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The Secret Aria on Shame:
An Analysis of Narrative Structure and Theme
in Coetzee's *Diary of a Bad Year*

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Introduction

Understanding a thing often looks to me like playing with one of those Rubik cubes. Once you have made all the little bricks snap into the place, hey presto, you understand. It makes sense if you live inside a Rubik cube, but if you don't...

J. M. Coetzee (*Elizabeth Costello* 90)

Coetzee's latest novel *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007) is in many ways a continuum of the previous novels *Disgrace* (1999) and *Elizabeth Costello* (2003), regarding the theme of shame, guilt, redemption and atonement. The narrative structure also shows an intriguing evolution with a complementary narrator's viewpoint added in each novel. In *Disgrace* it is the protagonist, university professor David Lurie, who tells the story. In *Elizabeth Costello* there is interplay between the writer Elizabeth Costello's lectures on various topics, and an anonymous third-person narrator who connects her ideas with her every-day life. In *Diary of a Bad Year* the narrative is threefold, divided between a writer, his written contribution to a book called *Strong Opinions*, and his secretary's thoughts about both the opinions in the manuscript and her employer's circumstances. The aim of this essay is to explore the relation between form and theme in *Diary of a Bad Year*, to see in what way these two fundamental elements of the novel intervene and support each other. By doing so the narrative structure will be read through Sigmund Freud's structural model of personality, whereby the text will be related to the notions of the super-ego, the ego and the id. Theoretical assumptions within the research-field of shame will be linked to this theory of Freud in order to point at the complexity of the novel. In other words, this essay will argue that the specific threefold narrative structure in *Diary of a Bad Year*, by reflecting the joined parts of human identity, helps in creating and supporting the theme of shame, which only exists connected to the

human psyche. This connection in turn gives special meaning to the entire narratology of the novel.

Before mentioning some of the reviews that represent the only substantial writing on *Diary of a Bad Year* so far, it is interesting to see what has been written within this essay's scope of interest, concerning his two previous novels *Disgrace* and *Elizabeth Costello*. The theme of shame functions on two levels in *Disgrace*: personal and national. The personal level concerns the protagonist, David Lurie, the white South African Professor of Communication, who after an affair with one of his students is dismissed in disgrace. While David stays at his daughter's homestead, both he and his daughter Lucy are attacked by three black men. This traumatic event, combined with that of a black worker on the farm who moves radically upwards on the social scale from helping hand to land-owner, focus the narrative on the altered power relations between the white and the black population, which is the result of the socio-political changes in South Africa. The text deals with the acute need of addressing issues relating to apartheid, colonialism and post-colonialism, and represents Coetzee's variation on the theme of shame on a national level.

Disgrace has received much attention from scholars world-wide, scholars like Sue Kossew, who see *Disgrace* as a contemporary statement on the political reality in post-apartheid and post-colonial South Africa. In her article "The Politics of Shame and Redemption in J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*," Kossew makes the connection between the national shame of the post-apartheid new South Africa and "the national public spectacle of shame, confession, and forgiveness that was the Truth and Reconciliation Commission" (Kossew 155). Other scholars focus on the protagonist, the white middle-aged David Lurie and his moral transformation and altered attitude towards the world around him. His final act of humility, for instance, is seen as "anchored in a sense of dignity, forged from an

antinomous matrix of shame and resistance” (Kissack and Titlestad 138). Here the motif of shame is seen through “the problematic relationship between thought, action and feeling” (136). Contrary to considerable academic interest in the themes in *Disgrace*, the narrative structure has passed almost unnoticed. As a telling example, Kossew vaguely mentions that “Coetzee is, of course, always alert to the possibility of novelistic complicity” (Kossew 161).

In *Elizabeth Costello* the theme of shame is globalized and de-politicized, which reflects Coetzee’s emigration to Australia in 2002. Elizabeth Costello is an Australian writer of international renown, travelling around the world giving lectures on issues such as animal rights, evil and Eros. The narrative structure is made up of mini-narratives, where each chapter consists of Costello’s lectures, three of which Coetzee has held himself (233). These “lessons,” or lectures, are sometimes criticized for being a place where Coetzee plays hide and seek with his own philosophical views. Critics like Michael S Kochin on the other hand, defend Coetzee for not taking a stand, arguing that: “he refuses to use his fiction to make a statement of what he believes [in order to show] us that the authority of the writer is false or phoney” (Kochin 89). Anthropologists such as Marscia-Lees, Frances and Sharp also admire Coetzee’s narrative style which they say favors the combination of theory through practice. They state that: “Coetzee may disconcert readers expecting realist fiction, but from the point of view of anthropology, this technique provides a way to have it both ways: In speaking through a character, he seems to insist that ideas, intellect, and ethical principles can only be understood in the context of particular earthly bodies” (Marscia-Lees, Frances and Sharpe 85).

