



J.M. Coetzee's *Diary of a Bad Year*

The Craft of Literary Counterpointing

**J.M. Coetzee's *Diary of a Bad Year*
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Foreword

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Introduction

Coetzee has been amazing his readers since 1974 when his first novel, *Dusklands*, appeared on the shelves. Thirty-four years later, Coetzee has presented us with nine more novels, five collections of essays, two Elisabeth Costello creations that adopt the posture of fiction, and two autobiographies.¹ Till 1999, Coetzee's novels dealt, implicitly and explicitly, through parable and allegory, with issues of South Africa. The bleakness of the South African image captured in his fiction, although at first worrying and shocking, became one of the most overwhelming attributes of his work. Even though Coetzee is not an explicitly political writer like Nadine Gordimer or Breyten Breytenbach,² and he prefers using silence rather than his voice, he did earn the reputation of being "the ideal chronicler of [...] South Africa: clear eyed, hard-headed and a scourge of sentimentality."³

Disgrace, which appeared in 1999, was Coetzee's last open tribute to South Africa. Although this theme still appears now and then in his work, none of his later novels are dedicated to his native country. We can speculate that together with moving to Australia in 2002, Coetzee decided to take a step back, in a certain way, from his origins. It is also possible that he decided to take a different turn in his writing. The novels that appeared after 2002 are

¹ Autobiography is an "autobiographical fiction" where the author, the protagonist, refers to himself in the third person singular. Margaret Lenta, "Autobiography: J.M. Coetzee's *Boyhood* and *Youth*" in *English in Africa* 30.1 (May, 2003): 157-69.

² Jason Cowley, "The NS Profile: J.M. Coetzee," *New Statesman* (October, 1999): 19.

³ "The NS Profile: J.M. Coetzee," p. 18.

not pure fiction anymore. Even though he was always actively engaged in writing essays and opinions, there was always a clear distinction between his work of fiction and the essays. From 2002 this distinction disappears and Coetzee's work has begun to look like generic hybrids, combining fiction and non-fiction. *Elisabeth Costello: Eight Lessons* (2003) for example, is a collection of eight essays representing the opinions of a fictional writer, Elisabeth Costello. Two of the lessons, *The Philosophers and the Animals* and *The Poets and the Animals*, are the Tanner Lectures that Coetzee himself delivered at Princeton University in 1998. Instead of the expected ethical, political or even linguistically oriented speech from Coetzee, the audience was confronted with the fictional Elisabeth Costello, talking through Coetzee, who did his best to take on himself the role of an old, tired, feminist animal activist. From then on, Costello has been recognized in literary circles as Coetzee's alter ego,⁴ who supposedly allows him to express his opinions without the actual burden and responsibility that comes with it.

Slow Man, published in 2005, could masquerade as a pure novel if it were not for Elisabeth Costello emerging out of nowhere in the middle of the book, trying to teach the protagonist a lesson. Moreover, she also takes upon herself the role of the writer creating the life of Paul Rayment, the protagonist. As Costello has been said to be Coetzee's alter ego, it is as if he brings himself into the novel:

It is a daring novelist indeed who would introduce himself as a character in his own novel. Coetzee indulges in mordant self-mockery by bringing himself into the book in the shape of a dowdy, aging Australian female who takes over and directs the plot.

⁴ See for example David Attwell in "The Lives and Times of Elisabeth Costello: J.M Coetzee and the Public Sphere," in *J.M. Coetzee and the Idea of the Public Intellectual*, ed. Jane Poyner (Ohio: Ohio UP, 2006), pp. 33-39.

Amazingly, he gets away with what in any other contemporary novel would be jeered at as a tired and pretentious piece of postmodernist trickiness.⁵

Although John Banville agrees that *Slow Man* is a masterpiece and that the reader will not quickly forget Paul Rayment or Marijana Jokić, he does think that it is time to “let the ubiquitous, omniscient, and tedious Elizabeth Costello fade into a graceful retirement.”⁶

In his latest book, *Diary of a Bad Year*, Coetzee does not employ Costello; he does, however, create an aging Australian writer, of South African origin,⁷ writing a set of opinions on self-chosen subjects for a German publisher for a book entitled *Strong Opinions*.

Simultaneously, he is writing a diary of his everyday life. The opinions of the writer and his diary take up two thirds of every page; the last part of it is given to the thoughts of Anya, a woman who types the author's writings on the computer. While *Elisabeth Costello* consists of essays trying to pose as a novel and is rather raw in its delivery, and *Slow Man* is a novel with some philosophical contents and “postmodernist trickiness” that make the reader question the course of the novel, *Diary of a Bad Year* is a perfect mixture of both, reading smoothly from the beginning to the very end. This very feature, the perfect welding of fiction with philosophical debate, makes the *Diary* simultaneously special, interesting and intricate.

The purpose of this paper is to look closely at the literary counterpointing of fiction and essays in *Diary of a Bad Year*. Because of the complexity of *The Diary*, I have decided to analyse it from two different angles. In the first part of my paper, I will treat *The Diary* as a novel in its own right, without involving Coetzee's own possible agenda. I will discuss the two main

⁵ John Banville, “She's Back,” *The New Republic* (October 10, 2005): 33

⁶ “She's Back,” p. 33.

⁷ Perhaps another alter ego?

characters, the writer and Anya, and how these two interact with each other, how they influence each other and how they deal with other people surrounding them. I will also try to establish the connection between the writer's essays – his so called strong and soft opinions – and the diaries of the writer and Anya in order to show how the literary counterpointing works within the novel.

The second part of my paper will investigate how *Diary of a Bad Year* fits into Coetzee's oeuvre. In this part I will start off by discussing the issue of mixing fiction and essays in Coetzee's novels. Furthermore, I will also talk about how Coetzee toys with the reader by creating characters like Costello and an aging Australian writer who, to a certain degree, resemble Coetzee and let the reader believe that Coetzee is the one that we listen to. Finally, I will treat the topic of themes that keep coming back in Coetzee's work, such as coldness, language and writing, and humanity.

Part I: *Diary of a Bad Year* –a Novel

As I mentioned above, *Diary of a Bad Year* is a complex novel combining fiction and non-fiction. The novel consists of two parts called *Strong Opinions* and *Second Diary*. In the first twenty-five pages of *Strong Opinions*, each page is divided in two. The top of the page belongs to an aging Australian writer with the initials JC, who presents the reader with opinions on freely chosen subjects that he composes for a German book entitled *Strong Opinions*. The second section belongs to C as well, but consists of his private thoughts; it is his diary. The writings begin the moment C meets Anya, a Filipino beauty, who is living with her boyfriend Alan in the same apartment building as C. She is between jobs, and she kills her time by performing administrative tasks for Alan's company. C, charmed by her and in need of someone who would type the manuscripts into the computer, offers her a position as his secretary. The instant Anya accepts his proposition, the division of the novel shifts from two into three: C's opinions, C's private thoughts and Anya's thoughts.

In *Second Diary* C writes another set of opinions, this time "soft opinions," which at the time of writing are not meant for publishing. These opinions are a result of Anya's stimulation and show C more as an old, lonely and compassionate human being than as a writer coming forward with his intense opinions. Because C reveals more of himself in those opinions, he is less present in the diary. His place is taken by Anya's thoughts, Anya reporting Alan's actions and behaviour, or JC reading Anya's letter to him. Therefore, the partition of the inner thoughts

of the characters changes continuously. The last few pages, beside the soft opinions of C, belong completely to Anya.

The literary shift between the strong and soft opinions in the novel is not only to be recognized in the writings but also in the characters. Both, Anya and C, change because of their interaction with each other. C, or as Anya calls him, Señor C, softens, and allows Anya and the reader to encounter him as more than just a writer. Anya softens as well, but moreover, she comes to conclusions that free her and change her existence forever.

I will first focus on JC from *Strong Opinions* to investigate what kind of man he is. Furthermore, I will discuss the interaction between JC's writings and Anya and Alan in order to show that no opinion stays unanswered. Also, I will discuss the private interaction between Anya and JC to discover how the two of them influence each other. I will devote the last section of the first part to the soft opinions of JC for the purpose of showing the results of Anya's influence. This will serve the purpose of demonstrating how and why the literary counterpointing of fiction and essays in *Diary of a Bad Year* works so smoothly and so beautifully.

Part I: *Diary of a Bad Year* –a Novel

1. Señor C – Strong Opinions

JC is a seventy-two-year-old writer, an Australian citizen of South African origin. He lives in an exclusive apartment building called Sydenham Towers in Sydney, leads a quiet life and has no wife or children. He sees himself as “a crumpled old fellow in a corner who at first glance might have been a tramp of the street.”⁸ This ironic self-consciousness introduces JC the writer and the essayist to the reader—a successful, knowledgeable and self-assured man. It is not until the second section of the novel that we perceive him otherwise.

As a widely respected writer, JC has been asked by a German publisher to contribute to the book entitled *Strong Opinions*, a collection of essays on freely chosen subjects from six writers. JC writes thirty-one pieces on different issues regarding politics, global issues, art and culture, society, etc. As it would be impossible to analyse each strong opinion, I have decided to choose a few that in my view are the most significant and say the most about its author. For the sake of clarity, I will first summarize and analyse the issues JC touches upon. As I go along, I will discuss the significance of the analysed opinion in order to show what kind of character JC is and how it emerges from his strong opinions.

⁸ J.M. Coetzee, *Diary of a Bad Year* (London: Harvill Secker, 2007), p. 4.

1.1. "On the origins of the state"

"On the origins of the state" is the first opinion presented to the reader. In this piece JC undermines the origins of the state according to Thomas Hobbes,⁹ and shows the reader that he not only disagrees with Hobbes's view but also that he is against the ultimate power that the state holds and that he is deeply concerned with the future of the autonomous individual.

JC distrusts the state because entering its discourse happens without our knowledge of it. "The state is always there before we are," "we" referring to "some generic we so wide as to exclude no one."¹⁰ JC explains that we enter into the world powerless; we are born into the state, and therefore, we have no choice but to submit ourselves, although unconsciously, to the state's political discourse. JC disagrees with Hobbes's view that we enter the state voluntarily. He draws his own conclusion and as an example he analyzes *The Seven Samurai*, a film by Akira Kurosawa. JC argues that *The Seven Samurai* "offers [...] no less than the [...] theory of the origin of the state,"¹¹ and by using the film as an example, JC shows that entering the state cannot be seen as voluntary. According to JC, the courageous samurai who rescue the inhabitants of the village that was plundered by a group of bandits and offer the villagers to take them "under their wing [for a certain price] that is to say, will take the place of the bandits,"¹² become the new scrounger of the village under false pretences. While the bandits were obviously the bad guys empowered by the inhabitants' fear, the samurai were empowered by the villagers' need for protection. The outcome, however, stays the same. Although the villagers refuse the

⁹ Thomas Hobbes, seventeenth-century English philosopher most active in the field of political philosophy.

¹⁰ J.M. Coetzee, *Diary of a Bad Year* (London: Harvill Secker, 2007), p. 3.

¹¹ *Diary of a Bad Year*, p. 5.

¹² *Diary of a Bad Year*, p. 6.

samurais' offer, and ask them to leave, which JC calls a "wistful ending,"¹³ this example shows that whether the empowered group has good or bad intentions, it always results in creating supremacy, a higher authority ruling from above. Once the supremacy has been chosen, and therefore the state has been created, there is no turning back. As JC says, the form of the state can hardly be changed and its abolishment is impossible. Therefore, "the handover of power to the state is irreversible,"¹⁴ and the state of nature unreachable. As we can see, JC feels strongly about allowing the state to take over power. He feels that the handover of this power, which happened long before we were born, disables us to choose otherwise.

Another issue that JC feels strongly about is the impersonalization of the individual by the state. In this argument we can recognize that JC is against subjecthood and that he is concerned with our autonomy. According to JC, the impersonalization begins at birth, just like entering the state. "We are born subject. From the moment of our birth we are subject. One mark of this subject is the certificate of birth."¹⁵ Furthermore, JC notices that the citizen is not dead until he is formally approved to be dead.

The state pursues the certification of death with extraordinary thoroughness – witness the dispatch of a host of forensic scientists and bureaucrats to scrutinize and photograph and prod and poke the mountain of human corpses left behind by the great tsunami of December 2004 in order to establish their individual identities. No expense is spared to ensure that the census of subjects shall be complete and accurate.

¹³ J.M. Coetzee, *Diary of a Bad Year* (London: Harvill Secker, 2007), p. 6.

¹⁴ *Diary of a Bad Year*, p. 4.

¹⁵ *Diary of a Bad Year*, p. 4.

