

Liminality:
choice and responsibility in selected novels
by JM Coetzee

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Abstract

This thesis argues that JM Coetzee's novels, in particular *Foe*, *Disgrace*, *Elizabeth Costello*, *Slow Man* and *Diary of a Bad Year* all illustrate the complexity of, and the ethical implications and far-reaching consequences resulting from an attempt to effect change in contemporary postcolonial societies.

Coetzee represents contemporary postcolonial society, by using liminal characters and narrators who are required by personal or societal conflict and/or crises to make ethical choices with significant results.

Various narrative conventions and strategies, all of which influence the ethical implications drawn up for the characters/narrators, are used by Coetzee. Reactions of these liminal characters to their crises of choice vary. The implications of relations between liminal characters, protagonists and narrators with regard to the Other are examined and evaluated.

The study identifies the strategies used by Coetzee to subtly lure the reader into accepting co-responsibility for ethical choices required of the characters and narrators. The various reactions that a reader could have on the ethical imperative of formulating a personal stance on liminality, both in terms of the texts and in contemporary postcolonial society, are also evaluated.

In the final instance the study indicates that a certain development in Coetzee's own ethical views can possibly be linked to certain narrative patterns in the selected novels.

Keywords

Liminality, responsibility, choice, postcolonialism, reader involvement, ethics

Opsomming

Hierdie studie argumenteer dat JM Coetzee se romans, in besonder *Foe*, *Disgrace*, *Elizabeth Costello*, *Slow Man* en *Diary of a Bad Year* elkeen die kompleksiteit sowel as etiese implikasies en verreikende gevolge illustreer van 'n poging om verandering in die kontemporêre postkoloniale samelewing te bewerkstellig.

Coetzee beeld die eietydse postkoloniale samelewing uit deur middel van liminale karakters en vertellers wat deur persoonlike en sosiale konflik en/of krisis genoop word om etiese besluite te neem – met ingrypende gevolge.

Coetzee wend verskeie narratiewe konvensies en strategieë aan wat 'n invloed uitoefen op die etiese implikasies wat aan die karakters/vertellers voorgehou word. Die implikasies van verhoudings tussen liminale karakters, protagoniste en vertellers met betrekking tot die betekenisvolle ander word bestudeer en geëvalueer.

Die strategieë waarmee Coetzee die leser subtiel oorreed om medeverantwoordelikheid te aanvaar vir die etiese keuses wat verwag word van karakters en vertellers word ondersoek. Die verskillende reaksies wat 'n leser mag toon op die etiese verpligting om 'n persoonlike standpunt rakende liminaliteit te formuleer, beide met betrekking tot die romantekste en die eietydse postkoloniale gemeenskap, word ook beoordeel.

Die studie dui laastens aan dat 'n bepaalde ontwikkeling in Coetzee se eie etiese standpunt waarskynlik verband hou met sekere narratiewe patrone in die geselekteerde romans.

Sleuteltermen

Liminaliteit, verantwoordelijkheid, postkolonialisme, leserbetrokkenheid, etiek

Chapter 1 Introduction

1.1 Contextualisation

This thesis will examine the evidence of liminality in literature with specific reference to selected works by John Maxwell Coetzee. Contextualised by the discourse of identity formation and representation, postcolonialism as a period of transition and change invites – indirectly but insistently – a comparison with the concept and conditions of liminality. Although liminality is a current topic, this specific approach to Coetzee has not received much attention up to this moment in time.¹ As a postmodernist/postcolonial writer, Coetzee investigates how colonialism and its aftermath have affected the representation of identity in his writing. He employs various strategies to highlight the idea of change as reflected in the experience of his characters and narrators as well as the respective roles of the writer and reader in his work in order to promote a more progressive society. This argument is substantiated by referring to specific novels by Coetzee: *Foe* (1986), *Disgrace* (1999), *Elizabeth Costello* (2003), *Slow Man* (2005) and *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007). It is anticipated that the interaction between these components or aspects of the novels, as depicted over a period of twenty years, would increase an awareness of the choices and responsibilities that contemporary society has to face. These novels have been chosen for the following reasons:

- they feature the three dimensions of writer, narrator and reader that pertinently apply to this study;
- they indirectly comment on and invert traditional perceptions of the South African reality, and
- they are representative of a selection of different types of novels in Coetzee's extended oeuvre (allegory, anti-allegory/realism, commemorating his move to Australia, and ostensibly autobiographical).

In addition, the extended period (1986-2007) covered by these novels could shed some light on the intrinsic development one would expect from Coetzee in terms of his individual stance as author/writer and the political changes in South Africa that necessitate a difference in approach and perspective to characters and readers with

¹ Liminality is implicitly discernible in the Ph.D study of Smit-Marais (2014).

regard to their perceptions of identity formation. Although it is my contention that most of his oeuvre if not all would fit comfortably in to this description, the field of study has been whittled down to the above novels in order to keep the study concise and to allow a closer scrutiny than would have been the case with a more general approach.

Characters in liminal spaces use this stage of development as a vantage point from which to make ethical choices about their views on society or their interaction with society. These choices allow characters to either remain in this state of liminality (for example Susan Barton in *Foe*) or return to a previous, more static position (for example David Lurie in *Disgrace*) or move beyond such a state into a new position (for example Elizabeth Costello in *Elizabeth Costello*; Anya and Señor C in *Diary of a Bad Year*) as a result of specific personal, moral and social choices. Coetzee's main aim is to create awareness of the Other and to engage the reader, whether a member of the South African or the contemporary postcolonial society, or a British/European reader with an interest in the postcolonial world, to participate in taking stock of the aftermath of colonisation. Coetzee's stance clearly illustrates that reaction to this society in a process of transition elicits three possible responses regarding the status quo: denial, rejection or participation. This stance inevitably correlates with the concept of liminality (Van Gennep, 1960) as the characters in Coetzee's novels who tend to remain static, regress to former ideas or advance to more enlightened positions. This process tends to evoke either similar or opposing reactions in the readers. However, Coetzee is also challenging the roles of the narrator and the author, creating a complex relationship of many voices. In order to further advance this condition of indecision and transition in the individual and society, Coetzee uses various strategies of alienation, such as allegory, intertextuality and metafiction. All these aspects of his oeuvre coalesce to interrogate the dilemma of identity formation in a globalised society.

To summarise: Coetzee considers choice to be concomitant with personal, social and moral responsibility and he confronts the reader as well as his fictional characters with these issues. This strategy results in conflating fiction with personal obligations that extend to readers and society members who are indirectly persuaded to formulate a personal stance on liminality.

Postcolonial literature as a product of its society is characterised by the desire to define itself as autonomous and not merely as a counterfoil to colonialism. This insecure situation is characterised by fragmentation, ambiguity, and a resistance to pin down parameters – all part and parcel of its deconstructionist heritage.² To formulate a definition of postcoloniality becomes a fiercely contested exercise. Nevertheless, critics across the spectrum have reached a broad consensus as expressed by Boehmer (1995:100) and Talib (2002:17). In order to clarify the concept for purposes of this discussion, postcoloniality, whether in terms of society, literature or culture, refers in part to that identity that has evolved from a people that were previously and historically subjected to British Imperialism. South Africa, India, Kenya, Jamaica and Australia comfortably fit into this category, while Boehmer (1995:4) excludes Ireland and the USA on the basis that Ireland was inseparably associated with Britain for a long time, and the USA attained independence long before any of the colonies started agitating for it.³

Postcolonial literature redefines itself not merely as a reaction, but strives for an autonomous identity which questions the colonialist discourses from which it originated. In the early stages of development, postcolonial literature could easily be regarded as anti-nationalist or anti-colonialist, especially as it must, of necessity, develop in opposition to the hegemony of colonising countries. This is probably the reason why it is often (and sometimes in an unnecessarily restrictive manner) regarded as “liberation” or “struggle literature”. Young (2001:2) points out that postcolonialism does not equal anticolonialism:

Postcolonial critique is historically and theoretically hybrid, the product of the clash of cultures that brought it into being; it is interdisciplinary and transcultural in its theory and has been in its effects. Postcolonial critique is therefore a form of activist writing that looks back to the political comment of the anti-colonial liberation movements and draws its inspiration from them,

² Postcolonial literature exhibits one of the major tenets of postmodernism, with a definite interest in deconstruction theory.

³ Postcolonialism as a temporal category is *not* the focus of this study. However, postcolonialism provides the context in which Coetzee’s texts were generated and therefore needs to be defined. I agree with the approach advocated by Boehmer (1995:3) to exclude the more general hyphenated term “post-coloniality”, which is taken specifically to refer to the distinctly different time frame of the post-Second World War period. Take note that many other critics do not make the orthographic distinction in terms of meaning (cf. Helgesson, 2004:6, 21).

while recognising that they are often operated under conditions very different from those that exist in the present (Young, 2001:10).

Although both postcolonialism and anticolonialism combine “the indigenous and the cosmopolitan”, postcolonialism specifically differs from anticolonialism in “preserving the traces of the violence, defiance, struggles and sufferings of individuals that represent the political ideals (e.g. community, equality, self-determination and dignity) for which they fought” (Helgesson, 2004:42). The significance of studying Coetzee’s comments on postcolonial society is illustrated by Helgesson (2004:42) who claims that South Africa is profoundly postcolonial in the sense that it is impossible to read South Africa as a unified narrative – it is not postcolonial in any *single* way. He advocates interpreting resistance strategies in terms of postcolonial hybridity – a concept that echoes the train of thought in this thesis, as will be illustrated with the kaleidoscope image further on.

Whereas colonialist literature aimed to instill values of the (English) coloniser’s superiority in relation to the colonised, postcolonial literature is characterised by experiences of cultural exclusion and division (Boehmer, 1995:3). Interestingly, although postcolonial literature is often written in English, it is not exclusively so and English as a medium may even be regarded as a structure that should also be deconstructed or resisted in order to attain postcolonial aims.⁴

In postcolonial literature the focus is placed on the changes, adjustments, and alterations required in attitude and ethics in order to evolve beyond being merely reactive to colonialist literature, in the process of acquiring an autonomous identity. The change needed to accommodate this shift in focus results in creating instability, which sets the scene for the phenomenon of liminality. The process is reciprocal: change gives rise to liminality and liminality needs change to develop. The kaleidoscope is an apt image to illustrate the change of perspective. In the kaleidoscope’s fragmented colour, the slightest twist of hand alters the perspective

⁴ In an intriguing study, Ismail Talib (2002:36) scrutinises the use of expletive language by especially Scottish writers in English, concluding that the all-too-common use of language previously regarded as obscene by writers such as James Kelman and Irvine Welsh, both of whom are award-winning novelists, can be regarded as ‘linguistic violence’ and an anti-colonial attempt to wrestle free from the bonds of English as a language, using language itself as a metaphor for subversion.

brought into focus. In the kaleidoscope of a postcolonial world, the impact of various concepts commonly associated with the transitional identity of postcolonial reality (such as migration, globalisation, diaspora, mixed cultures, and hybridity) brings different aspects to the fore.

Liminality as a concept is integral to the very nature of postcoloniality. In other words, the postcolonial context is permeated by liminality. This not only opens up possibilities for the characters inhabiting these spaces but simultaneously confronts them with the uncertainty of what is unknown, unrecognised, and unclaimed. Characters in transition have the capacity to function not only within the confines of the margins of mainstream society, but also to transcend, transgress, and reaffirm these parameters. The changes wrought by the choices of marginal characters are often experienced as liminal spaces of adjustment. As literature creates a liminal space of the imagination, Coetzee's characters are confronted by change and attempt to resolve change on that level. All of these choices imply moral responsibilities, towards themselves and others, that require an interim period of transition in order to enable them to progress towards an amended or improved state of being.

Liminal spaces (as opposed to marginal spaces) focus especially on the space *beyond* the threshold or margin in preference to those *behind* and *between*. I would like to argue that liminal spaces rather indicate the sense of the pioneering spirit, in transit to a new level. This new level could be either a higher level or regression to the better known territory of the previous level (the behind). The liminal does not refer so much to peripheral space in the sense of being rejected, isolated or pushed away as a result of being non-mainstream. It is possible that characters who find themselves in liminal space may have this status thrust upon them, and it is assumed, not by their own free will. In such a case I would still argue that the liminal status hinges on the choices that they would exercise with regard to their responsibility.

In her introduction to a collection of studies regarding postcoloniality, Arndt (2006:39) notes that borders actually seem made to be crossed over and violated, which poses

a danger as much in the metaphorical sense as in the physical. Cattin (1999:16) already hinted at this fact, noting that a logic of ambiguity seems to require one:

... not to forget that the door that shuts is the very door that opens, that frontiers are made to be crossed This is a difficult task, since while the bridge liberates people from imprisonment, there is a risk that it will destroy autonomy; if it unites insularities, there is a risk that it will set them against each other. The bridge gives all humanity governed by norms its necessary otherness, thus signifying that human beings cannot live without their *others*.

Delineation (which may also be described as defining the borders) is one of the key functions of the threshold, but compromising the integrity of its distinctions is equally critical. Young (2001:10) notes that postcolonial critique, founded in the revolutionary activism of the past, is dedicated to changing the objects of history into the new subjects of history. Interest in the oppression of the past will always be governed by the relation of that history to the present. In other words, the relation of the political priorities of the moment to the possibly suppressed past will determine its significance in the present.

Continuing this line of thought is the realisation that liminality is essentially subversive. While the existence of borders, frontiers, or whatever one may call them, creates the possibility for liminality, it also creates the incertitude associated with crossing, transgressing or violating the limits.

