

Högskolan Dalarna  
Degree Thesis (ENC2004)  
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**“A Higher Life”**  
A Postcolonialist Analysis of Coetzee’s *Disgrace*

Autumn, 2008  
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## Introduction

*The black man wants to be white.  
The white man slaves to reach  
a human level.*

Frantz Fanon (*Black Skin, White Masks* 9)

J M Coetzee's *Disgrace* deals with race and power in contemporary, post-colonial South Africa. This prize-winning novel is written after the country's first all-race elections, in 1994. It has therefore most often been analyzed as a representative for the writing of the *new* South Africa, where the social problems relating binary oppositions such as black – white, native – immigrant, powerless – powerful, are stressed. More specifically the shift of power within the above mentioned pairs is in focus. This is also the case for this essay, but instead of analyzing the realistic elements in the book it will examine the imaginary complexity of the opera *Byron in Italy*, which is created by the protagonist, David Lurie. Not many critics or scholars have been interested in this part of the book, and if they are, then other aspects than power and politics are in focus; like psychology regarding traumatic experiences (Segall 2005), the change of personality through imagination (Marais 2006), the geographical locations (Easton 2007) or the importance of intertextuality (Gaylard 2005).

Colleen M Sheils' article "Opera, Byron, and the South African Psyche in J M Coetzee's *Disgrace*," is closest to the selected field of interest of this essay, namely what Coetzee's opera in *Disgrace* has to say about white natives in post-colonial South Africa. The shared sphere of interest is shown by Sheils when she makes the connection between fantasy and political identity, focusing on "David's opera and its role in communicating reflections on identity, exile, and political meaning within the mind of a newly disenfranchised member of South Africa's nation" (38). However this essay will draw an alternative conclusion regarding Lurie's role as citizen in the new political climate in post-apartheid South Africa. Sheils makes the conclusion that Lurie's unfinished opera shows that he is giving up adapting to a

new South African citizenship: “In giving up before the opera is complete, David condemns himself to the comforts of ignorance” thus “he is never able to progress on his meditation on [...] identity and belonging in the nation” (49). However, this essay aims to show that Coetzee in Lurie wants to show that the way to adapt to the changes in the country is to make a fresh start, regardless of skin colour. Never finishing the opera, giving it up all together, becomes thus a way to adapt to the new times, where no ideas of the old can be used. The white native population has to share the power and their possessions in total humility, which is something that Lurie finally comes to understand through the course of events and through his work on the opera *Byron in Italy*.

The fact that the whole population of South Africa gained full citizenship after the 1994 elections is fundamental for the creation of new South African culture, as Frantz Fanon states: “The nation is not only a precondition for culture, its ebullition, its perpetual renewal and maturation. It is a necessity. First of all it is the struggle for nationhood that unlocks culture and opens the doors of creation” (*The Wretched of the Earth* 177). This essay uses a wide interpretation of the concept of “native” regarding post-colonial theory, since all native South Africans have been colonized by English culture. Still the focus is on the peculiarity of Lurie’s situation; he being a representative of the white population in South Africa. This population as a whole finds itself lost due to the new political winds blowing.

*Disgrace*’s white South African narrator, Professor David Lurie, is at first in a position where he can benefit from all the sovereignty that his skin color and profession entitle him within the social structure of apartheid. The story is set in present time so the decline in his power, due to the political changes, has already begun at the beginning of the book. He sees the University transformed into an “emasculated institution of learning” where he along with many of his colleagues are like “clerks in a post-religious age” (4). Instead of being a Modern Language professor he becomes an adjunct professor of Communications and when he

seduces a student he loses his job and has to leave in disgrace. He flees the city and stays with his daughter Lucy, who is homesteading in the country. There, a black worker Petrus, moves radically upwards on the social scale from helping-hand to land-owner, thanks to the socio-political changes in South Africa. He can be seen as a barometer regarding political power in the story. This shift in power between the white and the black population in South Africa is going to be analyzed using traditional post-colonial theory.