Whether the citizen lives or dies is not a concern of the state. What matters to the state and its records is whether the citizen is alive or dead.¹⁶

From the choice of the words, it is clear that JC has a strong personal reaction to such subjecthood as described above. Especially the reiterated “prod and poke” gives the impression of JC being almost sick with disgust while writing it. The sarcastic “[n]o expense is spared” suggests that this is one of the unique situations where the state does not hesitate about spending an enormous amount of money on their citizens. JC does not consider the fact that identifying the victims of the tsunami helps the families of the victims; he perceives the entire procedure as the affirmation of impersonalization of the individual by the state. As he says, it does not matter to the state if the individual lives, and how he lives. It does not matter that the individual is dying, literally or figuratively speaking. What matters is whether we are “alive or dead.”¹⁷

In the examples that JC gives in ““On the origins of the state,” he sees the confirmation that we cannot trust power. He undermines the autonomy of the state by questioning its origin. He is also afraid about the future of the individual, or rather, about the lack of it. He is afraid that the more power is handed over to the state, the less space is left to be an autonomous individual. Clearly, JC feels trapped. He lives in a world where an individual is born and, subsequently, subjected to the system. Thereafter, he or she is not able to change it, or to abolish it, and the choices that the citizen is presented with are no choices at all. JC feels that he is not able to move freely because wherever he goes, whatever he does, he is just another subject in the political enterprise that he cannot escape from. He feels that his existence is pre-

¹⁶ J.M. Coetzee, *Diary of a Bad Year* (London: Harvill Secker, 2007), p. 5.

¹⁷ *Diary of a Bad Year*, p. 5.

programmed to a great extent and that the political discourse we are born into “is a part of our fate, as monarchy is the fate of bees.”¹⁸

1.2. “On national shame”

“On national shame,” the tenth strong opinion, is another politically stimulated outlook that pursues JC’s distrust of power further. JC talks here about the shameful and disgraceful use of power by the US government in the war against terror and shows the reader that he is a man of high ethical standards who is against the policy “for the greater good.” Thereafter, he talks about the feeling of personal and collective shame, and he also applies it to himself. This allows the reader to see that he himself also carries a burden of shame and guilt.

JC shows his disapproval of the war against terror by frowning upon the US government which is authorising the torture of the prisoners being suspected of terrorist connections and which is trying to weaken laws prohibiting torture. To commit themselves to such proceedings, they must be shameless.

Their shamelessness is quite extraordinary. Their denials are less than half-hearted. The distinction their hired lawyers draw between torture and coercion is patently insincere, *pro-forma*. In the new dispensation we have created, they implicitly say, the old powers of shame have been abolished. Whatever abhorrence you may feel counts for nothing. You cannot touch us, we are too powerful.¹⁹

¹⁸ J.M. Coetzee, *Diary of a Bad Year* (London: Harvill Secker, 2007), p. 9.

¹⁹ *Diary of a Bad Year*, p. 39.

JC notices that the American government feel that they are beyond anyone's reach; they possess power that nothing and no one can undermine. "It may not take much of a push for Australia to slide into the same condition as America" argues JC, "where on the basis of denunciations from informers ('sources') people simply vanish or are vanished from society, and publicizing their disappearances qualifies as a crime in its own right."²⁰ As the government argues, and as JC sarcastically reminds us, in extraordinary times, extraordinary measures are needed. JC notices, however, that the concept of extraordinary times and measures has been used before. In "On the hurly-burly of politics," JC talks about the disappearances and arrests committed in his native country, South Africa under apartheid, which were committed "in the name of a struggle against terror."²¹ As he says, "I used to think that the people who created these laws that effectively suspended the rule of law were moral barbarians. Now I know they were just pioneers, ahead of their time."²² This comment is sarcastic and ironic and at the same time, it is very harsh and sad. JC admits that what he had witnessed in apartheid South Africa repeats itself years later all over the world, and it repeats itself in the name of the same ideology, war on terrorism. In South Africa, according to the National Party,²³ inventing severe measures during the apartheid period was simply a self-protective policy created to solve local

²⁰ J.M. Coetzee, *Diary of a Bad Year* (London: Harvill Secker, 2007), p. 43. What JC refers to here (people disappearing) is so called "rendition programme," that is designed to counter and prevent terrorist attacks and that operates by sending suspects to Syria where they undergo a series of brutal treatments in order for the US to obtain information. Most of the suspects are not charged with any crimes; they are imprisoned on the basis of their country of origin, their religion and the suspicion of terroristic connections. See also Jane Mayer "Outsourcing Torture. The Secret History of America's 'extraordinary rendition' program" *New Yorker* (14 February, 2005), <<http://www.newyorker.com>>, 29 Mei, 2008

²¹ *Diary of a Bad Year*, p. 171.

²² *Diary of a Bad Year*, p. 171.

²³ The National Party, or the Afrikaners party as it is sometimes referred to, was the party that introduced apartheid in South Africa. NP held power till 1994, when Nelson Mandela became president; it was disbanded in 2005.

problems²⁴ and the NP “had to resort to unconventional devices, propaganda and group force in order to keep political control.”²⁵ Nowadays, it is the threat of terrorism that allows governments all over the world to put extreme measures, such as rendition, into effect. In my opinion, the distressing truth that comes out of this example and that JC wants us to be aware of, is the fact that mankind seems to move backwards instead of forward. We allow history to repeat itself. The difference is, we give it a different name and we try to legalize it.

According to JC, witnessing such atrocities against human rights calls for actions that save one’s honour. Therefore, JC is a man for whom honour and being able to face himself every morning with clear consciousness is very important. Although he considers suicide to be one of the options saving one’s honour, it is not a political action that can stimulate change of the situation. Although JC does not believe that petitions, letters and strikes can revolutionize America’s actions, he does think that only by such measures will people be able to save themselves from dishonour and “to hold their heads up.”²⁶ Thus only by active participation against the inhumane methods, even if they are “for the greater good,” will people be able to save themselves from disgrace. JC himself, however, is not able to live free of guilt and shame. The source of this feeling is the country of his origin, South Africa under apartheid. The crimes committed in his name result in him carrying an enormously heavy burden on his shoulders that grows larger and stronger with every day. The trick used by the British generation nowadays, “The Empire was long ago abolished, they say, so what is there for us to feel responsible for?”²⁷

²⁴ Don Foster, “The Truth and Reconciliation Commission and Understanding Perpetrators,” *South African Journal of Psychology* 30.1 (March 2000): 6.

²⁵ “The Truth and Reconciliation Commission and Understanding Perpetrators,” p. 6.

²⁶ J.M. Coetzee, *Diary of a Bad Year* (London: Harvill Secker, 2007), p. 40.

²⁷ *Diary of a Bad Year*, p. 44.

is of no use to him because it is just another form of renouncement and denial. JC ends the piece by juxtaposing Jean Sibelius's²⁸ fifth symphony to the creation of Guantanamo Bay, the national pride next to the national shame. "Musical creation on the one hand, a machine for inflicting pain and humiliation on the other: The best and the worst that human beings are capable of."²⁹ We can apply this last comment to JC as well. From one side, his creative work, his novels and essays are the best he is capable of. His contribution to the art world can evoke the feeling of pride in him and his fellow South Africans or Australians. On the other hand, as he says, the crimes committed in South Africa, the crimes that showed "the worst that human beings are capable of"³⁰ were committed in his name. It does not matter that he personally has not caused pain or damage; his existence was enough. The guilt and the shame he feels may be recognized as the worst kind that there is because he is not judged by his individual actions; he is judged by his government's actions.

From "On national shame" the reader can observe that JC is a man of high ethical standards. Clearly, he is against the measures that are applied in the war against terror and he is against the policy "for the greater good." He notices that the world begins to follow America in that policy and that while South African crimes of apartheid were seen as a gross violation of human rights, the US rendition programme is seen by many as a necessary method to protect the nation from the threat of terrorism. He opposes the fact that the US government possesses so much power that it can outlaw their own laws. However, although disgusted by the US's approach, JC is a man who still believes in mankind. When he speculates about the possibilities

²⁸ Finnish composer of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; his music played an important role in the creation of the national identity; < <http://www.sibelius.fi>>, 29 Mei, 2008.

²⁹ J.M. Coetzee, *Diary of a Bad Year* (London: Harvill Secker, 2007), p. 45.

³⁰ *Diary of a Bad Year*, p. 45.

of saving one's honour, he assumes that American people indeed feel shame and guilt when observing their government's actions. As he says, he would not be surprised if "[...] there [has] perhaps already been a Stauffenberg plot [...]"³¹ against the ones sitting in the high offices. He does not believe that there is no one who would not feel the same disgust as he does.

Furthermore, JC struggles daily with his own feeling of shame and guilt related to his South African origins. Although he did not commit any atrocities himself, the atrocities committed in his name laid a burden of disgrace and dishonour on his shoulders. This very burden may be the reason why he became a writer. Like the composers he admires, he wanted to create a counterpoint to his dishonour – his work of art that can evoke the feeling of pride and lessen the shame.

1.3. "On paedophilia"

In this piece we can recognize JC as a man who is not afraid to go against the grain and to tickle the public opinion by discussing such taboo topics as paedophilia and pornography. Moreover, we also recognize JC as a man who feels that by all means he is entitled to his privacy and his opinions. He executes this right by attacking feminism for bringing confusion into the way pornography is perceived and steering the public in such a way that having one's own opinion about the taboo topics and enjoying pornography is frowned upon by the society at large.

³¹ J.M. Coetzee, *Diary of a Bad Year* (London: Harvill Secker, 2007), p. 41. Claus von Stauffenberg, a key figure in the plot against Hitler and Nazi Germany that failed in July 20, 1944.

JC shows his negative attitude towards the perception of pornography nowadays by giving an example of paedophilia expressed in art form from thirty years ago.³² He says that Stanley Kubrick's film version of *Lolita* was morally acceptable only because the actress playing the role of Lolita was known to be an adult. He argues that nowadays such disguise would not work; that fact that the "fictional character is a child would trump the fact that the image on the screen is not that of a child."³³ In other words, JC notices that it does not matter if the character is in fact a child; what does matter is that we are presented with an image of the child.

According to JC such an outlook has been created because of the feminist movement. As he puts it boldly, "[u]ntil the feminists entered the fray at the latter end of the twentieth century, morally minded censors had been suffering one defeat after another and were everywhere on the defensive. But on the issue of pornography, feminism, in other respects a progressive movement, chose to go to bed with the religious conservatives, and all became confusion."³⁴

What JC aims at here, is the question why should an image of an adult having sex with an adult pretending to be a child, be banned? He wonders if the case would be different if the image presented children having sex with other children. He comes to the conclusion that the problem that probably occurs is not the sex that takes place, "but the presence of an adult eye somewhere in the scene, either behind the camera or in the darkened auditorium."³⁵ However, he does not think that minors having sex with minors, directed by minors and viewed only by minors would change anything.³⁶ Although the feminists argue that pornography, all sorts of it,

³² *Lolita* by Stanley Kubrick was released in 1962.

³³ J.M. Coetzee, *Diary of a Bad Year* (London: Harvill Secker, 2007), p. 53.

³⁴ *Diary of a Bad Year*, p. 54.

³⁵ *Diary of a Bad Year*, p. 56.

³⁶ *Diary of a Bad Year*, p. 56.

heartens “real-world violations”³⁷ and is “a form of sexual exploitation,”³⁸ JC, according to me, thinks that the problem lies somewhere else. The problem that JC stresses here, the problem that feminists encounter when it comes to pornography but disguise as a sexual exploitation, is the problem of the sexual arousal. It is quite obvious that if feminists went to bed with “the religious conservatives,” they are indeed against any kind of arousal engendered by pornographic images. In their eyes pornography is a “morally evil non-art;”³⁹ and therefore, it is sinful to feel sexual arousal, and by doing so, one corrupts one’s soul. Feminists brought such an outlook into the public opinion and as a result, they created a new climate that condemns pornography at the very start. This is the aspect that JC opposes. Why should a certain group of people be able to influence society at large in such a way that it takes away the ability to freely enjoy whatever one finds enjoyable? Why should the pressure of the public opinion inhibit one’s individual needs if expressed in one’s own private domain? Those questions show that JC struggles once again against the use of power, this time the power belonging to society that can enforce such pressure over the individual that it can decide what one is or is not supposed to do. JC fights here for the right to be an individual and also for the right to privacy. However, what concerns JC even more, is the taboo put on the subject of paedophilia, pornography, sex between a minor and an adult, sex between teachers and students, etc. He feels that society frowns upon those issues to such an extent that speaking for the defence corresponds with

³⁷ J.M. Coetzee, *Diary of a Bad Year* (London: Harvill Secker, 2007), p. 55.