This thesis investigates whether Coetzee's novels, in particular, *Foe* (1986), *Disgrace* (1999), *Elizabeth Costello* (2003), *Slow Man* (2005) and *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007),⁵ succeed in illustrating the complexity, ethical implications and far-reaching consequences resulting from an attempt to effect change in contemporary postcolonial societies. There seems to be a progressive manifestation of aspects such as the writer's (or writers') liminal characters and narrators, together with metafictional aspects, and the identity of the reader in conveying this pertinent condition of liminality. It is argued that a possible kaleidoscopic cluster or cluster

⁵Here, these texts are mentioned in chronological order of publication. Take note that the specific editions used for this study could have a later date. They form the main focus of this study and will be discussed according to the focus of various chapters. However, as the opportunity arises, reference to other texts in Coetzee's oeuvre will also occur.

composition can be discerned in Coetzee's novels, and these various perspectives are examined in separate chapters. Naturally, fiction itself could be regarded as a liminal medium that encourages the reader to assume a different stance from his⁶ previous beliefs – which makes literature a vehicle of change in itself. Coetzee as agent of change explores the potency of literature to the extreme in his fiction. As stated in the title, this study illuminates the aspects of choice and responsibility with regard to liminality in various Coetzee texts.

In the above novels, the characters/narrators and in some cases, the author(s), (referring not only to the author but also to the reader as co-responsible for establishing meaning) all have to exercise choices that affect their lives and entail responsibilities towards the respective societies represented in the novels. All characters function within (a) society, even if the liminal character experiences himself/herself as an outsider from society. Coetzee astutely creates a universe of meaning by confronting the reader with the ethical implications of the choices made by the characters or narrators.

I concur with several critics⁷ that literature has not only a mimetic function in representing, echoing and reflecting the kaleidoscope of possible identities but also the function of questioning or subverting the past and ultimately constructing new narratives (Gallagher⁸, 2002:22; Thomas, 1987:514). Boehmer (2005:5) notes that postcolonial literature is especially concerned with studying those kinds of writing that are consciously and deliberately composed as literary work, such as novels and poetry, and to a lesser degree essays, letters, plays and travelogues. Reef (2005:248) remarks that Coetzee resists divulging his theoretical concerns and philosophies in an unmediated way, and that since 1996 he prefers to express the above in narrative rather than discursive or expository form by using a fictional persona such as Elizabeth Costello, the protagonist of *Elizabeth Costello*.⁹ Indeed, the characters of Coetzee's novels “provide readers with points of identification to

⁶ For the sake of brevity, use of the pronoun “he” also includes “she”. Genders are equal and no special preference should be assumed by the language use.

⁷ Byrne, 1999:ix; Dovey, 1988:16; Attwell (in Poyner), 2006:28; Helgesson, 2004:12; Van Zanten Gallagher, 1991:44.

⁸ Catherine Gallagher (2002) should not be confused with Susan Van Zanten Gallagher (1991).

⁹ Coetzee published this novel in 2003, developing the fictional plot around the historical person of the Australian author Costello, and incorporating his 1999 *The Lives of Animals*.

help them in their search for identity in a changed and ever-changing world” (Viljoen & Van der Merwe, 2007:3). The more recent novels *Slow Man* and *Diary of a Bad Year* have seen the change of setting to Australia. Coetzee’s emigration from South Africa is echoed by the characters of Rayment and Anya who are both immigrants in Australia.

Narratives like those mentioned above are instrumental in the process of constructing and voicing new identities. Since 1994, widely regarded as the birth of a transitional state directed towards democracy, many aspects of community life have been questioned and changed in South Africa. Coetzee’s novels actively assist in voicing the struggles of a variety of people searching for acceptance and assertion of their identities, for example, a character such as David Lurie in *Disgrace*, who finally accepts and embraces his reduced status.

If one accepts Poyner’s claim (2006:3) that Coetzee is preoccupied by the ethical responsibilities of the author in all of his novels, it becomes plausible that Coetzee seeks to sensitise readers of his novels about ethical choices and their implications. As Poyner (2006:2) points out, it is illuminating that Coetzee at times engages in the public debate on the authority of the writer whilst remaining stubbornly silent on his personal ethical views. These debates are conducted on an impersonal level of dialogue. Contrary to a critic such as Birks (2007:13), who points to what he call Coetzee’s “systemic lack of obvious ethical commitment and moral anchor”, I prefer to regard his fictions as definitive attempts at what Gallagher (2002:22) calls “undoing”; the process of constructing a “counterfactual” history in order to “correct the wrongs of the past”. In the current context of reclaiming the South African past, Coetzee appears to be preoccupied with the role of the author and authenticity using (hi)stories as (re)constructions (Boehmer *et al.*, 2009:7). Gallagher (1991:x)¹⁰ also insists that Coetzee’s texts seem to insist on the possibility of constructing an alternative history.

In the context created by liminality Aguirre (2006:93) argues that Coetzee seems to formulate a new version of existence where the borders between self and others are

¹⁰ Refer to footnote 8.

exempted, creating a middle ground where the past, although unchanged, is now assessed differently. This elicits fertile new possibilities in which past and present, historical and fictional, real and virtual combine into a thoroughly postcolonial smorgasbord obscuring the difference between them, so that copy can supplant original and fiction can replace history (Aguirre, 2006:101). Helgesson (2004:21) argues that while Gordimer wishes to supplement history with her writing, Coetzee ostensibly aims to supplant history with a rival writing – the kind of writing that, although dictated by history, liberates the writer from history. Fahraeus's (2005:1)¹¹ reminder that the developing current concern with forms of repression and usurpation bears witness to the growing interest in textual ethics in a postcolonial context endorses the main tenet of this study with regard to Coetzee.

Coetzee notoriously refrains from lifting the veil on his personal ethical views, to the extent of frustrating many critics (Attwell, 2006:26; Malan, 2003:68; Head, 1997:2), but his stance is defended by those who maintain that one's position in the public domain falls outside the personal sphere (Boehmer *et al.*, 2009:2; Helgesson, 2004:23). Instead, Coetzee cajoles the reader into independently judging those choices made by the characters. In so doing, the assumption of responsibility for the consequences of choices (in other words, the change) is deftly transferred to the reader, so that the reader is vested with the responsibility of co-authorship. While this process relieves Coetzee of the burden or responsibility of authorship, it logically also precludes him from having absolute authority as sole creator of the text – typical of deconstructionist theory. A decided advantage of this approach is that it creates a vehicle for the author to apply various distancing strategies to his texts, thus enabling Coetzee to open the possibilities of interpretation and intention of his texts.

Various techniques used by Coetzee to generate distance will be discussed in more detail below; they include different applications of aspects of time, perspective, narrator and allegory. Clustered with allegory is the technique of synecdoche. According to Aguirre (2006:18) synecdoche hinges on loss of meaning, obscurity, imagining the whole through a lesser part, whilst allegory on the other hand defines an individual part by equating it to the whole. Coetzee uses both allegory and

¹¹ The theme of usurpation will be discussed with reference to *Foe*, *Elizabeth Costello* and *Slow Man* in chapter 6.

synecdoche to provide the necessary distance and anonymity to allow his characters, narrators and readers the freedom and scope to make ethical choices about their views on and interaction with society. Examples of characters in these positions are found in *Disgrace*, *Elizabeth Costello* and, although not exclusively to be regarded as an allegory, the second most recent novel falling under the scope of this study, *Slow Man*.

A further level of implication is that the reader, as co-author, in turn focuses his critical reaction on the contemporary postcolonial society of which he is part. In this way Coetzee acts as a mediator, an agent of change in contemporary society. I agree with Boehmer *et al.* (2009:3) who note that his novels are best seen as challenging processes that stimulate a range of thinking and responses.

Coetzee's approach towards interrogating his readers in the first instance entails that he engages with the characters/narrators with regard to their respective choices and concomitant responsibilities. In the second instance, he indirectly addresses the readers who, captured in the liminal space of the imagination, can either endorse or reject the actions of the various characters/narrators. Both characters and readers are then confronted with a glimpse of change. Thereafter, they may react in a number of ways, either remaining aware of the possibility of change, or choosing to endorse and effect change as members of certain societies.

For Coetzee, the role of the reader is paramount in constructing such a narrative, as he, in the role of author, merely describes and never prescribes. In postcolonial literature this process may apply as much to the narrator of the text as to the readership. Fahraeus (2005:8, 11) acknowledges that the need for defining a new (postcolonial) textual ethos may include considering that the ethos itself may be multiple or contradictory and that the author may indeed choose not to choose at all. Coetzee skilfully prompts the reader towards active involvement, among other things via references and allusions. The reader is then left with the choice (or the responsibility?) of integrating these extra-textual references and allusions into the fabric – the texture – of the novel, or not. The result is that Coetzee entices the reader into involvement by the responsibility of co-authorship. Although it is virtually

impossible to resist involvement, it is hardly possible for the reader to accuse Coetzee of any measure of prescriptiveness.

Manzanas Calvo (2006: 93) cites the example of Costello who is cast by Coetzee in *Elizabeth Costello* as a “secretary” who does not interrogate or judge what is given to her to write down (Coetzee, 2003:199). Not wishing to be burdened by beliefs, she merely mirrors the facts that she must represent. One may very well regard Costello as an archetype of the traditional reader (in this sense involved in a metanarrative) and this introduces the ironic subversion that Coetzee so effortlessly combines with his narrative. However, I feel that this is in sharp contrast to what Coetzee expects of his readers, for they are confronted with the harsh reality of having to pass judgment, of having to choose. Fahraeus (2005:13) discusses the issue of the reader’s complicity with the text, but does not suggest a solution to the dilemma of ascertaining whether a text is ethically desirable or not, and how this influences the production of meaning in the temporal process of reading by the cooperative reader.

At this stage I would venture to suggest that there seems to be a movement or development in Coetzee’s views which may possibly be interpreted in terms of clusters, cycles or chronologically as witnessed by the progress from his earlier fiction (*Foe*, 1986; *Disgrace*, 1999), up to the most recent under the scope of this study (*Elizabeth Costello*, 2003; *Slow Man*, 2005; *Diary of a Bad Year*, 2007). Theoretical matters pertaining to liminality such as the clusters of characterisation, narrative stance and reader, as well as Coetzee’s stance on them, will be dealt with in chapter 2. Also, various strategies of alienation (including subdivisions) such as allegory, phasing, intertextuality and metafiction will be discussed. Chapter 3 concentrates on the writer’s liminality, drawing most of its examples from *Slow Man*. Chapter 4 will examine Coetzee’s use of liminal characters as narrators, mainly focusing on *Foe* and *Disgrace*. Chapter 5 will in turn examine Coetzee’s application of the reader as a liminal entity with special emphasis on *Diary of a Bad Year* and *Elizabeth Costello*. As all of these clusters overlap and integrate with each other, it is not a clear-cut differentiation, and elements of the other focuses may also be present in each chapter. This is inevitable and supports the notion of the transience and interconnectedness of fragmented postcolonialism. Chapter 6 looks at the strategies

of subversion in Coetzee's oeuvre. Chapter 7 presents a summary of findings and conclusions.

1.2 Central questions

Given this context and framework, the following key questions emerge:

- How does Coetzee represent postcolonial society in his novels?
- What strategies does he employ to underline the position of liminal characters in these novels?
- What does he achieve by using liminality as a form of alienation with regard to the Other?

1.3 Aims

- To determine Coetzee's interpretation of the liminal condition, the first question will interrogate the manner in which Coetzee sets about representing postcolonial society. I will therefore argue that he positions characters and narrators in liminal spaces to convey his interpretation of postcolonial society.
- I will then also argue that he applies narrative strategies and conventions to this effect – thus addressing the second question.
- The study aims not only to expose and analyse the liminal characters which are used as vehicles to channel his ideas, but also to evaluate the impact of narrative strategies and conventions used to create certain effects in the texts. The answers to the third question thus present the arguments that inform this study.

1.4 Thesis statement

This thesis will argue that Coetzee's representation of contemporary postcolonial society features characters and narrators in liminal positions who make ethical choices in response to personal or societal conflict and they experience crises which significantly influence their liminal identities. Coetzee resorts to various literary strategies that alienate the characters and/or narrators from their environment.

Various generators of meaning can be identified in these texts: the use of allegory to attain anonymity, dialogue to evoke different voices, rewriting or reconceptualising previously written novels and, more recently, the autobiographical genre to investigate the respective roles of author and reader.

The versions of representation depend on the form of ethics displayed by the role players and the choices they make – which incur the realisation of their concomitant responsibilities. Various reactions of these liminal characters and/or narrators to the crisis of choice are identified. For example, Susan Barton in *Foe* is kept suspended in this state of liminality, but the choices exercised by David Lurie in *Disgrace* return him to a previous, more static position of humiliated resignation, while Señor C and Anya in *Diary of a Bad Year* move into a new position based on their specific personal, ethical and social choices.

Various degrees of reactions that a reader could have on the ethical imperative of formulating a personal stance on liminality both in terms of the texts and contemporary postcolonial society are also evaluated, whether it is to effect change, to negate change, to passively criticise or to actively affirm the status quo.

In the final instance, the study will indicate that a certain development in Coetzee's own ethical views can possibly be linked to narrative clusters in the last novels, in the sense of looking at the role of the writer as a narrator and/or reader. All the novels discussed in this thesis display elements of metafiction, implying that Coetzee probably intended this comprehension and the transfer of responsibilities to the reader. It is anticipated that these considerations will contribute towards a more informed stance on his work.