In his article “J. M. Coetzee’s Cultural Critique” Harald Leusmann also defends Coetzee’s choice of writing style and theme when he reflects: “in all its irony, *Elizabeth Costello* is characterized by a large measure of seriousness and ultimately plays back and forth over the

ultimate questions of our culture. [...] There are not many books in which ethical and aesthetic elements strengthen each other in such an irritating way” (62-63). Thorsten Carstensen also approves of Coetzee’s effective fusion of the narrative structure and the theme in his article “Shattering the Word-Mirror in Elizabeth Costello: J. M. Coetzee’s Deconstructive Experiment.” Carstensen claims that the lack of both plot and characters results in: “a meditation on aesthetic as well as ethical issues. While it ignores the traditional boundaries of the genre, Coetzee’s novel presents us with a texture of philosophical discourses that are only superficially embedded in a fictional framework” (Carstensen 80). He states that this compliancy of Coetzee leaves the reader in uncertainty about both structure and theme which results in “a postmodern subversion of the *novel of ideas*” (79).

Understanding this rather lengthy background, regarding the narrative structure and the theme of shame in both *Disgrace* and *Elizabeth Costello*, makes a useful steppingstone for the subject matter of this essay, which highlights the interconnection of form and theme in *Diary of a Bad Year*. In this novel the plot circles around the protagonist Mister C, a renowned ageing immigrated Australian writer suffering from Parkinson’s disease, who is asked by a German publisher to contribute to a book called *Strong Opinions*. These opinions, written in essay form, are meant to comment on “what is wrong with today’s world. [...] The more contentious the better” (*Diary of a Bad Year* 21), and becomes reflections of Mister C’s philosophical and political position. One day he meets an alluring young woman, called Anya, in the laundry room of his apartment block and employs her to type his manuscript. The first play of desire between Mister C and Anya soon becomes an odd kind of friendship, which towards the end of the novel impels Mister C to change the focus of his writings. Instead of continuing writing strong opinions he begins to give voice to personal opinions, called “Soft Opinions” by Anya (193). These are collected in the so called “Second Diary”; the first

running parallel to the “strong opinions” in the manuscript Anya types. Anya’s companion, Alan, also plays an important role in the plot as a representative of evil and lack of principles. As Maggie Gee argues in her review: “Alan is evil precisely because he is without shame” (Gee 1). The scene seems to be set for the development of a domestic triangle, but there is more to it than just the competition for Anya’s heart. Mister C and Alan represent the old order against the new, the socialist intellectual, versus the neo-liberal grabber, a person living with his feeling of shame, facing an utterly shameless person.

The three-fold narrative construction is profoundly experimental, mostly because of the fact that every page is divided by a physical line in three sections thus separating the narrative voices throughout the whole book. The shift from the impersonal “Strong Opinions” to the personal “Second Diary” also marks a narrative division. There are also a few expressive blank sections and cases when one section continues in mid-sentence on the opposing page. The three sections on each page are independent but there are many subtle intertwinings. Usually the top section is Mister C’s essay, the middle section his private thoughts about Anya, the bottom section Anya’s thoughts and descriptions of her life with Alan. Gee remarks: “It is tempting, of course, to neglect the essay and read the personal stories, but that is partly Coetzee’s point: that without emotion, adventure, the unpredictable, thought is dead” (Gee 1). Neel Mukherjee captures the narrative structure in a most precise way when he compares it with music, which has the unique ability to say two things simultaneously. In this case Coetzee has extended this experience from the ear to the eye. Mukherjee states that the geniality of *Diary of a Bad Year* “is the ways in which the three strands braid with each other, some of the linkages metaphorical, some gradually illustrative in oblique ways, others musical in how they pick up tones, variations and themes” (Mukherjee 2).

The link between the music metaphor, the narrative structure and the theme in the novel is all captured in the title of this essay. At first, Mister C is disappointed in his secretary's lack of interest in what she is typing, since he has told her that he wants a person with "an intuitive feel" (*Diary* 18) for what he is trying to do. There is nothing wrong with Anya's intuitiveness, as Mister C soon finds out, and finally she tells him that he writes in a pessimistic, idealistic and unrealistic tone. From then on she continuously delivers her thoughts: "*a perspective from below, so to speak, an opinion of his opinions*" (196). In the end she confesses: "I was the one he was in love with [...]. I was his secret aria secretary" (225) and this is the pun that alludes to the title of this essay. These two characters are as different as heaven and earth, but in the end they have enriched each others lives in a most surprising way that enables them to modify their roles in the ongoing opera called Life. The constant processing between Anya and Mister C of the subject matter in the opinions that goes on within the intriguing structure of the novel is like the different songs in an opera; sometimes an aria, sometimes a duet, and if Anya's partner Alan joins in, a terzett. The theme of shame is to different degrees articulated in the narrative thus leaving parts more or less hidden, like a secret.