³⁸ *Diary of a Bad Year*, p. 55.

³⁹ Flo Leibowitz, “A Note on Feminist Theory of Representation. Questions Concerning the Autonomy of Art,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 48.4 (Fall, 1990): 361.

committing social suicide. Even debating about those issues earns you nothing more than “an edict of exile”.⁴⁰

In this piece the reader can observe that JC is a man who cherishes his privacy. He feels that the individual is entitled to enjoy in his own private space whatever images he, or she, finds enjoyable. Therefore, we can say that JC is against the societal power to influence one's actions. Also, JC is a man who is not afraid to break the silence about taboo topics. He feels he is entitled to his own opinion even if that opinion does not correlate with the public beliefs.

1.4. “On the slaughter of animals”

“On the slaughter of animals” is a fairly short piece that shows, however, JC's love and respect for animals. When JC discusses a cooking programme we can recognize how unnatural the idea of consuming animals is for him. Furthermore, he talks about cattle transportation from Australia to Egypt and the brutalisation of the cattle during this trip, and shows to the reader his humane approach towards the animals as well as his resignation when it comes to fighting for animal rights.

JC shows his attitude towards animals, and especially towards eating animals, in the very first lines. “[T]o someone unused to eating meat, the spectacle [of raw ingredients lying on the kitchen table] must be highly unnatural.”⁴¹ Although JC does not specify that he also is that someone, we know from his diary that he is a vegetarian or a vegan; when he invites Anya and

⁴⁰ J.M. Coetzee, *Diary of a Bad Year* (London: Harvill Secker, 2007), p. 57.

⁴¹ *Diary of a Bad Year*, p. 63.

Alan for a dinner, he serves roast quail but he himself eats butternut and a tofu tartlet. JC describes the cooking procedure further:

For among the fruit and vegetables and oils and herbs and spices lie chunks of flesh hacked mere days ago from the body of some creature killed purposely and with violence. Animal flesh looks much the same as human flesh (why should it not?). So, to the eye unused to carnivore cuisine, the inference does not come automatically (“naturally”) that the flesh on display is cut from a carcass (animal) rather than from a corpse (human).⁴²

JC cannot hide his revulsion towards eating animal flesh. Firstly, he describes meat as a “chunk of flesh” instead of as a piece of meat like every meat eater would say. Secondly, the meat comes from an animal that was “killed purposely and with violence.” These words say simply that the animal was murdered to satisfy the human lust for meat. Moreover, the animal was killed with violence showing no regard for its existence or its suffering. Finally, according to JC, as there is no difference in appearance between the flesh of a human and that one of an animal, it seems, for the vegetarian, that the piece of meat lying on the table comes from the human body. In my opinion, this last comment shows that JC, in many respects, sees animals as equal to himself. It is difficult to imagine that one could confuse animal flesh with human flesh, especially in a cooking programme. Therefore, we can say that JC looks at the animal flesh as a flesh from a living being, just like we, humans, are living being.

JC argues further on behalf of animals, and it is almost as if he appeals to the reader. “It is important that not everyone should lose this way of seeing the kitchen [...], as a place where,

⁴² J.M. Coetzee, *Diary of a Bad Year* (London: Harvill Secker, 2007), p. 63.

after the murders, the bodies of the dead are brought to be done up (disguised) before they are devoured (we rarely eat flesh raw; indeed, raw flesh is dangerous to our health)."⁴³ JC speaks of consuming meat as if it were a cannibalistic activity, and I am sure this is also what he aims at. The animal pieces of flesh are "bodies of the dead" to him that are waiting for humans, the cannibals, to eat them. His comment between the brackets can be interpreted in two different ways. If we perceive it as sarcasm then this irony is aimed at the irrationality of the human thinking; after all animals are the ones who should be afraid of us and not the other way around. JC then, shows his hopelessness in his own case. He is aware of the fact that humans will never perceive animals as he does, as living beings that suffer at our hands. Moreover, even after they are dead, we see them as an endangerment to our existence. Another way of looking at this comment is as a statement of the fact. JC reminds us that raw meat endangers our health because of bacteria that can diminish only during the cooking process. Therefore, he stresses that we are not supposed to eat meat as it is not a natural process.

When JC talks about the brutalisation of the cattle transported from Australia to Egypt for slaughter, we can recognize JC's humane approach to animals but also, his resignation when it comes to the fight for animal rights. The cattle that are transported, in order to keep them calm and easier to control, have their tendons hacked.⁴⁴ To lessen the cruelty, a special killing-bed has been offered to the slaughterhouses; however, because of the hassle that comes with its usage, it is not used.⁴⁵ JC pursues:

⁴³ J.M. Coetzee, *Diary of a Bad Year* (London: Harvill Secker, 2007), p. 63.

⁴⁴ *Diary of a Bad Year*, p. 64.

⁴⁵ *Diary of a Bad Year*, pp. 64-65.

The notion of compassionate killing is riddled with absurdities. What well-meaning welfare campaigners seem to desire is that the beast should arrive before its executioner in a calm state of mind, and that death should overtake it before it realizes what is going on. But how can an animal be in a calm state of mind after being goaded off a ship into the back of a truck and driven through teeming streets to a strange place reeking of blood and death? The animal is confused and desperate and no doubt difficult to control. That is why it has its tendons hacked.⁴⁶

JC thinks that the idea of compassionate killing is ridiculous because there is no way to kill an animal compassionately. Having compassion would simply mean, not killing them and I think that this is also what JC aims at in this passage. Instead of figuring out various possibilities of “gentle killing,” we should not kill them at all. And if we do, we should not pretend that we care and that we are more than “executioners.”

In this strong opinion we can discover JC's love and respect for animals and the fact that he feels that they are equal to us, human beings. As a vegetarian or a vegan, cooking programmes are almost disgraceful to him as he does not see a difference between human and animal flesh. He finds it very important that at least some of us perceive the kitchen the same way he does, as a place of murder. However, he is also aware that fighting for animal rights, although great in itself, has small chances of achieving anything because without the reawakening of society, animals will be nothing more to people than a chunk of flesh.

⁴⁶ J.M. Coetzee, *Diary of a Bad Year* (London: Harvill Secker, 2007), p. 65.

1.5. “On Tony Blair” and “On Harold Pinter”

I have decided to talk about those two strong opinions together because they have an important issue in common, JC's approach to writing and to writers. In “On Tony Blair” JC shows that it is of a great importance to him to be able to inform his readers truthfully about all kinds of issues, especially politics. In “On Harold Pinter” we can see that JC begins to doubt that his writing is enough and shows that he wonders if he fulfils dutifully his position as an intellectual.

From “On Tony Blair” we can clearly notice that JC cherishes truth above all virtues. He recognizes that people, tired of the politicians' lies, turn to “academics or churchmen or scientists or writers”⁴⁷ who can provide them with answers and, as we could call it, with the translation of what politicians say and do. Here we can see that JC prides himself on being put in such a position and that he wants to offer to his reader what he or she expects, the truth about the world. He is frustrated though because it is impossible to fulfil those expectations.

But how can this hunger [for truth] be satisfied by the mere writer (to speak just of writers) when the grasp of the facts that the writer has is usually incomplete or unsure, when his very access to the so-called facts is likely to be via media within the political field of forces, and when, half the time, he is because of his vocation as much interested in the liar and the psychology of the lie as in the truth?⁴⁸

Consequently, JC faces two obstacles when it comes to providing the truth to his readers. First, he himself is not able to obtain the entire truth. The truth presented to him is maybe only a bit less stretched and strained than the one presented to the public. Therefore he cannot

⁴⁷ J.M. Coetzee, *Diary of a Bad Year* (London: Harvill Secker, 2007), p. 126.

⁴⁸ *Diary of a Bad Year*, p. 126.

consciously confirm that his writings are the true depiction of reality. The second problem that he faces is the profession of being a writer itself. As he stresses, his interest in truth is as deep as his interest in the lie, the psychology of the lie and the psychology of the liar. Hence, it is possible that his writing will focus rather on the possible explanations, and so those explanations will also always be mere speculations, of why the lie has been created and what makes the liar to create it, than on the truth that probably is not the truth anyway. Consequently, he will never be able to satisfy his readers' hunger for truth and he will always end up disappointing them.

In "On Harold Pinter" JC discusses the bravery of Pinter's speech delivered for the 2005 Nobel Prize for literature, where he called for Tony Blair "to be put on trial as a war criminal."⁴⁹ I think that JC wishes for the same bravery in himself.

So it takes some gumption to speak as Pinter has spoken. Who knows, perhaps Pinter sees quite clearly that he will be slickly refuted, disparaged, even ridiculed. Despite which he fires the first shot and steels himself for the reply. What he has done may be foolhardy but it is not cowardly. And there come times when the outrage and the shame are so great that all calculation, all prudence, is overwhelmed and one must act, that is to say, speak.⁵⁰ JC admires Pinter for not thinking about saving his face, but speaking out of his heart and his beliefs and speaking out loud. He respects Pinter for his courage to speak up in front of many people, especially as he himself is not like that.⁵¹ He is a person who retreats into his privacy and he speaks out, acts, only in his writing. He acknowledges, however, that probably it is not

⁴⁹ J.M. Coetzee, *Diary of a Bad Year* (London: Harvill Secker, 2007), p. 127.

⁵⁰ *Diary of a Bad Year*, p. 127.

⁵¹ *Diary of a Bad Year*, p. 197.

enough anymore and that one day he will be forced, because of the times, burning shame, and his own need, to come out of the comfort of his privacy and to say what he needs to say, even if it means being “refuted, disparaged, [and] ridiculed.”⁵²

From those two strong opinions we can deduce JC's opinion on his own writing. He is a writer who above all would like to present his readers with the truth. Not being able to do so frustrates him and makes him aware of the fact that one way or the other he will always disappoint his readers. He also begins to recognize that mere writing might not be enough nowadays and that one day, he will have to come out of his private self and speak up.

1.6. “On authority in fiction”

In “On authority in fiction” JC pursues further the topic of writing. In this short piece we can recognize that JC opposes the idea of being given an ultimate authority in life because of the authority he presents in fiction and non-fiction. He argues on behalf of that by using Tolstoy as an example.

According to JC, even if the author had earned the authority of the narrator, he should not be given the ultimate authority. JC begins by saying that although the concept of the death of the author has long been in circulation, and he himself always admired the idea of no authority, he cannot free himself from the idea that authority does play a role in writing and not only by executing rhetorical tricks.⁵³ According to JC, one of the writers that is a master of

⁵² J.M. Coetzee, *Diary of a Bad Year* (London: Harvill Secker, 2007), p. 127.

⁵³ *Diary of a Bad Year*, pp. 149-50.

authority is Tolstoy. However, he also paid a price for it as he was perceived by the public as being an authority on more than just writing.

During his last years, Tolstoy was treated not only as a great author but as an authority on life, a wise man, a sage. His contemporary Walt Whitman endured a similar fate. But neither had much wisdom to offer: wisdom was not what they dealt in. They were poets above all; otherwise they were ordinary men with ordinary, fallible opinions. The disciples who swarmed to them in quest of enlightenment look sadly foolish in retrospect.⁵⁴

JC clearly explains here to the reader that being able to evoke authority in one's fiction and non-fiction, does not mean that the writer is an authority on life. It is not wisdom that they operate in but merely their own world of writings and speculations. JC stresses that the writer cannot be expected to provide answers to global, social, political and cultural issues. A writer is and always will be, "above all" and just, a writer. He or she will always be just a person with his own opinions and presenting those opinions with authority does not make them true or ultimate. I think that JC applies this also to himself. By talking about this issue JC shows that he himself would feel uncomfortable if he were given such a position. His strong opinions have no authority to guide the reader through life, have no authority to be seen as enlightenment. They are just a mere outlook of a mere writer on what he sees happening around him.

JC is also aware of how the writer can obtain the authority in his fiction and non-fiction and by that he shows that he is conscious of his limitations as a writer. As he says, "[I]earn to *speak without authority*, says Kierkegaard. By copying Kierkegaard's words here, I make

⁵⁴ J.M. Coetzee, *Diary of a Bad Year* (London: Harvill Secker, 2007) , p. 151.

Kierkegaard into an authority. Authority cannot be taught, cannot be learned. This paradox is a true one.”⁵⁵ The paradox is that by citing Kierkegaard’s concept of disavowing authority, JC himself defeats the very notion. He gives him authority although what Kierkegaard says is a mere opinion. Furthermore, the authority can only be given to the writer by its readers. JC has read Kierkegaard and by quoting him, by making his words worthy of using them in his own writing, he gives him a position of authority. JC knows therefore, that only his readers can give him the power of authority and only they can make his words worthy of quoting.

