

**Attitude towards the Social Problems in South Africa: The Use of the Classics in  
J.M. Coetzee's Novels *Life and Times of Michael K*, *Age of Iron*, and *Disgrace***

MA Thesis Western Literature and Culture

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## Introduction

The classics have always been an example for modern western cultures, but in the Middle Ages the classics had slightly fallen into oblivion. In the Renaissance, the ancient cultures had become more important again; the people of the Renaissance thought that culture had stagnated or maybe even declined during the Middle Ages. To bring back what they considered culture, they looked at the ancient Roman and Greek cultures.

White colonisers brought their knowledge of the ancient times with them around the world, since the classics have been a part of western civilisation. Like the Catholic missionaries, the colonisers wanted to impose their culture upon the indigenous people of the colonies, but the western culture was alien to the tribes. The classics are still considered to be meant for the white elite in (former) colonies, and especially white authors still gratefully use the stories their ancient colleagues have written.

In this MA thesis, I will demonstrate the role of the classics in Coetzee's attitude towards the situation in South Africa. To achieve this I will study three of Coetzee's novels, namely *Life and Times of Michael K* (1983), *Age of Iron* (1990), and *Disgrace* (1999) from the perspective of the classical allusions made in the books.

The oldest book I will discuss is *Life and Times of Michael K*. Coetzee wrote this novel in the early 80s, just before the troubles of the mid 1980s started and the government declared a state of emergency. *Life and Times of Michael K* is set in South Africa, but when exactly is not clear. Besides vagueness of time, Coetzee is also vague about the ethnical background of the protagonist.

Coetzee wrote the second novel that will be discussed, *Age of Iron*, shortly after the troubles of the mid 80s. School boycotts and demonstrations throughout the

country characterised that period of hostility. Eventually the troubles led to the abolition of apartheid in the 1990s, when Coetzee published *Age of Iron*.

The third novel that I will focus on is *Disgrace*. Coetzee wrote this novel in 1999 several years after the abolition of apartheid, which might have contributed to Coetzee's political explicitness in *Disgrace*. For instance, Coetzee does not write as subtly as in *Life and Times of Michael K* about skin colour and power relations.

Although the classics are a continuous intertextual presence in Coetzee's novels, few critics have gone beyond noticing individual allusions to study the relation between Coetzee and the classics in greater detail.

Many critics have written about *Disgrace*. For example, Pamela Cooper (2005) and Lucy V. Graham (2003) have written about the role of rape. They claim that the rapes in this novel are justified by the classical heritage, since rape seems to have been an aspect of everyday life then. Paul Franssen (2010) discusses the name of one of the black rapists, Pollux, and how it relates to his mythic namesake. In his article, Franssen herewith questions the justice of western culture.

In 2003, Franssen wrote an article on *Life and Times of Michael K* in which he invited the reader to read the novel in the light of Virgil's *Aeneid*. He focuses mainly on Michael K as an anti-hero compared to the classical hero Aeneas.

Unfortunately, very few articles have been written about the classics in *Age of Iron*, which is quiet surprising since the book is full of references and allusions to the classics. Many critics have written about the power relations, or they even regard the novel as a rewriting of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, but just few scholars have studied the classics in this novel.

The three novels that will be discussed were written in a time span of about fifteen years. Many events took place in that time, and to understand more of the

social context in which Coetzee wrote his novels, I will give a short overview of the events that are related to these three books.

When one thinks of South Africa, apartheid will certainly come up. The racial segregation between white and non-white people very much resembles the segregation in the United States after the abolition of slavery. The South African apartheid was part of the legacy of colonialism. As a reaction to the white supremacy, black nationalist movements occurred. For example, in the early 1970s the Black Consciousness movement was founded in South Africa by Steve Biko. Biko thought that it was time for the black people to emancipate after generations of repression, or as Davenport writes that blacks had to free themselves “from the tutelage of white liberals, who assumed too easily that blacks wanted merely to become incorporated in a social system dominated by white cultural values” (378).

Many different ethnic groups live in South Africa; there are the Afrikaners of whom the Boers are a minority, the Anglo-South Africans, Asians, coloureds and Africans. Their history is one of friction. Under apartheid, the government has tried to pit these different ethnic groups against each other, because the social relationships between them had always been fragile. For instance, after 150 years, the Afrikaners lost the rule over their territory to the British in 1814. That is when what they consider ‘the century of the wrong,’ and two Boer wars were the result: the Boers lost their land and were put in concentration camps (De Lange 65-66). Ironically, from 1910 until 1948 Anglo-Boer coalition governments, causing a shift in the hostile relationships between the ethnic groups, governed the country: the most important opposition became non-white and white, instead of Boer and Anglo-South Africans. The victory of the Afrikaner National Party in the elections of 1948 marked the end of the Anglo-Boer cooperation and the introduction of apartheid (De Lange 67). The

black South Africans are lowest on the rank: they had been sold as slaves from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century, and they were considered uncivilised by the colonisers. The coloured people and Asians are preferred over the Africans because they are not black. At the same time, being coloured is also a problem: because these people are of mixed race, coloured people do not belong to the white South Africans, nor do they belong to the black South Africans. Even black South Africans were set against each other, as shows from the Crossroads incident discussed earlier.

Under apartheid coloured people, i.e. persons of mixed race, were preferred to have a job to the Africans in the West Cape. In 1984 the government decided that coloured people could live in African districts in Cape Town, such as Guguletu. It was the government's intention to reduce the number of black people with residential rights in the West Cape and to replace them with coloured contract workers. The government forced the African people to leave the Cape. The African inhabitants with residential rights revolted against the authorities and the government decided that they could stay in 'New Crossroads,' an area in the Guguletu district. This motivated many black Africans to move to this district since it was the only place appointed by the government for them Africans, even those with residential rights, to go to. Many settled illegally in the outskirts of the area. The legal inhabitants of Crossroads felt threatened by the invasion of illegal African immigrants who crossed the government's plans to improve the district. The state solved the problem with the help of the police and brute violence; a non-white settlement was destroyed by the army during the troubles of May and June 1986 (Davenport 404-5).

Also economic issues led to violent protests: at the same time as the troubles in Guguletu mass protests were held against the high rents and electricity charges in the Transvaal. Several town governments imposed those charges on the day that new

coloured and Indian parliamentarians were installed. The protests communicated a strong political message when several politicians were murdered (Davenport 438-9).

From 1985 onwards the situation escalated. In March a confrontation took place between the police and demonstrators during the anniversary of the 1960 Sharpeville shootings. Although this confrontation rather seemed a coincidence than a planned event, this happening was a breaking point of the troubles. As a result, demonstrations in other places led to arrests of demonstrators, boycotts in schools all over the country, an increasing number of deaths, and also to bomb explosions on the commemoration day of the Soweto rising of 1976. On 20 July the government proclaimed the state of emergency (Davenport 439).

Coetzee plays with these conflicts and ethnic oppositions caused by apartheid in his novels. For example, in *Life and Times of Michael K*, Coetzee does not reveal the true racial identity of the protagonist, nor does he say anything about the ethnic background of the other characters, but he plays along with the prejudices of the readers. The time in which this novel is set is not clear, but scholars argue that it is in a future South Africa. Civil war and even concentration camps seem to denote a possible future, assuming the social unrest of the early 1980s was to escalate even further into full-scale civil war.

In *Age of Iron* the ethnic backgrounds of most of the characters are revealed, and the social problems of South Africa are reflected in the characters' relationships. White, coloured, and black South Africans fight for their rights. However, the white main character tries to keep the other groups together but like the government she loses power. The times are changing and Coetzee's protagonist finds this hard to accept. Also her seeing the world in the light of the classics results in miscommunication and ignorance with regard to the non-white South Africans.

*Disgrace* was written after the apartheid had been abolished. Also in this novel the ethnic backgrounds of the characters are revealed, or at least hinted at. Coetzee's white protagonist, a professor, has an affair with one of his presumably non-white students. The presence of non-white students at the university indicates the emancipation of the non-white majority and a power shift in the new South Africa after the abolition of apartheid. This power shift is emphasised when the protagonist's daughter is gang raped by black men. However, the position of the non-white student as a victim of her white professor's desires is not exceptional in the new South Africa either (Graham 438).

A surprising thing about Coetzee's novels is that he uses so many intertextual allusions in describing the political situation in South Africa. It is surprising because classical culture was, and still is, alien to the native South Africans. This is so because the classics had been part of white education, and there had always been an enormous gap in the way whites and the overwhelming majority of the country's non-whites had been educated. Black education had been neglected as opposed to white education, and dealt more with practical skills than with highbrow topics such as classical literature and history. Besides, by the eighties, there was no desire for racial integration in the educational system anymore among the blacks, because the Black Consciousness movement was against it, and wished to emphasise African culture, not white culture (Davenport 422); much of the non-white opposition to white rule, in fact, took the form of school boycotts, from the Soweto riots onwards. It is striking that, although they deal with the crisis of South African apartheid, most of Coetzee's novels have white well-educated protagonists or at least major characters. With this, Coetzee depicts the way the traditional relationship between the colonisers and the colonised survives in modern South Africa. Many protagonists have been classically



trained. For instance, Mrs. Curren, the main character in *Age of Iron*, is a retired professor of the classics. David Lurie in *Disgrace* is a professor of Modern Languages and teaches a course on the Romantics at a university, but he also has a thorough knowledge of classical literature and culture. In addition, the well-educated white medical officer in *Life and Times of Michael K* also has knowledge of the classics.

Not only the Greek and Roman cultures symbolise western culture, and with that white superiority, but it can be argued that in the case of *Disgrace* the Romantics, too, symbolise western culture. David Lurie, the main character of the novel, uses the Romantics in the same way the protagonists of the other novels and white colonisers have used the classics; to justify his crime and to explain and describe the world from the perspective of the ancient cultures. Lurie's heroes Wordsworth and in particular Byron are excuses to live a hedonistic life (Beard 60).

