

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<sup>1</sup> For a brief synopsis of Jean Rhys’s view of ageing see Roland Blythe’s *The View in Winter* (1979). Lessing’s view on ageing and desire can be found in “‘Lucky the culture where the old can talk to the young and young can talk to the old’: In Conversation with Doris Lessing” (2004) by Billy Gray. Germaine Greer’s perspective on this theme is outlined in her essay “Serenity and Power”, contained in *The Other within Us: Feminist Explorations of Women and Ageing* (1997).

relationships to acquire a depth of understanding which the earlier, more egocentric sex drive would have prevented. This implies that the shedding of one's sexuality can be viewed as a liberating and empowering experience, thereby representing an opportunity to renegotiate our identities as sexual beings. Ideally, therefore, the optimum course for people who enter the first stages of physical decline is to move from physique-based values to "wisdom" based-values, in terms of their self-definition and behaviour.

It is interesting however, that although an increasing number of contemporary middle-aged and ageing writers have situated middle-aged and elderly characters at the centre of their fiction, remarkably few have created male characters who, in the words of J. Middleton Murry, "acquiesce gracefully in the beginning of the declining curve" (qtd. in Blythe 1979: 30). Margaret Gullette has claimed that, in literature as well as in life, many men "attempt to preserve something of the atmosphere of the stag night well into middle age" (1997: 15). She notes how, at the risk of incurring mockery and disgust, many elderly male protagonists flirt with attractive female characters and often visit prostitutes in order to prove both to themselves and the surrounding society, that their sexual potency remains undiminished. For many of these fictional creations, masculinity and sexual identity are intimately linked to their personal sense of identity. They seemingly envisage the ageing process as a threat, not only to their psychological health, but also their concept of self worth. This would partly validate Andy Metcalf's belief that "the hold sex has for men arises from the fact that sex is linked with motives and forces other than the need for sexual satisfaction" (1985: v).

J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*, his eighth novel, engages with the issue of the ageing male in a manner that both consolidates and challenges the aforementioned depiction of the ageing process and how it impacts on traditional perceptions of masculinity. Situated in a post-apartheid South Africa, where brutal tyranny has been replaced by brutal chaos, *Disgrace* represents a significant contribution to the theme of ageing and desire. The text which suggestively abandons the parodic, deconstructive complexities of Coetzee's early fiction, investigates how David Lurie, the main protagonist, openly grapples with a profound sense of anomie, triggered by his overwhelming fear of the ageing process. Although Coetzee is best known for his frequent portrayal of the debilitating effects of colonial power on the individual psyche, in *Disgrace*

oppression is represented more by the enforced internalisation of negative cultural stereotypes in regard to ageing, than by the profound changes taking place in the political landscape of the “new” South Africa. He depicts how David Lurie’s life journey, his *becoming*, involves a movement away from frantic, ill-chosen sexual liaisons and a resistance to change, towards not only an acceptance of the inevitability of the ageing process, but also the transmutation of sexual desire into expressions of artistic creativity. This article attempts to chart the most salient features of this “progress narrative” that is, from Lurie’s initial habit of conflating real or imagined losses—an inclination which, according to Antonio Gramsci, undermines “the optimism of the will” (qtd. in Gullette 1997: 8)—to his increasing awareness that there exists in later life, “a fundamental condition of possibility” (Hepworth 2000: 30). It is necessary to begin however, by positioning Coetzee’s text within the historical, cultural and literary context of similar writings on the theme of ageing and sexual desire in order to assess the value of his contribution to a topic that has stimulated, not only remarkably strong opinions, but also avowedly ageist attitudes.

Not yet fifty-five, the philosopher Jean Améry, who had survived internment in a German concentration camp during World War Two, wrote: “The terror of my experiences at Auschwitz have been, incredible to say, less filled with internal horror and anguish than the experience of ageing” (qtd. in Gullette 1997: 7). While Améry’s reaction to the experience of ageing is notable for its tone of unreserved nihilism, it corresponds closely to cultural perspectives commented upon by writers such as Simone de Beauvoir, who has noted how in Western society, old age has been, and indeed continues to be, “a kind of shameful secret that it is unseemly to mention” (1996: 1). It can be stated without reservation that both old age and symbolic representations of the ageing body have been imbued with negative connotations throughout the history of Western civilisation. Kathleen Woodward has described old age as being “one of the discontents of our civilisation”, which has traditionally been subjected to our society’s predilection for dichotomising subjective reality, i.e., body/soul, culture/nature, etc. In terms of the experience of ageing, it has frequently been defined in terms of “splitting”: “Youth, represented by a youthful body is good: old age, represented by the ageing body, is bad” (Woodward 1991: 7). This penchant for partitioning the life cycle into two mutually antagonistic categories, together with the