“On authority in fiction” shows JC as a man who is very conscious of his writing and who thinks that evoking a voice of authority has certain consequences. He knows that the authority can be given to the author only by his readers, but he also recognizes that readers can go one step too far in the expectations towards that authority. That shows that although JC might agree to be an authority in his fiction and non-fiction, he strongly opposes being given the same authority in life. As he stresses, he is and always will be just a writer.

1.7. Conclusion

From *Strong Opinions* JC the writer emerges as a self-confident, strongly opinionated, and self-conscious man. He distrusts all sorts of power and he is against the power that can influence him as an individual. He is afraid that with the increase of the state’s supremacy and societal influence, there will be no possibility and no place to maintain the status of the individual. JC, however, goes against the grain and against being subjected to the state, and upholds his individuality and the right to have an opinion by discussing taboo subjects. It does

⁵⁵ J.M. Coetzee, *Diary of a Bad Year* (London: Harvill Secker, 2007), p. 151.

not matter to him that he can be condemned by the society at large; he feels he has the right to discuss whatever he wishes to and he executes this privilege. JC is also a man with high moral standards that are present not only in the fight for human rights, but also in the way he perceives animals. Although he knows that the animal rights campaigners have small chances, it is still important to him to make his own small contribution to their cause. His approach to animals shows that JC's humane position and behaviour is not only directed towards his own species, but to all living creatures. Furthermore, *Strong Opinions* show that JC is very conscious of his position as a writer. He feels honoured that the readers turn to his fiction and non-fiction in the search for the truth. However, he warns the reader that he is not able to fulfil those expectations entirely. He also calls upon the reader to be cautious about the authority they give him. Even if his writings evoke authority, the readers must not apply this authority to real life.

2. Anya and Alan

The action of *Diary of a Bad Year* begins when JC meets Anya, a young woman living with her partner Alan in the same apartment building as JC. Anya is a twenty-nine-year-old beauty and she calls herself a “little Filipina” although she is only half Philippine and she has never lived in the Philippines. “She has black hair, shapely bones. A certain golden glow to her skin, *lambent* might be the word.”⁵⁶ When JC meets her, Anya is between jobs and kills her time by helping with the administration in Alan’s company and by shopping. She is spoiled and very conscious about her looks. She thinks of herself as someone “racy, exciting, exotic,”⁵⁷ and she knows how to achieve what she wants with her looks. She thinks that JC comes from Colombia and therefore calls him El Señor, or Señor C, and herself his La Segretaria. Even when she discovers her mistake later on, she still refers to him as Señor C. Although she is not looking for a job, she accepts JC’s proposition to be his typist and consequently, adds her writings to the story.

Alan, Anya’s partner, is a “pale, hurrying, plump and ever-sweaty fellow”⁵⁸ who has left his wife to be with Anya. He is a man who likes to be in control and does so to uphold his image of a successful and powerful businessman at the top of his career. He presents himself as an intellectual as well. He reads a lot, he is familiar with global, political and cultural issues and theories, and he has an opinion and answer to everything. He executes his domination also in his private life. He treats Anya as his property and expects from her to match his status. He wants her to look good and to be representative, so he encourages her shopping sprees by putting no limits to it. He gets aroused by the idea that other men desire Anya and consequently

⁵⁶ J.M. Coetzee, *Diary of a Bad Year* (London: Harvill Secker, 2007), p. 6.

⁵⁷ *Diary of a Bad Year*, p. 27.

⁵⁸ *Diary of a Bad Year*, p. 9.

he stimulates her flirtatious behaviour. However, as he sees himself as the master in their relationship, she cannot undermine his opinion; instead, she is supposed to react with respect and admiration to his outlooks.

From the very beginning, JC is charmed by Anya. Although he cannot explain it, he is strongly drawn to her and does everything to be close to her. He is not impressed with her typing skills; however, he keeps his objections to himself not to offend her. She, on the other hand, does not hesitate to tell him what is wrong with his opinions and she does not hesitate to discuss them with Alan. This three-way exchange takes place in the diary part and complements JC's strong opinions.

3. Interaction – Strong Opinions vs. the Diary

Anya and Alan engage in interaction with JC's writings in the course of the novel. As for most of the time Anya types in her apartment, Alan can also read JC's strong opinions. The further into the novel, the more arousal and response we get from those two to JC's script. The interesting part is that although they both serve the purpose of showing the reaction of the society to JC's text, they do so in different ways. Whereas Anya, sceptic and not attentive in the beginning, later on gives more time and attention to the meaning of the strong opinions, Alan judges them at once and contradicts them with his own standpoint. Furthermore, whereas Anya stimulates JC to write about more than just politics, stimulates him to show more of his heart in his writings and has the power to influence JC and be influenced by him, Alan stays untouched. He represents the inability to consider and to take into account someone else's ideas. With his narrow-mindedness and judgmental approach he represents inability to change. Therefore, Anya and Alan symbolize two different societal reactions and together they simultaneously undermine and reinforce JC's strong opinions, as well as offering JC the possibility to look at his writings from a different, younger, perspective.

3.1. Politics

The first reaction to JC's writing concerns politics, and in particular, "On the origins of the state." Anya is generally bored with politics and thinks that JC could do much better than involving himself in the endless and unfruitful political debate. With her comments, however,

she unconsciously confirms JC's claims. Alan takes just one peek at JC's text and after misunderstanding the meaning of it, he dismisses the entire argument.

Anya is disappointed that JC's writing only concerns politics. She finds it boring and useless to write about because "people have had it up to here with politics."⁵⁹ With her comments she brings JC's attention to the generation gap and the intellectual gap between him and the young generation. He looks at everything from the point of view of the seventy-two-year-old old-school writer and intellectual while the young generation is mostly focused on the practical rather than the theoretical side of life. Young people are not bothered with politics to such an extent as he is. The speculations about the origin of the state are of no importance to young people, and even if they were, they are probably not able to understand it. Anya fails to see the connection between *The Seven Samurai* and the state, and she wonders "[h]ow John Howard and the Liberals are just the seven samurai all over again? Who is going to believe that?"⁶⁰ Besides, she does not care about it. As she says, "[p]olitics is all around us, it's like the air, it's like pollution. You can't fight pollution. Best to ignore it, or just get used to it, adapt." Although she fails to understand what JC aims at, she substantiates JC's argument without knowing it. He says that the politics and the state have too much power and rule our world and that there is nothing we can do about it. Anya states the same in simple words; however, she approaches it differently; she pays no attention to it because she knows it is useless. Alan on the other hand, takes one peek over Anya's shoulder while she is typing and says "[b]irth certificates for animals [...] is he crazy? Does he want to give them all names? Clifford John Rat. Susan Annabel Rat. What about death certificates too, while he is about it? When are you

⁵⁹ J.M. Coetzee, *Diary of a Bad Year* (London: Harvill Secker, 2007), p. 26.

⁶⁰ *Diary of a Bad Year*, p. 33.

coming to bed?"⁶¹ JC argues against subjecthood, and he explains that not being given a birth certificate, living without identity, means "living outside the state like an animal (animals do not have identity papers."⁶² Alan does not pay enough attention to go properly through JC's text. In his arrogance, he mocks JC without having read the argument.

Anya also responds to "On the national shame." She tries to convince JC that there is no such thing as collective shame and that nowadays only your own actions count. "You have got it wrong Mister C. Old thinking. [...] Abuse, rape, torture, it doesn't matter what: the news is, as long as it is not your fault, as long as you are not responsible, the dishonour doesn't stick to you. So you have been making yourself miserable over nothing."⁶³ Anya oversimplifies the feeling of shame. She presents to JC an easy, but by his standards dishonourable, way out of his misery. JC rejects that idea and reminds her that "no man is an island."⁶⁴

We can see from Anya's and Alan's reactions to JC's political issues that the young generations perceive the political discourse as not worthy of troubling one's mind. According to them you cannot fight something that will always be there, and bothering oneself with it only means wasting time. Furthermore, young people live for themselves, and although they live in the society, they do not coexist with it. In their perspective, every man is an island. Those reactions, however, show JC that, for the young generation, his thinking is outdated and that probably it would not be creditable for many.

⁶¹ J.M. Coetzee, *Diary of a Bad Year* (London: Harvill Secker, 2007), p. 36.

⁶² *Diary of a Bad Year*, p. 4.

⁶³ *Diary of a Bad Year*, pp. 104-05.

⁶⁴ *Diary of a Bad Year*, p. 107.

3.2. Global Issues

“On paedophilia” calls up an angry response in Anya. She challenges JC’s line of reasoning and accidentally shows that even such a great writer as JC can make mistakes. Alan disagrees with the idea that reality and perception are two different issues and argues that everything around us is perception.

Anya is strongly repulsed by JC’s argument that a sex scene between two adults, one of who pretends to be a child, should not be frowned upon. According to her what we visually experience on the screen, a child, might actually present the truth. “My first reaction is to go back to him and say, How do you know an actor who looks like a child and acts the part of a child isn’t in fact a child? Since when have movie credits come with everyone’s ages in brackets behind their names, and notarized copies of their birth certificates? Get real!”⁶⁵ Interestingly, Anya makes a good point here. JC writes that Stanley Kubrick was able to film *Lolita* only because the actress playing Lolita, Sue Lyon, was known not to be a child anymore. However, Sue was cast for the role when she was fourteen years old. She was filming, therefore, when she was a minor. Moreover, she could not attend the première because at the moment of release, 13th of June, 1962, Sue was still underage.⁶⁶ JC is mistaken in his argument and this mistake proves Anya’s point.

Alan juxtaposes JC’s thinking to Kant’s theory of perception. According to him “everything is perception. [...] If the audience in a theatre perceives a child being raped, then it

⁶⁵ J.M. Coetzee, *Diary of a Bad Year* (London: Harvill Secker, 2007), p. 89.

⁶⁶ Movie database on line, <www.imdb.com> and Sue Lyon’s biography on line, <<http://www.perfectpeople.net/biography/1117/sue-lyon.htm>>, June 10, 2008

is a child being raped, period, social consensus, end of story.”⁶⁷ Thus it does not matter that in reality the child is not a child but an adult playing a fictional child. What matters is that we identify that person as a child. This is the “social consensus” that we live in. Although Alan undermines JC’s argument about pornography, he sustains JC’s claim about the societal power. He shows that the social agreement about what is right or wrong denies our right to individuality and privacy.

Anya’s concern with JC’s arguments shows that even JC, the great writer, is still only a human and shows, to Anya and to the reader, that he, too, can make mistakes. Alan’s line of reasoning, although it brings another possible perspective on JC’s opinion, reinforces JC’s perception of power held by society at large in the life of the individual.

3.3. Writing vs. Acting

On the matter of writing and acting on behalf of human rights, we only hear the voice of Alan who accuses JC of being an impostor and a hypocrite. By doing so, he confirms JC’s fear of his writing not being enough in the times that we live in. Alan also represents the societal judgement and societal expectation that a writer that engages in discussing political, global and cultural issues on paper, should simultaneously engage in the verbal crusade.

What JC is concerned with, his writing not being enough, disappointing his readers and being given authority he does not want, comes back in the form of Alan’s accusations. During a celebration dinner on account of the completion of *Strong Opinions*, Alan attacks JC and accuses him of being a hypocrite.

⁶⁷ J.M. Coetzee, *Diary of a Bad Year* (London: Harvill Secker, 2007), p. 90.

You put yourself forward as a lone voice of conscience speaking up for human rights and so forth, but I ask myself, If he really believes in those human rights, why isn't he out in the real world fighting for them? What is his track record? And the answer, according to my researches, is: His track record is not so hot. In fact his track record is virtually blank.⁶⁸

Alan puts in words what most of society thinks. Why does he not do something more than just writing? Why doesn't he speak up? Interestingly, Alan and the society that he represents, expect from the politically opinionated writer to do more than just writing. They expect action, heated debates, speaking up.

Furthermore, Alan argues that no one will respect his book if he does not put words into action. He notices that maybe in the old world, meaning Europe, the society wants to hear about JC's outlook on what is wrong with the world, but "in the English-speaking world, the world of hard heads and common sense, a book of pronouncements on the real world won't get much traction, coming from a man whose sole achievement lies in the sphere of the fanciful."⁶⁹ Alan's words bring the reader's attention once again to false expectations. The writer has to conform to his writings, but moreover, he must do so in order to be successful and widely respected. He is not entitled to have mere opinions, he must act on them.

⁶⁸ J.M. Coetzee, *Diary of a Bad Year* (London: Harvill Secker, 2007), p. 197.