1.5 Methodology

Following this introductory discussion, Chapter 2 discusses Coetzee's representation of postcolonial society by focusing on the representation of liminal identity in postcolonial narrative theory and/or narratology. The approach followed by Coetzee

in each novel varies; for example in *Disgrace* he adopts an atypical and very realistic, almost modernist tone which can easily (but incorrectly) be regarded as narrowing down the scope of the novel (Boehmer, 1995:193). It seems more appropriate to read this novel in allegorical terms as a dystopic farm novel, as discussed by Smit-Marais and Wenzel (2007). In chapter 2, attention is also focused on the ethical or theoretical implications of the possible relation between narrators and characters as well as between main protagonists and marginal characters. The aspect of choice and how Coetzee manages to set the scene to allow his marginal characters to react to their liminality in terms of ethical choices is also addressed. In other words, what choices are available to liminal characters in terms of ethical issues? The study will argue that some stay on the same plane, others are enlightened but do not evolve, and yet others evolve to a higher state of comprehension. The study aims to ascertain whether these characters/narrators develop or mature with regard to ethical choices or not. In addition, this chapter focuses on examining how Coetzee manipulates the reader into accepting co-responsibility for ethical choices made by characters and narrators in the texts.

The next cluster concerns the relation, if any, between main protagonists and liminal characters, or between characters and narrators. Indications in some instances are that there seems to be a movement or progression of the one towards the other, and in other novels the protagonist and liminal character(s) bear a striking resemblance. The study will argue that Coetzee obliquely suggests that embracing liminality is the key to survival in a postcolonial society.

Another concern is the question of how Coetzee succeeds in coaxing the reader into accepting co-responsibility for authorship of the text. It seems that Coetzee is intent upon drawing the reader into the text, thus both giving up sole authority over the text and relieving himself of the burden of the responsibility. The study will indicate that he allows liminal characters/narrators, narrative techniques and conventions, as well as situations to set the scene for the reader to enter into a debate with the text. In this way the reader himself becomes co-author in establishing meaning from the text. The kaleidoscope image illustrates the shift in focus which is needed to

accommodate this shift in perspective, allowing the reader to evolve into a partial author.

In the penultimate instance, the significance or influence of the reactions in terms of ethical responsibilities exercised by readers, most importantly on contemporary postcolonial society but also on the texts themselves, will be addressed. The study will indicate that the reader could react with various degrees of commitment to effect change, to negate change, to passively criticise or to actively affirm the status quo.

Chapter 6 devotes attention to Coetzee as (partial) author of the texts. Can (or should) any development in his own ethical views be expected to emerge from the texts, and is it possible to gauge the importance or significance of Coetzee's work in interpreting contemporary postcolonial society? Also, how important is Coetzee's oeuvre with regard to the advancement of a global postcolonial commitment to ethical values? The study aims, finally, to indicate that a certain progression in his own ethical views can possibly be linked to definite narrative clusters of meaning in the applicable novels and to validate the significance of reading Coetzee's fiction as a set of provocative comments on postcolonial society. Chapter 7 summarises the findings and conclusions of the study.

Chapter 2 Liminality

This chapter aims to define and discuss the concept of liminality in terms of the change that constitutes a crucial aspect of postcoloniality. Within this context of transition the concept of boundaries, and their transgression or retention, becomes part of the postcolonial debate. This situation in turn raises the question of identity formation. JM Coetzee addresses this reality in his novels by asserting that the postcolonial condition implies choice and, concomitant with that idea, responsibility. For this purpose Coetzee uses various strategies of alienation such as phasing, allegory, intertextuality and a metafictional approach that promote liminal conditions in terms of three important components of fiction: the roles of the author(s), narrator(s) and the reader. Change as a concept could be perceived as an aspect of liminality in South African fiction. Furthermore, Coetzee's interpretation of this phenomenon will be discussed.

2.1 Liminality

Liminality as a concept relies on the Latin word *limen* for threshold, inherently implying dimensions of behind, between, and beyond. Originally conceptualised by Van Gennep (1960), Turner (1977:122) defines the liminal existence as being "against, with, towards, above, below, within, outside, or without one another". Stepping beyond the threshold indicates moving into uncharted or virgin territory. In terms of postcoloniality, liminality as an investigative approach would entail the expansion of territories to include that which had previously been excluded, transgressed and crossed, as explained by Wilfred (1999:vii) and Cattin (1999:11). The movement across borders always generates more reciprocal traffic. That which had previously been regarded as outside may now be central, while what had been regarded as central may now be a borderline issue – either lying on the outskirts or excluded from the previous inclusion¹². As explained by Elizondo (1999:53), the struggle for equilibrium results in a never-ending process of assimilation in which (cultural) identity is crucial. Although the threshold is not absolute in its imperialism, it is generally understood to evolve in the direction of shifting the borders as a first step

¹² Talib remarks that with regard to English literature studies, what was once at the margin is now at the centre (2002:5), especially in the postcolonial sense, so that the rise of a new order seems unavoidable. It is ironic to conclude that, similar to revolution, an order of any sorts must of necessity be succeeded by another order which in turn will be superseded by yet another. This process effectively illustrates the kaleidoscope effect which was introduced in chapter 1.

to expansion more often than delimiting the boundaries in order to narrow down or exclude (Schimanski & Wolfe, 2007:12). It is concluded that liminality is a direct result of the transience and of the subversive nature of the postcolonial world.

Symbols associated with the threshold are veils, doors, gates, frontiers and lines of demarcation. Characters tend to enter the liminal space and not cross in a line, which would have been merely two-dimensional and marginal. The liminal space evolves to become more than a line but rather a space or a territory. Examples of liminal spaces (Aguirre, 2006:15) are boundary lines such as crossing-points, rivers, mountains; even mountain ranges, borderlands, no-man's land; from plain barriers and triumphal arches progressing to temples, cities, and countries. All of these spaces can be shown to have a metafictional function. Coetzee shrewdly applies the strategy to introduce this level of significance to most, if not all of his novels. In *Foe*, the sea is an example of such a liminal space, signifying the loss of identity and belonging to a certain country which is in turn experienced by Susan the narrator; by Friday, the silenced slave; and by Cruso himself, who is forced to leave his natural surroundings in order to go to England. In *Elizabeth Costello* the bus stop can easily be equated with a waiting room, waiting for death, while simultaneously indicating the point of arrest, waiting before the gate of heaven. *Disgrace* uses the space of Cape Town, Lurie's home town, as original homeland (or paradise) from which he is forced to flee following his initial fall from grace. This is followed up by the liminal space of Lucy's smallholding which must be surrendered to Petrus, the new landowner, after the brutal attacks on both father and daughter.

Change introduces the possibility of choice in the normal lives of characters, narrators and readers who could well be regarded to be passing through "rites of passage" (Turner, 1987:102) because they enter and experience a phase of transition. Transition suggests a state of impermanence, of temporariness, of being in transit, all of which add to a disconcerting experience of instability and insecurity.

Depending on the choice exercised, the options are that

- characters and readers could choose either to uphold the status quo, regressing back into their comfort zones; or
- experience an awareness of such choices and responsibilities but remain indecisive or ambivalent with regard to such definite change; or
- acknowledge the challenge to accept and
- effect change.

Examples of such reactions from the Coetzee novels discussed in this study are, as mentioned before:

- Susan Barton in *Foe* who is kept suspended in a state of liminality,
- while the choices exercised by David Lurie in *Disgrace* return him to a previous, more static position of humiliated acceptance.
- Both Señor C and Anya in *Diary of a Bad Year* move into a new position based on their specific personal, ethical and social choices.
- Likewise Elizabeth Costello manages to transcend (and therefore subvert) her liminal status by evolving into a new sphere, becoming an autonomous writer in the sense that she features as author of *The Lives of Animals*. Following her appearance in *Slow Man* the reader will probably accept the credibility of her status as writer.

In exceptional cases the liminal position that is brought about by change may be passively or unsuspectingly thrust upon the unfortunate character. It is more commonly executed by an agent, willingly and actively bringing about a liminal status through the enactment of choices. As a result, liminal characters participate and contribute to the responsibilities which are concomitant with choices. By implication, characters, narrators and readers in the sense of authors are faced with the same ethical issues, creating new clusters of meaning in the process of writing their own stories.

Liminality may be explained as an extension of marginality. In the process of delineating this concept more clearly, the possibility (indeed, probability) of existence “beyond” is added. Previously marginality as a literary term was commonly used for

descriptions of anti-hero characters. Marginality by definition indicates the precarious situation of characters cast as outsiders – barely included within the borders of the group, hovering on the outskirts of the indefinite “out there”. Liminality opens up the possibility of moving into a new situation and fluctuating between the previous and newly established boundaries.

It is illuminating to note that feminist literary criticism is excellently positioned to speak about marginality. Moi (1986:213) remarks,

What is perceived as marginal at any given time depends on the position one occupies. If patriarchy views women as occupying a marginal position within the symbolic order, then it can construe them as the limit or borderline of that order.

Because of their marginality, women come to represent the margin between male and female, receding and merging both into the chaos of the outside and the order of the inside. Therefore women display a duality: they will be neither inside nor out, neither known nor unknown, and belonging to neither,¹³ although, ironically and subversively, possessed by both. One may conclude that woman is commonly regarded to possess an essentially liminal quality. Naturally, feminism as one of the four major tenets of postmodernism, alongside postcolonialism, intertextuality and metafiction, is of contextual interest to this thesis. Although feminism *per se* is not the primary focus of this study, the subversion of the hegemony brought about by conscious feminism, and specifically the influential role of female narrators by Coetzee will be examined in the course of this study.

I hasten to add the dimension of delineation that liminality brings about. Liminal identity is defined by what is associated with this identity and what is excluded, broadly referred to as “the Other”. In the words of Aguirre (2006:16), it tends to become part of the Other that it was supposed to isolate or demarcate. Then again, alterity is also distinguished and defined as much in terms of what is as what is not.¹⁴

13 According to Moi (1986:214), this dual aspect has enabled patriarchy (as opposed to feminism) to typify woman as both the whore of Babylon and the blessed virgin Mary.

14 The concept of alterity will be discussed in greater detail in a section on identity later in this chapter.

Curti (1998:20-23) discusses alterity in terms of sameness/difference and includes critics such as Irigaray, Wittig, Spivak and Kristeva in her discussion.

2.2 Boundaries

In the previous chapter the reality of change in postcolonial society¹⁵ was compared to the concept of the kaleidoscope. Just as the perception of the kaleidoscopic image evolves to myriad fragments of colour and shape, the slightest twist of hand brings about changes of postcolonial implications, as much from the perspective of the character as the reader and author. It is argued that change results in expressions of insecurity that threaten to destabilise boundaries while this process creates liminal spaces with indistinct boundaries. The nebulous character of boundaries is aptly described by the fact that boundaries demarcate as much as isolate. In fact, boundaries or city walls, for example, protect the inhabitants from outside threats but simultaneously compromise their freedom as the walls inhibit traffic from both directions. By the same token, once the influence that was kept outside is admitted into the city, the integrity of the boundaries is compromised. Schimanski and Wolfe (2007:13) advocate seeing the border as a dynamic concept that continuously reacts to both “fixing” and “blurring” as this process not only divides but also joins and overlaps. It is interesting to note that although Schimanski and Wolfe argue convincingly about the existence of *liminality* they do not call it by this name, hesitantly hovering between “polarities”, “differences”, even “planes” or “distances”. Consider the following definition of borders (Brah, 1996:198):

Arbitrary dividing lines that are simultaneously social, cultural and psychic: territories to be patrolled against those whom they construct as outsiders, aliens, the Others; forms of demarcation where the very act of prohibition inscribes transgression; zones where fear of the Other is fear of the self; places where claims to ownership – claims of ‘mine’, ‘yours’ and ‘theirs’ – are staked out, contested, defended, and fought over.

In this way intrinsic and extrinsic forces compete for authority over any boundary, and this condition is naturally never static – depending on a number of variables the

¹⁵ There is a popular joke, especially appropriate in the South African postcolonial context, that change is the only constant; phrased differently, the only thing one can depend upon is that nothing can be depended on.

identity of the boundary is always contested. Wilfred (1999:x) remarks that the dominant force usually holds the prerogative of deciding on names and borderlines and by implication wields power over mapping the contested space.

Bearing in mind how Brah, Schimanski and Wolfe regard the concept of liminality, it is concluded that the concepts of *boundaries* and *borders* are better known and used. Although their reasoning vaguely includes and acknowledges the notion of liminality none of them specifically identifies the concept. However, the definition of liminality extends beyond the confines of boundaries and borders. In brief, I would like to argue that the concept of liminality emphasises the inherent quality of *crossing* the threshold, stepping into uncharted territory, giving rise to the establishment (although itself a contested concept) or development of new borders. It echoes the kaleidoscope effect in creating new possibilities, which may or may not be actualised. It is therefore an eminently transitional state, rather defining its characteristics by what is kept safe inside the borders than by alterity; the identity of the Other. *Marginality* is regarded as a lesser and narrower term which is closely associated with the periphery. By the same token, the concept of *outsider* is associated with marginality, as it merely distinguishes binary opposites. The concept of binary opposites has been questioned and largely rejected by feminists (Curti, 1998:23). Cixous (1980:115) argues that binary oppositions (such as activity/passivity, sun/moon, culture/nature, day/night, father/mother, head/emotions, Logos/Pathos) favour male dominance and forever cast women as the negative, powerless, passive side. Rejecting the binary opposition concept, Cixous suggests the idea of multiple, heterogeneous difference. Moi (1986: 212) notes that this is similar to Derrida's concept of *différance*.

In *Elizabeth Costello* the concept of *purgatory* is introduced as part of a tertiary system that dismantles the binary oppositions inferior/superior, powerless/powerful, rich/poor for a more complex triad. According to Manzananas Calvo (2006:91) Coetzee applies purgatory as an intermediate category that prefers the "middle" to binary oppositions or dyads. The argument is that Coetzee, too, seems to prefer a more complex environment, possibly suggesting a preference for liminality over the less adventurous borders and marginality.