The theme of shame, both personal and global, is reflected upon by reviewer Kathryn Harrison, when she states:

Coetzee's fiction – and, 'Diary of a Bad Year' suggests, his psyche – has always manifested a fault line. On one side of the divide is reason, moral and sober, charged with the responsible stewardship of human society. On the other lie the passions, especially lust, that undermine and sometimes trump intellect. (2)

In this essay the division between reason and passion will be refined by using another, more varied division. The partition used will be one that acknowledges all three different parts of the human psyche seen from the perspective of Freud's structural model of personality where the super-ego represents conscience and morals, the ego represents consciousness and reality and the id represents the unconscious and desires. It will be argued that the three different narrative voices in *Diary of a Bad Year* can be seen to represent the super-ego (the opinions), the ego (Mister C) and the id (Anya and Alan). This analogous interpretation, based on the order they appear on each page, will then be used to investigate the two different parts of the novel, the part called "Strong Opinions" and that named the "Second Diary," where the chapters are named after the opinions they cover. In the first part, called "Strong Opinions," the subject matter varies from highly contemporary issues such as for example: "On democracy," "On terrorism," "On pedophilia," "On intelligent design" and "On Al Qaida" to some that are more universal, for instance: "On national shame" and "On probability." The second part, the "Second Diary," concerns matters as for example: "On fan mail," "My father," "The classics," "On ageing" and "On compassion." This scopic variety of issues, and in addition to the three-part narrative division on each page, may feel scattered, as Harrison voices it when she compares the impression of the narrative structure to "a highbrow alternative to split-screen TV" (Harrison 1). Contrary to these views of the novel giving a fragmented impression, this essay will argue that the three separate narratives in fact interact and strengthen each other within the theme of shame, making a unified whole, the narrative mirroring the human psyche and thus enforcing the theme of shame. This unified whole represents the core notion that Coetzee lets Mister C express in his writings on Tolstoy as: "the one question that truly engaged his soul: how to live" (*Diary* 193). This question that has enthralled humans of all times also touched Freud in his research on the human psyche, and will be further investigated in the next section.

Narrative Structure Seen with Freudian Eyes

The poor ego [...] serves three severe masters and does what it can to bring their claims into harmony with one another. [...] Its three tyrannical masters are the external world, the super-ego, and the id.

Sigmund Freud (*New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* 1932: 110)

Freud's psychoanalytic theory of personality, "an individual's mental apparatus" (Freud 104), consists of three different elements. These three elements of personality – known as the super-ego, the ego and the id – work together and result in complex human behavior. According to Freud, a healthy personality is one where the super-ego, the ego and the id are in balance. In other words the ego needs to be strong enough to satisfy the needs of the id, without upsetting the super-ego, and still take into account the reality of every situation.

The super-ego is where the internalized moral standards and ideas reside. It also contains the conscience, as Freud explains: "The super-ego is the representative for us of every moral restriction, the advocate of a striving towards perfection – it is, in short, as much as we have been able to grasp psychologically of what is described as the higher side of human life" (Freud 98). Freud also believed that the super-ego carries on cultural paradigms from the past: "The past, the tradition of the race and of the people, lives on in the ideologies of the super-ego" (99). As Kendra van Wagner writes in her explanatory article on Freud, the super-ego functions as a non-compromising authoritarian master over the other two parts of the psyche: "The superego acts to perfect and civilize our behavior. [...] It struggles to make the ego act upon idealistic standards rather than upon realistic principles" (Wagner 2). In *Diary of a Bad Year*, Mister C's opinions, both strong and soft, represent this function of the personality. In his opinions he often questions the fine line that humans have defined as the dividing point of

what is morally acceptable and what is not. In his opinion on terrorism for example, he objects to the new Australian legislation which makes it a crime to speak favorably of terrorism: “It is a curb on freedom of speech, and does not pretend to be otherwise” (*Diary* 21). He continues by pondering the difference in warfare: “dropping bombs from high altitude upon a sleeping village is no less an act of terror than blowing oneself up in a crowd, [still] it is perfectly legal to speak well of aerial bombing (‘Shock and Awe’)” (21). In Mister C’s essay on paedophilia he questions the hypocritical reality of the fact that a proclaimed fictional printed version of sex between an adult man and “an appropriately petite twenty-year-old actress” (55) would be banned as a film version. He does not display any bias for either representation, he merely comments that the subtle difference seems to be “the presence of an adult eye somewhere in the scene, either behind the camera or in the darkened auditorium” (56). The need to civilize our behavior is also a dominant concern of Mister C, as revealed in his opinion on competition. He states: “Competition is a sublimation of warfare. [...] If we want war we can choose war, if we want peace we can equally choose peace” (81). He then meditates on the predatory jungle metaphor people use in relation to competition but contradicts it by stating that the jungle is in fact “an ecosystem where the surviving species have attained symbiosis with each other. [...] The wolf is not predatory upon other wolves: *lupus lupus lupus* would be a slander” (80-81).

In the “Second Diary,” where Mister C’s more personal opinions are written without the aim of being published, there are other examples on how the conscience within the super-ego helps us to follow the true values of bonds between humans, and the value of truthful accuracy in expression. In his opinion on afterlife Mister C poses the question: “will those who loved many enjoy a richer afterlife than those who loved few; or will our loved ones be defined as those we loved on our last day on earth, and them alone?” (153), and in his opinion

“on the mother tongue” he contemplates his true possibility to express himself: “Are these words, printed out on paper, truly what I wanted to say?” (196). He continues by wondering if it would have been easier if he had “a truer, less questionable mother tongue than English in which to work? [...] Perhaps it is so that all languages are, finally, foreign languages, alien to our animal being” (196-97). Thus the concerns of moral and ethics in the conscious part of the human psyche are well represented in the essays of Mister C.