implication that old age reflects not only physical but also moral decay, has inevitably led the ageing process to be viewed with great trepidation. It has frequently been perceived as embodying negative changes to one's identity and self-image, to one's physical appearance and to one's ability to exercise control over the immediate environment. Not only have signs of ageing been invariably equated with bodily betrayal and actual or incipient frailty, they are, at least in modern secular society, experienced as connected to the inevitable, feared encounter with the boundary between life and death. The frequent lack of ambiguity in social representations of ageing and the relative paucity of their elaboration or differentiation are aptly exemplified by the views of Juvenal, who claimed that "Young people vary a lot [. . .] but the old are all like" (qtd. in Magnan 1984: 22). Given that an individual's ageing experience is determined directly by the cultural context in which that person ages, it is inevitable that negative social attitudes towards ageing are internalised to the degree that the powerful and universal experience of ageing is frequently met with an overwhelming sense of denial. In this respect our fear of ageing is similar to our dread of personal extinction, in that it is a reality we wish to retain as an "abstract conception" for as long as humanly possible. Inevitably, such denial is one reason why, as Roland Blythe has pointed out, "The inescapability of old age is now secretly for many, the new predicament" (1979: 19).

One of the most feared consequences of ageing is the supposed diminution of sexual desire. Since the establishment of western society's ideological precepts, primarily rooted in Platonic philosophy, the belief has been widespread that ageing automatically involves the erasure of sensual and sexual pleasure: Hubert C. Corey has commented that, regarding western perceptions of old age and its relationship to physical passion, sexuality "has been perceived with not a trace of ambiguity [. . .] On the contrary, it has been a topic of some fairly strong opinions and ageist attitudes" (1991: 110). Such convictions have encouraged the belief that sexual desire in elderly persons is unnatural and immoral. There is a general image of old people as being infertile in all aspects of life, a phenomenon that is a manifestation of the claim that the aged are devoid of sexual needs. The belief that sexuality automatically "withers away" has long since been turned into the quite unfounded assumption that with age, we naturally become asexual. This widespread opinion has been commented upon by John Cowper Powys who, at the age of

seventy, wrote “How well old people come to know that peculiar look of suppressed disgust which their obstinate concentration on some restricted sensual pleasure excites in the feverish idealism of the young” (qtd. in Blythe 1979: 13). There is a great deal of evidence which suggests that the general belief that sensual pleasure remains the exclusive domain of the young, has condemned many elderly people to feelings of sexual repression, frustration and loneliness. In a culture which either forbids or denies the reality of sexual desire in the aged, those who are unable to conform to the ramifications of such conventional views are seen as pitiful or “unnatural”. In the words of one commentator, this is why many elderly people “have been condemned to live half lives” (Blythe 1979: 103).

In fact as Roland Blythe has noted in his seminal book *The View in Winter*, “old age is not an emancipation from desire for most of us: that is a large part of its tragedy” (1979: 16). Montaigne confirmed the difficulty in renouncing sexual desire during the latter stages of life when he observed that “our desires incessantly grow young again; we are always beginning again to live [. . .] we have one foot in the grave and yet our appetites and pursuits spring up every day” (qtd. in Blythe 1979: 21). It is hardly surprising therefore that the aged, in addition to being what geriatric psychologists have termed “wounded in their narcissism” (Blythe 1979: 17) by the natural effects of the ageing process, view the assumption that they should renounce sexual desire as being an additional, gratuitous, insult to their sense of identity.