The enormous gap in education between the white protagonists and the black characters seems to be a major problem in Coetzee's novels, and also in South Africa. The relevance of the western cultural heritage becomes pressing, but is it a force for good or just an excuse for misbehaviour? Or could it be both? In this thesis, I will analyse Coetzee's attitude towards these issues: the role of the classics, the epitome of white culture, in a South Africa in which the supremacy of white culture can no longer be taken for granted.

### **Hidden Classics in *Life and Times of Michael K***

Compared to the other two novels discussed in this MA thesis, *Life and Times of Michael K* is the vaguest in terms of time. Several scholars argue that the novel is set in a futuristic South Africa (Liebregts 5; Franssen 2003, 454). Dominic Head claims that the troubles depicted in Coetzee's novel evoke the social breakdown of post-Soweto South Africa in the 1980s (93). It can be argued then that the novel depicts a possible scenario of South Africa if the troubles of the 1980s were to completely escalate.

*Life and Times of Michael K* is set in a South Africa in time of revolution. "The most dramatic action, in a campaign of strategic bombings," Head writes, "was the attack against the SASOL oil-from-coal plants in 1980, part of a series of acts of symbolic resistance which are representative of the historical background evoked through the setting of guerrilla warfare in the novel" (93).

Another difference between the other two novels is that the classics in *Life and Times of Michael K* are not as prominently present as in *Disgrace* or *Age of Iron*; just a few direct allusions are made to Roman mythology, such as a reference to Virgil's *Aeneid*, Lavinia, and Aeneas's flight from Troy. Furthermore, subtle references are made in the overall themes of the book. For example, the mother figure and elements, like the earth and the night, as a symbol of fertility, protection and the feminine play an important role. Not only in the ancient Roman and Greek cultures but in many other cultures as well, women have been associated with fertility and motherly protection. The ancient goddess Gaia or Mother Earth symbolises these features. Moreover, Ovid's *Metamorphoses* is subtly incorporated in the novel; the Ages shine through in the social situation of the country as depicted by Coetzee and K's own

world. In addition, the novel itself can be regarded as a metamorphosis of the protagonist.

Lavinia is the first allusion made to the classics. When K ferrets about in the deserted apartment of his mother's former employers, he only finds books. K is not interested in books at all and finds "nothing to engage him [t]here in stories of military men or women with names like Lavinia" (17). In Virgil's *Aeneid*, Lavinia is the daughter of the Latin king Latinus and his wife Amata. Lavinia initially is promised to Turnus, king of the Rutuli, but Aeneas wins her when he kills Turnus in a fight (*Aeneid* XII). Aeneas marries the princess and founds the city of Lavinium, named after his wife. This passage about Lavinia in Coetzee's novel captures the core of the protagonist's character: K is not interested in war, books, and women as is confirmed later in the book. He seems a rather dull person. K flees from the war, withdraws to a desolated farm and seems to live an asexual life until his experience with a prostitute near the end of the novel. K says that he "was never a great one for the girls" (130) because of his deformity, a harelip.

Several times K speaks about his mother's cremation. Whenever he does, he speaks of her with burning hair like a halo (32, 130). This image of the burning hair might refer to another part of Lavinia's story. When the princess stands with her father before an altar while holding burning torches, her hair catches fire. This is one of a few ill omens through which the gods want to show king Latinus that his daughter is not destined to marry Turnus – even though the king really wanted Turnus to be his son-in-law (*Aeneid* VII. 70-80). Lavinia brought misfortune, for she was the cause of Turnus' death. Like Lavinia, K's mother brings misfortune on to K; to K his mother is the most important person in the world, and K did anything to fulfil his promise to her to return her remains to her native ground after she dies. K endures a

lot to fulfil the promise to his mother. Anna K has also been the reason for K's social ineptitude. When she gave birth to K, she was shocked when she saw "what had been growing in her all these months" (1). Anna K keeps her son away from other children to protect him from any harm, but most of all, Anna K keeps him away from them because she is ashamed. Anna K sends him to a home for unfortunate children like K.

According to Franssen, the other words in the Lavinia allusion, "military men," refer to the opening line of the *Aeneid* "Arma virumque cano," meaning "Of a man and feats of arms I sing" (2000, 36). K does not want to be involved in war. With his *Aeneid*, Virgil did not only write about the greatness of the Roman Empire, but Franssen suggests that Virgil also wrote about the final subjugation of Africa to Europe. In Carthage, Aeneid falls in love with queen Dido, but their love affair delays Aeneas's mission to establish an empire. When the pious Aeneas leaves Carthage, Dido commits suicide. This is a mythical explanation for later wars between the Romans and Carthaginians (Franssen 2000, 37). Franssen also suggests that the expansion of an empire by a European power at the expense of Africa is later repeated in history in the form of colonialism. (2000, 37)

Another allusion to the *Aeneid* occurs when the white medical officer, from whose perspective the second part of the novel is written, claims that K's mother had been a burden to the protagonist. To K he says:

You made a great mistake, Michaels, when you tied her on your back and fled the burning city for the safety of the countryside. Because when I think of you carrying her, panting under her weight, choking in the smoke, dodging the bullets, performing all the other feats of filial piety you no doubt performed, I also think of her sitting on your shoulders, eating out your brains, glaring about triumphantly, the very embodiment of great Mother Death. (150)

Although his name is not mentioned, a classically trained reader will recognise the image of the Trojan hero Aeneas here. K is here compared to the Trojan hero Aeneas, or rather as Paul Franssen suggests, K is here depicted as an anti-Aeneas (2003; 455). The ancestor of the Romans was a pious man who did not avoid war and carried his father on his shoulders, while K in fact wheeled his mother in an improvised cart. In addition, the town from where K flees is not burning like Troy. Moreover, K is pious to his mother whereas Aeneas is pious to his gods and his father. Aeneas is also the predecessor of one of the mightiest peoples in the world's history, but K is a rather passive hero.

The medical officer does not (want) to see the differences between Aeneas and K, but according to Franssen, the differences between the hero and the anti-hero are most important; the medical officer superimposes the Aeneas-myth on the most unlikely of heroes and the differences between Aeneas and K are emphasised throughout the novel (Franssen 2003, 455).

For instance, there is the difference in piety. Franssen writes that K's piety to his mother as opposed to Aeneas's piety to his father might have something to do with the power relations in apartheid South Africa. K is often assumed to be a coloured person, which is in the South African context someone of mixed race. Franssen writes that usually coloured people were the offspring of white fathers and black mothers (2003; 456). The fathers did not acknowledge their child who was then brought up by their mothers. This denial of coloured children could explain K's loyalty to his mother and the negative attitude towards Huis Norenus, which K regards as the father figure in his life since he has never had a father. With the negative attitude towards the father figure, K's western heritage, i.e. the classics, are rejected (Franssen 2003; 456).

Coetzee is not explicit about K's ethnic background. The author does not say anything

about K's father, but from Anna K's work one can understand she at least is non-white for she is a hard-working domestic servant (6, 136). K's police record says "Michael Visagie – CM – 40 – NFA – Unemployed" (70). This record in which "CM" stands for Coloured Male is incorrect: K's last name is not Visagie, and K is not forty years old, but thirty-one (4). It is questionable whether K indeed is a coloured male, but the novel contains enough clues hinting at K's non-whiteness. For example, Head claims that K's silence contributes to his position as one of the oppressed (98). According to Head, silence is a way of agreeing, of showing no resistance. From childhood, K has learned to be silent. He used to tacitly watch his mother scrub the floors of others (4) and in Huis Norenius he had to be quiet (104). Even when the white Visagie grandson comes back to the remote farm where K lives, K does not send the Visagie boy away even though K sees him as an intruder. He hardly speaks with the white boy. K has decided to play dumb (61). His mother has taught him to be obedient and therewith K has been taught to be the Other: he has never really learned to stand up for himself. According to Franssen, this Aeneas allusion made by the medical officer symbolises the whites' incomprehension towards the coloured South Africans (2000; 37). Although the medical officer is well-meaning because he wants to save K's life, he cannot see K in a different light than from his own perspective. The doctor can only view K filtered through his own western culture.

Although his flight with his mother from the "burning" city much resembles Aeneas's flight with his father from Troy, K never had ambitions. Aeneas, through a line of his male descendants, became founder of the Roman Empire. Compared to the Trojan hero, K lives an ambitionless and secluded life on a desolate farm (Franssen 2000; 37). K does not have a wife or children and it appears he lives an asexual life. K

does not seem to be destined to be the predecessor of a mighty people. K says about himself:

How fortunate that I have no children...how fortunate that I have no desire to father. I would not know what to do with a child out here in the heart of the country, who would need milk and clothes and friends and schooling. I would fail in my duties, I would be the worst of fathers. (104)

K's only occupation is his pumpkins and melons; they are his children, the children of the earth. Virgil's hero has a son, Ascanius, whom he takes with him to Italy. Aeneas was assured of descendants, while K does not care about future generations; he only cares for his plants.

Another difference between the classical hero and Coetzee's anti-hero is that K carries his mother while Aeneas carries his father. K does not literally carry his mother on his shoulders like Aeneas; K carries her in a wheelbarrow. In this loyalty to their parents, another structural theme is set: the importance of the feminine in *Life and Times of Michael K* versus the importance of the masculine in the epic. K saves his mother and Aeneas saves his father.

The ancient goddess Gaia plays an important role in *Life and Times of Michael K*, although she is not mentioned. She symbolises Mother Earth, from whom all life sprang. In Greek mythology, Gaia gave life to the oceans, the sky, the Cyclops, the Hundred-Armed Giants, and the Titans who later gave birth to the Olympic gods.<sup>1</sup> The feminine, or the mother figure, is clearly present in the novel. Anna K is the most important person in the world to K: he remains loyal to her even after her death. K had promised his mother to bury her on the grounds where she was raised and when Anna K dies on the way to her native soil, K travels around with her ashes.