The ego is the part of the personality that deals with reality and which makes certain that the impulses of the id can be expressed in a manner acceptable in the real world. This is done by using the reality principle which means that it is the ego that “weighs the costs and benefits of an action before deciding to act upon or abandon impulses” (Wagner 1). In *Diary of a Bad Year* the middle section on each page can be seen as symbolizing the ego. The rich mass of text in the essays representing the super-ego is in the ego-passages contrasted with a few sentences, sometimes just a word. Here the reader follows the every-day actions and thoughts of Mister C, as can be exemplified by the following quote: “This young woman who declines to call me by my name, instead calling me *Señor* or perhaps *Senior* – is she the one who has been assigned to conduct me to my death?” (*Diary* 60). Sometimes Mister C’s comments are divided in a shrewd manner, on two pages: “It took a whole day of waiting – a day during which I fretted so / much that I wrote not a word – but it worked. The doorbell rang” (146-47). These ego-representing passages also relate pieces of dialogue between Mister C and Anya: “Alan must make a lot of money, I said, to finance all these purchases of yours. She shrugged. He likes me to look good, she said” (73). These dialogues reveal the profundity of the story and are significant bearers of the theme as can be exemplified by the following quote: “‘Dishonour descends upon one’s shoulders,’ she repeated softly. That sounds like the inmost depths to me. I sat shaken, speechless. So what is going to save you from dishonor,

Señor C? she said. [...] I don't know, I said. If I knew I wouldn't be so lost" (92). As seen here, the ego is characterized by actions manifested both physically and orally, enabling the reader to tag along on the narrative path.

In Mister C's "Second Diary," the first four chapters have an empty space representing the ego. This deliberately quiet space is a remarkable omission that can be interpreted in many ways. Kim L. Worthington explores this phenomenon of the strategic silence, in his book *Self as Narrative*. He notes: "the writer adopts a pose of voicelessness in which she still somehow manages to communicate" (Worthington 176). This can be done because "These gaps, or omissions, function only in relation to the words which frame them" (178), and its meaning is established on the fact that: "The liberation of silent self-erasure is thus always complicit with the structuring presence of the language it seeks to negotiate" (178). In *Diary of a Bad Year* the empty middle-passages are enclosed by the top-sections with issues named: "a dream," "on fan mail," "my father" and "Insh'Allah" and the bottom-sections retelling the awkward evening party at Mister C's apartment that was meant to celebrate the completion of the manuscript, but which Alan ruins by lengthy insults to both his host and Anya. The silent ego-parts also follow the last strong opinion on afterlife, which is the only one not being divided in any way, and are in turn followed by Anya's apologies for Alan's behavior, and the news that she is leaving Alan and her life as a neighbour to Mister C.

Using Worthington's idea the interpretation of these quiet spaces emerges out of the relation to the subject matters dealt with in the part dealing with afterlife as well as the top-sections of the pages. They are all of a disillusioned melancholy character. In "On the afterlife," Mister C establishes the fact that there is no consolation in Christianity's "skimpy" theory of the afterlife (153). In "A dream," Mister C dreams that he is dead: "The afterworld is a sad and subdued place" (159). In "On fan mail," a woman tells him of the devastating

experience of her father's incestuous abuse of her, which leaves her with a paralyzing feeling of loneliness. Mister C concludes: "As you sow, so shall you reap. I write about restless souls, and souls in turmoil answer my call" (163). In "My father" Mister C meditates over the fact that nobody will take care of the "pitiful little box of keepsakes" (166) that his father left him. Finally, in "Insh'Allah" the title says everything: "If it is God's will." One interpretation of the silent sequences is that this contemplation on his imminent death, which leaves all to the imagination, literally empties his ego. In fact it is his powerful emotions, (reflected in the title "On mass emotion," which by a change of accentuation heightens Mister C's emotions), on hearing the shocking news from Anya that she is leaving, that brings his voice back. The last eleven chapters use Mister C's ego-space for a letter from Anya who has moved to Brisbane. The interpretation of this change of narrator closest to hand is that his medical condition has deteriorated resulting in an uneventful every-day life, where his only existing reality consists of thoughts of Anya, expressed through her hearty, self-revealing letter.

The third part of the personality is called the id, and it is the only part that we are born with and which operates entirely in the unconscious. It includes all instinctual and primitive behavior and functions in the irrational and emotional part of the mind. The id is ruled by the pleasure principle that strives after immediate fulfillment of all desires, wants and needs, disregarding any rules: "The id of course knows no judgments of value: no good and evil, no morality" (Freud 107). When the desires can not be instantly performed the id creates a mental image of the desired object as a way to satisfy the need (even though the super-ego intervenes). A good example is when Mister C meets Anya for the second time: "she passed through the front door in a flash of white slacks that showed off a *derrière* so near to perfect as to be angelic. God, grant me one wish before I die, I whispered; but then was overtaken with shame at the specificity of the wish, and withdrew it" (*Diary* 8).