⁶⁹ *Diary of a Bad Year*, p. 206.

3.4. Private Interaction

While the interaction between the strong opinions and the diary adds to JC's writings, the private interaction between Señor C and Anya influences their lives. Anya discovers the true nature of Alan and chooses to go ahead with her life without him by her side. JC realizes not only that his opinions are outdated, but that his life is coming to an end and that he has met Anya, this incredible goddess, too late.

Because of the interaction with JC Anya realizes that Alan is nothing more than an empty, deceitful, untrustworthy and arrogant narcissist. Whereas she has a soft spot for JC and treats him with the utmost respect, Alan does nothing more than abusing, ridiculing JC and trying to steal his money. Witnessing that, Anya chooses for herself, meaning, she chooses for JC and for living a moral life instead of living in wealth but with an immoral man. In the letter she writes to JC from Brisbane, she confesses to JC that he helped her to see the truth.

Did you have undue influence on me? I don't think so. I don't think you had much influence on me at all. I don't mean it in a negative way. I was lucky to meet you when I did. I would probably still be with Alan but for you; but you didn't influence me. I was myself before I met you and I am still myself now, no change. 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.⁷⁰

Anya says that JC did not influence her in the way that it changed her character. What he did was much more subtle; he showed her a different way of being. He showed her that there is much more to the world than just living and profiting for oneself. He showed her that

⁷⁰J.M. Coetzee, *Diary of a Bad Year* (London: Harvill Secker, 2007), pp. 203-04.

compassion and humanity still occupy a place in everyday life and that being truthful and honest to oneself and others is important.

Furthermore, Anya develops compassionate love for JC that makes her understand his love for her. "But maybe, in another life, if our ages were more compatible, you and I could set up a house together and I could be your inspiration. Your resident inspiration. How would you like that? You could sit at your desk and write, and I could take care of the rest."⁷¹ Whether she writes that out of kindness or out of love does not really matter. What matters is that she gives JC something to look forward to. Instead of heading into the unknown, he knows that there is a chance he might meet her again, if not in this life, than in the other one, and if their ages are compatible, it will be possible for them to be together. This shows that Anya is a caring person and that she has come a long way from the beginning of the novel, where she is spoiled and selfish, to the very end where she reassures JC that one way or another, she will always be beside him.

JC is influenced by Anya on two levels. The first is that of being a writer. With Anya's suggestions and with her being, she has affected his way of looking at his opinions.

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. As I read through what mere hours before she translated from a record of my speaking voice into 14-point type, there are flickering moments when I can see these hard opinions of mine through her eyes – see

⁷¹ J.M. Coetzee, *Diary of a Bad Year* (London: Harvill Secker, 2007), p. 204.

how alien and antiquated they may seem to a thoroughly modern Millie, like the bones of some odd extinct creature, half bird, half reptile, on the point of turning into stone.⁷²

JC realizes that the way he looks at the world is not the way the young see it. Although his opinions are still the same, he does not think they are meant for the modern world. He is an old man who looks at everything pessimistically. He does not like the changes happening around him; different life styles and people's approach to others upset him. In his writings he opposes that; he expresses his regret that mankind becomes a mechanical being that follows the rules given by the state and society. There is no individual thinking, there is no interest in what is happening around them; they exist only in their private domains and they care only about themselves. Unfortunately, as he realizes himself as well, his voice is and will be lost in "the world of hard heads and common sense."⁷³

Another reawakening because of the interaction with Anya happens on the personal level. JC realizes that his time on earth is coming to an end and that he has met Anya too late. From the moment he meets her, he is overwhelmed by her beauty and freshness and as he says, "[he] would give [his] right hand to be [Alan]."⁷⁴ By meeting Anya, by meeting a woman of his dreams, he is faced with the fact of being all alone and not being able to do anything about it. He is a seventy-two-year-old man with no chance of companionship. "As I watched her an ache, a metaphysical ache, crept over me that I did nothing to stem. And in an intuitive way she knew about it, she knew that in the old man in the plastic chair in the corner there was something personal going on, something to do with age and regret and the tears of things." JC

⁷² J.M. Coetzee, *Diary of a Bad Year* (London: Harvill Secker, 2007), p. 137.

⁷³ *Diary of a Bad Year*, pp. 203-04.

⁷⁴ *Diary of a Bad Year*, p. 39.

does not repress that ache of regret. He allows it to happen probably because it makes him feel alive again, it makes him feel. Thus although Anya makes him aware of his age and the coming end, she also awakes him, makes him alive for the brief period of few months. However, JC does not know what is Anya's purpose in his life. His deep urge for having her around is not entirely understandable for him. "I seem to have grown obsessed [with Anya], to the extent that a man can be called obsessed when the sexual urge has dwindled and there is only a hovering uncertainty about what he is actually after, what he actually expects the object of his infatuation to supply."⁷⁵ Although JC does not provide an answer to his uncertainty, it is clear in my opinion that he yearns for companionship, a bit of reality in the form of a warm compassionate someone next to him who could help him enter the afterlife with a smile on his lips.

The private interaction between Anya and JC allows them both to develop emotionally and professionally. JC shows Anya that life is more than just shopping and looking good; he brings her attention to the fact that there is another way of living than just caring for oneself. On the other hand, JC learns from Anya to look differently at his opinions. He recognizes that he is too outdated for the modern world with his strong opinions and that this is actually the normal course of things. However, he recognizes as well, that his time is limited and meeting Anya evokes a feeling of regret for something he never had and never will have. This interaction between Anya and JC awakens a feeling of sadness in the reader. JC's craving for companionship and for Anya shows how lonely he feels and that his professional success is nothing compared to the feeling of emptiness surrounding him. Anya's understanding of his desire and loneliness,

⁷⁵ J.M. Coetzee, *Diary of a Bad Year* (London: Harvill Secker, 2007), p. 89.

and her gentleness about it, shows her respect towards JC and her compassionate love for him. Her attitude reassures JC that although it is too late now, in another life or in the afterlife, everything is possible. However, looking at the title of the book, we might say that Anya's reassurance and her love for JC are not enough. JC's loneliness and regret is still greater than the joy and all the promises Anya gives him.

3.5. Conclusion

The interaction between the strong opinions and the diary shows that no writing, no opinion, stays unanswered. Anya and Alan create a crossing point with JC's script and mirror public opinion. They are the first voice, the tryout of what will come after the book is published. Although most of the time they disagree with JC and undermine him, simultaneously and unconsciously they reinforce his arguments. However, they also show him that his thinking is outdated and that young people are less than bothered by the set of opinions coming from an old-school writer.

The private interaction shows that there are exceptions in the young and heartless generation. It shows that compassion and understanding can still be found and that young people too, can be an inspiration. Although Anya makes JC aware of his regrets and loneliness, and this pain overwrites the joy of having her beside him, she also persuades him to look differently on his opinions and to write about more than politically stimulated outlooks. She encourages him to look deeper into his heart and to open himself to his readers even if it means facing difficult issues that bring sadness upon him.

4. Soft Opinions

Because of Anya's influence, and the reawakened regret of passing life, JC decides to act on Anya's advice, and writes yet another set of opinions, this time soft opinions entitled *Second Diary*. He composes twenty-four outlooks and this time, instead of telling the reader what is wrong with the world, he tells us about himself. Whereas in *Strong Opinions* fifteen cases treat or are strongly related to politics, in soft opinions only two outlooks are occupied by politics and both refer to JC himself rather than to a general design. In soft opinions the reader does not have to speculate about what kind of a man JC is, JC makes it clear himself. He confesses to his shortcomings, he confesses to the lack of belief in his writing and to his negative and passive attitude towards the modern world. He writes about birds, Johann Sebastian Bach and Dostoevsky. He writes about the fear of dying, about his father and about his fans. Simply, he writes from his heart and he goes straight to the heart of the reader.

4.1. JC as a Writer

Whereas in *Strong Opinions* JC presents himself as a man conscious of his position as a writer and the responsibilities that come with it, in *Second Diary* he questions the quality of his writing. In "On mass emotion" JC confesses that he perceives his art as cold and spiritless because it does not follow mass emotions. In "On writing life" he explains that as a writer grows older, his fiction becomes less intriguing and more schematic; therefore one turns to writing non-fiction. "On the mother tongue" shows JC's struggle with the impossibility of translating thoughts on to the paper.

In "On mass emotion" JC undermines his art because he believes it to be cold and unemotional. He looks back on everything he has written and wonders if it even can be called art if it is spiritless.

As a young man, I never for a moment allowed myself to doubt that only from a self disengaged from the mass and critical of the mass could true art emerge. Whatever art has come from my hand has in one way or another expressed and ever glorified in this disengagement. But what sort of art has that been, in the end? Art that is not great-souled, as the Russians would say, that lacks generosity, fails to celebrate life, lacks love.⁷⁶

JC here questions the very object of his earlier pride. He always thought that to compose true art and to be a real intellectual, you need to be an individual who looks on everything with a critical eye and distances himself from mass emotions. According to him, to be a real intellectual you need to step outside of the mass and not to give in to it. Now, however, he seems to be discovering that this very individualism not only lacks emotions, but has also made him lonely. He never felt the need to belong to the group and he never made an effort in this direction. According to him, his art follows the same pattern. His art is not an archetype; it does not follow the stereotype. His novels and non-fiction go against the grain and therefore, because of their individualism, they distance themselves from the rest. Therefore, JC asks himself if his art can be called as such, if it is meant not to celebrate the stream of mass emotion and thought but to contradict it and be disengaged from it.

⁷⁶ J.M. Coetzee, *Diary of a Bad Year* (London: Harvill Secker, 2007), p. 170.

“On the writing life” explains why JC is keener on writing non-fiction than on writing novels. He thinks that he is no good in the “evocation of the real” and that the “*steady fire*” of inspiration needed for creativity has abandoned him.⁷⁷ He argues that with getting older, the prose is not as fluent and rich as it used to be and that the “treatment of characters and action [is] more schematic.”⁷⁸ Therefore, his creations are not daring any more. Instead of inspiring people, the novels become just another same old story. However, according to JC, the inability to create fiction can be seen as a liberation process, “a clearing of the mind to take on more important tasks.”⁷⁹ It is safe to assume that by “more important tasks” JC means engaging in philosophical debates that might shed light on such issues as “how to live.”⁸⁰ JC thus sees non-fiction as a means to help people, to help them understand what is happening around them. He perceives it as a possibility to speak up directly.

However, one of the obstacles that JC experiences in the way of approaching people directly with his writings, is the impossible task of translating thought onto the paper. In “On the mother tongue” JC speculates that the unease that he feels while uttering words or reading what he wrote, comes from the fact that he has no mother tongue, meaning, a tongue which he feels perfectly comfortable with. He feels disengaged from the words coming out of his mouth and out of his pen and realizes that he fails in transforming his thoughts into the verbal or visible existence. “At the end of a day of writing-work I emerge with the pages of what I am accustomed to call *what I wanted to say*. But in more cautious spirit I now ask myself: Are these

⁷⁷ J.M. Coetzee, *Diary of a Bad Year* (London: Harvill Secker, 2007), p. 192.

⁷⁸ *Diary of a Bad Year*, p. 193.

⁷⁹ *Diary of a Bad Year*, p. 193.

⁸⁰ *Diary of a Bad Year*, p. 193.

words, printed out on paper, truly what I wanted to say?"⁸¹ Furthermore, JC notices that "as [he] listens to [himself] speak or as [he] read[s] what [he has] written, [he has] the uneasy feeling that there is something false going on."⁸² JC here expresses the notion of language as the traitor, as something rather concealing the truth than bringing it to the surface. He looks at it that way because once the thoughts are spoken or written, the real emotion behind it, its true meaning, disappears because of the limitation of language and because of the very fact of telling or writing. Emotions and thoughts are impossible to translate onto the paper because by the very action, they lose their essence. By arguing this, JC wants to stress that his writings are not the true representation of what he wants to share with his reader. There are mere imitation of his thoughts, a small piece of what he thinks limited by his tongue and his pen.

From those three soft opinions, we can see that JC begins to disbelieve in his writing. First, he undermines his art by wondering if a spiritless art, disengaged from the mass emotion and thought, can be called art at all. Secondly, he recognizes that the inspiration to write fiction has left him and therefore, he prefers to engage in non-fiction that can bring more light to some important issues. Finally, however, he does not believe that he can truly speak out of his inner depths because the language will always betray his thoughts. In other words, what is the point? JC faces the question of the value of his writing. He wonders if the years of being a writer were meaningful or rather purposeless.

⁸¹ J.M. Coetzee, *Diary of a Bad Year* (London: Harvill Secker, 2007), p. 196.