Lurie takes his superiority for granted and has incorporated ways of using and violating people which can be seen in the facts that he does not respect the private life of the prostitute that he has got attached to and that he uses the uneven power-relation towards his young students in order to get what he wants from them. Eventually he is caught in a situation where he and Lucy are being used and violated. This shift in power that is shown from the point of view of Lurie through his own experiences is reflected in the opera *Byron in Italy* that he is writing. Thus the opera is a project that also shifts focus significantly. By using post-colonial theory this essay aims at showing that Lurie can be seen as a white native, and that his process of writing the opera can be seen as symbolizing the evolutionary phases a colonized nation goes through in order to develop a national culture, as described by Franz Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth*.

This essay will analyze how the various events in Lurie's life are reflected in *Byron in Italy* and how his own progress from an egocentric macho to a compassionate man conscious of his responsibilities, can be seen to follow Fanon's theory about the three evolutionary phases in the development of national culture for the colonized. This essay will thus argue, by applying post-colonial theory, and especially focusing on Frantz Fanon's texts, that following the revolutionary political changes in South Africa in 1994, the former colonizer can be seen in the same way as the colonized usually is: a powerless native, regardless of skin color. This

white native is in search for the culture of his new nation, and this is what can be witnessed in *Disgrace* when Lurie is creating his opera.

### **Assimilationist Phase**

*To speak a language is to take on a world, a culture.*

Fanon (*Black Skin, White Masks* 38)

The first stage of development in the works of colonized writers is labeled the assimilationist phase by Chidi Amuta in his article “Fanon, Cabral and Ngugi on National Liberation”. It is described by Fanon as the phase when the colonized intellectual proves he has assimilated the colonizer’s culture: “His works correspond point to point with those of his metropolitan counterparts. The inspiration is European and his works can be easily linked to a well-defined trend in metropolitan literature” (*The Wretched* 159). What could be more English than Byron? For Lurie, an expert on romantic poetry, Byron must be seen as a role model. Even their lives have several touching-points of which the two most obvious are their predatory way around women and the fact that they both have to flee their former life due to sexual scandal. As Sheils rightly points out they are both “paying the penance of alienation for their societally adjudged misbehavior [...]. A far cry from their previous glory days as sought-after lovers and applauded members of the intelligentsia, David and Byron in exile have lost authority over sense of self and belonging” (42). In Lurie’s case he loses direction as well as authority when he is expelled from his job and social sphere. To add further to his disturbing situation he becomes dislocated when he has to flee the city life he is used to. He also suffers disaffection when his Casanova identity is being torn and later on he suffers dispossession. Coetzee makes sure that the reader fully understands all the different ways in which Lurie’s power is gradually tapped off.

Coetzee also makes a point out of Lurie's incapability to adjust to the situation due to his male sex and his role of superior within the power structure of South Africa under apartheid. Lurie's world-view is revealed in his discussion with Lucy on her choice of lifestyle, which includes voluntary work at the Animal Welfare clinic, and having best friends without an academic degree. Lucy mocks her father when she states: "You think I ought to be painting still lives or teaching myself Russian. You don't approve of friends like Bev and Bill Shaw because they are not going to lead me to a higher life" (Coetzee 74). On another occasion Lucy's indignant comment challenges her father's polarized view: "Well, contrary to what you think, people are not divided into major and minor" (198). Lurie's own feeling of superiority is shown in the fact that his shameful dismissal in the end is the result of his refusal to acknowledge his fault publicly and to take part in counseling: "I'm not prepared to be reformed. I want to go on being myself" (77). Strangely enough his self-confidence is intact because he can not really see what he has done wrong. Lucy says that he is unbending, but he only thinks that he has followed his temperament: "Follow your temperament. It is not a philosophy, he would not dignify it with that name. It is a rule, like the Rule of St Benedict" (2).

Lurie's estranged position is not only mirrored in Byron, but also in Byron's idea of Lucifer, the former heavenly being, now a fallen angel in disgrace who is forced into our pitiful "breathing world" (32). In his lecture on Byron's poem "Lara" Lurie discusses Lucifer and his reasons for choosing his own path: "Good or bad, he just does it. He doesn't act on principle but on impulse, and the source of his impulses is dark to him [...]. His madness was not of the head, but heart" (33). The link between Byron, Lucifer and Lurie is thus established by Coetzee. For Lurie too, his heart is an important part of his character and closely linked to his way of conceiving the world. His heart is closely attached to his instinct which has led him to casual sex without feeling guilty of sexual abuse or shame. In this way Lurie, Byron and

Lucifer are spiritually connected. Not only do they share the feeling of alienation in time and location, but they also share the grounds for their actions.