In *Diary of a Bad Year* this unconscious and primitive part of the personality takes up the same textual space as the essays on the opinions, again making a contrast to the brief writings of the ego-parts. The id-part is represented by 29 year-old Anya who, due to her maternal heritage sees herself as a “racy, exciting, exotic” Filipina (*Diary* 27). Her thoughts make an appearance in the story on page 25, which is when she begins her typing-job. This is the moment chosen by Coetzee to be significant, since a dialogue between Mister C and Anya, as well as his thoughts about her has preceded this. Anya personifies sexual drives and desires, which she acts out in an overtly sexual manner right on the first page: “As I pass him, carrying the laundry basket, I make sure I waggle my behind, my delicious behind, sheathed in tight denim. If I were a man I would not be able to keep my eyes off me” (25). Much of her thoughts also refer to sexuality: “Segretaria. It sounds like a cocktail from Haiti: rum and pineapple juice and bull’s blood, shaken up with chipped ice and topped with a couple of rooster’s testicles” (39). She enjoys her ability to arouse desire in men and uses her power frequently: “Señor C can’t help it if he desires me, just as I can’t help it if I am desired” (87). The language in her sections of the text is sometimes even more explicitly sexual: “Mister Rabbit, I call him [Alan] sometimes [...]. Mister Carrot Top. Mister Big. [...] he says. My Princess of Pussy. My Queen of Cunt” (85). This excessive reference to sex fits well with Freud’s theory that half of our unconscious and primitive part of the psyche consists of “sexual instincts, understood in the widest sense” (Freud 136).

Another feature in the passages of Anya’s representation of the unconscious, the id, are word-plays referring to suppressed material in the form of taboos: “Eeny-meeny-miny-mo. That is how Howard [Prime Minister for the Liberal Party] got elected. The nigger you catch by the toe. The nigger you know. Oops. Negro” (42). Other word-plays exploit sounds in an immature, infantile way, representing the innate origin of this part of the identity: “Scurry-

scurry along the skirting boards when they think you aren't looking. [...] Cockroach heaven. [...] Crunch-crunch scribble-scribble talk-talk. Down with the Liberals. What Hobbes said. What Machiavelli said. Ho hum" (45). This sound word-play is also found in Anya's thoughts about her situation in life: "When I am not carrying laundry baskets I am his segretaria, part-time. Also, now and again, his house-help. At first I was just supposed to be his segretaria, his secret aria, his scary fairy, in fact not even that, just his typist, his tipista, his clackadackia" (28). This use of some words in her mother tongue can also be seen as the inmost need of the individual. A typical multileveled Anya-comment about her relationship with Alan is: "Mr Haystack and Ms Needle, tight as twigs" (41).

The character of Anya's partner, Alan also has his voice in the id. In these sections of the text representing the unconscious parts of the individual, there is a shift from sexuality to immorality between the parts "Strong Opinions" and "Second Diary." It is here that Alan's immorality that hitherto has been hinted at, comes into full bloom revealing his total lack of shame. The narrative space is mostly occupied by Alan's divulgence of his scheme to empty Mister C's bank account through manipulating his computer, and his accusations about Mister C's sexual intentions towards his girlfriend. This shift of subjects is also shown in the mixture of primitive and pleasurable thoughts of Anya, which reflects those of Alan, and the more mature thoughts about the realities of life and society: "Politics is [...] like pollution. You can't fight pollution. Best to ignore it, or just get used to it, adapt" (35), and "Makeup may be a lie, but not if everyone wears it. If everyone wears makeup, makeup becomes the way things are, and what is the truth but the way things are?" (86). Anya becomes engaged in Mister C's opinions, as for instance when she is disturbed by his way of questioning the boundary of criminal offence regarding pedophilia and discusses it with Alan who says: "If the audience in a theatre perceives a child being raped, then it is a child being raped, period, social consensus,

end of story” (90). There is reference to conversation in this part as well, but the elements of word-play and the personal topics make, often as a joke at Mister C’s expense, a noticeable difference to those appearing in the ego-section: “Where were you born? Why do you want to know? I replied. Am I not blond-eyed and blue-haired enough for your tastes?” (31).

Throughout the narrative the bottom-section on each page, representing the id, contains most of the text and the action. All those comments on the realities of life, sketched in rich descriptions and in coarse vocabulary, never far from humour, they motor the story forward, fuelled by the deep human emotions and intentions that are revealed and played upon, at the same time interspersed with great humbleness. The emphasis on the unconscious regarding the actual amount of text and the rich embodiment of the theme of shame in the narrative relates to Freud according to whom: “the id is the source of all psychic energy, making it the primary component of personality” (Wagner 1). This part also symptomatically ends when the protagonist dies accompanied by Anya’s farewell: “[I will] give him a kiss on the brow, a proper kiss, just to remind him of what he is leaving behind. Good night, Señor C, I will whisper in his ear: sweet dreams, and flights of angels, and all the rest” (*Diary* 227).

Shame – Research and Reality

Demosthenes: Whereas the slave fears only pain, what free man fears most is shame.

J. M. Coetzee (*Diary of a Bad Year* 39)

Shame is not an easy notion to define. It is diffuse and complex but at the same time painfully precise in its symptoms. Every human has at some point been affected by shame, yet not many can make accurate distinctions in order to separate shame from related notions such as guilt, blame, disgrace, dishonor, humiliation or embarrassment. The same goes for academia.