⁸² *Diary of a Bad Year*, p. 196.

4.2. JC as a Human Being

In four short opinions, “My father,” “*La France moins belle*,” “On ageing,” and “A dream,” JC gives himself over reminiscing about his past. From those four examples, we see JC as a man who never understood and was never understood by his father and who regrets not being able to pass on his father’s belongings. In “*La France moins belle*,” we discover a man who has a weak spot for the unloved ones and cannot help himself but to rescue those. “On ageing” and “A dream” paint the picture of a man who hopes that his mental abilities will last longer than the physical ones, and that when his time comes, he will not die alone.

JC is faced with the memory of his father who has been dead for thirty years, when among the packages that arrive from Cape Town, he finds a small box with his father’s belongings. JC remembers him as a man of no achievements, “a man who asked for little from life and received little.”⁸³ He goes on: “Like me, he disliked friction, flare-ups, displays of anger, preferred to get along with everyone. He never told me what he thought of me. But in his secret heart I am sure he had no very high opinion. A selfish child, he must have thought, who has turned into a cold man; and how can I deny it?”⁸⁴ There is a certain voice of resignation in that last passage. It is not clear whether this resignation and sadness are because of his father’s opinion of him, or him being cold and selfish, or not being able to be the child and the man his father wanted him to be. However, I think that it shows JC’s regret that the relationship between them did not work out the way they both wished it to. The only thing that JC still has of his father is that small box of his belongings, and he wonders “Who will save them once I am

⁸³ J.M. Coetzee, *Diary of a Bad Year* (London: Harvill Secker, 2007), p. 166.

⁸⁴ *Diary of a Bad Year*, p. 166.

gone? What will become of them? The thought wrings my heart.”⁸⁵ Clearly, it pains JC that he cannot pass the belongings on. Moreover, his belongings cannot be passed on either.

In “*La France moins belle*” JC confesses to the biggest weakness of all, taking care of and loving the unloved ones. “[...] I do tend to slip into the role of guardian and protector of the unloved and unlovable, of what other people disdain or spurn: bad-tempered old dogs, ugly pieces of furniture that have stubbornly stayed alive, cars on the edge of breakdown. It is a role I resist; but every now and then the mute appeal of the unwanted overwhelms my defences.”⁸⁶ Interestingly, JC never speaks with such affection about people, because people will always manage, will always find their way out, whereas all those “things,” dumped and unwanted, need love, need to be reassured of their usefulness. JC takes upon himself this role, although sometimes unwillingly, and shows that he is not only a humanitarian with animals, but also with an old cupboard and an old car that are left behind. Moreover, the way he refers to them, furniture that “stayed alive,” shows in my opinion that JC thinks that even a cupboard has a soul and needs to have a purpose to exist; a purpose he can give them.

“On aging,” a piece consisting of five lines, we experience JC as a man facing his aging. His hips give him such pain that he cannot walk. He notices that the “physical mechanism” that his body is, worsens every day.⁸⁷ He is “hoping against hope” that his mental abilities will stay untouched, that he will be able to keep a clear mind and that he will be able to keep on writing. However, as he ironically notices, “[a]ll old folk become Cartesians.”⁸⁸ This piece demonstrates

⁸⁵ J.M. Coetzee, *Diary of a Bad Year* (London: Harvill Secker, 2007), p. 166.

⁸⁶ *Diary of a Bad Year*, p. 188.

⁸⁷ *Diary of a Bad Year*, p. 181.

⁸⁸ *Diary of a Bad Year*, p. 181. Cartesians believed that the mind is not a physical substance and that mental abilities do not relate to the physical ones.

that JC, like every human being, wants to last and if not physically, then at least mentally. He thus also wishes his mind to outlast his body. Nevertheless, he is a realist in his expectations; he knows that he is hoping against hope and that this hope is false, because in the end, all abilities will fade away and turn into ashes.

In "A dream" JC recounts how he dreamed about his own death. Only one person, a young woman, is trying to comfort him in that process but at the same time she is truthful to him. She tries to reassure him calmly that although she knows he does not want to go, his time has come and it will be in his best interest to follow his fate. The rest of the people surrounding him want him to be gone as soon as possible, without taking his will into account.⁸⁹ Awoken from this dream, JC notices that in "the moment of death we lose all power to elect our companions. We are whirled away to our allotted fate; by whose side we get to pass is not for us to decide."⁹⁰ JC tells us that, although he is afraid of dying alone, he is even more afraid of dying among people who do not care that he is passing away. He wants to feel someone beside him, like this woman from the dream, who will guide him through this experience and who will, with calmness and compassion, help him to go through with it. JC wishes for someone to convince him that entering the afterworld, "a sad and subdued place,"⁹¹ is the best thing to do. JC tells Anya about this dream, and although he does not know this, as Anya tells it to the reader and not to JC, she promises to be the woman from his dream. As she says on the last two pages:

I will hold his hand. I can't go with you, I will say to him, it is against the rules. I can't go with you but what I will do is hold your hand as far as the gate. At the gate you can let go

⁸⁹ J.M. Coetzee, *Diary of a Bad Year* (London: Harvill Secker, 2007), p. 157.

⁹⁰ *Diary of a Bad Year*, p. 159.

⁹¹ *Diary of a Bad Year*, p. 159.

and give me a smile to show you are a brave boy and get on the boat or whatever it is you have to do. As far as the gate I will hold your hand, I would be proud to do that. (...) All that I will promise him, and hold his hand tight and 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: sweat dreams, and flights of angels, and all the rest.⁹²

Anya promises JC to take away his fears by being with him till the very end. Moreover, she is proud to have the opportunity to be his saviour. Therefore, although JC is afraid of dying beside unloved ones, we know that his beloved goddess will be there and will help him to get to the other side.

JC uncovers his true self in front of the reader. He allows his weaknesses, his fears and his hopes to come out to the day light. We see him as a man who has disappointed his father and has disappointed himself by not being a father; we see him as the saviour of the unloved ones, and moreover, as the one who wants to be saved as well, at least at the very end. Interestingly, although JC might seem as a man for whom his intellect and ability to use it is far more important than his body, at the end he discovers that it is because of his intellectual individualism that he is alone. He discovers that at the end a human being is nothing more than an animal being steered by basic instincts and yearning for basic emotions such as companionship, warmth, need for belonging. JC realizes that his intellect will not hold his end in the final moment and is nothing compared to a pair of kind and loving eyes to look into and looking at you.

⁹² J.M. Coetzee, *Diary of a Bad Year* (London: Harvill Secker, 2007), pp. 226-227.

5. Conclusion

Diary of a Bad Year has clear divisions. There are the strong opinions, soft opinions, and the diaries of JC and Anya. If one were to read the novel by sections, that is, each part on its own, I believe that then the novel is just a simple blending of fiction and non-fiction. However, if we read closely, page after page, all the parts simultaneously, an entirely new world of possibilities and understanding comes to the surface.

At first we are introduced to JC from strong opinions, a writer with clear-cut outlooks on the world. At the same time, in the diary, we meet JC the seventy-two-year-old man who falls in love with a forty-two-years younger woman and allows her to enter his professional and private life. The two types of interaction, essays-diary and diary-diary, allow JC to look at his strong opinions from a younger perspective and allow Anya to take a different turn in her life. Because of their interaction, JC's writing takes a different turn, and he permits us to witness himself as an old man, fearing loneliness and death. Furthermore, their interaction changes Anya's life, but also saves JC from facing death alone.

The literary counterpointing of fiction and essays in *Diary of a Bad Year* works smoothly and beautifully because nothing stays unanswered. JC's strong opinions are sometimes undermined, sometimes reinforced by Anya's and Alan's reactions. Anya's suggestion to write more personalized opinions is taken into account by JC and transformed again into his writing, his soft opinions. Strong opinions, the diary, soft opinions, everything is connected by Coetzee's craft of making us realize that everything, from the simple account of the daily actions and feelings to the firmest judgement, can be influenced, and therefore, changed.

Part II: *Diary of a Bad Year* as a Part of Coetzee's Oeuvre

It is impossible to discuss *Diary of a Bad Year* without looking at Coetzee's own possible agenda. The uniqueness of this novel comes from two factors. Firstly, Coetzee has mastered the craft of literary counterpointing of essays and fiction. Secondly, I would argue, *The Diary* is his best novel since *Disgrace*. The passion for Anya and the voice of JC's yearning and resignation takes the reader back to Lurie's passion for Melanie, his love for the unloved dogs and his resignation when it comes to the possibility of saving the dogs. However, reading JC's essays brings Elisabeth Costello to mind, though in a slightly less philosophical and eccentric way. What we encounter thus is the power of Lurie's passion and resignation combined with an improved Costello.

Another interesting point is JC being yet another alter-ego of Coetzee. This time, however, Coetzee goes even further in playing with the reader. His new alter-ego is of his own gender, comes from South Africa, is only four years younger than him, and has written, *Waiting for the Barbarians*, which in *The Diary*, came out in South Africa in the seventies⁹³, while in real life it was published in 1980. Coetzee thus gets closer and closer to implying that it is him that we are listening to, and at the same time, by changing a few details, he plays with us by keeping us wondering. He thus functions on two levels in *The Diary*. He is the author who wants to call the readers' attention to certain issues and he is the possible narrator of the novel.

Furthermore, certain themes from Coetzee's previous writings recur once again in *Diary of a Bad Year*, and show that they are of a great importance to him. For example, all of

⁹³ J.M. Coetzee, *Diary of a Bad Year* (London: Harvill Secker, 2007), p. 171.

Coetzee's male characters describe themselves as cold and impassionate. The questions of humanity, shame, ageing, and animal rights come back as well. Also the question of language and one's writing occupies a central position.

Therefore, in the second part of my thesis I will try to establish how *Diary of a Bad Year* fits in Coetzee's oeuvre. In chapter one I will discuss the literary counterpointing of fiction and essays to find out what were Coetzee's intentions in doing so. Furthermore, I will dedicate chapter two to JC being Coetzee's alter-ego, however, more daring for Coetzee and more challenging for the reader than Costello. Finally, I will discuss Coetzee's recurring themes with a special focus on coldness, language and writing, and humanity.

Part II: *Diary of a Bad Year* as a Part of Coetzee's Oeuvre

1. Two Genres

Diary of a Bad Year combines two genres, fiction and essays. I have already discussed why the blending of genres works so well within the novel. In this chapter, however, I want to come back to that topic and discuss this successful merging from the literary point of view, from outside of the novel. The first question to ask is how those two genres create a new hybrid genre that, although it engages in philosophical debates, is far more satisfactory than *Elisabeth Costello*. Secondly, I will try to discover why Coetzee has chosen for this very structure.

1.1. Literary Counterpointing

Till 1999 Coetzee engaged in writing either pure fiction or pure essays. This clear division became blurred after 1999, when Coetzee decided to involve Elisabeth Costello in his writings. Most of the chapters in *Elisabeth Costello: Eight Lessons* are Coetzee's public lectures presented through fiction featuring Costello.⁹⁴ Although Costello's arguments are disguised as fiction, her "lessons" are undeniably a sort of ethical seminars. Each judgement stands on its own and is not connected with the rest as one might expect from fiction. The novel, if one insists upon calling *Elisabeth Costello* a novel, lacks unity. The issues that Coetzee touches upon with the help of Costello are large-scale issues such as human perception of animals or the problem of evil in the world. However, Coetzee's delivery of Costello's arguments is dry, and Costello herself, her eccentricity and inability to connect emotionally to her opinions, annoys the readers rather than

⁹⁴ Derek Attridge, "A Writers Life. *Elisabeth Costello*" in *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading* by Derek Attridge (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004), p. 192-197.

convincing them of her claims. Furthermore, because *Elisabeth Costello's* lessons are Coetzee's speeches, it has been argued that "Coetzee uses his fictional creations to advance arguments [...] without assuming responsibility for them [...]." ⁹⁵ Therefore, Costello's creations fail to come across as fiction because of the lack of unity and their seminary overtone; on the other hand, the uncertainty whether we hear Coetzee speaking or Costello, makes it impossible for the reader to look at *Costello* as pure essays. As Roy Robins complained, "[...] *Elisabeth Costello*, for which Coetzee has once again been long listed for this year's Man Booker Prize, has neither the gravity and compulsion of Coetzee's best fiction, nor the precision and intensity of his finest critical writing." ⁹⁶

Alternatively, we have Coetzee's effort of creating a novel with Costello's philosophical debate in it. *Slow Man* reads easily till the moment Costello enters the stage. She barges in on Paul Rayment's life and in the reader's arena without any warning, we might say, out of the blue.