Lurie's feeling of alienation is also understood in a specific socio-political context. The political changes in South Africa make him feel lost in his own country, so he turns to the traditions of the imperial culture, "a culture in which he was indoctrinated as an honorary member, as a colonial. Undeniably, his unconscious dream of nationhood is tied deeply to growing up English, *but African*" (Sheils 40). This is something natural Fanon explains; since all colonized people share an inferiority complex through the deprivation of their local cultural originality, and therefore they find themselves "face to face with the language of the civilizing nation; that is, with the culture of the mother country" (*Black Skin, White Masks* 18). Even though Fanon has black native authors in mind this could apply to Lurie as well, he being a representative of white native authors.

Lurie's position as a white native in South Africa makes him a hybrid; he is English, but not British, only South African. At the same time, as Lurie turns his creative side to a typical Western forum he understands that the new times ahead will bring unavoidable changes. This understanding is shown in his reflections on the English language and its role as a colonial repressor for native South Africans: "He would not mind hearing Petrus's story one day. But preferable not reduced to English. More and more he is convinced that English is an unfit medium for the truth of South Africa [...]. Like a dinosaur expiring and setting in the mud, the language has stiffened" (Coetzee 117). This can also be found in Fanon's assertion that: "To speak means to be in a position to use a certain syntax, to grasp the morphology of this or that language, but it means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilization" (*Black Skin* 17-18). After leaving his position in Cape Town and after an attack on his daughter's farm, Lurie feels lost and it is symptomatic that it is at this precise time that he actually starts writing his opera after many months of planning (Coetzee 121). The opera

becomes a representative of a culture which gives him stability and safety in his world of chaos.

Since the colonized produces replicas of the dominant culture, there is no progress or development in any direction. Fanon states that “after a century of colonial domination culture becomes rigid in the extreme, congealed and petrified. The atrophy of national reality and the death throes of national culture feed on one another” (*The Wretched* 172). This stand still is also true of Lurie’s mind, temperament and life. He is fully aware of this when he reflects on his dislike of women who “make no effort to be attractive [...] a prejudice that has settled in his mind, settled down. His mind has become a refuge for old thoughts, idle, indigent, with nowhere else to go. He ought to chase them out, sweep the premises clean. But he does not care to do so, or does not care enough” (Coetzee 72).

Already in the beginning of the book Lurie admits that: “His temperament is fixed, set. The skull, followed by the temperament: the two hardest parts of the body” (2). Lurie’s reflection on his life in the much quoted first line of the book gives a hint of his monotonous and passionless existence: “For a man of his age, fifty-two, divorced, he has, to his mind, solved the problem of sex rather well” (1). Spending ninety minutes a week with the prostitute Soraya, is the solution. He continues with the reflection that: “In the field of sex his temperament, though intense, has never been passionate. [...] Intercourse between Soraya and himself must be, he imagines, rather like the copulation of snakes: lengthy, absorbed, but rather abstract, rather dry, even at its hottest” (2-3). When he describes his relationship with his student, Melanie, he says: “I failed to supply, something. I lack the lyrical [...] I manage love too well. Even when I burn I don’t sing” (171).

Lurie’s official life follows the same pattern. He has a steady, disengaging job at the University, or rather as he puts it: “I was what used to be called a scholar. I wrote books about dead people. That was where my heart was. I taught only to make a living” (162). He has

fixed interests in poetry and music, and seems to have no friends, except his ex-wife. At the very end of the story he meditates on his own character: “Not a bad man but not good either. Not cold but not hot, even at his hottest. [...] Lacking in fire. Will that be the verdict on him, the verdict of the universe and its all-seeing eye?” (195). This trait of listlessness in Lurie’s character can be seen represented in the way the two most important areas of his life are restricted: love and work. As Gaylard points out, it is not a coincidence that “the one course in Romantic literature that Lurie is allowed per annum [...] echoes the ninety minutes of sex he allows himself per week”( 321). The process of Laurie’s gained insight in his own person and how that person is responding to the new socio-political climate is reflected in *Byron in Italy*.