It is also regrettable that, given literature's role as a cultural artefact which encodes a culture's dominant values, attitudes and prejudices, it has also frequently been culpable of endorsing negative perceptions of ageing and sexual desire. Throughout literary history there has been virtual unanimity in rejecting the sexuality of the aged. Robert Magnan's critical examination of medieval literature has shown how the expression of any form of sexual desire in the aged was frowned upon, partly because of the dogma that intercourse should serve only for reproductive purposes and also due to the cult of youth and beauty in courtly love (1984). In literary texts from this period, age is frequently set in opposition to love and desire, both of which were believed to be the exclusive domain of the younger population. Noting that expressions of this attitude abound in medieval literature, Magnan mentions that it is not only the misalliance between the different generations that brings

reproach upon older people; rather, any manner of sexual activity on behalf of the aged is treated with suspicion. Philip de Novare, for example, once memorably warned against the marriage of two “old” people—that is, over 60 years of age—because “two things rotting in one bed is not at all proper (qtd. in Magnan 1984: 28); and a popular French pamphlet, published in 1873, noted that “like our hair, our desires should wither” (qtd. in Magnan 1984: 14). Such perspectives were also endemic in eighteenth and nineteenth century literary texts which, when they deigned to discuss the subject of ageing and sexual desire at all, frequently pointed to the apparent inevitability of suffering from what could be interpreted as “a lamed eros”. This view gained credence from the widely held conviction that the incapacities of old age were precipitated by a decline in hormone levels. Indeed, so pervasive was this assumption that it was as late as 1934 that William Butler Yeats underwent his infamous “monkey gland” operation designed to resurrect his failing libido. As Blythe has cogently pointed out, even in relatively contemporary literary accounts of sexuality and ageing, there is much “which is scandalously similar to that which governed nineteenth century attempts to solve the intractable problem of the poor” (1979: 19).

However, the last three decades or so have witnessed the proliferation of literary texts dealing, in a more considered and nuanced manner than formerly, with an issue that has, due to demographic trends, assumed a greater visibility within popular culture. This period has witnessed two specific and noteworthy changes in terms of literature and the theme of ageing; on the one hand, as Mike Hepworth has pointed out, older characters have more frequently been moved by their authors from a marginal position in fiction to one of centre stage (2000: 12); equally, there has been a proliferation of texts in which such characters begin to comprehend that an individual’s experience of ageing and sexuality is directly determined by cultural circumstances. This new type of fiction, which has dealt almost exclusively with ageing female characters, is called the *Reifungsroman*, or “the novel of ripening”.<sup>2</sup> It rejects negative cultural stereotypes about ageing and sexuality and produces alternative

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<sup>2</sup> For an analysis of the *Reifungsroman* literary subgenre, see Barbara Frey Waxman’s *From the Hearth to the Open Road: A Feminist Study of Ageing in Contemporary Literature* (1990).

“progress narratives”, which assert that society’s problem orientated approach to ageing is both prejudicial and counterproductive. One of the psychological, ethical and cultural functions of women’s alternative progress fiction is to redefine experience during mid and later life to include the concept of self-rescue. It confronts the social forces which structure perceptions of ageing as decline and attempts to examine and undermine the “chain of signifiers” that marginalise the ageing woman to the point of symbolic invisibility. These texts recognise that the ageing process is an interactive experience between body, self and society and create female characters who adopt oppositional strategies towards the cultural forces that impose images of decline. This renegotiation is closely connected to a situation which forces women at a noticeably earlier stage than men to challenge society’s prejudiced conception of the ageing body. Given that external signs of ageing are frequently remarked upon earlier in their life course, women are often presented with an opportunity to re-evaluate their sense of self at a comparatively early stage. In this regard, they are afforded the opportunity to view the ageing process as a corroboration of both personal and social growth and may even concur with Gullette’s view that “ageing can feel like a cure” (1988: xxv).

It is unfortunately the case that men have had fewer and weaker messages of this kind addressed to them. Within the cultural sphere there exists, even today, remarkably little ethnography of male ageing and a scarcity of first-hand reports from men regarding its effects on their concept of identity. Research that has focused on the issue has been characterised by its precariousness, partly because the analysis of the cultural construction of later life has often focused on women, and also because of the existence of a greater number of elderly women than men. Within the field of literature, we have not witnessed the emergence of a large number of texts which fruitfully engage with the experience of male ageing in a manner equivalent to that of the *Reifungsroman*. Those that have done so have largely focused upon the experience of decline, failure and loss. Leslie A. Fiedler has identified how, in various traditional folk narratives, ageing frequently relegates men to a position of status inferiority, a condition they reject by attempting to recoup their sexual potency (1986: 40). This is done with the aid of magical powers as these supernatural forces are thought to enhance their potency and even help them seduce younger partners. In a variation of this recurrent

storyline, which originates with an evocation of impotency in old age, the subsequent events reflect a wish fulfilment fantasy of restoring youth and genital vigour with a secret potion. The narrative ultimately lapses into a nightmare scenario when the miraculous recovery turns out to have been a hoax or a diabolical trap.