[...] [B]ecause of [this] particular plot device the author chooses to fit in, the novel refuses to sail very high water. (...) [...] [A]t a cost for the good of the novel, Coetzee ushers onto the stage the eponymous character from his previous novel, *Elisabeth Costello*, as a sort of nemesis and fairy godmother for Paul. What Coetzee wanted this novel to do – show the ultimately humanizing effect of a crisis of physical frailty – could have been accomplished much more expressly without this exasperating contrivance. ⁹⁷

⁹⁵ Derek Attridge, "A Writers Life. *Elisabeth Costello*" in *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading* by Derek Attridge (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004), p. 197.

⁹⁶ Roy Robins, "Alter Ego" *New Statesman* 132. 4655 (September 15, 2003): 51.

⁹⁷ Brad Hooper, *Slow Man* Review, *Booklist* 101. 21 (July 1, 2005): 2.

This “postmodernist trick”⁹⁸ used by Coetzee enables him to bring himself into the novel and to “teach” us and Rayment yet another lesson, but at the same time, it disturbs the reading by defamiliarizing the reader with the course of the plot. Although surely this is what Coetzee aimed at, this transition fails to take us in.

Diary of a Bad Year does not struggle with the problems that *Costello* and *Slow Man* struggle with. In *The Diary*, the essays and fiction float simultaneously beside each other without disruption. Coetzee does not camouflage essays as fiction; he allows them to be what they are and to function on their own. Although we are tricked into thinking that JC is Coetzee’s alter ego, still within the novel, the essays are part of the fictionalized story; they are a part of the book the protagonist writes. Furthermore, besides being essays they also tell us something about the protagonist. JC’s opinions show what kind of a man he is, and the transition from strong opinions to soft opinions, and the change of the tone of the essays that comes with it, show JC as a human being whereas Costello stays an artificial invention till the very end. Therefore, because the essays work within the discourse of fiction, they can tell their story and still, they do not interrupt the real narrative – the diaries.

On the other hand, the emotionality of the real fiction, the diaries, and the three-way exchange of those emotions bring vitality to *The Diary*, something that was lacking in Coetzee’s fiction after 1999. In a certain way Coetzee has managed to bring back the passion present in *Disgrace*. JC’s metaphysical desire for Anya and Anya’s compassionate love for JC go straight to the heart of the reader just like Lurie’s love for unloved dogs. The multiple person narrative and the visible interaction between the characters within the narrative and within JC’s writing, keep

⁹⁸ John Banville, “She’s Back,” *The New Republic* 233. 15 (October 10, 2005): 33.

the reader's attention and the conclusion JC arrives at, that at the end what matters is love, show that the author of *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *Disgrace* is back.⁹⁹

Therefore, undoubtedly, Coetzee has created a new kind of novel. His new genre allows him to get involved in critical analyses as well as allowing his imagination to float. As he says in *Doubling the Point*, by engaging in criticism only, he feels a great deal of responsibility to conform to the discourse of criticism, which does not give him many opportunities for voicing his own ideas.¹⁰⁰ Therefore, as he says, "[he] is concerned to write the kind of novel – to work in the kind of novel form – in which one is not unduly handicapped (compared with the philosopher) when one plays (or works) with ideas."¹⁰¹ The first try-out of this concept was Costello, but the real combination, the real play of ideas in the form of the novel is without a doubt *Diary of a Bad Year*.

1.2. The Need for Non-Fiction

Coetzee's perfect merging of fiction and non-fiction brings the reader to yet another question. Why this urge for non-fiction? Why this urge for creating Costello and camouflaging her as fiction? Why the need to bring her back in *Slow Man*?

If we assume that JC is indeed Coetzee's alter ego, then JC himself presents us with an answer. Besides seeing writing essays ironically as "an opportunity to grumble in public, an opportunity to take magic revenge on the world for declining to conform to [his] fantasies,"¹⁰²

⁹⁹ *Slow Man*, Review in *Kirkus Reviews*, 73. 13 (July 1, 2005): 700

¹⁰⁰ J.M. Coetzee, *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews*, ed. David Attwell (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), p. 246

¹⁰¹ *Doubling the Point*, p. 246.

¹⁰² J.M. Coetzee, *Diary of a Bad Year* (London: Harvill Secker, 2007), p. 23.

JC, and therefore Coetzee, seems to think that writing fiction is not enough anymore. The world we live in calls for much more than the imaginary life of imaginary characters. JC's strong opinion "On Harold Pinter" and Alan's accusation of JC being a hypocrite, who merely writes instead of acting, represents Coetzee thoughts that the modern world calls for action, for speaking up. Coetzee, like JC, does it by writing essays in which he can confront the world surrounding him, although he acknowledges that it might not be enough anymore.

Furthermore, as already mentioned, stepping back from fiction allows one to become involved in answering far more important questions that help to clarify the state of today's affairs.

On the other hand, Coetzee has written and still writes volumes of essays. Why then involve essay writing in his fiction? This question is answered by Anya's simple words. "[W]e have all got opinions [...] [but] [i]f you tell a story at least people will shut up and listen to you."¹⁰³ Indeed, "a story" finds its way to people far faster than the collection of essays. For Coetzee to reach a broader public with his opinions, that is to be read not only by literary critics as it probably would be the case with a collection of essays, he decides to merge it into his fiction. Consequently, by doing so, he is able to share his point of view with his readers.

Coetzee's need for writing fiction expresses his urge to contribute not only to art but to society's wellbeing as well. To achieve the best results he created *Diary of a Bad Year*, a hybrid novel that allowed him to combine the liveliness of his best fiction with the strength of his criticism.

¹⁰³ J.M. Coetzee, *Diary of a Bad Year* (London: Harvill Secker, 2007), p. 55.

2. Another Alter-Ego

Actually, it goes without saying that JC is Coetzee's other alter-ego. Whereas Costello has been created for the purpose of lecturing and only later became a "fiction" on paper, the invention of JC seems to me to be a more deliberate device for Coetzee to face his own writing.

There are similarities between JC and Coetzee as well as differences. They are both of South African origin and they both live in Australia nowadays. They are both authors of many novels including *Waiting for the Barbarians* and they both gave a speech in the National Library of Australia. However, JC was born in 1934, JMC in 1940. JC lives in Sidney, Coetzee in Melbourne. JC lives alone and has no children whereas JMC lives with his partner. According to William Deresiewicz then, JC "is and is not J.M. Coetzee [...]"¹⁰⁴

In particular [JC] seems to represent the ascetic, taciturn, publicity-averse Coetzee's self conception or inner reality: a little older than he actually is, a lot more solitary, not nearly as big a deal. So, are those "strong opinions" [...] Coetzee's own? Again, yes and no. The whole question of what it means to have opinions, of the relationship one has to one's opinions, is something Coetzee has been wrestling with for a long time [...].¹⁰⁵ Consequently, it is possible to say that with the character of JC, Coetzee gives to his reader a slightly different version of himself. Perhaps, a version of himself as a writer, a writer that is trying to discover his connection, his stand point in his own opinions, in order to determine if he indeed supports those opinions as a writer and as a human being. Therefore, JC is not only

¹⁰⁴ William Deresiewicz, "Foes," *The Nation* 286.7 (February 25, 2008): 30.

¹⁰⁵ "Foes," p. 30.

Coetzee's alter-ego; he is Coetzee's conscious version of one of his many selves. When we say that JC is or is not Coetzee, we should think that he is both and at the same time, neither.

Another interesting approach of Coetzee is the fact that he challenges his opinions. In *Elisabeth Costello* he does that by employing multiple listeners at Costello's lecture that undermine her arguments. In *The Diary* it is Anya to whom Coetzee gives that position. "That is the ultimate significance of Anya's presence in the margins of these essays [...].JC is Coetzee, or a part of him, and so is Anya."¹⁰⁶ Coetzee thus challenges his writer-self by making use of his non-writer self, Anya. As Deresiewicz correctly notices, when Anya calls JC's attention to the fact that people say talkback radio instead of talk radio,¹⁰⁷ we see that in the strong opinion "On Machiavelli," the term is already used correctly,¹⁰⁸ "which means that that passage, and who knows how many others, already reflect [Anya's] shaping presence."¹⁰⁹ As Anya stresses herself, "I take away the tapes and listen to them on my earphones and solemnly type them out. Fix them up too here and there where I can, where they lack a certain something, a certain oomph, though he is supposed to be the big writer and I just the little Filipina."¹¹⁰ Thus Coetzee does not allow his alter-ego, Coetzee-the-writer, to stand on its own. He influences his writings by exposing them to, perhaps, his own anti-intellectual self that he imagines he could be like if he had not been an intellectual. As we discovered earlier, according to JC – JMC – intellectualism is the very thing that kills spirit and emotions in writing. Therefore, by employing himself as Anya

¹⁰⁶ William Deresiewicz, "Foes," *The Nation* 286.7 (February 25, 2008): 32.

¹⁰⁷ J.M. Coetzee, *Diary of a Bad Year* (London: Harvill Secker, 2007), p. 23.

¹⁰⁸ *Diary of a Bad Year*, p. 17, and "Foes," p. 32.

¹⁰⁹ "Foes," p. 32.

¹¹⁰ *Diary of a Bad Year*, p. 29.

he is allowed to colour up and to give “oomph” to his writings that he is not able to give himself as JC – JMC – the intellectual.

Coetzee beautifully shows the trickiness of writing. From one side, he feels he is entitled to his opinions, whatever they might be. From the other side, however, he is very conscious of what might be the outcome of those opinions.¹¹¹ Coetzee shows the reader that the opinions of JMC – the writer – may be entirely different to JMC – if I were no intellectual – Anya. Furthermore, Coetzee stresses that his many selves are capable of influencing each other and that sometimes one triumphs over the other. In *Diary of a Bad Year* Coetzee tickles us with his nakedness until, a moment later, we realize he is not there at all.

¹¹¹ See Alan's reaction to JC's writing.

3. Recurring Themes

Looking at *The Diary* it is very noticeable that Coetzee engages in discussing certain themes over and over again. Like a boomerang, we see the question of shame, guilt and dishonour coming back; issues that actually never left Coetzee's prose. The ageing process, and what happens to one on the emotional and physical level, is also something Coetzee pays a lot of attention to. However, in this chapter I would like to focus on the themes that in my opinion, although maybe less prominent in *The Diary* than the other topics mentioned above, tell us a great deal about the author.

3.1. Coldness

All Coetzee's white male characters perceive themselves as cold and impassionate. Whether it is Coetzee in his fictionalized autobiography *Youth*, or Paul Rayment in *Slow Man* and JC in *The Diary*, all men suffer from the lack of passion and spirit.

Coetzee's first male character who is described as rather impassionate is David Lurie. We come across this description already on the second page of the novel and it refers to Lurie's sexual interaction with a call-girl, Soraya. "In the field of sex his temperament, though intense, has never been passionate. Were he to choose a totem, it would be the snake. 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."¹¹² We find a similar account of sexual intercourse in Coetzee's autobiography, *Youth*. There, we are faced with an image of a young Coetzee who fails to give himself to the woman who persuades him to make love on the

¹¹² J.M. Coetzee, *Disgrace* (London: Vintage, 2000), p. 2.

beach. "Unresisting he follows, does his best, goes through with the act, even pretends at the last to be carried away. In fact he is not carried away."¹¹³ Young Coetzee spends more time wondering why this woman wants to have intercourse with him and that the sand gets in everywhere, than enjoying the act. In fact, not to offend his partner, he has to fake affection. We come closer to the possible explanation of this phenomenon of indifference when we read passages from *Slow Man* and the account of Paul Rayment.

All in all, not a man of passion. He is not sure he has ever liked passion, or approved of it. Passion: foreign territory; a comical but unavoidable affliction like mumps, that one hopes to undergo while still young, in one of its milder, less ruinous varieties, so as not to catch it more seriously later on. Dogs in the grip of passion coupling, hapless grins on their faces, their tongues hanging out.¹¹⁴

Interestingly, Rayment not only does not mind being a man of no passion, he explicitly disapproves of it and takes care that it will never consume him. He compares the consumable passion, the overwhelming feeling of a passionate moment to animal coupling and consequently, to something that a human being should be above. JC does not describe his unaffectionate way of making love. He calls himself "a selfish child [...] who turned into a cold man [...]"¹¹⁵ However, if we look at JC's soft opinion "On mass emotion," and his approach to his intellect, it becomes clear that he as well, has never given in to basic instincts.

At first, we may think that this reference to coldness and the lack of passion means being cold and impassionate within inside, within the very core of the human being. However,

¹¹³ J.M. Coetzee, *Youth* (London: Vintage, 2003), p. 5.