Lurie has a wish to create “an eccentric little chamber opera” (Coetzee 214) that will ensure him a triumphant return to society. “That is how he had conceived it: as a chamber-play about love and death, with a passionate young woman and a once passionate but now less than passionate older man; as an action with a complex, restless music behind it, sung in an English that tugs continually toward an imagined Italian” (180). Copying the cultural traditions of the Western world, this piece contains all the elements required for tragic love: “the trapped couple, the discarded mistress hammering at the windows, the jealous husband” (180).

Even though Lurie has nurtured the ideas of the opera for a long time, it is his unwelcome exile that triggers the work. He soon finds it extremely hard to see his characters in an active plot. In his mind, Byron, who is used to quick conquests, is complaining about his ugly and dull mistress, Teresa Guicciolis, and suffering from being constantly watched over by her jealous and malevolent husband. Byron’s whole situation feels choking and has come to a standstill, which is summed up in Lurie’s words: “In adultery, all the tedium of marriage rediscovered” (87). Teresa, on the other hand, begs the unwilling Byron to run away with her and settle somewhere where they can rediscover the passion they once shared.

Not only the characters, but also the music becomes reluctant to Lurie's pen: "As for the music, it hovers somewhere on the horizon, it has not come yet" (162). In this way the stationary life of Lurie is also found in the opera, which echoes Fanon's idea of the first phase the colonized has to pass through in order to be able to create culture of the new nation. Lurie's reluctant characters, as well as the traumatic experiences that await him in the near future will force him to think in other directions, both concerning the opera and his life. As Fanon writes: "Whereas the colonized intellectual started out by producing work exclusively with the oppressor in mind [...] he gradually switches over to addressing himself to his people" (*The Wretched* 173).

### **Cultural Nationalist Phase**

*Well, let poor Bev Shaw go home and  
do some singing too. And let him stop  
calling her poor Bev Shaw.  
If she is poor, he is bankrupt.*

J. M. Coetzee (*Disgrace* 150)

The second phase of Fanon's theory, labeled the cultural nationalist phase by Amuta (158) sets in according to Fanon when: "the colonized writer has his convictions shaken and decides to cast his mind back" (*The Wretched* 159), or when, put in Amuta's words: "the native intellectual remembers his authentic identity and kicks against attempts to assimilate him" (159). Lurie, who already fights his dubious feelings towards English as medium for the telling of the stories of the new South Africa, clearly is affected by his own hybridity. Representing white natives in South Africa means that he is in an ambiguous position where he though "still colonized by Europe and European ideas, [...] [is himself] the continuing colonizer[s] of the original inhabitants" (Tiffin 96). Facing his perpetrators, Lurie acknowledges his own helplessness while Coetzee plays with colonial labeling: "He speaks

Italian, he speaks French, but Italian and French will not save him here in darkest Africa” (Coetzee 95).

On a language–culture basis he is in the “third space” which Homi K. Bhabha describes in his article “Cultural Diversity and Cultural Differences,” as the place where interpretation has to pass through in order to create meaning. It is an unconscious platform consisting of the “general conditions of language and the specific implication of the utterance in a performative and institutional strategy” (208). It is where all communication between I and You has to pass through. After decolonization there is ambivalence in meaning and reference when meaning and symbols of culture do not have any primitive, fixed definition. This means for example that the difference in power that binary oppositions are charged with, changes.

By hybridity Bhabha means the area that the “third space” creates. This is where the colonial identity is questioned and reevaluated through “the repetition of discriminatory identity effects. It [the third space] displays the necessary deformation and displacement of all sites of discrimination and domination” (*The Location of Culture* 112). Thus it is the ambivalence in the “third space” that creates hybridity, which also creates meaning to culture. The political changes in South Africa make Lurie reevaluate his representation as a once colonizing member of society. Hybridity reverses the rules of identification that the dominant discourse applies on the colonized, when the rejected knowledge of the colonized intervenes, thus alienating this basis of authority. For Lurie this process works the other way around. The power shift in contemporary South African society will have an all-pervading impact on Lurie and will also be traced in the opera.