Within the postmodernist paradigm of globalisation, boundaries seem to warrant being crossed. Depending on variable factors, this movement across the limen can be regarded either as migration or exile. Arndt (2006:60-70) argues that the conditions or processes of exile and migration constitute a double-bind that excludes from both worlds. I am wary of Arndt's insistence on exclusivity, as I would rather argue that *eventually* the experience of exclusion would evolve into liminal space. The experience of exclusion influences characters, narrators, readers and authors. Arndt (2006:71) rightly notes that living between cultures has an effect on writers and their work, both in terms of poetics and content. It is likely that the experience of exile or migration contributes to the formation of a liminal identity, enriching and defining the postcolonial context. She notes that the need for a poetics of global relationships is addressed by viewing the hybrid character of humanity combined with cultural experiences in terms of universal patterns – again reminiscent of the kaleidoscope transformation. Coetzee cleverly turns the kaleidoscope with such agility that the reader is hardly aware of the process which implicates the reader. Reader and writer share a relationship with one another in which, according to Dovey (1988:59), each grants the other the position of mastery, the authority of the knowledge or the meaning which is inaccessible to himself. Coetzee's process of reading and re-writing of traditional texts involves an active displacement of the ideological position that is more than the passive repetitions required by normative reading and writing.

The processes of reading and re-writing by Coetzee are followed up by the process of reading and subversion of the traditional texts by the reader, who in turn becomes a writer in the act of establishing and subverting meaning. In this way the act of reading questions the hegemony of the postcolonial context. The crossing or transgressing of boundaries results in such instability that it is difficult to imagine boundaries without infiltration, and yet this point of departure for reading Coetzee's texts has not previously attracted much attention. It is hoped that this discussion will lead to greater understanding of both the liminal condition and Coetzee's contribution to the postcolonial context.

2.3 Identity

While postmodern literature is generally deconstructionist in its outlook, postcolonialism has the added agenda of political subversion. The issue of identity, according to Head (1997:7), is crucial to establish the niche of postcolonialism which Coetzee inhabits, and this probably explains why critics often demand Coetzee to be politically precise about his position. Much to their frustration Coetzee is notoriously mute on his personal views, leaving everything to be gleaned or extracted from his texts. Very often this involves the reader beyond the ways traditionally associated with “reading”. Head (1997:13) points out that Coetzee has in recent years resorted to a style of writing that may comfortably, but not exclusively, pass as semi-autobiographical (*Summertime, Slow Man, Diary of a Bad Year*). The possibility seems likely that the orientation of Coetzee’s writing nudges him to progress beyond – and therefore actively exhibit liminal traits – the late-colonial situation of South Africa under apartheid.

The formation and formulation of identity in postcolonial literature is ostensibly informed as much by self-knowledge as by knowledge of what is “different” or “excluded”. Feminists such as Irigaray (1985:68-85) have actively contributed to the establishment of women as a conscious group, as part of the Other that is by definition excluded from the male discourses of power. As previously argued, it seems logical that the identity of woman, as opposed to the historical hegemony of patriarchy, relates sympathetically to liminal identity.

2.4 Alterity

Postcolonial interest in identities (Head, 1997:7) has contributed significantly to unsilence the voice of the Other. Lacan’s psychology (1968) explains that in infancy the image that is mirrored to oneself is regarded as a hostile other. The fact that the mirror image may be identical to the original is rejected whilst the Other, a mirror image, is regarded as deserving of exclusion and animosity. Although the mirror image is a replica of the original, it is denied any authority because the entity responsible for making these decisions is incapable of realising the similarity of the image. The irony is that the mirror is rejected in favour of the original, whilst the mirror is nothing less than a carbon copy/replica, subverting the validity of the denial.

Colonialism lays the emphasis on unifying and wiping out differences with a view to overpower. In other words, difference is tolerated but only as a tool with which to divide and rule. The effort to subjugate and dominate is in itself a desire to overpower, and logically excludes the possibility of non-assimilation. Young (1996:10) states that postcolonialism, in turn, attempts to give back or reinstate the previously suppressed, specifically minorities and women. Coetzee enters this arena when he opts to employ female narrators. Previously, the stories of female characters were relayed through male-dominated discourses. Now, interestingly, the subversion that Coetzee creates by allowing the female narrator Susan Barton in *Foe* to account for Friday's silence and Crusoe's illness adds to the ambiguity of this text as much as the loss or change of meaning brought about by Anya's editing in *Diary of a Bad Year*. The central theme of being perceptive to the otherness of animals in *Disgrace* echoes the subverted attempts of Lurie to understand women. Even before the publication of *Disgrace*, Dovey (1988:41) observed that Coetzee seems preoccupied by the theme of understanding otherness.

Critics such as Boehmer (2005:3) and Helgesson (2004:33) have commented that anti-colonial nationalism has joined forces with colonialism in its construction of woman. The patriarchal turn in anti-colonial texts of cultural nationalism has been critiqued by female writers who have objected to the portrayal and troping of women in these texts as mother/motherland/mother-of-the-nation (Garuba, 2002: 107). I hold that by consciously *assuming* the role in which women have previously been cast, the constraints of the role are subverted in true feminist/postcolonial style. This conviction is also held by Curti (1998:9), who notes that deconstructionists attempt to speak for "woman" but, from the position of male dominance, are incapable of formulating female thought. Coetzee is fond of doing exactly this: appropriating female narrators' voices, while arguably being unable to speak for them. This point will be discussed further in chapter 4, when the role of narrators in establishing a liminal quality with regard to the text is examined.

Millett (2000:25) argues that dominance of male over female constitutes "perhaps the most pervasive ideology of our culture and provides its most fundamental concept of power."

Feminist critics such as Moi (1986:206) find themselves speaking from their own marginalised position on the outskirts of the academic establishment. In the current moment this position has undoubtedly changed to one where the hegemony of the moment belongs to the marginalised, and a new dominance is being established. According to Moi (1986:208) this situation brings about a new crisis: just as white people may be non-racist but never become black, men can attempt to speak from a feminist approach but can never become women. One is therefore obliged to acknowledge the possibility of interpretation, of being a medium. Worthington (1996:11) questions whether it is possible to articulate one's self if one is not aware of what one is not. The argument is that one cannot express one's identity without reference to the Other, and therefore one needs the existence of the Other in order to be. This is reiterated by Cattin's statement (1999:11) that a homeless or exiled person – one who has been cast out by the hegemony – has lost something of his humanity and identity as he cannot be defined except in terms of what he is not.

Arndt (2006:22) examines the perception that whatever is inexplicable or bad may in the African context be defined as "black" and therefore ascribed to the (oppressed) Other. This notion is first incorporated and then subverted by Coetzee in *Disgrace*, where the rapists are identified as black youths, and Petrus, a black farm manager, assumes a position of authority over Lucy and, by implication, also over Lurie.

In order to avoid reaffirming the implied "Otherness" and in order to secure the "Self" from it, Arndt (2006:71) suggests that one should operate with newly developed definitions of identity. This results in creating a new version of existence where the borders between the self and the other have become blurred. In Arndt's words (2006:93), it is interesting that self-fashioning is similar and simultaneous to self-unfashioning. Such a space is full of intellectual possibilities, creating moral hybridity and moral possibility. Worthington (1996:5) remarks on the importance of establishing identity through language but warns that language precedes all other forms of freedom or suppression¹⁶. On the other hand, Palmer states (2004:93) that

¹⁶ "In thinking myself, therefore, I speak (or write) myself in terms of a language which is prior to, and has primacy over, my self-conception. I speak myself, to myself and to others, in the language of others". (Worthington, 1996:5)

the results of various studies in psychology indicate that “a person can be virtually robbed of language yet still perform intelligently in other areas.” The linked theme of representation resounds in Coetzee’s fiction. For example, in *Foe*, Barton speaks on behalf of Cruso and Friday. Costello in the eponymous novel poses as “secretary” whose function is merely to relate what she is commanded, and Anya functions as medium between JC and his text in *Diary of a Bad Year*.

Liminal freedom constitutes a privileged state of being, with the freedom to choose. “I am an other”, uttered by Costello (Coetzee, 2003:221) signifies to Manzanos Calvo (2006:94) the luxury of having the freedom not to choose, or the imitation of the self that can introduce multiplicity, but also to reaffirm or increase the limits of the self.

Fahraeus (2005:27) remarks that Lévinas repeats the idea of the other/ the same (or alterity) and the relation between them in various degrees in his criticism. Helgesson (2004) offers an illuminating discussion on Lévinas’s concept of alterity which is useful as secondary criticism. According to Helgesson (2004:33) the task of postcolonial theory is “to undermine Western metanarratives which are regarded as structuring hierarchy and eliding difference”.

Attridge (2004) observes that the ethics of Lévinas, and elaborations by Derrida, bear fruitful resemblance to the themes of alterity and responsibility in Coetzee’s fiction. Sanders (2007:641) suggests, along similar lines to Attridge, an approach that begins by examining the act of reading.

Lévinas’s arguments provide a curative approach to the colonial and imperialist discourse theory. He addresses what Helgesson (2004:39) deems “the key problematic of the assignation of otherness and the exclusion of the other”. Boehmer (2006:3) explains that postcolonial literature is deeply concerned with experiences of cultural exclusion and division under the British Empire. Postcolonial writers seek to undercut thematically and formally those discourses that supported colonialism and colonisation, for example the myths of power, race classifications, and the imagery of subordination. It seems that Lévinas inverts the imperialistic relation between the self and the other by conferring absolute responsibility on the self which signifies an

absolute prohibition on the self to dominate, appropriate or even know the other, according to Helgesson (2004:39).

The inescapability of the other underlies Lévinas's insistence that "ethics", understood as the responsible encounter with the other, precedes the enlargement of the self in "philosophy". On such an understanding, Helgesson (2004:37) notes that it is ethics and not philosophy that is capable of taking the Other in his otherness into account. The logical outcome of this argument is that ethics focuses more on the inclusion and comprehension of the Other, whilst philosophy attempts to focus rather exclusively on the definition of the self. In other words, the reciprocal process of defining one's identity both by what is included and what is excluded is more successful as an ethical endeavour than as a philosophical venture. Philosophy in this sense can be deemed selfish with its more exclusive focus on the self without the ethical concern for the Other.

2.5 Coetzee's agenda in appropriating the liminal space

Garuba (2002:87-89) claims that mapping any space, in postcolonial terms, is the logical precursor to subjecting the space to one's authority. The danger that is presented/represented by the map is more readily felt by those who came under its power, because maps not only contain, but also actively constitute their subjects. Therefore colonial resistance is primarily a resistance to colonial maps and the mapping of the colonised body/subject. In this deeper sense colonialism is a discourse of maps and power.

Garuba (2002:89-90) discusses the common assumptions of cartography as set out by Harley (1988:292), mentioning three specific strategies, namely silences, positional enhancements and representational hierarchies. Garuba interrogates the discursive space produced by these maps, to explore the ways in which the maps become instruments for the production of colonial and postcolonial subjectivities by constituting and constraining what could be enunciated within their discursive space. I would like to suggest that maps, and the process of mapping, represent boundaries and imaginative spaces which intrinsically have a liminal quality as the space is defined and limited or de-limited in Schimanski's (2007) terms. The process of mapping must be understood as a metaphoric concept which is not limited to

geographical space. Garuba's argumentation with regard to geographical space provides a useful intersection with the focus of this study, especially as the argument goes that what is conveyed by geographical or physical mapping becomes metaphoric.

This point is illustrated by laying claim to the physical body. Just as land is never transparent but rather culturally constituted, "the body" is never a neutral space that just happens to be there. The body, even more than land, is always informed by signification. Baker (2005:39) adds the dimension that the writing of sympathy, which is another way of expressing the concept of an ethical responsibility, commences with the troping of the physical body and the damage that it may sustain. The body as a visual sign has often functioned as a site for the cultural coding of a multitude of ideas, of beauty and ugliness, the normal and abnormal, self and other, the familiar and exotic. Garuba (2002:105) mentions that in racist and sexist discourses, it has served as the site for the visual coding of naturalised difference. In Coetzee's novels the body itself is offered as a liminal space, for example Lucy's body in *Disgrace*, appropriated by the rapists. On a metaphorical level this echoes the process of losing possession of the land. In *Slow Man* the photograph which is stolen from Rayment, representing his heritage and by implication his right to lay claim to the land, is siphoned by Drago, suggestive of the threat that he poses to Rayment, while ironically and conversely Rayment attempts to lay claim to Marijana's physical body, which in turn suggests that he wants to impose on her family identity.

The moment of moving beyond the liminal threshold of transition is described by Samuelson (2008:130) as claiming "the house of a new culture". The trope of "home" – which equals the post-liminal space – seems to be filled with various opposing forces: intimacy and violence, belonging and exclusion, hospitality and hostility, destruction and restitution, but also public and private spheres. These opposites form a fluid and dynamic tension in which the dreams of a nation (regarded as home) are not accommodated by the urban structures of the city that should shelter all. The concept of the body as metaphor for home in Coetzee's novels is a point worthy of further investigation, especially as the author's specific use of the female body has fuelled a feminist interest in Coetzee. Unfortunately pursuing this point within this

study would cause too much of a diversion to the main argument to which we will now return.