Furthermore, the earth, the ancient goddess Gaia, becomes a second mother to K

when Anna K has passed away. The earth provides him with his basic needs such as food and shelter. K cultivates his pumpkins and melons in her soil and digs out a shelter in the earth. Mother Earth as a symbol of the feminine and fertility is emphasised when K scatters his mother's ashes to fertilise the soil: "she makes the plants grow" (130), he later tells the medical officer. In this way, the mother literally fertilises the earth and has she been returned to her native soil. The importance of the mother figure, and therewith K's anti-heroic status, is emphasised even more when K imagines his ancestors: those were all women (117). In the classical epics such as Virgil's *Aeneid*, heroes come from a line of men. For example, Aeneas rescues his father Anchises while his mother dies in the fires of burning Troy. On the way to Italy Anchises dies, but Aeneas has also taken his son Ascanius with him to secure a future line of descendants.

K never speaks about his father; he has never had one but the home in which he grows up, Huis Norenius, he regards as his father (104). However, K does not look back happily on his time in Huis Norenius. The father figure Huis Norenius was a place of rules and prohibitions. K feels threatened by masculine elements, which is underlined by his fear for the sun and sky. The sun, in classical cultures personified by male gods and in the Romance languages a masculine word (le soleil, il sole, el sol), is K's enemy. The sun is a destructive force that makes the earth dry and plants die. In addition, it makes K vulnerable: in the daylight K can be spotted from afar. He does not want to leave any traces on his land because he is afraid he will be caught and be put back in a camp. Just as the sun, the sky is an enemy to K. In Romance languages the sky, too, is a masculine word (le ciel, il cielo, el cielo) and is in Greek mythology personified by the male god Uranos. The sky also contributes to K's vulnerability: from planes and helicopters K can be easier seen by his enemies, i.e. the people who



are involved in the war. Because all this suggests that masculine elements and objects have a rather negative connotation in *Life and Times of Michael K*: they symbolise rules and punishment, destruction, and betrayal.<sup>2</sup>

Because the day is K's enemy, K works in the nights by the light of the moon. The moon, a feminine word in the Romance languages (la lune, la luna, la luna), was associated with the Roman goddess of the hunt and chastity Diana and her Greek equivalent Artemis or Cynthia.<sup>3</sup> The night and the moonlight keep him out of sight of intruders. Striking is that although the female elements provide K with food, shelter, and protection, it all just seems enough for him to stay alive. This feature of the mother figure giving K just enough to survive<sup>4</sup> is emphasised in the beginning of the novel when the reader learns that Anna K fed her son with a teaspoon.

K's lifestyle in harmony with nature and his passive attitude towards war do remind one of Ovid's Ages. In the second part of *Life and Times of Michael K*, the doctor says that K comes from "a Garden of Paradise" (155). Not only does this remind one of the Biblical Garden of Eden, but also of Ovid's Golden and Silver Ages. In the Golden Age people lived in harmony with nature and one another and no rules were needed. In the Silver Age people built shelters and started to cultivate the land, but there was no war (*Metamorphoses* I). K's otherworldliness is even more emphasised by the remark made by the doctor that K is not from this world, but that he lives wholly in his own where he is not involved in a war (142, 138).

*Life and Times of Michael K* can be regarded as a metamorphosis of the protagonist, which is another reference to Ovid's best-known work, *Metamorphoses*. K gradually changes from a city dweller into a farmer. His mother's shame and her overprotective behaviour in his youth are the cause of this transformation:

From the first Anna K did not like the mouth that would not close and the living pink flesh it bared to her. She shivered to think of what had been growing in her all these months. . . she took the child with her to work and continued to take it when it was no longer a baby. Because their smiles and whispers hurt her, she kept it away from other children. (1)

K becomes dependent of his mother so she is the only person for him to hold on to. He promises her to bring her remains back to her native soil and K has to endure a lot to fulfil this promise. He stays on the farm where his mother (probably) was born and starts to grow vegetables, thinking, “at last I am living off the land” (46). K feels at home in the countryside. One of his first attempts to gather food is to hunt the flock of goats that live near the farm. After several tries, he finally catches a ewe. He kills the animal, but once it is dead, he does not really know what to do with it. He eats just a small piece of meat, and leaves the rest on the carcass. Then K decides to catch smaller animals, like birds and lizards, because a goat is too big for him. Eventually he eats small pieces of pumpkin, and finally he hardly eats at all. It can be stated that K’s eating and hunting habits are a question of a reversed evolution: K changes from a city dweller into a kind of hunter-gatherer who lives in harmony with nature like the people of Ovid’s Age of Gold.

Furthermore, K’s position in the chain of life undergoes a metamorphosis. Although K eats less and less, he shares more and more similarities with animals – as can be derived from the animal-like imagery. K eats big animals, small animals, eats plants, and sometimes does not eat at all. He comes out at night to take care of his vegetables and sleeps in the daytime. As the days grow shorter, K sleeps more. It seems as if K hibernates. The further the plot develops the more animal imagery Coetzee uses to describe K’s status. In the second part of the novel, K is even

relegated to a stone. The protagonist's position in the chain of life drops from human to animal (62, 132), and eventually to stone (135).

Although the classics are less obviously used in *Life and Time of Michael K* than in books like *Age of Iron* and *Disgrace*, they are nonetheless present. The two most obvious and important allusions to antiquity are the name of Lavinia and Aeneas, both referring to Virgil's *Aeneid*. With these references to the *Aeneid*, Coetzee illustrates the incomprehension between the white medical officer and K as the Other. Although the medical officer is well-meaning, he can only understand the world through the classics and he does not realise that K does not fit into it. Unlike Aeneas, K is an anti-hero. Other clear themes in the novel that can be traced back to the classics are the importance of the feminine elements, the earth and the night, referring to the ancient goddesses Gaia, Diana, and Artemis or Cynthia. They symbolise the feminine as a source of fertility and protection, the good qualities in life. Male elements such as the sun, sky, and Huis Norenius, symbolise enmity, punishment and rules. Besides the *Aeneid*, Ovid's *Metamorphoses* is an important intertext throughout the novel. K seems to live in a Golden or Silver Age, while the reality in the South Africa is depicted by Coetzee as a Bronze or Iron Age. In addition, K's story as a whole can be regarded as a metamorphosis in itself.

### **Coetzee's *Age of Iron***

Coetzee published his novel in 1990 when apartheid was being abolished. However, also *Age of Iron* is set in a time of social unrest that resembles the troubles of the mid 1980s. The time in which Coetzee wrote the novel, the mid 1980s, is according to Dominic Head clearly depicted in the novel (133).

The 1984-85 mass protests that resulted in confrontations between protestors and the government serve as the social context in which Coetzee's *Age of Iron* is set. This time of growing hostility is referred to in the novel's title, which also serves as one of the structural metaphors of the book. In addition, the social friction is also depicted in the relationship between the black teenagers John and Bheki and the tramp Vercueil. Their dislike towards the coloured Vercueil can be related to the South African government playing the different ethnic groups off against one another.

The novel's title is not only a reference to the social friction in the South Africa of the mid 1980s, but it is also a clear reference to Ovid's Ages which he describes in the first book of his best-known work *Metamorphoses*. In this book, Ovid describes the creation of the world and he explains how due to the involvement of gods animals, plants, and stars came into being. They were usually created when a jealous or amorous god transformed a human being. According to Ovid, the creation of the world has known four stages: the Age of Gold, the Age of Silver, the Age of Bronze, and the Age of Iron (*Metamorphoses* I). The Age of Gold was an era of eternal spring; men lived in harmony with nature and one another, the earth provided them with their basic needs, and men did not need rules. In the Age of Silver the seasons were introduced and people started to cultivate the land. After these Ages, the Age of Bronze and the Age of Iron followed:

Third in succession came the race of bronze,

Of fiercer temperament, more readily  
 Disposed to war, yet free from wickedness.  
 Last came the race of iron. In that hard age  
 Of baser vein all evil straight broke out,  
 And honour fled and truth and loyalty  
 Replaced by fraud, deceit and treachery  
 And violence and wicked greed for gain. (*Metamorphoses* I.125-31)

The image of such an anarchistic era such as Ovid's Age of Iron is clearly put forward in the novel: children do not go to school, their parents are not in control of them any more, the government pits the different ethnic groups against each other, non-whites rebel against the authorities, and many people are killed. The country is in war and all charity seems to be gone (22). This image of charity having left the country does recall another image from Ovid's Ages: the goddess of justice, Astraea, as last of the gods leaving the earth in the Age of Iron (*Metamorphoses* I.149). The only person who seems to care about others in Coetzee's novel is the protagonist Mrs. Curren. Coetzee's main character, however, comes from an Age of Gold and finds it very hard to accept the troubles in South Africa.

Curren considers herself as one of a dying species, namely those who were born and raised in colonial South Africa. Frequently Curren looks back with feelings of nostalgia to this bygone Age of Gold:

Word games, from a past that alone I could look back to with nostalgia, when we of the middle classes, the comfortable classes, passed our Sundays roaming the countryside from beauty spot to beauty spot, bringing the afternoon to a close with tea and scones and strawberry jam and cream in a tea room with a nice view, preferably westward over the sea. (69)

The tea and scones with jam and cream clearly refer to the English colonisers. The view westward implies the direction from where the colonisers came. The colonisers thought that the western culture they had tried to impose on the native South Africans was the best also becomes clear when Curren says to Mr. Thabane that her car is “[f]rom the time when British was Best” (99). Mr. Thabane, in contrast with Curren, questions whether this British colonial period was the best at all. As turns out, this Age of Gold was not as beautiful as it seemed; it turns out to be an illusion as Curren grows older. For example, Curren tells about the Piesangs River she used to visit when she was a little girl. Years later she went back to the river with the “lovely golden name” (17), but then it was nothing more than just a little stream. In addition, that ideal world to which Curren clings cannot be brought back. The times have changed.