Many of the elements woven into this seemingly archetypal tale—such as the seduction of a younger female by an ageing man, the terror of physical entropy and the attendant fear of a loss in sexual possibilities—are all embedded, as central thematic concerns, in Coetzee's *Disgrace*. David Lurie is a fifty-two-year-old Professor at the Technical University of Cape Town. An ageing scholar with a specialist interest in the Romantic Poets, he is reduced to teaching introductory courses in “communications” as the university has changed its emphasis from liberal arts to that of technical education. He has a brief affair with Melanie Isaacs, one of his female students, and when the relationship is brought to the attention of the university authorities, Lurie is asked to make a public apology and enter into counselling if he wishes to save his career. Believing himself to be scapegoated by the forces of political correctness, he pleads guilty to charges of sexual harassment but refuses to issue a public apology. Leaving the university in a state of disgrace, Lurie visits his lesbian daughter Lucy, who lives alone on a small holding in the Eastern Cape. Carving out a living on a subsistence-level income, Lucy, in order to raise additional funds, also sells flowers and vegetables at a local market in co-operation with her black neighbour, Petrus. On an otherwise calm and uneventful day, the farm is infiltrated by three coloured men who, after simulating a need for assistance, attack Lurie and his daughter. They proceed to both set him on fire and lock him in the bathroom while they repeatedly rape Lucy. The remainder of the novel concerns Lurie's and his daughter's attempt to come to terms with the calamitous nature of these shocking events.

Although the novel reflects upon the post-apartheid society in South Africa and its carefully juxtaposed trials and enquiries constitute a compelling debate over confessional and legal versions of ethics, *Disgrace* principally engages with what Coetzee himself has claimed to be the central theme of his work; the creation of characters who are capable of “slipping their chains and turning their faces to the light” (Attwell 1992: 341). In order to embark upon such a process of self-discovery, David Lurie must first acknowledge his internalisation of the

common belief that ageing, of necessity, involves a movement into a constricted mode of living. His habit of conflating losses has produced profound feelings of alienation, a condition compounded by a recognition that his powers of sexual attraction are waning. When reflecting back upon a period of many years duration in which he enjoyed various sexual conquests, he remembers how:

If he looked at a woman in a certain way, with a certain intent, she would return his look, he could rely on that. That was how he lived; for years, for decades, that was the backbone of his life.

The one day, it all ended. Without warning his powers fled. Glances that once would have responded to his slid over, past, through him. If he wanted a woman he had to learn to pursue her; often in one way or another, to buy her. (1999: 9)

Remarking that “who would have thought it would have come to an end so soon and so suddenly: the roving, the loving” (1999: 120), this abrupt sense of sudden invisibility precipitates an emotional crisis, culminating in an ill-fated affair with a young female student. Seemingly unaware of his ulterior motives and drawing upon a somewhat skewed reading of Byron’s poetry, Lurie legitimises his sexual relationship with Melanie Isaacs by suggesting that “my case rests on the rights of desire” (1999: 89). When called upon to explain his brazen breach of professional ethics, he comments that, when embarking upon the affair “I was no longer a fifty year old divorcee at a loose end. I became a servant of Eros” (1999: 52). Perceiving himself as symbolising an honourable bastion of liberal opinions resisting the malign influence of political correctness, he legitimises his behaviour by suggesting that it represents “a last leap of the flame before it goes out” (1999: 27). Lurie’s conviction that his future will consist of an unremittingly bleak old age devoid of sensual delights is augmented by an additional event that undermines his sexual confidence; Soraya, the prostitute he patronises on a weekly basis and for whom he has begun buying gifts, suddenly stops receiving him. Offended by her unexpected indifference, Lurie imagines both her and her colleagues shuddering over him “as one shudders at a cockroach in a washbasin in the middle of the night” (1999: 7), and wonders if he can ask his doctor to castrate him as one neuters a domestic animal. Certainly, by this stage of the novel, one is left in no doubt of the intended irony underlying the opening sentence of the text where Coetzee writes, “For a man of his age, fifty-two, divorced, he has,