¹¹⁴ J.M. Coetzee, *Slow Man* (London: Vintage Books, 2006), pp. 45-46.

¹¹⁵ J.M. Coetzee, *Diary of a Bad Year* (London: Harvill Secker, 2007), p. 166.

Rayment and JC allow us to discover what lies beneath Coetzee's notion of indifference. All white male characters of Coetzee are intellectuals.¹¹⁶ They pride themselves on it and see it as their greatest value and as intellectuals, they reject the consummation of passion. Passion, in its pure physical form, is to them a betrayal of their intellectual power of steering one's will. As Rayment says, the heat of passion, to lose oneself in passion, means to give in to the pure animal instinct, an action that is unthinkable for an intellectual. Young Coetzee focuses his passion on becoming a great writer, Lurie's passion goes to Lord Byron, Rayment cycles and photographs, and JC writes essays. All in all, all men turn and discipline their fervour into art.

However, ironically, most of them either fail to achieve the ultimate release from animal instincts or discover at the end that intellect is nothing compared to the human warmth and the sense of belonging. Lurie gives in to his obsession with Melanie and pays a high price for it. Rayment's fixation on his married nurse Marijana brings his nemesis, Costello, into his life. JC realizes that his intellect and individuality have made him lonely and that having no one to love and to love you back, is a high price to pay for being a great writer. Therefore, while Coetzee presents his characters as intellectuals priding themselves on it, at the same time he makes them realize that it does not matter how much work and discipline we put into proving that we are better and higher beings than animals because at the end, we have to face that we are in fact mere creatures craving for love and warmth.

It is clear that coldness is one of the themes that occupy an important position in Coetzee's novels. However, it is not until Rayment's statement and JC's approach to his intellect

¹¹⁶ Although Paul Rayment does not entirely fit the profile, because of his deep interest in history we may perceive him as a beginning intellectual, or an intellectual hobbyist.

that we recognize that it is their being intellectuals that urges them not to act upon their basic instincts. Even JC, who has nothing to lose, does not give in to his craving for Anya.

3.2. Humanity

Another important theme in Coetzee's writing is humanity. What deserves the most attention within this topic, however, are, in my opinion, the small acts of humanity, steered mostly by love, performed by Coetzee's characters and showing their humanity. In *The Diary* such an act of humanity is performed by Anya and her promise to stay with JC till the very end.

Coetzee himself confesses to his deep concern with humanity. "[...] I, as a person, as a personality, am overwhelmed, that my thinking is thrown into confusion and helplessness, by the fact of suffering in the world, and not only human suffering."¹¹⁷ Coetzee illustrates this suffering, human and animal, in his writings but still gives us a bit of hope through his protagonists. In *Waiting for the Barbarians* it is the Magistrate that shows his reawakening from the state of empire and his kindness by releasing the barbarian girl. In *Age of Iron* it is not Elisabeth Curren, as we might have expected, who shows compassion but compassion is revealed to her. Vercueil offers Elisabeth his presence in her last moments. "There has always been in him a certain hovering if undependable solitude for me, a solitude he knows no way of expressing. I have fallen and he has caught me. It is not he who fell under my care when he arrived, I now understand [...]."¹¹⁸ Yet another act of humanity on Vercueil's side is his promise to deliver Elisabeth's letter to her daughter, a promise that allows Elisabeth to leave her body-

¹¹⁷ J.M. Coetzee, *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews*, ed. David Attwell (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), p. 248.

¹¹⁸ J.M. Coetzee, *Age of Iron* (London: Penguin Books, 1998), p. 196.

self in peace. The same act of compassion we experience of course in *The Diary*. Although JC influences Anya's life, it is Anya that saves JC by assuring him she will stay till the very end. From those examples, we can see that the protagonists either learn to be compassionate on their way to emotional development, or the act of compassion comes from the people next to them, the people they would least expect to be compassionate. The case of Anya and JC fits both examples. Anya grows emotionally through the course of the novel and at the end, unexpectedly becomes the source of compassion for JC. Coetzee shows us that humanity is a result of unconditional love; a result of an ultimate acceptance and trust, and the ability to put one's life into the hands of another human being.

However, Coetzee's notion of humanity applies also to our treatment of animals. Animals have always been present in Coetzee's writings, but it is not until *Disgrace* that we see Coetzee's explicit involvement with them and his perception of people's treatment of them. In *Disgrace* Coetzee involves Lurie in disposing of the dead dogs' corpses, making it Lurie's ultimate act of kindness. Lurie's uncomprehending need to allow the dogs to enter their last moment on earth with dignity arguably makes him, in this respect, Coetzee's most humane character. Then, we also have Elisabeth Costello, according to whom the slaughterhouses are for animals what Treblinka was for Jews.¹¹⁹ In *The Diary* Coetzee, yet again, makes his protagonist sensitive to animal issues. JC sees the kitchen as a place of murder, cannot help himself saving the unloved dogs, and the inheritor of his money, three million dollars, is an organization that rehabilitates animals used in laboratory experiments. Moreover, he is a vegetarian as is Costello and Coetzee for that matter. It is clear then that one of the measures of

¹¹⁹ J.M. Coetzee, *Elisabeth Costello: Eight Lessons* (London: Secker & Warburg, 2003), pp. 62-66.

humanity for Coetzee is the human treatment of animals. Lurie gives back dignity to the dogs, Costello fights for animals with her lectures, and JC brings the readers' attention to them in his essays and shows that he also acts according to his beliefs by leaving his money to the animals. Thus humanity is not only being kind to another human being; it means taking all the living beings into account.

Humanity in Coetzee's writing, beside the explicit essays treating this topic, is also expressed through his characters and their actions. In this way, instead of moral debating, Coetzee bring this issue closer to the reader. In the example of JC and Anya, he shows that compassion and humanity can be employed in everyday life where they matter the most.

3.3. Language and Writing

Coetzee is very peculiar when it comes to the use of language and to writing. He despises giving public lectures; the only interviews he gives in the written form and during official dinner parties he can go as far as not to articulate a single word.¹²⁰ It does not come as a surprise then, that the theme of language as a means of telling a story finds its way into *Diary of a Bad Year*.

One of the forms of Coetzeean consciousness about the language and its use is his refusal to use it to give voice to the characters in his fiction he feels he has no right to speak for. Characters like Friday, Michael K., the barbarian girl, Vercueil, are either mute or simply refuse to speak. The subject of Coetzee's expressive silence has been discussed before,¹²¹ and without

¹²⁰ Jason Cowley, "The NS Profile: J.M. Coetzee," *New Statesman* 128. 4459 (October, 1999): 19.

¹²¹ See e.g. Derek Attridge *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004).

going further into the subject, I only wish to call to mind here that this silence expresses Coetzee's belief that if one is denied one's rightful participation in creating history, he himself, allowed to do so, has no right to raise his voice on behalf of the oppressed ones. This shows that Coetzee is very conscious of the power language holds.

On the other hand, Coetzee also acknowledges the weaknesses of language. The first obstacle he arrives at with the usage of language is the confusion language creates. For example, in "On being photographed," Coetzee calls our attention to the idiom "taking a photograph" and "making a photograph."¹²² "Taking a photograph" means taking an image that already exists, whereas "making a photograph" indicates making an image that conforms to the expectations of the photographer. Therefore, the innocent act of photographing signifies, depending on which idiom is used, two different actions and consequently, two different meanings. Coetzee stresses that even such a simple idiom can confuse and manipulate the reality. A photographer that makes a picture instead of taking it, misguides the viewers by presenting a picture that is closest not to the image of the one being photographed but to his own idea of whom the photographed person represents. The same can be said of writing. The writer has the power to mislead the readers; with the use of language the writer can stimulate the readers into thinking what he or she wants the readers to think. This is the reason why we should never fully trust the author and be aware of the writer's ability to trick us.

The second difficulty in perceiving language as a device exposing the truth is the limitation of language. Already Costello admits that her failure to convince her listeners of her

¹²² J.M. Coetzee, *Diary of a Bad Year* (London: Harvill Secker, 2007), p. 201.

arguments results from the inadequacy of converting thoughts into language.¹²³ In *The Diary*, Coetzee expresses the same notion of language being an apparatus that disables one to communicate truth to the outside world. In his Master Thesis, Sjoerd Bruil confirms my thoughts on that subject:

[Coetzee has] an ambiguous stance towards language. It being [his] only tool of expression within [his] medium, [he] has no choice but to use language to tell [his] story. At the same time, however, [...] Coetzee [...] seems to be convinced that language alone never enables [him] to say *exactly* what [he] want to say. There is always a gap. (...) What is striking in [...] Coetzee[’s] [...] work is that the narrator in question is always aware of the fact that his or her account is by definition untrustworthy. This leads to another big question: if the story you are trying to tell is not to be trusted, is it worth telling? (...) [...] Coetzee [has] chosen to use [his] own craft – language – to try and express doubt and apprehension of the same medium. This is both modernist and a brave approach towards [himself] and [his] public.¹²⁴

In *The Diary* Coetzee confesses that it is impossible for a writer to be truthful to himself in his storytelling, and therefore, it is impossible to be truthful to the reader. Once the story is told, its essence and genuineness are lost in the process of translating the thoughts onto the paper. Consequently, what the writer and the reader are faced with is the mere attempt of telling the story. As Bruil notices further, it is difficult for the writer to face that very fact. Coetzee demonstrates it to us in the example of JC who begins to question his art and its purpose. What

¹²³ J.M. Coetzee, *Elisabeth Costello: Eight Lessons* (London: Secker & Warburg, 2003), p. 111.

¹²⁴ Sjoerd Bruil, *Language as Barrier – Samuel Beckett’s Influence on J.M. Coetzee* (Master Thesis: University of Utrecht, 2006), p. 46.

is the point if you cannot be truthful? Although this doubt is understandable, I think that even the mere effort to account for the truth is valuable to the reader. The engagement in telling the story and the determination to do so is “brave” and admirable, and acknowledging that the presented truth is not entirely ingenuous, is in itself trustworthy.

Coetzee’s speculation about the trustworthiness of his texts finds its way into *Diary of a Bad Year* and shows that being genuine to his readers is of a great importance to him. As JC, and JMC for that matter, cannot complete this undertaking because of the restrictions of language, they decide to make the reader aware of their limitations. By doing so, they stress that their texts by no means should be treated as a truthful account but as a mere attempt to get as close as possible to the core of things. As Coetzee says himself, “[o]ut of that interplay [with writing] there emerges, if you are lucky, what you recognize or hope to recognize as the true.”¹²⁵

¹²⁵ J.M. Coetzee, *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews*, ed. David Attwell (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), p. 18.

4. Conclusion

Coetzee shows us that *Diary of a Bad Year* not only fits perfectly into his oeuvre, but that it brings his fiction to yet another level. *The Diary* demonstrates that Coetzee still works with the same issues that he worked with in his earlier writings, such as coldness, aging, shame and guilt, humanity, language, etc. It is possible to say that he never loses interest in basic human emotions and in the psyche of people. Every time Coetzee allows a certain theme to come back, he allows the reader to glimpse further and to discover just a little bit more about the thought and the reasoning behind it.

Furthermore, Coetzee presents us with another alter-ego, or rather with one version of himself. We can recognize Coetzee in many characteristics and facts about JC. At the same time, Coetzee warns us not to get too comfortable with that assumption. Using autobiographical elements and creating a representation of himself as a writer, does not mean revealing himself to the reader. This is something the real Coetzee, the master of privacy, would never allow himself to do.

Finally, because of the superb literary counterpointing, Coetzee has reached a new level in his fiction. He has created a novel that allows him to use his imagination freely, as well as to present the issues he finds important to his readers. Simultaneously, writing his essays within the fiction and providing a response to them as well as providing an interaction between the writer and his typist, *Diary of a Bad Year* reads smoothly from the beginning to the ending. The lightness of the literary shifting between essays and fiction, and the concord of it, leaves the reader with a pure admiration and yearning for more.

What, however, makes *Diary of the Bad Year* special, is one of many implications Coetzee seems to be making; implications also present in *Age of Iron*, *Disgrace* and partially in *Slow Man*. Coetzee once again brings to the surface the significance of love and belonging; the idea that at the end nothing matters but to have someone beside one, someone to love who loves you back and will hold your hand till the very end. What Coetzee seems to be saying in *The Diary* is that only by having someone next to us who says: *Good night, Señor C, I will whisper in his ear: sweat dreams, and flights of angels, and all the rest,*¹²⁶ we are able to peacefully depart from this life and enter another journey to the unknown.

¹²⁶ J.M. Coetzee, *Diary of a Bad Year* (London: Harvill Secker, 2007), p. 227.

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