Coetzee’s *Age of Iron* is marked by war, indifference to neighbours, and chaos, precisely as Ovid described in his *Metamorphoses*. Curren explicitly states that she does not belong to this Age of Iron (71) but gradually she realises she cannot escape the Age of Iron South Africa is in and that these turbulent times are a result of the past, the Age of Gold or the colonial period.

Curren’s domestic Florence tries to explain this to her. “But who made them [the rebellious black youth] so cruel? It is the whites who made them so cruel! Yes!” (49) she says to Curren. Florence admires her son’s resistance to the apartheid regime; his generation is afraid of nothing (48). Curren does not understand why Florence does not force her son Bheki to go to school, because in her Age of Gold education was a privilege. Curren thinks that this new generation are wasting their future with the war and the boycotts (38). Florence, in contrast to Curren, is proud of her son

Bheki: “[t]hese are good children,” she says, “they are like iron” (50). Curren thinks Florence herself too is made of iron. The argument with Florence makes Curren think:

[i]s it truly a time out of time, heaved up out of the earth, misbegotten,  
 monstrous? What, after all, gave birth to the age of iron but the age of granite?  
 Did we not have Voortrekkers, generation after generation of Voortrekkers,  
 grim-faced, tight-lipped Afrikaner children, marching, singing their patriotic  
 hymns, saluting their flag, vowing to die for their fatherland? (50-51)

Curren concludes that there must have been something harder than iron that made it possible for the Age of Iron to exist. Ovid linked the most precious of metals to the best of Ages and the roughest of Ages to the toughest of metals. In her personal interpretation of the Ages, Curren applies harder materials to indicate the roughness of the time she lives in. Because something harder than iron was the reason for the Age of Iron to exist, Curren thinks it must have been the Age of Granite; Stones are harder than metals and granite is the hardest of stones. In Curren’s version of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, the Age of Granite symbolises the colonial period, as she explains. Again, it is clear that her Age of Gold, the idealised past had been an illusion. The white colonisers had been harsh on the native South Africans and after centuries of oppression, the non-white majority is now fighting back. In Curren’s own interpretation of Ovid’s Ages, she asks herself how long men have to endure these tough Ages of Iron and Granite “before the softer ages return in their cycle, the age of clay, the age of earth?” (50), because she thinks the Ages are cyclical.

In line with South Africa in the mid 1980s as an Age of Iron is an allusion to Greek culture. When Curren thinks of the present generation as a generation of iron, she compares Florence to “a Spartan matron, iron-heated, bearing warrior sons for the nation. “We are proud of them.” We. Come home either with your shield or on your

shield” (50). Parents like Florence bring up their children with the thought of winning. The children, like Spartan soldiers, cannot come home defeated: they must come home as victors, or they can come home dead as eventually happens with Bheki. This is the essence of the Black Consciousness movement, an anti-apartheid organisation. Leader and founder of the movement Steve Biko thought that it was time for the black Africans to stand up after being suppressed by the whites for generations (Davenport 378).

Other passages that show Curren’s use of the classics to explain the world to her are for example the passage of the photograph taken in a flowering garden. First of all, the garden seems perfect, like the Garden of Eden or a garden from the Age of Gold. The picture was taken when Curren was just a small child. When she was young it was a mystery to her who took care of the garden, as she had always thought it was her grandfather. Now being a mature woman and at the end of her life, she realises it was not her grandfather who watered the plants, but the black gardeners: “*Dies irae, dies illa* when the absent shall be present and the present shall be absent,” Curren thinks (110). The *Dies Irae* is a part of the Requiem, a Roman mass for the Dead and it deals with the Day of Judgment. In the light of a Requiem, the word is a conjugation of the Latin noun ‘requies’ which means ‘rest,’ this passage can be regarded as an anticipation on allusions to the Hades and book VI of Virgil’s *Aeneid* since those references deal with resting in peace after death. I will later return to these allusions. ‘*Dies irae, dies illa*’ means ‘the day of anger, this day,’ and refers in the context of South Africa in the mid 1980s to the rise of black nationalism. The garden in the picture symbolises the country: Curren realises it is the non-white workers who actually built the country. The white oppressors did not do the tough labour, but they took the credits for the hard work the repressed non-white people delivered. As a



child, she had always thought it was her grandfather who took care of the garden. Curren's *Age of Gold*, her youth in a colonial South Africa, again proves to be a lie: the truth is that the non-white suppressed majority did the hard work, and not the white colonisers. The black people were always kept out of the picture. Now the day has come that the black Africans force their way into the picture; it is time for restitution. The tables have turned in South Africa with the rise of national black pride: the black Africans stand up and do not want to be repressed anymore.

Ovid's *Metamorphoses* can be regarded as one of the earliest works on evolution. With etiological myths Ovid explains the origin of natural appearances through metamorphoses. Change and transformation are themes that return throughout the book. Therefore, *Age of Iron* can be regarded as a metamorphosis in itself.

For instance, the novel was written in a period of transition with the total abolition of apartheid just several years away. At the moment of writing, no one knew what the new South Africa would be like after the abolition of apartheid. The future of the country was unsure. Coetzee's protagonist regards the social problems of the country as a backward evolution or metamorphosis:

Fish from the primitive depths (I am sure you know this) grew patches of skin sensitive to the fingerings of light, patches that in time became eyes. Now, in South Africa, I see eyes clouding over again, scales thickening on them, as the land explorers, the colonists, prepare to return to the deep. (127)

The fish that had come from the deep to see the light now return to the darkness. The scales on peoples' eyes thicken in the *Age of Iron*: they become estranged from one another and only seem to care about themselves. In Curren's opinion, the good old days of colonialism have gone, and South Africa has turned into a barbarous country.

Furthermore, there are the metamorphoses of the characters. Curren is diagnosed with bone cancer and her health fails rapidly. Coetzee uses a micro cosmos to refer to a macro cosmos: throughout the novel Curren struggles with accepting her condition and nearing death, but at the same time this struggle with the self symbolises the difficulty of her resigning to the current situation in the country. Once Curren has embraced her ageing and nearing death, she writes to her daughter that it is “the soul of me that will be left with you when this letter is over. Like a moth from its case emerging, fanning its wings that is what, reading, I hope you will glimpse: my soul readying itself for further flight. A white moth, a ghost emerging from the mouth of the figure on the deathbed” (129). Curren reconciles herself with her ageing and her death. This image of the moth breaking from its case is a literal metamorphosis or a reincarnation of Curren’s soul. She does not have to fear death because her soul will live on and only her body will decay.

Moreover, there is also the metamorphosis of Vercueil, who transforms from a tramp into a divine messenger. The day that Curren is diagnosed with bone cancer, she finds a tramp on her driveway. She sends him away, but when he comes back she invites him in. Coetzee only reveals a little about the man’s past. The reader learns that his name is Vercueil, which Curren confuses with “Verkuil, Verskuil” (37). According to Dominic Head, the confusion about the name contributes to the character’s mysteriousness. Head writes that ‘verkuil’ is derived from the Afrikaans word ‘verkul,’ which means ‘to cheat’. ‘Verskuil’ is said to be derived from the Afrikaans verb ‘verskuilen,’ which means ‘to cover’ or ‘to hide’ (140). Coetzee does not give away Vercueil’s ethnic background. His name indicates that he is of Afrikaans descent, but the fact that Vercueil is unemployed and deformed – he had an accident and as a result his fingers are numb and disfigured (186) – indicate non-

whiteness. In addition, it is not clear how well educated Vercueil is. He has never heard of Latin (191), but he knows how to get a car to start (19). Scholars usually assume that Vercueil is a coloured character.

Vercueil makes his entry as one of the “scavengers of Cape Town” (5), but he becomes very important to Curren. She takes him in and makes him her messenger (32, 48): Vercueil has to mail her letter (the novel) to her daughter in America when she has deceased. “*In manus tuas*” Curren thinks when she calls her doctor (183), but it is actually Vercueil to whom she entrusts her life, her story.

The importance of Vercueil’s role in the plot is emphasised by the imagery Curren uses to describe her relationship with him. Often she thinks they behave like a married couple or as lovers (118). She tells him her story and they even share a bed like “old mates, bunkmates, conjoined, conjugal. *Lectus genialis, lectus adversus*” (189). They share a bed as friends; Curren sleeps under the covers and Vercueil above the covers, but by using words such as “conjugal,” “lectus genialis,” and “lectus adversus” Curren shows she is very fond of Vercueil. In Roman culture, the lectus genialis was the nuptial bed in which the married couple slept during their wedding night (Cic. *Cluent.* 5). The lectus adversus was a symbolic nuptial bed that stood in the atrium. It is not sure whether it was the same bed as the lectus genialis, which could perhaps have been brought to the atrium after the wedding night. However, the lectus adversus was a bed for the spirits of the newly weds (Hor. *Epist.* I.1.87). In Curren’s view, she and Vercueil are more than just ‘old mates’ or ‘bunkmates’ and she sometimes has erotic visions of him and her (30, 131). Curren frequently refers to Vercueil as her “husband” (85, 189), and even once she names herself “Mrs. V” (190).

Besides this transformation from a social outsider into an intimate lover or husband, Vercueil's status changes into a divine one. Several times Curren refers to Vercueil as her "messenger", but he becomes a divine messenger when she calls him "Hermes" (140): in ancient Greek mythology Hermes is the messenger of the Olympic gods and a guide to the Underworld. Furthermore, Hermes is the god of commerce, travellers and thieves,<sup>5</sup> which is also relevant to Vercueil since he is a tramp and apparently steals money from Curren (14). Before she compares Vercueil to Hermes, Curren refers to Vercueil as "Odysseus" (140) and earlier in the book she compares herself to Circe (85). In Homer's *Odyssey* Circe is a sorceress who tries to keep Odysseus on her island, and she is known for her knowledge of herbs and magic potions. Circe transforms her enemies into animals such as lions and wolves, and she changes Odysseus' crew into pigs (Homer 142). Like Odysseus, Vercueil has lived at sea (84) and been 'washed ashore': Curren found him on her driveway. The image of Curren as a sorceress is reinforced by the cats she has. These animals have been associated with mystery, magic, and witchcraft for centuries. Like Circe, Curren tries to keep Vercueil with her, and maybe like the sorceress who transforms men into animals, Curren tries to transform Vercueil into something which he is not. Vercueil is a social outcast but she likes to think of him as a divine messenger.