to his mind, solved the problem of sex rather well” (1999: 1). The use of the words “to his mind”, in conjunction with Lurie’s identification of sexual desire as representing a “problem”, suggests a man who is moving from a stable sense of self into a condition of crisis. Coetzee skilfully endorses this belief by linking Lurie’s increasing sense of personal crisis to the painful realignment in the political landscape of South Africa. Lurie’s coloured neighbour Petrus, finds himself in the same life-phase as Lucy’s father, yet there is a notable contrast in the manner in which they confront the experience of ageing. The portrayal of Petrus as the embodiment of fertility—indeed, one of his wives has just given birth to a new baby—symbolises the increasing vitality of the previously oppressed black majority. This confidence is deliberately contrasted to the situation facing the white minority, who are unsuccessfully clinging to the last vestiges of colonial rule. The relationship between sexual potency and political power is made clear in the scene where Petrus is presented, by Lucy, with a bedcover as a gift; a keepsake that undoubtedly resonates with symbolic significance.

Lurie’s insistence on perceiving the relationship between ageing and sexuality as being an inherently problematic one is partly attributable to his unquestioning acceptance of the negative and stereotypical views that proliferate around the issue of ageing. Stating that “After a certain age, one is no longer appealing and that’s that” (1999: 67), his projection of a veritable litany of dismal and pathetic images concerning the elderly is symptomatic of his belief that the ageing process is reducible to the experience of ineluctable physical and mental decline. Convinced that “Soon, maliciously he will be shuddered over” (1999: 7), he sees himself “white haired, stooped, shuffling to the corner-shop to buy his half-litre of milk and half-loaf of bread; he sees himself sitting blankly at a desk in a room full of yellowing papers, waiting for the afternoon to peter out so that he can cook his evening meal and go to bed” (1999: 107). It is both interesting and revealing that Lurie’s belief that old age consists of “being without hopes, without desires, indifferent to the future” (1999: 52) is based on an intimation of the condition of ageing rather than an actual experience. He is comparatively young—barely fifty-two-years-old—yet his sense of dread reflects a development that is noteworthy from a historical perspective; that is, his angst reflects the comparatively recent phenomenon whereby ageing-as-inward-anxiety has become a quintessentially midlife problem. In this respect, age ideology could be

said to have moved the “problem” of ageing backwards, from old age into the middle years. In fact, many psychoanalysts, psychiatrists and other researchers working with clinical data often view a so-called “middle-age” crisis as a developmental inevitability. According to the psychoanalyst Eliot Jacques (1965), this development is hardly surprising given that at the midpoint of our lives our fears of decline and death reach crisis proportions, partly due to the clear evidence of physiological changes in our bodies. Michael P. Farrell and Stanley D. Rosenberg claim that men entering middle age confront a common range of alterations which predispose them to undergo a crisis (1981: 85-86). They argue that a gradual accumulation of life problems and role transitions ultimately lead a man to experience himself as having become middle-aged. These alterations, in tandem with the acknowledgement that their relation to self and social environment tends to become increasingly problematic, predisposes many men to undergo a crisis. Within a literary context, Margaret Gullette has noted how, at the beginning of the last century, literature began to create a host of ageing male characters, the most striking and canonical of which experienced the ageing process as signifying unexpectedly rapid and absolutely irreversible, physical and mental decline. Arguing that although such texts are often plausible in their depiction of male fears about ageing, she contends that what is being constructed in these novels is “a midlife crisis, but without resolution to follow”. Gullette states that:

In the middle-class novels, male midlife disabilities are petty but telling. In other words, a reader can find the symbolism ludicrous and nevertheless conclude that the midlife is drearily predictable and his own physique deteriorating. And he may share the conclusion I have many times heard men say and never understood: “Downhill all the way”. (1997: 53)

In a humorous aside, Gullette suggests that many such male characters appear to be suffering from the vicissitudes of a condition affectionately known as M.A.A.D, an acronym for “Middle Aged and Downhill” (1997: 16).