Stephen Pattison defines three main reasons for this obscurity. The first is the lexical meaning of shame which derives from notions of covering and concealing: “The word *shame* is derived from a Germanic root *skam/skem* (Old High German *scama*, Anglo-Saxon *scamu*), with the meaning ‘sense of shame, being shamed, disgrace (*Schande*).’ It is traced back to the Indo-European root *kam/kem*: ‘to cover, to veil, to hide’” (Pattison 40). Pattison rightly comments that these meanings say more about the reaction of shame than of the experience of shame itself: “Shame can be defined simply as the feeling we have when we evaluate our actions, feelings or behavior, and conclude that we have done wrong. It encompasses the *whole of ourselves*; it generates a wish to hide, to disappear, or even to die” (41).

The second reason for the hidden condition of shame lies in the actual failure of words. There are no words that in a sufficient way describe the visual (blush) or the imagistic experience of shame. Pattison states: “Indeed, the experience of shame often reduces the shamed person to speechlessness” (41). The English language also proves to be poor considering the various aspects and types of shame, since it has only one word for it, contrary to other languages (42). The third and last reason for the unfixed notion of shame is that it is being confused with guilt: “Shame has been obscured from view by being assimilated to, and hidden behind, the concept of guilt” (43). While guilt is related to an action, shame is something deeper, rooted in our feeling of self. The paradox in the relation between shame and guilt is described by James M. Schultz: “One can be guilty and feel guilty without being ashamed, and one can feel shame without feeling guilty or having done anything to feel guilty about” (Shultz 2).

These three reasons for the difficulty in defining shame, answer in their own way the question of what shame is, and what it is not. Pattison says that he has given up the aim of finding a fixed essence of meaning for all the various instances of the concept of shame:

“Like an onion, shame is made up of enfolded and overlapping, but also discrete, meanings and understandings; there is no ‘essential onion’ or ‘essential shame’ at the centre of meaning or experience” (Pattison 39). In her doctoral dissertation *Shame and Guilt*, Vessela Misheva explains why shame is considered to be “the master emotion” in her strikingly clear summary: “shame is both an *emotion* and a *feeling* that has a total impact upon the individual as a *biological, feeling, thinking, and communicating* being. [... It] has a total effect upon the individual’s physiological, mental, psychological, and social states, its total scope of influence involves *nature, culture, and society* in one whole” (Misheva 64).

The power in shame lies thus in its all encompassing influence upon the individual. Misheva stresses the two-way relation between culture and individual in this regard, which exists through the dialectic relationship between individual, culture and society. This means that “culture is as much responsible for changes in an individual’s psychology as the individual, in his turn, becomes responsible for changes in the society in which he lives” (64). This dialectic relationship is also highlighted in the extensive work of Michel Foucault on power. One of his most important contributions to the understanding of power is his acknowledgement of the apparent neutrality and political invisibility of techniques of power. He defines the whole apparatus of intervening instances, practices, that exert power upon humans within society: “these types of practice are not just governed by institutions, prescribed by ideologies, guided by pragmatic circumstances - [...] but, up to a point, possesses their own specific regularities, logic, strategy, self-evidence, and ‘reason’” (Foucault 225). Foucault also stresses the fact that the decentralized external punishment on the body throughout history now has become internalized and centralized on the individual (388-93). This development relies heavily on the notion of shame, which relates to what Misheva states: “Shame as perhaps no other feeling is an emotion that is capable of

performing miracles, making the social problem a personal problem and the personal problem a social problem” (Misheva 64). In other words, contemporary society requires of its members to act in certain dictated ways, by using their internal moral police: their sense of shame.

This connection between society, shame and identity inevitably points towards theories relating to psychology and psychoanalysis. Psychoanalysis analyzes microstructures of power within the individual. That is, it analyzes the psychological existence of the self and of the self’s kinship systems. Misheva (98), Schultz (6) and Pattison (45) all comment that Freud, as the “father of psychoanalysis” said surprisingly little about shame. In his lecture “The Dissection of the Psychological Personality” he only touches on the subject stating: “our moral sense of guilt is the expression of the tension between the ego and the super-ego” (Freud 92). He seems to be more interested in the pathological aspects of the anxiety resulting from tensions between the different parts of the human psyche (113-44). Nevertheless Pattison mentions the psychoanalytic approach to shame first in a long list of approaches. The basic assumption for this approach is that shame originates in unconscious events and processes, which in turn shape the personality. He makes the critical point that: “Where there is no objective self-awareness and no evaluation, there can be no shame” (Pattison 50). The conclusion of different scholars dealing with shame is that it is a difficult topic, for three main reasons: its lexical history relating it to concealment, lacking English vocabulary, and the constant mix-up with the alternative notion guilt. It is also considered the “master emotion” because of the complete way it affects human beings; biologically, culturally and socially.

Shame in *Diary of a Bad Year*

When you live in shameful times shame descends upon you, shame descends upon everyone, and you have simply to bear it, it is your lot and your punishment.