In the theme of metamorphosis and change, Vercueil could also be as an angel of death, or maybe even a devil or Satan. Several times Curren refers to Vercueil as an angel sent by a higher power (168, 181), but Vercueil seems to have a great interest in death, which is a rather devilish quality. When he and Curren are driving up to a viewpoint he asks her "this is the day?" Curren wanted to commit suicide to end her sufferings, and Vercueil eagerly wants to help her. He offers her a box of matches and tells her to set the car on fire (113-16). Later in the book when Curren has changed the

dose of her medicines, he offers her again to help her end her life: “If you want me to help you I’ll help you,” he said. He leaned over and took me by the throat, his thumbs resting lightly on my larynx, the three bad fingers bunched under my ear” (184-85). Furthermore, Curren says that Vercueil “is dry. His drink is not water but fire. Perhaps that is why I cannot imagine children of his: because his semen would be dry, dry and brown, like pollen or like the dust of this country” (196). Death, fire and dryness are often associated with hell and the devil.

Besides a Hermes or an Odysseus, Vercueil also plays the role of Charon, the ancient ferryman of the Underworld. Curren has been looking for someone to guide her to her end. That person has been Vercueil. Curren says “All the days you have known me. . . I have been standing on the river-bank awaiting my turn. I am waiting for someone to show me the way across. Every minute of every day I am here, waiting” (179). Like a restless soul, Curren has been waiting to be guided to her final resting place. It looks like Curren has found her Charon. After Curren has died, Vercueil will act like the ancient ferryman: Vercueil will make sure that Curren’s soul, her life, her story will be sent across the waters of the Atlantic Ocean to her daughter in the US.

Like Curren, Vercueil could make a literal transformation. When Vercueil and Curren shortly live on the streets, Curren hopes that Vercueil’s jacket will fall off his shoulders and that great wings will sprout from them (161). This evokes the image of a larva emerging from its case as a beautiful butterfly. Another possible image is that of an angel, since Vercueil is her companion and guide in the last days of her life. However, the image of the insect breaking from its case is more convincing, since Curren uses the image of a moth breaking from its pupal case as a metaphor for her soul leaving her body when she has passed away. In addition, grubs are a frequently

returning image in the novel symbolising the innocence and ignorance of white children, and, moreover, in biology this process of transformation is called metamorphosis.

These personal metamorphoses symbolise the metamorphosis of South Africa; Coetzee uses micro cosmos, Curren's body, Vercueil, and Curren's house, to represent a macro cosmos, which is South Africa. Curren's struggle with her cancer symbolises the acceptance of social change in South Africa. The cancer in Curren's body can be regarded as the resistance of the black majority in the country. Like a spreading disease the number of black and other non-white rebels grows because the government tries to set the ethnic groups against each other.

Vercueil represents the coloured people in South Africa, who were, like Asians, in between the white and black Africans. The coloured people were too white to be black and too black to be white. This 'in between' position is clarified by the way Vercueil is treated by Curren and the black teenage boys. Curren invites him in, she protects him, but she still does not trust Vercueil because, for instance, it seems that he has stolen money from her. Bheki and John beat Vercueil when they catch him with another bottle of alcohol hanging around Curren's house. As a non-white man, Vercueil should stand up for himself instead of succumbing to the white benefactor Curren. Alcohol is a tool of the oppressor to keep control over the repressed. Furthermore, Vercueil asks Curren for money to buy even more alcohol; he has become dependant on her. As Vercueil represents the 'in between' groups in South Africa, Bheki and John represent the Black Consciousness movement.

Curren's house symbolises the country in the sense that all different ethnic groups meet. White, black, and coloured people live in her house. This causes troubles, as is just the case in the country. Curren protects Vercueil, like the coloured

people in South Africa who were favoured above the blacks in, for example, having jobs. This causes friction in the house. Bheki and John's beating of Vercueil is a parallel to the confrontations between the ethnic groups in the country. All this shows that the personal metamorphoses symbolise the metamorphosis of South Africa.

Another important intertext Coetzee uses in this novel is Virgil's *Aeneid*, in particular book VI. In this part of the *Aeneid*, Virgil's hero Aeneas visits the Underworld to look for his father, who shows him the great future of the Roman people. With book VI of the *Aeneid*, Coetzee supports an important theme of *Age of Iron*, namely death. Death is omnipresent in the novel; Curren struggles with the cancer and philosophises on the end of her life, and of course, due to the social unrest in South Africa, many lives are lost.

The first allusion made to Aeneas visiting the Underworld, is when Curren visits a hospital to look for Bheki's friend John. The boys have had a bicycle accident and John was brought to a hospital. Curren feels that death is clearly present in the hospital. She compares her visit to a journey to the Kingdom of Shadows:

I was seeing too many sick old people, and too suddenly. They oppressed me, oppressed and intimidated me. Black and white, men and women, they shuffled about the corridors, watching each other covetously, eyeing me as I approached, catching unerringly on me the smell of death. "Impostor!" they seemed to whisper, ready to grasp my arm, draw me back. "Do you think you can come and go here as you please? Don't you know the rule? This is a house of shadow and suffering through which you must pass on the way to death, that is the sentence passed upon all: a term in prison before the execution." Old hounds patrolling the corridors, seeing that none of the condemned flee

back to the air, the light, the bounteous world above. Hades this place, and I a fugitive shade. (69-70)

In ancient mythology, one could not just visit the Hades, which is a synonym for the Underworld referring the ruling god of the Kingdom of Shadows. For example, a Sybil accompanied Aeneas, and Orpheus had to ask the gods for permission to look for his deceased wife Eurydice in the Hades (*Metamorphoses* X.1-12). There were also rules for visiting the Underworld: Aeneas was given the time from sunrise to sunset to look for his father. Once Orpheus had found his wife, he was not allowed to look on to Eurydice's shadow. If Orpheus did look back to see if she followed him, she would be forever lost (*Metamorphoses* X.50-53). Curren sees the hospital as an Underworld where patients terminally ill are waiting for their deaths. They do not like to be disturbed by the living: one is not allowed in the hospital unless one is dying, as it is not possible to go to the Hades unless one is dead.

Then there is the allusion to the end of the Age of Gold and being on the edge of life and death, *in limine primo* (92). These words are taken from the second book of the *Aeneid*: "Apparet domus intus et atria longa patescunt; apparent Priami et veterum penetralia regum, armatosque vident stantis in limine primo" (483-85), meaning "The inside of the house is revealed and the long rows of columns show; the halls of king Priam and former kings appear, and they see armed men standing at the front of the doorstep."<sup>6</sup> Here, Greek soldiers are on the doorstep of the Trojan King Priam's rooms. The soldiers have come for Priam to murder him. Curren wonders what will happen to those of the Age of Gold, the bygone colonial period, after they have died. She compares the people of her generation to "grubs," a metaphor for innocence and not being full-grown. She thinks that her generation is innocent, or rather ignorant; the civil war in is the legacy of colonialism but they do not want to see it. As grubs they



will reach the first threshold of the underworld, the limbo. If there is any justice left in the world, they will “join those infant souls whose eternal whining Aeneas mistook for weeping” (92). The threshold here is literally the edge of life and death. Limbo is the doorstep to life or death, heaven or hell. On this threshold of heaven and hell, Curren’s generation will be judged. Virgil describes how in limbo souls of infants who died a premature death, the souls of the wrongfully accused and of those who committed suicide are being judged (*Aeneid* VI.426-440).

Etymology in view of Latin is also important in the novel. With her knowledge of Latin, Curren manipulates the under-educated Vercueil. For example, etymology is used to depict the censorship in the South African state of the 1980s. Curren explains with the Latin word “*stupere*, to be stunned astounded,” which is “[a] gradient from *stupid* to *stunned* to *astonished*,” how the South African politicians turn the people to stone with their never changing messages (29). More important, etymology is used by Curren to manipulate others, i.e. Vercueil as the simple Other. When Vercueil tells Curren she could turn her home into a boardinghouse for students, Curren refuses because she is of the opinion that there is no more charity in the country (22). She explains to Vercueil that *charity* comes from the Latin word for *heart*. However, the reader learns that this is a lie: “[C]harity, *caritas*, has nothing to do with the heart. But what does it matter if my sermons rest on false etymologies? He barely listens when I speak to him,” Curren says to justify her lie (22). *Charity* is derived from the Latin word *caritas* as Curren says, but it has to do with care and not so much with the heart.

Vercueil later asks her “what is Latin?” (191-92) and Curren answers that it is “a dead language. . . a language spoken by the dead. . . You only hear it at funerals nowadays. Funerals and the odd wedding.” This is not completely true, because she

will cite a passage from the *Aeneid*; as a living being she will speak the language of the deceased or a dead language. Vercueil seems to be fascinated by the fact that Latin is a language of the dead and he asks her to cite something in the dead language.