One manifestation of a typical male midlife crisis frequently commented upon and which is identifiable as an important component of David Lurie’s personality is a tendency to indulge in what has been termed as “untheorized nostalgia”. In Lurie’s case, the immersion in “anxiety-producing, masochistic, life-course nostalgia” (Gullette 1997:

56) is determined by two overriding factors; the centrality of the body to his past sense of identity, and also the burden of what Cowper Task, in 1784, referred to as “Memory’s pointing wand / that calls the past to our exact review” (qtd. in Butler 1968: 486). Of course, in general terms the ageing body is never just a physical entity subjected to the imperatives of cellular and organic decay; rather, it is continually being inscribed with cultural perspectives that equate the ageing body with deterioration, while its youthful equivalent is suggestive of energy, vigour and grace. For Lurie ageing equals decline, and decline is primarily judged from the external signs of ageing. As a younger man, his physical attractiveness encouraged him to view his body as “the bedrock of the real” and this, together with a mental image of his remembered body in the past, makes him nostalgic for a time when his sexuality was most active. As A.L. Vischer rightly points out: “It is difficult to renounce a thing when we know its value [. . .] and our memory of it does not fade but even calls for repetition” (qtd. in Blythe 1979: 19). This echoes Lurie’s belief that nostalgia for a time of personal sexual fulfilment, allied with a realisation that one’s ageing body precludes the possibility of indulging in such pleasures, is truly one of the greatest tragedies of the ageing process: “Yet the old man whose company he seems to be on the point of joining. – all of them were once upon a time children of God, with straight limbs and clear eyes. Can they be blamed for clinging to the last of their places at the sweet banquet of the senses?” (1999: 24).

These “old men”, as Lurie refers to them, seem, like Lurie himself, to have their point of reference in the past—in the experience of young minds and bodies—and this overwhelming sense of desperation and nostalgia makes them resistant to the whole concept of change. For the greater part of the narrative, Lurie instinctively equates change with decline and seems oblivious to the idea that life can be a set of acquisitions, an active process that includes flexibility and growth. Although he is aware that he is living in a political world that is uncomfortably in transition—at one point he confides that “It is a new world they live in, he and Lucy and Petrus” (1999: 119) —, he continues to insist that “His temperament is not going to change; he is too old for that” (1999: 2). His inability to view identity as fluid rather than a static collection of clearly compartmentalised roles makes him reluctant to accept the inevitability of time passing.

Nevertheless, several factors coalesce which oblige Lurie to recognise the importance of coming to terms with his ageing body and realise that his acute sense of stagnation and depression can be transformed into an acceptance of what is, after all, a natural phenomenon. The horrific rape of his daughter, together with the shocking experience of having his body badly burned by the intruders, pushes Lurie into a hitherto unprecedented period of self-reflection. A reassessment of his role as a father in the face of an inability, not only to protect his daughter from physical harm, but also to persuade her to terminate her subsequent pregnancy, provides a forceful momentum for his acceptance of loss. The recognition of what he no longer has—his career, his parental role and, most importantly, his youthful self—leads to a period of mourning. That his phase is superseded by a sense of acceptance is partly due to his relationship with Bev, a married friend of Lucy's, who works in the local area as a moderately qualified, voluntary veterinarian. Bev not only encourages him to show sympathy and respect for what are essentially abandoned, mistreated or simply dying animals, she also, by engaging in a brief physical relationship with Lurie, forces him to confront his conflicted sexual desire. Although he finds Bev remarkably unfeminine, Lurie, principally at her instigation, embarks upon the affair as a *rite de passage*. After their first sexual contact is over, Lurie interprets the experience as symbolising a form of initiation: "let me not forget this day, he tells himself, lying beside her when they are spent. After the sweet young flesh of Melanie Isaacs, this is what I have come to. This is what I will have to get used to, this and even less than this" (1999: 177). The relationship rapidly becomes a platonic one as Lurie learns to value Bev for her qualities of endurance and perception, rather than viewing her as an—admittedly to Lurie's eyes, somewhat unattractive—sexual object. Equally, it is through his friendship with Bev and his admiration for her ability to offer solace to maimed and sick animals that Lurie comes into daily contact with the inescapable reality of death. His transition from a position of scepticism regarding the value of providing emotional support to dying animals, to a conviction that such animals should not face extinction unaccompanied, is indicative of a growing need to confront the reality of his own inevitable demise.