J. M. Coetzee (*Diary of a Bad Year* 96)

In *Diary of a Bad Year* the theme of shame is embedded in all three narrative voices. Their structure within the story, representing Freud's three different parts of the human identity, makes a persuasive unison comment on "the age of shame" (Pattison 142) of contemporary society. The story of Mister C's bad year echoes the "age of the self-conscious, reflexive self" (142) in contemporary society. However unison these voices are on the theme of shame, they simultaneously express individual relations to shame, hence the reference to a musical composition by the reviewer Mukherjee. The melody, played by Mister C, Anya and Alan, stands out from the background music, in its most obvious fact by the visual separation on each page. In a sense, the division made by Coetzee between Mister C's "Strong Opinions" and the "Second Diary" functions as a mirror in which Mister C's thoughts in the first part are reflected by Anya's in the second part. Following this allegory of a music composition, this intricate melody is also played by different instruments, giving a diversity of tone representing the different levels on which shame affects the characters. The application of Freud's theory of the super-ego, the ego and the id, used in the interpretation of the novel, can be seen as a clarification of the relationship between the characters, i.e. the narrative structure, and the subject matters that they raise, i.e. the theme of shame, also taking in account the complex theories on shame discussed above.

Mister C's experience of shame on a socio-cultural level is represented by the super-ego, i.e. the moral part of the mind. He feels shame to be a part of society that favors global

inhumanity, cruelty and ruthlessness. In his essays on various opinions, both strong and soft, he shares all of Foucault's suspicion of being a subject of government and state (Foucault 123, 202, 221, 295, 300 and 325). This is declared in Mister C's opening opinions about the origin of the state, anarchism, democracy and Machiavelli. His discontent with the state of being is reflected in all his opinions: "Democracy does not allow for politics outside the democratic system. In this sense, democracy is totalitarian. [...] Who is the servant, who the master?" (*Diary* 15). He openly criticizes the USA and its followers Great Britain and Australia and especially makes the present politics of these governments his target of criticism. In one of his soft opinions called "On the hurly-burly of politics" he says for example: "politics is not for sissies, they [Tony Blair and Co] say, by sissies meaning people reluctant to compromise moral principles" (125). In another essay he contrasts Sibelius' fifth symphony and the pride one would think it evokes in Finnish people, to "one's feelings of shame that *we, our people*, have made Guantanamo" (45). Mister C, just like Foucault, dwells on the demoralizing fact that, truth by definition, nowadays is what seems to be truth. In other words truth has become representations of truthful acts, which then are freely modified: "What ordinary people grow tired of hearing from their rulers are declarations that are never quite the truth: a little short of the truth, or else a little beside the truth, or else the truth with a spin to it that makes it wobble" (126).

Mister C, with South African roots, also feels shame in relation to his white ancestry, on a mixed personal-socio-cultural level: "The generation of white South Africans to which I belong, and the next generation, and perhaps the generation after that too, will go bowed under the shame of the crimes that were committed in their name" (44). He concludes that he "might learn a trick or two from the British about managing collective guilt. They have simply declared their independence from their imperial forebears" (44). He also poses the

question: “Is dishonour a state of being that comes in shades and degrees?” (43), and all the issues raised in his essays on opinions reflect his effort to pose this moral question over and over again throughout the novel. In a sense, he accomplishes what Foucault poses: “Maybe the target nowadays is not to discover what we are but to refuse what we are” (Foucault 336).

Mister C’s experience of shame on a personal level, interpreted as the ego, is connected to his suffering of old age and illness: “Are old men with doddering intellect and poor eyesight and arthritic hands allowed on the trading floor, or will we just get in the way of the young?” (*Diary* 144). His critical self-image compared to Anya is revealing: “this shrunken old man and this earthly incarnation of heavenly beauty” (190). The result in his loss of virility and ability to attract women by other means than money or pity evokes feelings of shame in him: “Her connection with the no doubt freckle-backed Mr Aberdeen is a great disappointment. It pains me to think of the two of them side by side, that is to say, side by side in bed, since that is what counts, finally” (11). The above mentioned mirror-effect of the two parts of the novel can be seen in Anya’s words, in her letter to Mister C in the part called “Soft Opinions”:

I knew you wanted to move to a more personal basis. Which is a roundabout way of saying, I suppose, that to me you belong to another generation and another world, and I don’t mean the world of my parents (I tried sometimes to imagine you and my mother together, but I could not even get the two of you in the same frame). Which is a roundabout way of saying something else, which I don’t need to say, because I am sure you understand. (192)

Indeed he does, which can be seen in his thoughts on his written material: “What has begun to change since I moved into the orbit of Anya is not my opinions themselves so much as my opinion of my opinions” (136).

In the representation of the unconscious we hear Anya and Alan’s voices, where Anya embodies sexuality and Alan immorality. Anya’s self-image of being a sexual object gradually changes under the influence of Mister C’s super-ego and his altered appreciation of her from a sexual illusion to a sympathetic human being, and she starts to notice the flaws of Alan and her ritualized life with him. There is also a sense of her shame due to her ignorance which she compensates with sexual appeal: “I didn’t know you needed a license to practice as a writer” (47). In a way her unconscious realizations become visible in her ego. One example is when she discusses a rape that she and her friend were victims of with Mister C. He comments: “dishonour, *infamia*, is like bubble gum, wherever it touches it sticks” (100), whereby she answers: “as long as you are not / responsible, the dishonour doesn’t stick to you” (104-105). This process is nothing that Anya willingly admits; it is residing in her unconscious, which can be seen in her letter in the end of the novel, where she questions Mister C’s influence over her: “I don’t think you had much influence on me at all. [...] I was myself before I met you and I am still myself now, no change” (203). But she contradicts herself right away by admitting: “You opened my eyes somewhat, I will say that. You showed me there was another way of living, having ideas and expressing them clearly and so forth” (204).