In the case of Lurie the definite break with what has been comes with the attack on Lucy’s farm where Lurie is beaten and set on fire, while Lucy is being gang-raped by three black men. Everything that he has believed in concerning himself and the world around him up till that day, changes. He already felt that his power and authority had been decimated when he

had to leave his life in Cape Town, even though his self-esteem was intact and he left, holding his head high. But the pointless violence he and Lucy experience results in the insight that whatever power he had is now completely wiped out. He could not even act on instinct to protect his own child. For the first time in his life he has suffered entirely on behalf of the fact that he represented the apartheid regime. This fact can best be seen in the only information about her experience of the violation that Lucy unwillingly reveals to her father, the significant detail that the men who raped her did so in a frighteningly familiar and personal manner: “It was so personal. [...] It was done with such personal hatred. That was what stunned me more than anything. The rest was [...] expected. But why did they hate me so? I had never set eyes on them” (Coetzee 156). Indeed Mike Marais is right when he argues that: “The implication, here, is that the men know her through the generic categories of race in South African society. Indeed, they rape her because they believe they know her” (83).

This insight casts new light on Lurie’s sense of self and on his conception of other. His state of mind is shown in the opera, where it is projected upon Byron who dies and is hereafter only heard as a disembodied ghost “from the caverns of the underworld” (Coetzee 183). Byron’s words represent the essence of Lurie’s present existence: “It has dried up, the source of everything” (183). He wonders where his place is in this new state and if he has to change in order to fit.

According to Fanon this break with the past in the second phase does not mean that the cultural production changes in any revolutionary way. He explains that: “since the colonized writer is not integrated with his people, since he maintains an outsider’s relationship to them, he is content to remember. Old childhood memories will surface, old legends be reinterpreted on the basis of a borrowed aesthetic, and a concept of the world discovered under other skies” (*The Wretched* 159). In other words, this second phase begins when the colonized realizes that he has something else to contribute with than what the colonial society presumes. His efforts

are somewhat fumbling, since he has been out of touch with his “real” self, and “real” environment, busy copying the colonizer’s culture and the values of that culture. Amuta states that the colonized intellectual in this phase only succeeds in producing “romanticizations of bygone days corrected by philosophical traditions and aesthetical conventions borrowed from the world of the colonizer” (159).

After the attack, Lurie is in shock and finds that “his pleasure in living has been sniffed out” (Coetzee 107). Not only does he suffer in his own chaotic darkness, but he is also tormented by guilt since he failed protecting Lucy during the assault. The worst is that he is unable to help her afterwards since she retreats into quiet apathy. Their disagreement regarding the information given to the police after the assault makes Lurie move back to his house in Cape Town, only to find it ransacked. It is there, in the stripped place that echoes his inner feelings, that he finally starts writing his opera. He describes this in these words: “Again the feeling washes over him: listlessness, indifference, but also weightlessness, as if he has been eaten away from the inside and only the eroded shell of his heart remains. How, he thinks to himself, can a man in this state find words, find music that will bring back the dead?” (156).

Following the attack Lurie begins to think of women and their ability to be “surprisingly forgiving” (69). Abandoning his usual habit of objectification of women he tries to put himself in their place: “The question is, does he have it in him to be the woman?” (160). Lurie starts reflecting on how women are used by men through history: “He thinks of Byron. Among the legions of countesses and kitchenmaids Byron pushed himself into there were no doubt those who called it rape. [...] From where he stands, from where Lucy stands, Byron looks very old-fashioned indeed” (160). He also begins to ponder his “not quite rape” of his student Melanie: “Not rape, not quite that, but undesired nevertheless, undesired to the core”

(25). His newfound ability to see things from other people's perspective has a significant effect on the opera.

A tale about a passionless Byron and an over-passionate Teresa somehow no longer appeals to him: "the project has failed to engage the core of him. There is something misconceived about it, something that does not come from the heart" (181). Lurie's heart, as discussed above, is an important guide, so he abandons his original story-line and adopts another: "Abandoning the pages of notes he has written [...] he tries to pick Teresa up in middle age" (181). He keeps the form of the opera but changes its meaning when switching focus from a male voice to a female. Now the protagonist has changed from a famous womanizer seeking refuge and tranquility in exile to a plain middle-aged woman, "a dumpy little widow" (181), who bewails her long-since dead lover and the glorious days gone by, leaving her with nothing else than memories. After all, it was his love that set her apart from other women: "She wants to be loved, Teresa, to be loved immortally; she wants to be raised to the company of the Lauras and Floras of yore" (185).