A consequence of Lurie's willingness to confront the ever-present spectre of non-existence, together with his insight that ageing involves

not only decline but also a sense of “value-added”, is quite remarkably, a period of unforeseen yet intense creativity. It is true that the idea of converting profound experiences into a form of artistic expression is hardly new: when asked to reveal what constituted the original impetus behind one of his literary works, Proust retorted “I had to recapture from the shade that which I felt, to reconvert it into the psychic equivalent. But the way to do it, the only way I could see [. . .] was to create a work of art” (qtd. in Woodward 1985: 9). Although in Lurie’s case he has previously published two somewhat insubstantial critical texts on the Romantic Poets, he has long toyed with the idea of writing music. This idea had crystallised around the form of a chamber opera, incorporating a meditation on love between the sexes. As first conceived, the opera had as its thematic core Lord Byron and his mistress the Contessa Guiccioli, together with Byron’s lover, Teresa. In its original form, the work engaged with an articulation of the perennial topics of love and death, with the focus upon a passionate young woman and a once passionate but now less than infatuated older man. Nevertheless, despite this interesting blueprint, Lurie concedes that “the project had failed to engage the core of him”. However, his increasingly successful negotiation with the ageing process, leads him to return to the chamber play and it is revealing how the ageing process has come to assume a central role in its revamped construction. No longer fixated upon Teresa as an energetic young lover, Lurie wonders if “an older Teresa will engage his heart as his heart is now?” (1999: 197). It is noticeable that the “new” Teresa has lost the attribute of physical beauty: “The passage of time has not treated Teresa kindly. With her heavy bust, her stocky trunk, her abbreviated legs, she looks more like a peasant than an aristocrat” (1999: 198). Yet evidently Lurie finds this creation of an ageing woman much more compelling than the younger, more physically attractive incarnation. So much so in fact, that he feels “he can now put himself in the role of giving voice to a woman” (1999: 200). The successful and rapid completion of the chamber opera symbolises a creative resolution of the imaginative mind, the genesis of which originates in Lurie’s acceptance of the ageing process in all its multifarious forms. This interpretation is given credence in the final scene of the novel, in which we glimpse Lurie walking contemplatively towards his daughter’s farm. He admits that he “lacks the virtues of the old: equanimity, kindness, patience. But perhaps these virtues will come as other virtues go: the virtue of passion for

instance. He must have a look again at Victor Hugo, poet of grandfatherhood. There may be things to learn" (1999: 210).

Lurie appears ready to embark upon a new phase of life, one that perhaps will be characterised by the acknowledgment that change underpins all experience and that to be old is not necessarily to be "pre-death". Desire for Lurie has moved from a fixation on sexuality to a desire to create a work of art that reflects his new state of being. His success in transforming his troubling sexual desire into a creative form of artistic expression represents not only a resolution of his midlife crisis but also the acceptance of future possibilities. He views the completion of his chamber opera as a gift and "like a flower blooming in his breast, his heart floods with thankfulness" (1999: 201).

It could be argued therefore that *Disgrace* constitutes that rare phenomenon within the literary canon; a *Reifungsroman* or "novel of ripening" featuring a central male protagonist. David Lurie's fear of ageing has driven him to dwell upon what he perceives to be his implacable deterioration, an attitude of despair which ultimately leads to a form of retirement from life. Thankfully, rather than experiencing a diminution of creative potential his subsequent wealth of creative possibilities serves as a refutation of the common belief that the latter stages of life necessarily involve, in Cowper Task's words, "dropping buckets into empty wells / And growing old in drawing nothing up" (qtd. in Blythe 1979: 283). One of the most notable achievements of Coetzee's novel is to oppose the major discourse of western culture which rarely presents the topic of male ageing in terms of creativity in later life. If it is true, as Irma Kurtz has claimed, that "age throws a shabby cloak over all women" (2004: 5), the same fate has surely befallen many men. Although the consumerist system whose values we imbibe clearly exploits gender differences, it is not primarily concerned with the biological sex it utilises. If the starting point of critical elaboration is the consciousness of oneself as being a product of a historical process, it is vital that men identify the infinity of traces which ageist cultural ideas have impacted upon their sense of self. This is why, as theorist R.W. Connell has mentioned, understanding the ageing process is of utmost importance to men: "Age is crucial. If they can get you to 'feel your age'—to feel over-the-hill and wistful about youth because you think youth equals true masculinity—,you are theirs" (qtd. in Gullette 1997: 143). If, as Irma Kurtz suggests, "a long, long time must pass before you

reach a harbour to call home” (2004: 8), *Disgrace* at least holds out the possibility of navigating a course towards the shore of acceptance.

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