Curren cites the following passage, taken from Virgil's *Aeneid*:

Nec ripas datur horrendas et rauca fluenta  
transportare prius quam sedibus ossa quierunt.  
Centum errant annos volitantque haec litora circum;  
tum demum admissi stagna exoptata revisunt. (VI. 327-330)

Vercueil is curious about the meaning of the passage and Curren explains: "It means that if you don't mail the letter to my daughter I will have a hundred years of misery" (192). This again is a lie. This passage, in fact, is about the restless dead; the unburied dead cannot be brought across the Styx. The ferryman Charon can only carry the souls of those who have been buried, and the souls of those who have not been buried have to roam the banks of the Styx for a hundred years. After that time they can come back and Charon will take them across the river (*Aeneid* VI.325-30). Vercueil does not believe her, but Curren assures him it is the truth, because 'ossa' means 'diary' she says, "[s]omething on which the days of your life are inscribed" (192). Curren deliberately bends the true meaning of the words so that Vercueil will act like Charon after her death: he will send her soul, her story across the ocean to her daughter. However, 'ossa' is a conjugation of the word 'os' (ossis), which means 'bone.' Instead of burying her bones so she can rest in peace, Vercueil will have to send Curren's diary. This image of the restless souls becomes a metaphor for Curren's feeling of guilt; she cannot rest in peace before she has allayed the guilt of apartheid, caused by her ancestors. Coetzee implicitly asks the reader how the white population of South Africa is blinded to the troubles. What must be done to straighten out so one

can die in peace? Vercueil is impressed by the Latin and wants to learn the language. Moreover, this shows Vercueil's position as the Other: Curren repeats the passage over and over, and she thinks that Vercueil remembers the words, but it appears that it is the dactyl that attracts him, because rhythm is an important part of African culture. Besides manipulating Vercueil for her own good, Curren's lecturing Vercueil represents the traditional colonial relationship between the all-knowing white oppressor and the oppressed Other.

Coetzee's protagonist is very upset about John and Bheki fighting the civil war; they and other children die too early. Curren tells Bheki's friend John about Thucydides (80). He wrote about the behaviour of people in times of war: they follow rules without making any exceptions and their victims feel the unfairness of the killings. According to Thucydides, in times of crisis people will do what they are told; they will not look at the person, but at the appearance of someone. If someone is ordered to kill people with a light skin colour, that person will carry out the order, whether the victim is a gentle person or not. In such times there is no mercy, and this is the case in South Africa. Curren thinks this is not right and wonders how she can keep the boys from participating in the war. Curren concludes she has no voice to change modern South Africa. After a long struggle, she finally accepts the situation in the country. To Vercueil she says: "You are not free, at least not on this earth, nor am I. I was born a slave and I will most certainly die a slave" (150). Like Florence and the boys, Curren and Vercueil were born in a social situation they had not asked for. Every crime has its price, also the crime that had been committed long ago, i.e. apartheid. It is the legacy of her ancestors and Curren is ashamed. She was born into it and apartheid along with its troubles has become a part of her. The oppressed are therefore also part of her. When Curren was angry with them for the school boycotts

and the white people they had killed she wished the black people dead, but by doing so she in a sense wished herself dead too. Because a shameful life and shameful death are the price of the crime, she wished them and therewith herself dead to be rid of the shame and die an honourable death, or a “[h]onesta mors” (164). These words are taken from Tacitus’ *Agricola*. “Honestam mors turpam vitam potior,” which means an “honourable death is always better than life dishonoured.”<sup>7</sup> In this work Tacitus describes the life and deeds of Roman general Julius Gnaeus Agricola and it also covers the Roman conquest of Great Britain for which Agricola for a great part was responsible. The line that Coetzee has used is taken from a war speech by a chieftain of the island’s tribes. He tells his soldiers that they will die an honourable death because they had defended their freedom until the end. Curren wonders what exactly freedom is. Nobody really knows, but everyone will recognise a not free situation (164).

Curren is in a struggle to accept her condition and that of South Africa. Curren writes to her daughter: “And you, flesh of my flesh, blood of my blood, bleeding every month in to foreign soil. For twenty years I have not bled. The sickness that now eats at me is dry, bloodless, slow and cold, sent by Saturn” (64). In Roman mythology Saturn is the god of harvest and agriculture and the ruler of the gods before Jupiter dethroned him. Saturn could make a harvest fail if he wanted to. In the Renaissance, Saturn was identified with melancholy. People in whose body black bile was in abundance were thought to be melancholic. Together with yellow bile, blood, and phlegm, black bile formed the Four Humours. The humours were related to cosmic elements and divisions of time, and together they controlled the whole existence and behaviour of mankind.<sup>8</sup> In the ninth century, an Arabic author related the planets to the humours. According to his theory, stars, elements, and humours

should be linked to their colours. The colour of black bile is black or dark, its nature is, like that of the earth, cold and dry. The colour of the planet Saturn is also dark and black, and so it must be cold and dry by nature too.<sup>9</sup> Curren is also 'dry' in the sense that she has become infertile. Instead of carrying a baby she carries a cancer that consumes her from the inside, like "insect-eggs laid in the body of a host, now grown to grubs and implacably eating their host away" (64). She describes her cancer as (unnatural) children, which could be also another reference to the Saturn-myth. The god is often associated with the Greek god Chronos who in mythology is also the ruler among the gods. Once it was predicted that one of his children would dethrone Chronos. To retain his throne, Chronos ate his children, but his wife was able to save one child, Zeus, the equivalent of the Roman god Jupiter. She hid her son and gave a rock wrapped in cloths to Chronos. He eagerly devoured the rock thinking it was his son. Zeus later rebelled against his father and dethroned him.<sup>10</sup>

The role of the classics in *Age of Iron* is mainly to describe and explain the world from the view of the white main character Mrs. Curren. Born before the troubles, in colonial South Africa, Curren finds it hard to accept her ageing and along with that the social problems in the country. Ovid's *Metamorphoses* is an important intertext in this process. Ovid's Age of Gold and Age of Iron play important roles: the Age of Gold symbolises Curren's happy youth in colonial South Africa and the Age of Iron is the current state in which the country is. This Age is also the title of the novel.

Iron is an often reoccurring element: Curren thinks the non-white majority are people of iron. They are harsh and do not seem to be afraid of anything, a quality the parents of the new generation of iron children seem to admire. Curren compares her African domestic Florence to a Spartan matriarch: she wants her son to fight the white

oppressors and he cannot return home unless he has defeated them. Based on her own version of the Ages of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* Curren realises that this Age of Iron South Africa is in, is the legacy of the white people oppressing the Africans. The whites had been harsh on the non-whites and now the same violence is inflicted upon them.

Furthermore, the novel itself can be seen as a metamorphosis. South Africa in the mid 1980s was in a period of transition: the white superior minority was losing power and the black inferior majority was rising. The novel had been written a few years before the abolition of apartheid. The novel contains also personal metamorphoses such as the transformation of Vercueil. With images from Virgil's *Aeneid* and Homer's *Odyssey*, the social status of Vercueil as an outcast is transformed into a divine one. In addition, Curren also undergoes a transformation: she learns to deal with the social unrest in the country and her physical condition. Curren also discusses a literal metamorphosis of her soul: after her death it will live on and it will leave her body as a white moth (129).

Moreover, Curren misuses the classics for her own good. Perhaps this is to illustrate the traditional relationship between the coloniser and the colonised. An important method to misuse the classics is etymology. Several times Curren wrongly explains the true meaning of words to Vercueil. For example, she tells Vercueil that 'charity' comes from the Latin word for 'heart,' but in fact it has nothing to do with the heart at all. She also deliberately bends the true meaning of a passage from the *Aeneid*, because she wants Vercueil to send her diary (the novel) to her daughter in America.

The classics emphasise the gap between the white protagonist and the Others, especially Vercueil. He has never heard of Latin and wants to learn it, while in

western cultures almost every one knows what Latin is. In the context of South Africa the classics belong to the culture of the oppressor and they are alien to the indigenous people of the country. Vercueil wants to learn Latin, but soon Curren discovers it is not the words that touch Vercueil, but the rhythm of the dactyl (192).

### **Desires in *Disgrace***

In his novel *Disgrace*, Coetzee uses the classics to support the themes of lust and desire, and ageing. David Lurie, a professor of the Romantics at the University of Cape Town, succumbs to his passion for a non-white student in his class. Later on in the novel, three black men rape Lurie's daughter Lucy. It seems as if justice has been done: Lurie has offended Melanie's father and now he has been offended as a father. Coetzee plays with the question of how to deal with desires. A need can derive from the craving for power, or eros. A desire can also be caused by feeling that just happens to someone, like love or Eros. Because of Lucy's rape, Lurie realises that he cannot protect her as a father; he is confronted with his powerlessness when others put their desires into action: the craving of the black men for power and sex results in rape. Lurie realises that he is powerless on the countryside where black men hold sway: he cannot protect his daughter from the rapists and he is abused. In the city it is the other way around: as a white man Lurie is dominant when it comes to women. He likes non-white passive women. Classical allusions in names, the theme of rape in classical mythology, and the Eros and eros that cause desires support the power shift that has taken place in South Africa: the white minority is losing power like Lurie loses his power in the country side, and black Africans are taking over the country.

The first allusion made to the classics can be found in the names of several characters. For example, the student with whom Lurie has an affair is called Melanie Isaacs. Lurie calls her "Meláni: the dark one" (18). The name is derived from the Greek word 'melas,' which means 'dark,' or 'black.' This indicates that Melanie is a non-white girl (Beard 65). Lurie has a weak spot for exotic girls, as shows from descriptions of his favourite prostitute Soraya. In the book of the escort company she is under "exotic" (7). "She is tall and slim, with long black hair and dark, liquid eyes"



(1). Not only does the student's name suggest her dark skin colour, Melanie also brings the darker side of Lurie to the surface. Lurie's daughter is called Lucy, which is believed to be derived from the Latin word for 'light' (Beard 65). Furthermore, both Lucy and Melanie are victims of rape. Their names resemble the names of two other victims of rape in classical mythology: Lucrece and Philomela (Graham 439).

Another name that is directly taken from the classics is Pollux. Coetzee's Pollux is one of the three black men who rape Lucy. Paul Franssen suggests that by giving a black rapist this name, the justice of classical culture, and therewith western culture, is questioned (2010; 242); rape was normal in classical mythology, so this would justify rape – caused by desire – in western culture, since classical cultures have been the building stones of western civilisation. Lurie learns that in this way, white males have justified their power with desire.