Linking up with feminism, Samuelson (2008:131) argues that women's bodies have been cast as the contested terrain on which the new national homes would be constructed. She posits that the new national home is articulated through the domestication of women together with the abjection of their voices – in short, making the home symbolic is to the detriment of woman. This happens as the home itself is not always a site of peace and safety for women, who often experience home as a space isolated from the outside world and therefore not exposed to the scrutiny of the world – a space in which secrets and secret horror abound. Abuse is often kept hidden and the terror of what is not displayed but only hinted at is the worst kind of nightmare. Birks (2007:19) and Coetzee himself (1999:35) mentioned the magistrate's words in *Waiting for the Barbarians* in *The Lives of Animals*, specifically referring to domestic violence (as exemplified by Lucy's rape): "nothing is worse than we can imagine". Birks intentionally describes "the imagination of the torture chamber" as the creative space that creates fiction (2007:19). The fact that Lucy's rape is shrouded in silence involves the reader "as Coetzee heavily dramatizes imagination in a very self-reflexive process that stimulates the reader's own imaginative mechanism" (Birks, 2007:19).

Samuelson (2008:134) states the intriguing, although entirely acceptable argument that today's xenophobia and concomitant exclusion seem to spring from the apartheid of the past. Therefore the fragility and transience of the peaceful home introduce the reader to the interior intimacies of a world originating in the uneasy structures of the past. The question that arises is what could be regarded as new in the crossing into the beyond-the-threshold. Samuelson (2008:135) suggests that Freud and Bhabha reason that "uncanny" is both a psychological and postcolonial condition allowing one to regard being-at-home as simultaneously inherently liminal – coming home to a never-ending threshold that must be crossed. She links the past and the present in the same way that she links seeming binary oppositions, for example the "open doors" and "gaping windows"; homes that are "risky" but "hospitable". She concludes that post-transition literature continues to function in a

double-bind, offering “a welcome to those who stand outside, while to those entrapped inside they may present various lines of flight”.

The focus of this study is to examine Coetzee’s contribution to the on-going discourse regarding liminality in a postcolonial world. More often than not the main character in Coetzee’s novels functions as (one of) the narrator(s) whilst portraying liminal characteristics as well – for example, Susan Barton in *Foe*, or JC/Señor C in *Diary of a Bad Year*. Some time in this study will be devoted to examining Coetzee’s handling of the relation between characters and narrators as well as the mutual influence of the writer on the reader. In some instances there seems to be a movement or progression in some novels along the continuous scale which has central characters (main protagonists) at the one end and liminal characters at the other; yet in some cases there is a remarkable correspondence. This also implicates the various authors and their relationships to characters.

It has been observed that Coetzee is fond of employing a character/narrator as an oblique vehicle for commentary. For example, Susan Barton in *Foe* starts out as a first-person narrator (as well as main protagonist) but soon is subjected to being a castaway, marginalised by her fellow shipmates. As a liminal character Barton evolves from being rescued by Cruso to the point where she begins to usurp his position of power. Cruso’s death results directly from her actions, as he cannot exist out of his depth – he is incapable of coping with the liminal space into which he is thrust. Still later Barton appeals to Mr Foe to restore her to society and finally usurps his position in order to gain command. In turn, Mr Foe is then marginalised to a shadowy existence of hiding from the bailiffs. Dovey (1988:349) notes that Friday’s survival, although forever subjected to silence, is the direct result of his dependence upon Susan Barton to provide him with a voice; ironically he exists as a figure of her speech. Noting the trend that Coetzee’s marginal characters often coincide with main protagonists, it becomes entirely plausible that he suggests liminality as a key concept to survival in a postcolonial (transitional) society.

The following marginal characters bear testimony to travelling to and fro between liminal spaces: Susan Barton, the narrator of *Foe*, yearns for first Cruso and then Mr Foe to “return her to life”, yet stubbornly refuses to be drawn into society as she

forever denies the validity of reality, for instance when confronted with her long-lost daughter. Elizabeth Costello in *Elizabeth Costello* is another example of a marginal character using the prerogative of crossing the threshold to the *beyond* as she finds herself in transit to another plane of being. *Diary of a Bad Year* introduces the concept of choosing between, on the one hand, the character/first-person narrator (Señor C), his presumably objective “day-to-day strong opinions” and, on the other hand, the comments of Anya, a second first-person narrator/ character hired by the author (JC) to type his strong opinions, and who dares to offer her (mostly unsolicited) criticism of his work. In turn, she can also be regarded as an author in the sense of supplying an interpretation of JC’s work. The culmination of this pattern is probably found in *Slow Man*, where the reader is confronted with the choice of opting for either the author and character or the third-person narrator – or even, if he so wishes, all or none.

It is important to establish the measure of responsibility and authority enacted in or by a text as this aspect cannot be ignored in the postcolonial situation. Attridge (2004:9) defines a responsible response as one that re-enacts the work in terms of referentiality, metaphors, intention and ethics; that calls the specific work of literature into being. He states that the reader is accountable to the work of literature just as he is accountable to another human being. This responsibility is important not only for the reader but equally so for character and writer. According to Sanders (2007:642), Attridge¹⁷ finds Coetzee’s work particularly significant for an ethics of reading because it unites formal features of literary modernism with an ethics and politics of otherness which were previously associated with race, gender and colonialism.

Jakobson (1987:71) identified and described six functions of language which are still regarded as benchmark concepts. The poetic function of literature, with its focus on the message itself, is of particular concern to any attempt to gauge reader response and responsibility. It seems that in the reading process, probably similar to rituals and other cultural activities, there are certain textual structures that impose themselves on us and elicit experience *by default*, regardless of our attitude or response towards them. In other words, a certain type of affective response will be

¹⁷ This is a review of Derek Attridge’s 2004 study entitled *JM Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading: Literature in the Event*.

elicited unless the reader becomes conscious of and reacts to those structures in ways that tend to transcend, modify or devalue their impact. According to Aguirre (2006:15) some of these structures which represent space and thresholds can be regarded as shaping a poetics of space. It is assumed that Coetzee as a literary critic has incorporated these structures into his texts, expecting and eliciting the responsibility of response from his reader.

Baker (2005:35) voices a suspicion that he claims to be held by various critics: that Coetzee has abandoned the idea of purely theoretical involvement, seemingly simplifying his narratives and moving into a more realist narrative mode. He suggests that the more recent novels, which seem to be historically more specific, superficially appear to be more realistic and theoretically less challenging. The reader must be warned that this movement in Coetzee's work should not be taken to suggest that his latter works are simpler and therefore of inferior quality. I prefer to suggest instead that it indicates a progression in the direction of being more accessible to readers – and therefore more capable of effecting change.

Head (1997:6-7) notes that Coetzee's own comments on his ethnic identity – of the term Afrikaner as having three different applications of which he can eliminate only two – show him to be acutely aware of the precariousness of his situation, and of the ambivalence of the site that divides colonial from postcolonial experience. The first and second applications of the term Afrikaner are linguistic and cultural. As Coetzee's mother tongue is English, he is not immersed in Afrikaner culture or encumbered by the Dutch Reformed Church. The third application is the external grouping or naming on the basis of historical association, and here, Coetzee suggests, he does not have the power to disassociate himself from the guilt collectively ascribed to the whites of Africa.

Baker (2005:30) comments that Coetzee's fiction holds "a minimalist programme for prompting change which is undermined even as it is articulated". He agrees with Marais (2000:183) in arguing that Coetzee's fiction adopts a strategy of paradox, which basically means that his fictional works seems to refute one another and as a result their prompts towards practical, political action may go unheard. I do not agree with Baker's allegation that Coetzee's influence is superficial and inefficient as his

intentions and intimations seem clear to me. I am convinced that Coetzee believes that the responsibility for accepting the challenge and effecting change lies with the reader.

Marginality and the associated social exclusion are frequently referred to in *Diary of a Bad Year* during the course of the narrative, pointing at Coetzee's definite attempt to highlight this issue as in his other texts. Byrne (1999) conducted a study entirely dedicated to the phenomenon of social exclusion. In the foreword, series editor May (1999:ix-x) defines "the ability to have acted otherwise and thus to imagine and practice different ways of organising societies and living together" as a necessary condition for human freedom. Byrne (1999:xi) presents a vision of an alternative mode of organizing society and social relations that does not replicate the mistakes of the past, much in the same vein as I suspect that Coetzee is doing. Byrne (1999:2) defines social exclusion as a multi-dimensional process consisting of exclusion from making decisions and no access to employment or material resources. This process creates spaces of acute exclusion.

Byrne's theory (1999:12) is entirely suited to the postcolonial reality, although he limits its application to the developed world, drawing all of his examples from this context. Coetzee's texts have not yet been examined in these terms. I suspect that Coetzee's contribution points towards awareness of this social issue in order to interrogate the reader's response regarding the status quo. I agree with Byrne (1999:70) in noting that exclusion in material circumstances is not as serious as exclusion from power, as power is the most indefinite yet most important of all social concepts, and this point is reiterated by Coetzee's liminal characters such as Lurie and Rayment.

Fahraeus (2005:8) discusses how 'good' seems to be an inherent requirement of the literature that we deem fit for studying. She mentions Eaglestone, who asks whether criticism should have ethical obligations.¹⁸ She reminds us that the concern with the ethicality of interpretation is a meta-critical concern but warns that many critics regard it as a secondary concern in the relationship between ethics and texts.

¹⁸ Eaglestone (1997:1) regards ethics as having been central to the inception of criticism but those conceptions of ethical belief have disappeared in the wake of modernist and postmodernist theory.

Naturally this leads to the question of why any text should be deemed fit for critique – involving the reader in its formulation of reality. It has been widely observed, for example by Reef (2005:248), that Coetzee consciously avoids presenting his theoretical concerns and philosophies. Instead, since 1996 he voices his opinions in a narrative rather than discursive form by speaking through a narrator or a fictional character such as Elizabeth Costello. Attwell (2006:25) mentions that Coetzee’s fiction has proved resourceful in generating a discussion of ethics in fiction or of the relationship between ethical and fictional discourses. Even the texts themselves (e.g. *Foe*, *Elizabeth Costello*, *Diary of a Bad Year*) seem to insist on being delivered in embedded narrative form, emphasising the process of communication and the idea of text/message as being subject to variable influences which have significance for the integrity and credibility of the text.

Considering the possibility of a counter-history requires one to examine the issue of ethics and ethicality such as done by Fahraeus (2005:7-9). This process helps one to define the attitudes of various researchers interested in ethics.

Jolly (2005:250) states that the aesthetic of postmodernism represents history more accurately than does realism. Flanagan (2002:389) explains that it is probably because postmodernism consists of

nonlinear form, the blurring of distinctions between past, present and future, a constant circling about aporias and double binds which preclude the drive to a premeditated conclusion.

The ethics of re-presenting rape in literature simultaneously interests and troubles writers/critics. Flanagan (2002:388) discusses possible narrative strategies for representing traumatic experiences. A discussion of the ethics of applying rape as a metaphor for representation will be found in the section on metafiction using *Disgrace* as primary text.

2.6 Aspects of (postcolonial) liminality

The following aspects of liminality are examined: characterisation, narrators and the role of the reader. The latter aspect also entails “judgment” and responsibility. As the

role of the reader has already been discussed in the previous section, characterisation and narrative issues will be addressed below, providing an introductory and theoretical discussion on these aspects. This discussion will be expanded in subsequent chapters, drawing appropriate examples from different novels.

2.6.1 Characterisation

As outlined and discussed earlier, Coetzee's liminal characters have the following possibilities regarding the outcome of choices: the liminal character can retain the status quo, showing no development in terms of progression; or the liminal character can regress to a lesser level; or evolve to a higher state. Examples of reactions to the above are Susan Barton in *Foe*, who is kept suspended in this state of liminality, while the choices exercised by David Lurie in *Disgrace* return him to a previous, more static position of humiliated acceptance. Both Señor C and Anya in *Diary of a Bad Year* move into a new position based on their specific personal, ethical and social choices. Likewise, Elizabeth Costello manages to transcend (and therefore subvert) her liminal status by evolving into a new sphere.

2.6.2 Focalisation

Bal (1980:109) further developed Genette's concept (1972) of focalisation. This idea proposes that the entity who perceives or observes should be distinguished from the entity who narrates, as these two do not necessarily correspond. She discusses that the existing term of perspective lacks an adequate observation regarding this distinction, as it ambiguously refers to both narrator and vision or stance. The concept of focalisation, according to Bal (1980:110), has the double advantage of not being an entirely new concept, having already been introduced by Genette, and also of being a technical term that allows for manipulation. She (1980:110) defines focalisation as pertaining to the textual layer of narratology, slotted in between the layers of fiction and history.

Bal (1980:111) explains that the relation between the narrator-observer as subject and the object of his focalisation implies a continuum in which the focaliser is, by default, limited and biased. The reader becomes co-author of the text as the focaliser may, for example, speak from the perspective of an eight-year-old, while the reader

who is more mature would be able to interpret events from his own vantage point. She also describes the distinctions between internal focalisation, external focalisation, double focalisation and ambiguous focalisation (Bal, 1980:112), cautioning that these distinctions should not be confused with extradiegetic, homodiegetic, heterodiegetic and intradiegetic narrators, as they belong to different textual levels.

2.6.3 Narrators

The similarities between Coetzee's *Foe* and Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* are obvious, while the differences between them are often slight and need conscious scrutiny in order to identify the differences. Note that Coetzee studiously avoids the possibility of mistaking his Cruso with Defoe's Crusoe, applying an orthographic difference as marker of the subversive nature of his text. The suggestion seems to be that Cruso and Crusoe are the same, and yet not the same. Also, Defoe the fictional but historical writer features as the fictional character Mr Foe in Coetzee's text, adding a layer of intertextuality and possibly metaphorical meaning.