The music is radically changed too when soon Lurie realizes that: "purloined songs will not be good enough, [...] the two will demand a music of their own" (183). The piano is changed to a banjo since "there is something about the sound of the piano that hinders him: too rounded, too physical, too rich" (184). Lurie is very pleased with the created companionship of Teresa's voice and "the silly plink-plonk of the toy banjo. The lush arias he had dreamed of giving her he quietly abandons; from there it is but a short step to putting the instrument into her hands" (184). The shift in instruments, from piano to banjo, can be seen as a representation of the colonizer and the native respectively and shows the changed preferential right of interpretation. Neither story nor power is coming from the colonizer. All new opportunities lie within the reach of the native. Thus Teresa has the chance to grab the banjo and sing the songs of her heart.

Fanon calls the production in this second phase in the evolution of national literature, “precombat literature” (*The Wretched* 159). He means that: “To fight for national culture first of all means fighting for the liberation of the nation, the tangible matrix from which culture can grow. One cannot divorce the combat for culture from the people’s struggle for liberation” (168). A literal reading would imply violence and that is something that Fanon has been criticized of (Arendt 69), but Bhabha points to the obvious reason for Fanon’s statement in his foreword to *The Wretched of the Earth*. Fanon had himself been involved in the armed political resistance during the “apocalyptic times” of the 1950s in Algeria, by both his professions; psychiatrist and writer. Bhabha states that: “Fanon forged his thinking on violence and counter violence in these conditions of the dire extremity, when everyday interactions were turned into exigent events of life and death” (*The Wretched* xxxiv). He suggests a different reading where Fanonian violence “is part of a struggle for psycho-affective survival and a search for human agency in the midst of the agony of oppression. It does not offer a clear choice between life and death or slavery and freedom, because it confronts the colonial condition of life-in-death” (xxxvi). Following this reading, the statement from Amuta that: “There ought to be a reciprocal relationship between national culture and the fight of freedom, a relationship in which national culture subserves national liberation” (160), becomes less threatening and more pertinent. The relevance this second phase has to the aim of this essay is that it is in this phase that the definite change in the mind of the colonized occurs.

Besides the resemblance of the cultural productions in the first and second phase, Fanon mentions other characteristics of the production in this phase: “Sometimes this precombat literature is steeped in humor and allegory, at other times in anguish, malaise, death, and even nausea. Yet underneath the self-loathing, the sound of laughter can be heard” (*The Wretched* 159). This is something that Lurie discovers when he thinks about his role in the opera: “But

he was wrong. It is not the erotic that is calling to him after all, nor the elegiac, but the comic. He is in the opera neither as Teresa nor as Byron nor even as some blending of the two: he is held in the music itself, in the flat, tinny slap of the banjo strings” (Coetzee 184). His image of self has traveled a long distance and he has come to the humble insight that he is simply equal to all other human beings, or to the colonized of the past. Lurie feels vulnerable and empty of life, which is represented by Byron’s voice which is: “So faint, so faltering [...] that Teresa has to sing his words back to him, helping him along breath by breath, drawing him back to life: her child, her boy” (183).

Lurie’s new-found compassion in his fellow creatures enables him even to put himself in the position of animals, especially dogs – the lowest valued of all South African domestic animals as well as the most prominent sign of colonial power: “in a country where dogs are bred to snarl at the mere smell of a black man”(110). Through the violation of Lurie and Lucy the opera changes in character, tone and focus. This change can be seen as a representation of Fanon’s second phase, the cultural nationalist phase, where Lurie has to reevaluate his self, working up his traumatic experiences in an allegory told by his identity muse: the middle-aged Teresa, once a young Contessa celebrated by her lover, the famous Lord Byron.