In his article "Pollux in Coetzee's *Disgrace*," Franssen speculates about the role of Pollux in the novel. He gives several possible reasons why Coetzee chose the name of Pollux. According to Franssen, the name is somewhat strange, as can be noticed in Lurie's reaction (240). In classical mythology, Pollux is the twin brother of Castor. They have the same mother, but they have different fathers. Pollux has the god Zeus as his father and Castor a mortal man. The brothers are great warriors and hunters, but this comes to an end when Castor loses his life in a fight. Pollux cannot live without his twin brother and Zeus makes him a proposal: the brothers can live half the time in the underworld and half the time with the gods. Without any doubt, Pollux accepts the proposal and the brothers are transformed into the Gemini constellation.<sup>11</sup> In his article, Franssen suggests how Coetzee's Pollux is related to his mythological namesake. For example, there is the myth of the Rape of the Daughters of Leucippus. The twin brothers abducted the two daughters of king Leucippus, who

were promised to Idas and Lynceus. Pollux and Castor ended up in a fight with the two brothers and Castor was killed. In his rage, Pollux killed his enemies. Like his namesake, Coetzee's Pollux has participated in a gang rape, although rape in classical context is first of all an unwanted abduction (Franssen 241). Lurie's anger towards Pollux is according to Franssen partially applied to himself: the crime the black young man has committed is a mirror image of his raping a woman of a different colour (241).

The name Pollux can also be associated with another story of rape, namely that of Leda. Married to King Tyndareus, Leda has caught the eye of Zeus. He then disguises himself as a swan and copulates with her. The result is believed to be two eggs: one from which Castor and Pollux were born, and another that bore Helen of Troy and Clytemnestra, who later marries the Greek king Agamemnon.<sup>12</sup> Pollux in Greek mythology is also the product of rape, and therefore maybe destined to rape. Coetzee's Pollux is the product of a society in which rape seems to be normal: "I think they *do* rape," Lucy even says about the perpetrators (158). "And the third one, the boy?" Lurie asks her, she answers "he was there to learn" (159). Rape seems to be a job, a normal aspect of everyday life. Coetzee's Pollux is like his mythical namesake destined to become a rapist.

The classical image of the twin brothers becomes a symbol of the social problems in South Africa. Like the rape of Leda, both rapes committed in *Disgrace* are interracial. Leda's rape is interracial in the sense that she is the victim of a god and several of her children are half-gods. The rapes in *Disgrace* both represent the power relations between the different ethnic groups. Lurie's affair with Melanie can be regarded as the old situation of white superiority, or as Cooper writes, "Lurie is broadly representative of an older social order: the officially defunct South Africa of

Afrikaner dominance, statutory racial oppression, and the uneasy pleasures of white privilege” (22). Since the book was published several years after the abolition of apartheid, Lucy’s assault can be regarded as the power shift in current South Africa; white rulers gradually lose their power and become increasingly dependant on the suppressed black majority (Franssen 242). However, Melanie’s position was still not exceptional according to Graham (438).

To describe his feelings for Melanie, Lurie uses classical imagery. He uses the images of Eros and Aphrodite. The latter was the ancient goddess of love, (feminine) beauty, and sexuality. One of the myths on her birth tells the story of Chronos. When Chronos usurped his father Uranus, he castrated him and threw his genitals into the ocean from which Aphrodite “goddess of the foaming waves” (25) was born.<sup>13</sup> After Lurie has seen Melanie on stage rehearsing for a play, he visits her to make love to her again. It is because of “the wig, the wiggling bottom, the crude talk. Strange love! Yet from the quiver of Aphrodite, goddess of the foaming waves, no doubt about that” (25). These lines indicate that Lurie confuses lust with love: he is rather physically attracted to her instead of having feelings of true love for Melanie.

Related to Aphrodite is Eros, also known as Cupid. Eros was one of the elementary forces in the universe when the earth was created and is the personification of the amorous lust. Since the classical period, Eros, as the son of Aphrodite and Ares (Venus and Mars), has been regarded as a symbol of sexual love. The difference in the use of capital ‘E’ is important in Lurie’s confusion of lust and love. With *Eros*, Coetzee indicates that Lurie is a tool of the god of lust. Lurie describes his feelings for Melanie as something he cannot help. To Melanie’s father he says: “I will not try to describe. Suffice it to say that Eros entered” (52). Later he thinks “I was a servant of Eros...it was a god who acted through me” (89). With

'eros' a desire for a greater cause, e.g. power, is meant. It is an impersonal desire in the sense that the victim, not the person who is held by *eros*, is used as a medium to reach a higher goal. The desire that is raised by 'Eros' is a feeling of attraction to a person; usually it is a physical attraction. Lurie confuses *Eros* or love, which is the (physical) attraction to Melanie, with *eros* or desire, which is Melanie as a tool or object to attain his dominance. Lurie likes to be dominant in bed for he likes his women passive and docile (1, 2).

When Lurie later thinks of Lucy's rape, he refers to a painting that depicts the Rape of the Sabine Women. After the founding of Rome, soon there was a shortage of women in the city; the greatness of the Roman people was doomed to last for just a generation. To be assured of descendants, the Romans needed the women of neighbouring tribes. They negotiated with the tribes to ask if they could marry their women, but the tribes refused so the Romans thought up a plan. They organised a feast in honour of Neptune on which they stole the women of the Sabines who were also present (Livy I.IX). The English word 'rape' is not completely in place. The word is derived from the Latin verb 'raptare' meaning 'to violently abduct.' Lurie wonders what rape exactly is, "the man lying on top of the woman and pushing himself into her?" (160) He has been charged with assault and his daughter is a victim of gang rape. Lurie has justified his crime for himself in view of his idol Byron: "Among the legions of countesses and kitchenmaids Byron pushed himself into there were no doubt those who called it rape. But none surely had cause to fear that the session would end with her throat being slit" (160). That is why Lurie does not consider himself as a rapist; he has never used any violence towards Melanie. Although Melanie does not reject Lurie, the intimacies are undesired nevertheless (25). In this

sense, she is docile and submissive as Lurie likes his women. The rape of Lucy, unlike Melanie's rape, was violent.

Interracial relationships play an important role in the novel. Lucy speaks of her offenders as if they were tax collectors, but they committed their crime with a personal hate. According to Lurie, she would have never talked of the offenders like that had they been white (159). Lurie himself is put in his place when he runs into Melanie's boyfriend in the theatre. Melanie's boyfriend says that Lurie has to "stay with [his] own kind". Lurie then thinks of "Omnis gens quaecumque se in se perficere vult" (194). Unfortunately there is no official translation for this sentence, but the tenor of the words is "every people, whatever it is, wants to perfect itself." Lurie realises that Nature does not obey any rules. Rape is the "seed of generation, driven to perfect itself, driving deep into the woman's body, driving to bring future into being" (194). The laws of the apartheid regime forbade interracial relationships, but again, nature does not obey rules. Both Lurie and Pollux had the desire to have sex with a woman of another race. Lucy even gets pregnant and she does not want to abort the pregnancy. This shows that although people might be of a different race, their natural passions are boundless.

Like the Sabine Women, Lucy was used. The Romans needed women in order to procreate, and Lucy is raped in order to get to her land. The thought that her black helper Petrus had put up the rape, is very plausible since one of the rapists appears to be Petrus's family. Her helper is an independent man with whom Lucy shares the land, but lately Petrus has taken over more tasks from her. As a white, single woman, and a lesbian too, Lucy has no man to protect her. Petrus has probably instructed the men to rape her so that she has to come to him for protection. The only way in which she can get Petrus' protection is by marrying him. Her land then comes as a dowry.

The raping of women here is a way for men to get the property they want. In addition, it must have been a nice incidental circumstance to damage Lurie's pride: it shows the inability of Lurie to protect his woman, i.e. his daughter, since it is important for a man to protect his women. Lucy has slightly different thoughts; Lucy thinks she was raped because she lives in the territory of the rapists and she has to pay them to stay there. She compares them to tax collectors. They did it with so much personal hate, even though she had never seen the men before (156). Lurie, however, realises it is an act of vengeance. "It was history speaking through them," he says, "a history of wrong...it may have seemed personal, but it wasn't. It came down from the ancestors" (156). Lurie is not a real man, or at least, he is not a young man any more. This flaw in his manliness shows that his importance gone; Lurie is an old man. Furthermore, the exploitations of women symbolise the power shift in the South Africa at the time of the abolition of apartheid. Lurie is a white professor who imposes himself on his student. In the countryside, it is the other way around. Three black men have raped the white Lucy. Lurie gradually understands that rape is not just pure lust, but it is also a biological process because the need to survive and perfect human kind plays also a role. Furthermore, rape is also a way of showing power. Although Lurie in first reaction condemns Pollux for raping Lucy, Pollux' action makes Lurie think about his own behaviour: is he maybe also after power? Lurie is, because he likes docile women so he can be dominant.

Besides the allusion to the Sabine Women, there is also an allusion to the myth of Oedipus. The cripple dog Lurie gives up at the end of the novel, Bev calls it *Driepoot* (215), refers to the myth of Oedipus and the Sphinx<sup>14</sup>, and therewith the acceptance of ageing. The Sphinx terrorises the inhabitants of Thebes by devouring all who cannot solve its riddles. The Sphinx poses the following question: what has

four legs in the morning, two in the afternoon and three in the evening? The answer is mankind.<sup>15</sup> Oedipus solves the riddle and frees Thebes from the Sphinx. With giving up the dog, Lurie accepts his ageing, the creature on three legs in the riddle of the Sphinx, which he has tried to deny for a long time. For example, he still feels that he has to protect Lucy because he is her father but her being raped shows his incapability of doing so. Moreover, he wants younger women, women whose father he could have been. Lurie does not want women of his own age, but he knows that he has to get used to the women of his own age when he makes love to Bev (150).

Another way in which the Oedipus myth supports the novel is in blindness. Once it is revealed to Oedipus's wife Jocasta and him that they are mother and son, Jocasta hangs herself and Oedipus blinds himself with her brooch. Oedipus's uncle takes over the reign over Thebes and banishes Oedipus as a Delphic oracle had commanded.<sup>16</sup> The theme of blindness is important in *Disgrace*. Like Oedipus, Lurie is literally blind after one of the rapists set fire to him (97). This cruel treatment is a revelation to Lurie: as a white old man he is powerless to the black rapists, which symbolises the radicalisation of black South Africans and the gradual loss of power of the white minority in the country.