Alan’s shamelessness is a vital ingredient in the narrative. He thinks that Mister C is an “old-fashioned free-love, free-speech sentimental hippie socialist” (92) that is “a hundred years out of date” (107). He continuously questions the moral implications of Mister C’s opinions, all “ignorant bullshit”, and by doing so he points to the fact that “the old powers of

shame have been abolished” (39). Alan states that the market “is beyond good and evil” (98), politics is a mere “sideshow” (99), everything works in “pluses and minuses. Natural justice” (91), and a lie can “transcend its origin” (86). He is a man of his age, a secular being, reading *The Economist* rather than books. Thus cut off from the knowledge of the classics of antiquity, he believes that “Eurydice was the woman who got turned into a pillar of salt” (78). Alan’s obvious jealousy is also a significant marker of the unconscious drives that govern human actions: “life really is a struggle. [...] It is going on in this room at this moment. [...] Anya struggling to save you from me and my voracious depredations. You struggling to split Anya off from me. Me struggling to cut you down to size” (195).

Conclusion

The novel, the traditional novel, [...] is an attempt to understand human fate one case at a time, to understand how it comes about that some fellow being, having started at point A and having undergone experiences B and C and D, ends up at point Z.

J. M. Coetzee (*Elizabeth Costello* 38-39)

Coetzee has become an important voice on ethical phenomena in the world, following the publication of *Disgrace*, *Elizabeth Costello* and most recently *Diary of a Bad Year*. So important in fact that, already in 2002, a whole conference entitled “J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Intellectual Practice” was held in England, focusing on his works and on the role of the intellectual in the public sphere (Poyner 643). The conference resulted in a book called *J. M. Coetzee and the Idea of the Public Intellectual* thus giving wider recognition to Coetzee’s role as a public intellectual voice in contemporary society (Veggian 922-25). This

identification of Coetzee as a “public intellectual” is commented on by Leusmann: “*Disgrace* already went beyond the realms of the politically critical South African novel. And *Elizabeth Costello* confirms that, for years now, Coetzee has been developing a cultural critique that was not visible in his earlier works” (Leusmann 4). The ultimate recognition of Coetzee’s courage to address complex human issues, such as shame, is formulated by the Swedish Academy in their announcement of Coetzee as the laureate of the 2003 Nobel Prize in Literature: “Coetzee’s ‘intellectual honesty erodes all basis of consolation and distances itself from the tawdry drama of remorse and confession’” (Leusmann 1). Coetzee’s works never give ready answers to the difficult issues raised, only a lot of troubling questions. As this essay shows, Coetzee once again wants to manifest that by posing the right questions progression can be made towards the goal of solving them. But he leaves it up to his readers to define if the questions are right or wrong. This trait of Coetzee’s authorship regarding *Diary of a Bad Year* is rightly summed up by Gee: “And though C the essayist never pinpoints a way of escaping shame, the story that the real Coetzee unfolds provides a pragmatic solution: change your behave-iour (sic) and be lucky enough to find someone forgiving like Anya” (Gee 2). Suggestions for future research would be to connect a wider range of Coetzee’s authorship (lectures and essays included) to the theme of shame as well as to research on the concept of shame in depth and within different fields, and relate the findings to sociology and social anthropology. The focus would then be turned from Coetzee’s person as a “public intellectual” to all contemporary inhabitants of the world.

This essay set out to show that Coetzee’s latest novel *Diary of a Bad Year* continues this process of raising important ethical questions addressing the difficult and diffuse notion of shame, and while doing so it relies heavily on an intriguing narrative structure. Harrison comes near to this aim when she states: “Somehow she [Anya] figured out what he [Mister C]

can't: how to live. How to live as body, brain and soul united" (Harrison 2). Read through Freud's theory of the structural model of personality, which enables a link between the three visual divisions on each page to the three parts of the human mind; the super-ego, the ego and the id respectively, this novel becomes a more than powerful exposition of the concept of shame. Especially since this threefold divided structure allows the characters to voice issues of shame both on a personal level and on a public level. The structure and the theme do not co-exist in the story, but are highly dependent on each other, neither one existing without the other. Since the feeling and affect of shame is something highly distinctive of the human race and it is realized and processed within the human mind, this essay advocates a Freudian reading of the novel.

In the creation of *Diary of a Bad Year* Coetzee visualizes Freud's words:

We cannot do justice to the characteristics of the mind by linear outlines like those in a drawing or in primitive painting, but rather by areas of colour melting into one another as they are presented by modernist artists. After making the separation we must allow what we have separated to merge together once more.
(112)

The embroidered unity of the narrative structure and the theme, where every stitch that keeps the colorful piece together is calculated with great precision, wit and humility, results in a fantastic fabrication. Thus the main characters, Mister C and Anya, partake in a transition from unsympathetic cartoons to compassionate, fleshed companions. Their duet in the aria on shame invites everyone to join in and to create something new whatever it may be. But it is

also possible to just lean back to enjoy and marvel at the melodious tones. Artistic creativity, skill and perceptive musicality make Coetzee the master of narration.

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