### **Nationalist Phase**

*So this is art, he thinks, and this is how  
it does its work! How strange!  
How fascinating!*

Coetzee (*Disgrace* 185)

The nationalist phase, which is called “combat stage” by Fanon, is the phase “where the colonized writer, after having tried to lose himself among the people, with the people, will rouse the people. Combat literature, revolutionary literature, national literature emerges” (159). For Lurie this third phase begins when he realizes that the sacrifices and changes he has

made are not enough. He feels that time is running out on him and his generation: “Between Lucy’s generation and mine a curtain seems to have fallen. I didn’t even notice when it fell” (210). It has all to do with forgiving and being able to await the future in humbleness. Lurie and Lucy’s armed Boer neighbour belong to a past where these two features go with the loss of their honour, which up till now took its strength from the colonial soil: “Well, he [Lurie] is too old to heed, too old to change. Lucy may be able to bend to the tempest; he cannot, not without honour” (209).

The future lies in the next generation of South Africans, with the Lucies and the Petruses: “I suspect it is too late for me. I’m just an old lag serving out my sentence. But you [Lucy] go ahead. You are well on the way” (216). Lucy’s capability to adapt to the changes is shown by the fact that she decides to give birth to the mulatto baby that was conceived in such hatred. She is also determined that she will be able to be a good mother: “A good mother and a good person. You [Lurie] should try to be a good person too. [...] A good person. Not a bad resolution to make, in dark times” (216).

Lurie also feels that his opera project is going nowhere despite new devices: “Would he dare to [...] bring a dog into the piece [...]? Why not? Surely, in a work that will never be performed, all things are permitted?” (215). It is becoming “the kind of work a sleepwalker might write” (214). He knows that he is hopelessly entangled in his own imaginary word, writing exclusively on behalf of Teresa: that is of himself. He has developed a symbiotic relationship where he can feel her agony and longings and where she in turn gives voice to his pain and wishes: “*I am here*, she sings, supporting him, saving him from going down. *I am your source*” (183). He has gone so far in empathy that he even feels with her during her period: “This is a bad time of the month for Teresa, she is sore, she has not slept a wink, she is haggard with longing” (213). What can *Byron in Italy* say to anybody in contemporary post-colonial South Africa? Nothing. He resigns and has to admit that “the lyric impulse in him

may not be dead, but after decades of starvation it can crawl forth from its cave only pinched, stunted, deformed” (213).

Lurie’s thoughts can be seen as representing the future nation of South Africa, as can be seen in the following quote where he ponders the fact that he will become a grandfather:

What will it entail, being a grandfather? As a father he has not been much of a success, despite trying harder than most. As a grandfather he will probably score lower than average too. He lacks the virtues of the old: equanimity, kindness, patience. But perhaps those 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. (217-218)

Lurie gives up his plans for the opera but looks at the future with expectation. The figure of the “father” with his “virtue of passion” would then represent the colonizer who is giving up the former core idea of segregation. He will probably face an existence in the near future that will be less elevated than that of his fellow humans of other nations, but he will eagerly await other qualities like stability, friendliness and tolerance to emerge. Even though Lurie turns for guidance to yet another symbol of the colonizing culture he is slightly optimistic when he admits that there “may be things to learn” (218). Lurie’s meditation above can also be seen as representing Fanon’s desire to produce literature “for a new humanism” (*Black Skin 7*) in a time which “must no longer be that of the moment or the next harvest but rather of the rest of the world” (*The Wretched xli*). Fanon’s idea of duration is thus mirrored in Teresa’s “immortal longings. [...] She [They] will not be dead” (Coetzee 209).

Despite the obvious fact that Lurie never completes any written “combat literature” it can be argued that he is capable of it; in his mind. Without the understanding that he has to let go of all his old ideas and that he has to give up the opera, Lurie would freeze in the second phase and no real change or progress would ever occur. This becomes the essence of *Disgrace*

which is symbolized through a scene where Coetzee draws on the biblical sacrifice that Abraham was about to make had he not been prevented by an angel. Lurie's favourite, crippled, musical dog at the Animal Welfare clinic, where Lurie works as a volunteer, does not share the same luck: "Bearing him in his arms like a lamb" he carries the dog to the surgery. "Are you giving him up? Yes, I am giving him up" (220). Seeing first to the needs of the dog rather than to his own, sacrificing the ultimate symbol of colonial repression gives the reader a powerful image of how a culture of the future nation may be obtained.