In addition, Lurie is similar to Oedipus in the sense that he also does not see he himself is the source of the problems. He justifies the rape of Melanie with the Romantics (160). Lurie brings Lucy in an awkward position because he does not want to see that South Africa has changed. He still believes that non-whites are inferior to whites, while Lucy disagrees: she thinks that she has been raped because she lives in the territory of her rapists so she owes them a payment. Lucy is also going to marry Petrus because she needs his protection, not because she loves him. The tables have turned on the countryside, and Lurie does not want to see that. Furthermore, Lurie

does not want to see he is becoming an old man; he still sleeps with young women because he feels the need to prove to himself he is still as full of vitality as a young man; he needs to prove that he can still perform in bed to compensate his ageing.

One could say that Lurie's process of contemplation is indicated with the sentence "Sunt lacrimae rerum, et mentem mortalia tangunt," (162) which freely translated means, "these are tears of things, and mortality touches the heart." The sentence is taken from Virgil's *Aeneid*, book I. When Aeneas enters Carthage for the first time, he sees images of the Trojan War. Even in Carthage, the war was noticed. Lurie feels impotent because he has failed to protect his daughter. After the incident, he does try to protect her by, for example, suggesting Lucy should leave for Holland. Lucy tells him that he cannot treat her like a little child anymore. This is a painful discovery for Lurie. With the sentence from the *Aeneid*, Lurie's sense of his mortality, his ageing, and the letting go of his child – accepting she is full-grown – has commenced.

The classics support the themes of desire and ageing in *Disgrace*. Eros, Aphrodite, and Pollux represent the lusts and desires, and the execution of those desires of mortal men. Coetzee plays with the question of how to deal with desires. They are cravings that cannot be helped; they can arise from the yearning for power. Like Curren in *Age of Iron*, Lurie misuses the classics for his own good; he claims he had become a tool of the god Eros and therefore could not help his desire for Melanie (Graham 441; Cooper 25). The myth of Castor and Pollux symbolises the problems of the South African society: interracial rapes represent the power shift of white superiority to the increase of power of a black majority. Allusions to the *Aeneid* and *Oedipus* represent the acceptance of ageing: Lurie cannot sleep with younger women and he cannot keep protecting his daughter. He has to let her go. Lurie's acceptance



of his incapability to protect his daughter and therewith the acceptation that tables have turned, i.e. the increase of black power, symbolises the acceptation of a new South Africa.

## Conclusion

The troubles that started in the 1980s and that led to the abolition of apartheid shine through the novels *Life and Times of Michael K*, *Age of Iron*, and *Disgrace*. To illustrate his attitude towards the social changes in his country, Coetzee frequently uses important classical texts such as Virgil's *Aeneid*, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, but also Livy's *Ab Urbe Condita* and Homer's *Odyssey*.

An important intertext for *Age of Iron* is Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, as can be deduced from the novel's title. The four Ages that Ovid describes play an important role, especially the Age of Gold and the Age of Iron. South Africa is in an Age of Iron where all justice, personified by the ancient goddess Astraea, has gone. The Age of Gold, in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* an era of eternal spring, is to the protagonist Mrs. Curren a memory of happy days in colonial South Africa. Metamorphosis is also an important theme; the novel in itself can be regarded as a transformation. Coetzee wrote the novel in the mid 1980s when the abolition of apartheid was just a few years away. South Africa then was in a transitional period, but no one really knew to what the troubles would lead. The metamorphoses of the two main characters Curren and Vercueil symbolise the change of South Africa. So Coetzee uses a micro cosmos, the individual metamorphosis, to refer to a macro cosmos, which is the metamorphosis of the country. The tramp Vercueil changes from an outsider of society into a divine messenger, and Curren reconciles with the current situation in South Africa, her illness, and her death. To have a grip on reality, Curren tries to explain the social problems in the light of the classics: she uses the ancient mythologies to keep her sane, but she also misuses the classics. For instance, she bends the meaning of words to make Vercueil send her letter to her daughter in America: she manipulates the undereducated Vercueil with her knowledge of Latin.

Another intertext Coetzee uses in *Age of Iron* is Virgil's *Aeneid*. To illustrate Curren's process of accepting her condition and the social changes in South Africa, Coetzee uses the passage from the *Aeneid* in which Aeneas visits the Underworld.

In this novel, Coetzee moves from a micro cosmos to a macro cosmos: both Curren's body and her house symbolise the country. The spreading cancer in her body symbolises the moving black majority of South Africa. In addition, Curren's house is a miniature version of South African society where members of different ethnic groups meet, and even fight.

Many scholars wrote about *Disgrace*. The first allusion to the classics is the names of several characters. For instance, the name of Melanie is derived from the Greek word 'melas,' meaning 'dark,' and Lucy's name from the Latin word for 'light' (Beard 65). Furthermore, their condition and names also remind one of the classical victims of rape Philomela and Lucrece (Graham 439). Another example of a classical name is Pollux. By giving a black rapist such a name, Franssen argues that the justice of western culture is questioned (2010, 242); rape was normal in classical mythology, so it would justify rape – caused by desire – in western culture. Like Curren in *Age of Iron*, Lurie misuses the classics and the Romantics to justify his crime (Graham 441; Cooper 25).

An important intertext of *Life and Times of Michael K* is again Virgil's *Aeneid*. Two clear allusions to this epic are made in the novel. For example, one can read that K is not interested in books with "stories of military men or with women with names like Lavinia."<sup>17</sup> According to Franssen, the words "military men" refer to the opening words of Virgil's epic (2003, 455) "arma virumque cano," which means "of a man and feats of arms I sing." These words enclose the essence of Coetzee's novel: K tries to stay out of the war and even out of history. He is the opposite of Aeneas: he does

not like war and he is not interested in women. Furthermore, Lavinia could play a small and subtle role in Coetzee's *Life and Times*; K's references to his mother with burning hair could allude to a tale about Lavinia when her hair caught fire (*Aeneid* VII: 70-80).

In the second part of the book, a white doctor compares K to Aeneas. As is the case in *Age of Iron*, in the second part the classics are used to describe and explain the world through the eyes of a white character. However, K does not fit in this classical image; K is rather an anti-Aeneas (Franssen 2003, 455). Unlike Aeneas, K does not have the ambition and intention to reproduce, and rather stays away from the war, whereas Aeneas fights when he has to and is the ancestor of the Roman people.

Less obvious, but nonetheless present in the novel, are the ancient gods Gaia and Uranos, or Mother Earth and Father Sky. The earth and feminine elements such as the night and the moon protect and provide just enough for K to stay alive. Masculine elements such as the sky, the sun, and Huis Norenius are K's enemies. Throughout the novel, a metaphorical battle is fought between the patriarchal and matriarchal elements.

All this shows that Coetzee mainly uses the classics to illustrate the traditional relationship between the coloniser and the colonised; his white protagonists Curren, Lurie and the medical officer see the world through the classics and, in Lurie's case, through the Romantics. Their visions of the world filtered through the western classical cultures do not correspond with reality. Therefore one should wonder if western society based on the classics is really as just as white people have always thought. The classics are completely alien to the indigenous people of South Africa and other (former) colonies, and the white colonisers have used the classics to justify the expansion of their empire. Most of Coetzee's allusions refer to Virgil's *Aeneid*

which covers the idea of founding and expanding empire, and as Franssen suggests the subjugation of Africa to Europe (2000, 37). Although it seems that in Coetzee's opinion the classics have always been abused, Coetzee perhaps also admires the black South Africans. For instance, Coetzee compares the radicalising youth in the characters of Bheki and John to Spartan soldiers, and dedicates an entire novel to an anti-hero. The radical black youth are a problem to the white South Africans, but by connecting those non-white characters to classical white heroes Coetzee might try to show that they are needed to free their people.

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## Notes

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- <sup>1</sup> Michael Grant and John Hazel, “Gaia,” *Who’s Who in Classical Mythology*, 1996.
- <sup>2</sup> Paul Franssen, “Life and Times of Michael K,” *Drift* 23, Utrecht, 16 Mar. 2011.
- <sup>3</sup> Grant and Hazel, “Artemis.”
- <sup>4</sup> Paul Franssen, “Life and Times of Michael K,” University College Utrecht, Utrecht, 11 Mar. 2011.
- <sup>5</sup> Grant and Hazel, “Hermes.”
- <sup>6</sup> My own translation.
- <sup>7</sup> Tacitus, *Agricola, Germania, Dialogus*, trans. M. Hutton, Loeb Classical Library Series (London: Heinemann, 1970) *Agricola* 33.
- <sup>8</sup> Raymond Klibansky, Erwin Panofsky, and Fritz Saxl, *Saturn and Melancholy* (Nendeln: Kraus Reprint, 1979) 3.
- <sup>9</sup> Klibansky, Panofsky, and Saxl, *Saturn and Melancholy* (Nendeln: Kraus Reprint, 1979) 127-28.
- <sup>10</sup> Grant and Hazel, “Cronos.”
- <sup>11</sup> Verity Platt, “Castor and Pollux,” *The Classical Tradition*, 2010.
- <sup>12</sup> Luba Freedman, “Leda,” *The Classical Tradition*, 2010.
- <sup>13</sup> Grant and Hazel, “Aphrodite.”
- <sup>14</sup> P.Th.M.G Liebrechts, ed., “*Ubi Amor Est, Ibi Oculus Est*”: *Ethiek en Literaire Vorm in J.M. Coetzee* (Leiden: Universiteit Leiden, 2007) 13.
- <sup>15</sup> Guido Paduano, “Oedipus,” *The Classical Tradition*, 2010.
- <sup>16</sup> Grant and Hazel, “Oedipus.”
- <sup>17</sup> J.M. Coetzee, *Life and Times of Michael K* (London: Vintage, 2004) 17.