2.6.3.1 Female narrators

The most significant difference between Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* and Coetzee's *Foe* in Coetzee's reworking and rereading of the historic literary work is the use of the female narrator, who tells Cruso's story in place of Cruso himself. Traditionally, according to Dovey (1988:338), women were assumed to be part of the oppressed/ repressed/ unspeakable/ unrepresentable. This is now cleverly inverted by Coetzee, who uses a woman as the medium for handing down Cruso's story. In fact, Coetzee seems particularly fond of the female narrator, as exemplified by the use of female narrators Magda in *In the Heart of the Country*, Elizabeth Curren in *Age of Iron* and Elizabeth Costello in *Elizabeth Costello*; he also uses Anya as an interpreter for JC's "Strong Opinions" in *Diary of a Bad Year*.

Together with Graham (2006:15) I am convinced that the female narrators deployed by Coetzee go a long way towards interrogating authorship and the discourses of creation. Irigaray (1985:68-85) pointed out that women, previously bullied into

submission, can become dominant figures, applying mimicry as main weapon of this transformation. I strongly suspect that if one would examine the subversion brought about by Coetzee's female narrators in terms of liminality when women *consciously and deliberately* assume the role of subordination traditionally assigned to them, the conclusion would be that it turns subordination into an affirmative quality, as it is not forced upon the subject but rather chosen- therefore subverting the act of dominance.

2.6.4 Narratological approaches

Palmer (2004) developed a speech category approach to classify different narratological approaches, arguing that narrative theory has concentrated too long on the privacy of consciousness. He suggests instead that the minds of characters/narrators may be better comprehended from the perspective of the communicative nature of thought. Palmer (2004:12) argues that narrative is a description of the mind of the character and therefore essential to understanding the novel. His investigation is focused on how the mind of the character is constructed by the narrator and the reader of the text, and therefore his exposition is of value for this and the following chapter.

Palmer (2004:11-12) suggests the following categories of speech to illustrate different options of narrative. These are supplemented by my own examples from Coetzee texts:

- Direct thought. The train pulled away. He thought, "Why the hell am I still waiting for her?"

Example from *Slow Man*, third-person narrator relating a conversation between Rayment and his friend Margaret McCord:

'You are making a mistake,' she says: 'people who drive recklessly should be taught a lesson. I suppose they will fit you out with a prosthesis...you will soon be riding your bicycle again.' 'I don't think so,' he replies. 'That part of my life is over.' Margaret shakes her head. 'What a pity!' she says. 'What a pity!' (Coetzee, 2006:15).

- Thought report. The train pulled away. He wondered why he was still waiting for her.

Example from *Foe*, narrated by Susan Barton:

“A mutineer, was my first thought: yet another mutineer, set ashore by a merciful captain, with one of the Negroes of the island, whom he has made his servant” (Coetzee, 1986:8).

- Free indirect thought. The train pulled away. Why the hell was he still waiting for her?
Example from *Slow Man*, third-person narrator using Paul Rayment as focaliser:

From the opening of the chapter, from the incident on Magill Road to the present, he has not behaved well, has not risen to the occasion: that much is clear to him (Coetzee, 2006:15).

Palmer describes direct thought narrative as roughly equal to mimesis (showing). This correlates to Prince’s definition (1987:87) of showing: “the detailed, scenic rendering of situations and events and by minimal narratorial mediation.” By contrast, thought report narrative is deemed roughly equal to diegesis (telling); to cite Prince’s definition (1987:96) once again: “a mode characterised by more narratorial mediation and by a less detailed rendering of situations and events than by showing.”

Palmer’s study (2004:25) prefers a focus on third-person narrators and more specifically heterodiegetic narrators – narrators who are not characters in the story being narrated. This probably explains why his method has not previously been applied to a study of Coetzee’s novels, as it does not at first glance seem applicable. However, this study is optimistic that applying Palmer’s theory will contribute significantly to a global appreciation of these Coetzee texts. In *Foe* Coetzee uses the first-person (homodiegetic) narrator Susan Barton. Lurie in *Disgrace*, and Rayment in *Slow Man* are third-person variations. Palmer’s distinction between homodiegetic and heterodiegetic narrators appears simplistic and therefore insufficient to explain Coetzee, because Coetzee effortlessly manages to switch between first-person and third-person narration using free indirect thought. Here one may refer to the switch in narrative voices in *Foe* and *Diary of a Bad Year*. I venture to suggest that a further distinction, such as *extra/intra*, could prove useful in describing Coetzee’s narrators. The extradiegetic narrator would then have access to information or insight which seems to come from an external source. Bal’s distinctions (1980:113) in terms of focalisation would be useful in such a case, as she describes the internal focaliser, called PF by Bal, as a (narrator who is) a character in the text, and an external

focaliser, called EF (Bal, 1980:111) as emanating from a narrator who is not a character in the text.

The narrative voice in *Disgrace* could then be described as an extra-homodiegetic narrator, as it switches at times to include information that would not be possible to obtain from Lurie as homodiegetic narrator, for example the closing comments in chapter three:

“She is behaving badly, getting away with too much; she is learning to exploit him and will probably exploit him further. But if she has got away with much, he has got away with more; if she is behaving badly, he has behaved worse. To the extent that they are together, *if they are together*, he is the one who leads, she the one who follows. *Let him not forget that.*”

(Coetzee, 2000:28; my emphasis).

Palmer (2004:24) cautions that often a homodiegetic narrator can be very unobtrusive, as the “I” pronoun may not feature for long stretches. Palmer then warns that the homodiegetic narrative always has two first-persons – the one experiencing the events and the one narrating them. Also, other complexities of the text could be a first-person narrator disappearing and being replaced by a third-person narrator. This seems perfectly applicable to *Foe*.

Searle (1992:126) states that narrative consists of reconstructing the thought of the fictional character or narrator. Palmer (2004:124-125) notes that the common assumption is that a person can explain the processes in his own mind more easily than those of others. He neatly discredits this notion by arguing that the lack of insight into one’s own psyche, or the stubborn but very human desire to choose what one believes, may result in a very unreliable account. The solution suggested by Palmer is that of ascription – the process of ascribing intention and motives to actions.

2.6.4.1 Ascription

Palmer (2004:124-5) notes that first-person ascription is less, and third-person ascription more reliable than commonly supposed. Evaluating the truth of Palmer’s

observation with regard to Coetzee's texts it indeed seems true, especially as Coetzee stages Barton as a first-person narrator that challenges all previously accepted definitions. On the other hand Palmer (2004:10) concedes that contrary to popular assumption it is often easier to read someone else's mind than to describe one's own, although it may result in unreliable representation. Dennett (1991:94) adds that narrators unwittingly co-create fiction as they relay events. In his words: "It is not that they lie in the situation; but that they confabulate; they fill in the gaps, guess, speculate, mistake theorising for observing."

In a short piece entitled *A Note on Writing*¹⁹ Coetzee points out that writing in the middle voice inevitably constitutes a commentary on the act of writing. Dovey (1988:15) asserts that the phantom presence of the middle voice can be felt if one is alert to the possibility of the threefold opposition active-middle-passive:

To write (active) is to carry out the action without reference to the self, perhaps but not necessarily on behalf of someone else. To write (middle) is to carry out the action (do-write) with reference to the self.

One may conclude that much of Coetzee's writing is therefore (intended as) criticism or commentary on the act of writing – as in *Foe*, *Diary of a Bad Year*, even *Elizabeth Costello*. This point will be further examined in chapter three, focusing on the role of the author.

Dovey (1988:15) finds that Coetzee's writing is conducted in the middle voice and his novels all point to the fact that the narrator, as representative of the writer, is not only affected (=changed) but also effected (=realised) by the writing. Extending this argument is the realisation that Coetzee's re-writing of a pre-existing text (for example, *Foe*) also constitutes a redemption of, or alternative take on history.

Petersen's (1989:243-252) reading of *Foe* criticises the above position by arguing that the displacement of Susan Barton's perspective indicates Coetzee's desire "to show that there is no special insight to be gained from a woman's point of view or

¹⁹ Daymond, MJ, Jacobs, JU & Lenta, M., eds.1984. *A Note on Writing. Momentum: On Recent South African Writing*. Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press. p.11-13.

woman's writing". Accordingly Petersen (1989:251) concludes that Coetzee himself is the "foe" in the search for the place and role of a female view of literature and history. I do not agree with Petersen's conclusion, as I would like to suggest that Coetzee consciously assumes a subverted role that in the final instance becomes subversive again (Curti, 1988:3). To me Coetzee seems in fact to indicate that a female view has a profound influence on and contribution to literature and history. In *Elizabeth Costello*, Costello's son John argues with Susan Moebius about this very position, asking "So is this what you think ... that we live parallel lives, men and women, that we never really meet?" (Coetzee, 2003:23). As mentioned previously, it remains arguable (Moi, 1986:208) whether or not Coetzee is capable of assuming the stance of spokesperson for the feminist view.

The traditional narrative technique of stream of consciousness/interior monologue is not supported by Palmer (2004:25), who deems it at once too contested and too simplistic. Pinker (1997: 134-139) indicates that the term consciousness has three different levels of meaning:

- self-knowledge: self-awareness of self-consciousness;
- access to information: the verbal reports, rational thought, deliberate decision making which provide access to mental events. This kind of consciousness has four features:
 - i) sensation (colours, shapes, sounds, smells, pressures, aches)
 - ii) pieces of this information which fall under the spotlight of attention;
 - iii) sensations with an emotional flavour (pleasant/, interesting/ exciting) and
 - iv) an executive "I" who makes choices and pulls the levers of behaviour ;and
- sentience: or *qualia*, subjective experience, phenomenal awareness, raw feelings, what it is like to do something, etc.

Research originally done by Searle (1992) also describes the experience of consciousness. Palmer (2004:99-104) offers the following elaboration:

- Finite modalities: these include the six senses, including balance; bodily sensations such as pain and the sensory awareness of one's body; and the stream of thought. The stream of thought contains feelings and emotions such as a sudden surge of anger; words; visual images; and other non-verbal and

non-imagery elements. Thus a thought can occur suddenly and in a flash and in a form that can be expressed neither verbally nor by image;

- Unity: a sense of unity is essential to make sense of conscious states. Both vertical and horizontal unity exist. The question is: which techniques are used by the narrator to convey this sense of the unity of a character's consciousness? Do some narrators convey it better than others and if so, what is its significance? A good deal of contemporary fiction is concerned with the desire to disrupt or problematise the sense of the unified nature of experience and to portray clearly non-unified states of consciousness. I am convinced that this definitely applies to Coetzee;
- Aspectual shape: conscious experience is always from a point of view and therefore perspectival – never completely objective or disinterested. It is also possible to differentiate between intentional and non-intentional states of perspective;
- Familiarity: this is one of the most pervasive features of ordinary consciousness awareness. It becomes clear that narrators tend to be more interested in a character's lack of familiarity with his surroundings. This sort of unfamiliarity has potential for various sorts of psychic disturbance and conflict with others;
- Boundary conditions: In cases of breakdown the pervasiveness of the boundaries of consciousness is most noticeable. This sense of disorientation occurs when certain crises in characters' lives occur such as when one cannot remember what day it is or where one is. Palmer comments (2004:103) "therefore, the description of fictional minds experiencing this breakdown is common in a wide range of postmodern novels";
- Overflow: conscious states tend to refer beyond their immediate content – connections in long, associative series – in this way narrators regularly use associations in thought processes such as chains of correspondences in which memories and sensations accompany immediate experiences; and
- Mood: provides the colour/tone that characterises the conscious state which pervades all of our conscious experiences. The description of characters' moods is an important element in narrative discourse although sometimes not stated explicitly or directed intentionally to satisfy any conditions.

2.7 Strategies to illustrate liminal spaces and places

Major strategies indicating liminal spaces and places that are discussed in this study are: phasing (including the variations of repetition, aporia, embedded and double embedded narrative, palimpsest and copy/original); allegory (with its subsections diptych and synecdoche); intertextuality; and metafiction. What follows below is a brief exposition of each of these strategies focusing on theoretical aspects. As the occasion arises each of these strategies will be discussed in the following chapters with different texts as points of departure.

2.7.1 Allegory and synecdoche

Head (1997:7) remarks that allegory is itself, as in most postcolonial literature, a recurrent theme in Coetzee's work. Head dismisses the creation of allegory as fruitless as it diverts the author from the real task at hand. I do not agree with him that allegory poses a stumbling block for the *author*. Coetzee is adept at using allegory as a metafictional vehicle for his texts and applies it as a vehicle of textual layering that adds to the richness of the novel. The only danger regarding allegory in my opinion is that the *reader* may be lured into falsely interpreting it as an absolute and exclusive reading.

Dovey (1988:51) points out that allegory seems to surface regularly in critical or polemical atmospheres, when for political or metaphysical reasons there is something that cannot be said. This is relevant to Coetzee's use of allegory when writing in the SA context and may also be applied to his strategies for concealment. Samuelson (2006:184) observes that, broadly speaking, South African novels published during the transition period from apartheid to rainbow nation, also referred to as the interregnum, through their allegorical structures characteristically prefer a focus on race rather than on gender in a rhetoric of elision in which the past continues to exert control over the present.

Secrecy and various associated rhetorical devices seem capable of extending in various directions as recurrent themes/motifs in Coetzee's work. According to Birks (2007:13-16), research in psychopathology suggests the reasons that certain things have to be left unsaid, for example the rape in *Disgrace*. Ultimately the representation of handicap and physical molestation on an imaginary level allows

Coetzee to reflect on the nature and position of South African subjects in their complex relation to history and society. Violent acts such as those imagined by Coetzee in his narratives prevent any possible association of thoughts and any possibility of putting words to what is supposed to have happened, seeing that it cannot be rationally conceptualised or psychically realised. This resistance to symbolisation lends these events their traumatic quality. According to Birks (2007:16), true healing of the trauma represented by the texts can occur only once it has been incorporated into the psyche – in other words, only once the full horror of the implied events has been conceptualised by the reader's imagination. This understanding clearly supports Coetzee's desire to commit the reader to taking responsibility for the meaning engendered by his reading of the text.