## Conclusion

*As long as we have faith, we have no hope.  
To hope, we have to break the faith.*

Richard Pithouse ("That the Tool Never Possess the Man" 1)

Fanon's ideas within the field of post-colonialism which he articulated in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967) and *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963) in the early 1960s still have an immense impact on everyone interested in the field. It has been the aim of this essay to stretch his ideas into a somewhat new direction by applying his theories on nation and culture onto a white subject, this being a white native South African. The traditional lack of power of the colonized can be said to apply to him as well, since the all-race elections in 1994 in reality meant subversive political activity where those who benefited the most under the apartheid regime also often saw themselves to be the ones who lost the most in the new South African state. It is important to keep in mind the dual position of the main character of *Disgrace*. Although he can be seen as colonized by English culture, as all native South Africans, he still can be seen as a representative of the same colonizing culture. Being a white native in this complex geopolitical context means experiencing hybridity, where the mother culture is a stepmother at best. Being part of post-colonial times in South Africa means for the white

native the same as for the black regarding the difficult task of creating a national culture, free of all the values tainted by colonialism.

Fanon describes three different phases of development in the works of colonized writers creating national culture. In this essay these phases have been identified in Coetzee's *Disgrace*. In this text the white protagonist, David Lurie is working on a chamber opera called *Byron in Italy*. By applying Fanon's theory of the development of national culture, during and after colonization, it becomes clear that Lurie implements his feelings of alienation, insecurity and inferiority in the opera, projecting his feelings on Byron and his mistress Teresa. Following the course of events Lurie's consciousness of self undergoes a radical change, a change that is echoed in the opera and which can be elucidated by Fanon's theory.

*Byron in Italy* starts out as a classical cultural piece of Western Europe with its English-Italian characters and music. Lurie writes for a male protagonist that, like him, is familiar with poetry and fair ladies. This phase represents Fanon's first "assimilationist" phase when the colonised writer is copying the culture of the colonizer. After the attack on Lurie and his daughter he suffers deep trauma with feelings of devastation and hollowness, which results in a radical change of spokesperson and music in the opera, needing a new language to express a new reality. Middle-aged, "dumpy" Teresa accompanied by a banjo gives voice to the sad story. This shift in voice and sound of voice represents Fanon's second phase: the Cultural nationalist phase, where the colonized writer wants to protest against the attempts of assimilation. Leaving Lucy after a disagreement of opinion and still haunted by the ghosts of the past Lurie is absorbed totally with his interpretation of Teresa's sorrow. He knows that the opera is a dead end: a personal piece which fails to express the new South African reality, and finally gives it up. The hint towards Lurie's possible perception of what is needed to produce national culture signifies Fanon's third phase: the Nationalist phase, where the colonised

writers “feel the need to proclaim their nation [...] and become the spokesperson of a new reality in action (159).

In *Disgrace*, Coetzee does not give any clear answers to the future of the new South African nation, nor can Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks* or *The Wretched of the Earth*. They both dream of something new, something put together by pieces never used before. Fanon’s exhortation in his conclusion of *The Wretched of the Earth* gives voice to his high hopes: “for ourselves and for humanity [...] we must make a new start, develop a new way of thinking, and endeavour to create a new man” (239). Coetzee in *Disgrace* is pointing at a future where forgiveness and humility are the cultural bearers. At the end of the book Lurie gives up the whole idea of his opera once he understands that it, despite radical changes, is a worthless piece for the citizens of future South Africa. He realizes that the relations among all citizens have to start from scratch. On his own part, as a representative of the former colonizers, it has to start from somewhere lower than the white man has ever been in the history of South Africa. Perhaps even lower than the pigs and dogs in his discussion with Lucy on “a higher life” (74). The binary oppositions that are highlighted on behalf of colonialism can all be discussed from the point of view of “a higher life” which is also why these words have been chosen for the title of this essay. A future without these oppositions is what both Lucy and Lurie, both in their own way, foresee:

‘How humiliating’, he says finally. ‘Such high hopes, and to end like this.’

‘Yes, I agree, it is humiliating. But perhaps that is a good point to start from again. Perhaps that is what I must learn to accept. To start at a ground level.

Without nothing. Not with nothing but. With nothing. No cards, no weapons, no property, no rights, no dignity.’

‘Like a dog.’

‘Yes, like a dog.’ (205)

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