Dovey (1988:394) regards Coetzee's novels as "allegories of irony", bearing in mind that allegorical imagery in postmodernism merely simulates and appropriates but never creates original elements. Postcolonial allegory, according to Dovey (1988:387) must of necessity also be regarded as a palimpsest. Manzanas Calvo (2006:101) notes that when copy and original become totally entwined, confounding any attempt to distinguish between them, it affirms the idea that Coetzee's fiction simulates allegory without equating to traditional allegory.

Critics disagree on the question of allegory in Coetzee's texts. In a critique on Attridge's appraisal of Coetzee, May (2007:632-637) acknowledges Coetzee as a pivotal figure in twentieth- and twenty-first-century literary history, but warns against Attridge's attempts to allegorise all or any part of Coetzee's works, rather going in the opposite direction and arguing for the "singularity" of each of his works. May conversely but justly offers the opinion that Coetzee's earlier works are better in terms of singularity and therefore probably more brilliant, hesitantly posing the question whether it is at all possible, in the last instance, to avoid allegory.

Sanders (2007:644) joins the discourse by voicing the conviction that Attridge is firmly opposed to a reductive reading of Coetzee. He poses the possibility that strong allegorical readings of Coetzee, such as that of Spivak, who finds an aporia of race and gender identity politics in *Foe*, or Wicomb's commentary that stages *Disgrace* as a hyperbolic repetition of a history of South African racial and sexual violence, should

perhaps be regarded as the beginning of a discussion about the displacement of politics by ethics, and of the displacement of writing by reading. This argument is supported by McDonald (2010).

Sanders (2007:643) notes that Attridge disagrees with Dovey's treatment of Coetzee's (first five) novels as Lacanian allegories, although the latter admits that he, too, reads Coetzee allegorically to the extent of keeping the moral questions alive. According to Sanders, the allegory that Attridge derives from Coetzee is 'steadfastly counter-allegorical'.

Synecdoche, according to the Oxford English Dictionary (2007:769), is a figure of speech in which a part represents the whole or vice versa. Boehmer (2005:190) regards synecdoche as providing the connective tissue of early postcolonial writing. This figure of speech allows us to see Lurie, the male focaliser in *Disgrace*, as representative of a class or race, and the loss of Rayment's leg in *Slow Man* as representative of the metaphoric loss of identity that is suffered as a result of leaving the motherland – by the author as much as by Rayment and possibly by the reader as well.

The function of synecdoche is to build up tension, according to Aguirre (2006:3), mentioning it in conjunction with the representation of the Other as a site that variously expands, absorbs or colonises. The Bloomsbury Guide to English Literature (1998:523) comments that synecdoche is essentially associated with representing realism as it combines attributes of similar objects.

2.7.2 Phasing

This technique occurs at its simplest when the plot is interrupted or segmented into different parts. It is common in children's stories, medieval narratives and folk tales where, for example, three sons each set off to conquer the world, each one meeting with failure until the third/youngest/elected one manages to fulfil the requirements that had been set up as prerequisites for success. It also echoes the kaleidoscope image as different perspectives on the same plot are supplied in various versions.

Aguirre (2006:19) offers the following definition:

Phasing has a prismatic function which diffracts events into a number of significant moments or unfolds them into a sequence of episodes. In breaking down motion into several stages, phasing achieves duration, suspense, and solemnity; suggesting order, closure, disclosure, completion, finality and inevitability. It is a favourite strategy of all folk narratives, medieval storytellers and equally at work in gothic fiction.

According to Aguirre (2006:19), the obvious result of this technique is to retard the narrative. Related techniques include the device of the fragmented manuscript, which is illegible in places, interrupted narrative, labyrinthine spaces and withheld or insufficient information.

Aguirre (2006:20-21) notes that from one perspective, phasing builds up a view of the cosmos which includes time itself; in another way, it defamiliarises reality, so that the same function performs both ways. With regard to the construction of a plot, Aguirre argues that retardation primarily affects the characters as it shapes their world and does not in the first place affect the reader's perception of reality. Therefore this strategy is categorised as pertaining to its effect on characters.

Phasing can be indicated in Coetzee's *Diary of a Bad Year*, where the narrative is segmented into three concurrent sections, simultaneously offering perspectives by JC, Anya and the superscribed comments of Señor C/ JC on Anya's interferences. It is also evident in *Elizabeth Costello*, where the action is divided into eight 'lessons', indicative of a progression towards the climactic culmination of reaching 'the gates'. The same idea is present in *Foe*, where Susan Barton presents not one but various versions of the same history, creating a textured and multi-layered whole in which original and copy merge, blurring the differences and confusing judgment. This technique functions repeatedly in *Slow Man*, as will be discussed in chapter 3.

The diptych structure is explained by Samuelson (2006:186) as setting up a partial mirror between two sets of relations. This structure can be indicated in *Foe*, for example in the scenes of discovery between Susan Barton and the unnamed

narrator, but also in the description of Barton meeting and coming face to face with her own daughter (Coetzee, 1986:73-75).

A variation of phasing is repetition. Coetzee applies repetition in various texts with variations as a functional technique. The re-writing (or repeating) of Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* provides the familiar site of numerous repetitions which allow *Foe* to become a literary palimpsest, superimposed upon an already jumbled layering of marks. Dovey (1988:332) rightly remarks that the result of this multi-layering is that it becomes impossible to distinguish between original and superimposed marks. Manzanas Calvo (2006:101) adds that copy and original intertwine so that one resembles the other, blurring the distinctions and therefore perpetuating the image.

Coetzee uses this master plan regarding Susan Barton and her relationships with the Captain, with Cruso, with Foe and with Friday, to develop an intricate debate set amidst the discourses of feminism, postcolonialism and postmodernism, resulting in what Dovey (1988:334) calls "an almost too-fertile ground for criticism".

Manzanas Calvo (2006:101) echoes Gallagher (2002:11) in noting that this convergence does not alter the past but alters the evaluation of it; it opens a new intermediary space beyond the real and beyond realism. Repetition, such as that produced by representing both copy and original or various versions of either, constitutes a convergence in the here and now, more than it offers an escape from the present. To me this is reader involvement, as these multiple layers cannot intertwine without the reader's active participation. Therefore, unlike phasing which is associated with characterisation, it is argued that the strategy of repetition can be classified as concerned with readers' assessment of its impact.

2.7.3 Aporia

Derrida (1986) uses this term to refer to the point in a text which forecloses a certain outcome, a certain interpretation of the text. As such it suggests the possibility of various interpretations, reminiscent of the cluster/kaleidoscopic composition suggested earlier in this study. In this context, Fahraeus (2005:7) agrees with

Derrida's view of aporia as a narrative technique that conveys authorial involvement. She notes that the growing concern with forms of repression and usurpation proves the increased interest that textual ethics holds for writers such as Coetzee, who places himself in the eye of the storm – itself a liminal situation as it immediately conveys authorial involvement.

This technique also reminds one of the Y-structure suggested by Gallagher (2002:11-31) which she applies to texts that deal with time travel or, of more interest to us, alternative history. She argues that an alternative history, which she calls counterfactuality, exists and illustrates it with examples of time-travelling movies – where a person goes back in time in order to change the course of history in such a way that the present never happens. Instead of the commonly accepted time scheme of circular loops, she suggests a Y-scheme, in which the time traveller goes back to the point just before the splitting off into different directions. She calls such a plot “undoing”, noting that it might provide us with a plot type needed to identify past events whose alteration or undoing would lead to a substantially different present. She links this device to “our collective ambitions to undo certain events in our national past”. These attempts are closely associated with the consequences of past discrimination based on race and/or gender. She then explains that people are fascinated by the notion of regarding the future from the perspective of a *different* past. She mentions the example of Isaac Disraeli who published a “History of Events That Never Happened” in the early nineteenth century. To me this ties in with the human desire for choice, for imagining an alternative that may be more acceptable to our minds. Cattin's phrase (1999:15) is memorable: allowing for the possibility of a different scene is precisely what makes us human.

Worthington (1996:15) rightly comments that no writing can have direct correspondence with the past as it really was, but rather mediates and modulates the events of the past from a present interpretative moment. Palmer (2004: 110) claims that there seems to be a consensus among writers that memory is to be regarded as a container of possibilities in which the past is seen as actively causing, or generating, the present and the future. Searle (1992:187) defines memory as a mechanism for generating current performance, such as conscious thoughts and actions, based on past experience. In all cases the past is seen as actively causing,

or generating, the present and the future. This seems to me to reiterate what Coetzee successfully attempts to establish in his writings.

2.7.4 Embedded narrative

An embedded narrative is set within the frame of another narrative, and this process is capable of reverberating in an endless process of mirror images. Palmer (2004:185) explains that embedded narratives explore the relationship between individuals and the societies in which they live. Searle (1992:187) comments that the idea of memory as a mechanism is consistent with the conception of characters' minds as embedded narratives; both convey a sense of the causal process or relationship that exists between memories of the past, behaviour in the present, and plans for the future. The frequency with which this technique occurs in Coetzee's novels leads one to conclude that embedded narratives, doubly embedded narratives, reported narratives and any combination of the above are applied regularly in his fiction. While Palmer (2004:189) argues that applying the notion of embedded narratives to an entire novel will result in it then having to be "necessarily simplified", it is my contention that Coetzee applies the embedded narrative technique beyond the ways indicated by Palmer. This technique will be further examined in chapter 3. The technique is brilliantly applied by Sczurzek (2009) in an article on Coetzee in which she casts Eliza Coetzee as a fictional narrative voice, supposedly speaking from the inner circle of JM Coetzee's family.

Palmer's argument (2004:153) regarding the portrayal of the concept of fictional minds branches out to include the phenomenon of embedded narrative. In the sense that a narrator is always involved with the narrative, he can (consciously or unwittingly) influence the discourse of the characters. Palmer explains that this is because any utterance, regardless of how accurately reported, is still subject to certain semantic changes. The layers of interpretation compound when the utterance occurs in an intentionally embedded context. He nods towards Bakhtin's notion (1984) of the dialogic or polyphonic novel such as those by Dostoevsky that result from a plurality of autonomous voices of consciousness. Palmer argues (2004:175) that we are able to read a character's mind as an embedded narrative by applying the continuing-consciousness frame technique. Bakhtin's vision of the novel (1981) as a polyphony of independent voices is validated by embedded narratives. Palmer

(2004:187) explains the notion that meaning is always based on group life as stemming from Bakhtin's Russian Collectivist foundation.²⁰

Palmer's embedded narrative approach (2004:185) draws attention to the fact that narrative is in essence the presentation of fictional mental functioning. In summary it highlights the following aspects of fictional minds:

- the future (goals) and the past (memory) relate to the present (immediate consciousness, emotions and dispositions);
- the mind is an information-processing device that adapts to its environment by dealing with surprises;
- much of our mental functioning is public and social in nature;
- we make stories of our lives;
- a good deal of our mental functioning is counterfactual in nature;
- there is a network of causal mental events behind our actions, and many of the action descriptions in narrative discourse make the existence of this network clear;
- ascription has an important role to play in assessing the nature of this network, both as first-person and third-person ascription;
- the use of the word *embedded* stresses the situatedness of our mental functioning;
- the story world is aspectual: it is seen from the points of view of the characters in it, and is the amalgamation of the various story worlds of the characters' minds; and
- it is an open concept that stresses the wide variety of information, both public and private, that is available for the process of constructing fictional minds.

I regard the embedded narrative approach as laid out by Palmer as valuable for a number of reasons. It is a detailed, precise approach to the whole of a particular fictional mind that avoids the fragmentation of previous approaches. It views characters' minds not just in terms of the presentation of passive, private inner speech in the modes of direct or free indirect thought, but in terms of the narrator's

20 The similar notions of Bakhtin's voice and the dialogic approach to narrative are complementary and do not form the focus of this study.

positive role in presenting characters' social mental functioning, particularly in the mode of thought report. Also, it highlights the role of the reader, the process by which the reader constructs the plot by means of a series of provisional conjectures and hypotheses about the embedded narratives of characters.

Double embedded narrative is defined by Palmer (2004:231) as a character's mind within another character's mind. He cautions that it is possible to have a narrative of others that is more reliable than the narrative which one has of oneself. As in real life, characters continually attempt to reconstruct aspects of the minds of others by the process of third-person ascription, even if there is no suggestion or hint in the text that this is the case. Palmer (2004:233) suggests the terms intermental and intramental regarding double embedded narratives and explains the following applications:

- Individual thinking about another individual; one character speculating about the motives of another's actions in the context of that second character's whole mind.
- Individual thinking about a group – typically negative thoughts.
- A group thinking about an individual – typically rather negative; *fully double embedded narrative*: when the reader never meets a character directly, and he exists for the reader only through the doubly embedded narratives of other characters. Examples would be Friday, Cruso and Foe in *Foe*, Dwayne Blight and Blanka in *Slow Man*, as well as Alan in *Diary of a Bad Year*, as these characters only feature through the narrative descriptions of the narrator.
- A group thinking about another group – typically intermental thought.

2.7.5 Metafiction

Much, if not all of Coetzee's writing, can be classified as metafiction. Head (1997:112) regards *Foe* as Coetzee's most obviously metafictional novel. I agree that *Foe* is definitely metafictional in the sense of deploying so many embedded narratives; this will be discussed in more detail in chapter 3. However, since publishing *Foe*, Coetzee has in my opinion outdone his literary skills time and again. *Diary of a Bad Year* is precisely a diary – a daily account or journal of JC's efforts –

but then on a metafictional level also an account of his attempts to exert authority over his text. *Slow Man* can be regarded as a metaphorical account of the loss of a limb – which may be read metafictionally as indicative of the loss of identity experienced by expatriates on their removal from the mother country. As long as Coetzee continues to publish, it would be risky to declare any of his novels the ultimate example of metafiction.

2.7.6 Intertextuality

Coetzee's oeuvre consists of various texts that each contribute significantly to the whole. It would seem that throughout his oeuvre Coetzee has attempted to set up a structured and intertwined opus. Although *Waiting for the Barbarians* has echoes of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, it is with *Foe* that the issue of intertextuality was specifically foregrounded. Also, *The Master of Petersburg* plays on Dostoevsky, master of literature. The protagonist of Defoe's novel *Robinson Crusoe* is borrowed to serve as a survivor of a shipwreck, the person who initially rescues Barton and to whom she relates her life story. Cruso (as mentioned earlier, orthographically distinguished from Defoe's character) soon becomes dependent on Barton and fails to survive, leaving her as the sole source of his life history which she should relate to Foe, Coetzee's version of Defoe, the author, who is to set down her and Cruso's life story in what will, in future, be known as *Robinson Crusoe*. In *Elizabeth Costello*, the Lady Chandos letter which serves as postscript takes intertextuality one step further. Lady Elizabeth Chandos, a fictional elaboration of the historical Lord Chandos, serves as yet another frame in the novel. *Elizabeth Costello* also operates along these lines; although presented as a real historical figure, is fictional. The latter novel continues along the lines of the previously published *The Lives of Animals*, a series of eight lectures to be delivered by the fictional Costello, but also peopled by characters that are reminiscent of real persons. In *Slow Man* Costello pops up again, interfering and soliciting in Rayment's life, looking for a character to put in a novel. In *Diary of a Bad Year*, intertextuality is explored intentionally in the text itself, as Anya rewrites and interprets the text originally penned by JC. It would seem that Coetzee continually uses intertextuality as a strategy to involve the reader.

2.8 Summary

This chapter sets the parameters of this study by defining liminality as a condition commonly (but not exclusively) to be associated with postcolonialism. Although Gothic fiction, for example, would also include liminal spaces and even Joseph Conrad's description of Lord Jim's position hinges on the liminal, this study includes only the specified Coetzee texts, all of which are unequivocally postcolonial in topic and presentation. An overview of Coetzee's position in the postcolonial argument has been provided and key concepts have been discussed and clarified. We have indicated that the following liminal characters from novels by Coetzee illustrate different degrees of liminality: in *Foe*, Susan Barton, both as character and narrator; her daughter Susan; Friday; and Crusoe himself. In *Disgrace*: Lurie as well as Lucy and to a certain degree Petrus. In *Elizabeth Costello*: Costello herself as both character and narrator. In *Diary of a Bad Year*: Anya and JC/Señor C as well as Coetzee, the fictional author, and in *Slow Man*: Paul Rayment.

The following strategies are variously applied by Coetzee in his novels to offer oblique comments regarding liminality: phasing (including repetition, embedded and doubly embedded narrative, the use of the middle voice, aporia, palimpsest), allegory (diptych, synecdoche and anti-allegory), intertextuality and metafiction, including metaphors. We have set out the argument that Coetzee's use of liminal characters can be broadly clustered around writers, characters/narrators and the readers of the texts who exhibit various degrees of responsibility towards authorship of the texts. Using the various texts identified at the beginning of the study, these issues will be discussed more thoroughly in the following chapters.

In the next chapter the spotlight will fall on the role of the writer(s) in establishing liminality in the text.

Chapter 3 Liminality and the author(s)

3.1 The concept of the author

This chapter focuses on the role or position of the author in terms of the strategies that are employed to achieve or construct liminality in the text. The hypothesis is that the author cannot be excluded from the interpretation of a fictional text. Counter to Dovey's (1988:402) conviction that the author must assume the role of a dead man, the question here is whether the assumptions and attitudes that the author promotes in his approach to the text can be divorced from the ethical impact on the reader's experience. As far as the terms author and writer correspond, they are used as synonyms in this chapter. It is argued that author probably refers to the historic person who formulated and wrote down the text, although this could open up the possibility of there being more than one author. A writer could be defined as any entity who adds to the simple, original text, so that a text could be ascribed to one (historic) author but in almost all cases of Coetzee texts, to many writers. Not only narrators but also readers qualify to assume the role of writers with regard to a Coetzee text. One is reminded that there are many writers discernible in a Coetzee text that correlate with the presence of multiple voices. It is hardly possible to imagine any Coetzee text in terms of a single voice or narrator. Not only do we often encounter embedded narratives, multiple narrators, and different characters as focalisers, but authors also feature indirectly, echoing the theme of the kaleidoscopic fragmentation that is contextualised by the postcolonial. Almost all the texts examined in this study – *Foe*, *Diary of a Bad Year*, *Elizabeth Costello* and *Slow Man* – deploy multiple writers in various capacities.²¹

The logical conclusion of this observation would be that the author has a certain obligation or responsibility, not only to the textual world, but also to the concurrent reality of the reader. The focus formed by the reader's attention is closely related to the influence exerted by the writer, even overlapping at times, and while it is not entirely possible to isolate one from the other, this chapter attempts to focus more specifically on the role of the writer. The reader implicitly also assumes the role of

²¹ The realistic approach of *Disgrace* seems to exclude the possibility of multiple authors. As the only discernible author seems to be Coetzee, this text is omitted from this specific angle of examination.

writer in his reading and interpreting of a text. This chapter will therefore identify “author” in the following contexts:

- Coetzee as author in a metafictional sense as the constructor of the narrative;
- the manipulation of the narrator as authoritative agent;
- multiple voices;
- the implementation of literary devices such as irony, allegory, intertextuality; and
- the choice and responsibility of the writer as global term which includes narrator and reader.

*Slow Man*²² is the primary focus of our attention in this regard, although mention of other Coetzee texts will also be made as applicable.

3.2 Author and text

In a rare interview transcribed by McDonald (2010:496) after the award of the Nobel Prize in 2003, Coetzee admits that he would feel very uncomfortable if he were to be consulted as a sage with authoritative views on almost every moral issue of our times. From this statement it is possible to deduce that Coetzee in his personal capacity questions the notion that the writer has special authority or infallible status. Yet McDonald (2010:497) nevertheless insists on hailing Coetzee as a writer who attempts to transform the specific worldview or idioculture of his likely readership. The term idioculture broadly explains the influence of the holistic and individual experience of a reader in interpreting any text²³. Hereby McDonald acknowledges that writers do not write merely for aesthetic reasons but definitely with a view to shaping or influencing their readership’s opinion(s).

Although the kind of author defined in the argument above could broadly be described as “committed”, it is evident that even this approach to writing is open to a variety of stances. Helgesson (2004:14) discusses the opposing views of Coetzee and Nadine Gordimer regarding the status or nature of literature.

²² Coetzee, JM. 2006. *Slow Man*. London: Vintage. All subsequent references to *Slow Man* will be to this edition.

²³ The concept will be explained in more detail in chapter 5 under section 5.2.2.

It would seem that Coetzee and Gordimer manage the responsibility of the author very differently. Gordimer's position as described by Helgesson (2004:15) is that society has a right to lay claim to the author in as much as the author would honour his commitment to an artistic vision. He claims that Gordimer insists that this conflicting position (of being a writer but also more than a writer) can be balanced through writing and attaining reconciliation: It forces the writer to confront both aspects of this responsibility rather than to evade them. In short, Helgesson argues that to gain her freedom, Gordimer as writer believes in giving up her freedom.

Coetzee provocatively assumes the opposite stance; he refutes the demands of history which Gordimer wants to answer. In *Waiting for the Barbarians* Coetzee illustrates this point as he allows the magistrate to turn a blind eye while injustice instead of justice is served. Helgesson (2004:15) explains that comparing and contrasting the authors would typify Coetzee as the "rival" aesthetically-minded writer and Gordimer as the "supplementary" and politically responsible one. As Helgesson (2004:16) explains, Coetzee's rivalry with history elevates the novel, since the novel's autonomy is warranted by the existence of history and the fact that the "novel" presents a reality different from history. This reminds us of the argument that "self" and "other" mutually define one another, as much as by excluding one from, as including one in the other. I feel more comfortable to describe Gordimer as a *committed* writer while Coetzee may be deemed an *involved* writer. Coetzee does not preclude the direction that the reader chooses in taking up a stance but only indicates that the reader has a choice. Coetzee keeps outside history, refraining from explicit commentary and criticism, and maintains a subtle balance by highlighting history and simultaneously seducing the reader to accept responsibility. In fact, Coetzee and Gordimer seem to have little more in common than the Nobel Prize that was obviously awarded to each for very different reasons – arguably to Gordimer for the political content of her novels, and to Coetzee for his linguistic artistry.

Helgesson (2004:32) states that both Coetzee and Gordimer, albeit involuntarily, find themselves in a peculiarly precarious situation in which their very identity precludes or disqualifies each from being able to disassociate from being "white". Therefore ambivalence in Coetzee's resistant writing was present from the start and he still

persists in his efforts to subvert the status quo in his texts. Helgesson (2004:12-13) notes that Coetzee himself, undoubtedly aware of the ability of the author to assign literature either a rival or a supplementary role in history and historicity, declared in *Upstream* (Coetzee, 1988:3) that a novel occupying a rival or autonomous place would help to demythologise history. This implies that our history is ideologically affected and in order to neutralise this, it is necessary to also include personal histories to supplement documented reality.

Helgesson (2004:13) admits that Coetzee is not indifferent to the matter of choice – he definitely advocates the rival view as opposed to the supplementary. Although this means that he grants the writer the capacity to choose between two alternatives, it is “an implied, heavily qualified form of agency”. This places a high premium on the responsibility bestowed upon the reader as interpreter, unlike the largely prescriptive stance assumed by traditionally committed authors.

3.3 Authorial voices

Helgesson (2004:16) comments that Coetzee seems critical of much “black” writing of the 1980s, but “it is understated; his argument is held in abstract terms and makes few explicit claims on its own behalf”. As noted previously, this is the root of much of the criticism against Coetzee – he does not persuade or influence his readers in any direction; he merely questions. Helgesson (2004:20) explains the difference between “history” (factual) and “writing” (interpretive) in which “historicity” involves a shift in focus from history *per se* to the *effects* of history. The effect of the past on the present and even the future is perhaps what is most often considered in postcolonial and especially liminal texts. Coetzee attempts to alter history by indicating the problem to the reader and then leaving him to resolve it, instead of making accusations like the typical committed author. This ties up with the notion of suggesting an alternative history, or counterfactuality, and possibly erasing the damage of the past.

The above argument extends to include Gallagher’s concept of “undoing” – fashioning a counterfactual world in which the wrongs and sins of the historical past are erased by constructing an alternative world. It would seem that Coetzee entertains this option in *Elizabeth Costello*, *Slow Man* and *Diary of a Bad Year*. In

Slow Man, Rayment is acutely aware of the different routes he has available to him in his life. If he could have gone backwards in time before the accident on Magill Road, he would have made different choices. But then he is rather bluntly reminded by the visiting character Costello that he is not free to choose his own life (Coetzee, 2006:89), just as she is not free to choose an author for her story but must exist as a figment of the author's imagination. The nearly infinite repetition of embedded narratives contributes to make *Slow Man* a very complex work of fiction. This is illustrated by the many instances of aporia in the novel. For example, things could have gone differently for Rayment during his accident on Magill Road. If Marijana had been a different person and accepted him into her life he would indeed have been able to live a different life – possibly even as “father” to “these excellent children” (Coetzee, 2006:72). If Rayment and the blind substitute girl Marianna had been able to accommodate each other's disability, they could have found a new life with one another. If Costello had approached him differently it might have been possible for him to continue having her in his life. All of these possibilities exist, and yet the author premeditated the direction of the novel differently.

The result of writing is the generation of meaning when the narrative emerges, but this can only be effected by a reader who functions from a suitable distance in time. Helgesson (2004:21-22) argues that the act of writing is semi-autonomous, which implies that the reader must invest writing itself (and his reading of it) with a measure of agency. A reader's first loyalty is to the text, regardless of whether or not it contradicts what a writer says about his work. Such a position does not simply sever the ties between writer and writing, thus disabling the writer's agency, but rather indicates a relationship of mediated authority between writer and the written text. Baker (2005:39) cautions, though, that this movement is not simplistic and uncomplicated. Thus, the writer may mobilise writing as a mode of agency that symbolically challenges, negates or deconstructs history, while the text in question, conversely, may indicate how the act of writing is pressured, conditioned and enabled by an on-going historical process.

Helgesson (2004:22) explains that writing is not a fixed and objective but rather a performative mode that enables history and fiction to clash, allowing the formal qualities of written narrative (such as irony, self-reflexivity, the representation of

multiple subjectivities, the suspension and contraction of time) to momentarily displace the daunting imperatives of the historical process. Helgesson (2004:21) claims that history determines the writer's writing, but that the writer attempts, through writing, to be free. In summary, then, fiction and history may be regarded as offering opposing versions of the past, because history contains a particular version of reality, while postmodern fiction entails variations on a theme – a (hi)story of possibilities.

In addition, Helgesson (2004:22) comments, the critic must distinguish between the private realm of a writer and his public position. The way in which he interacts with society and the public domain may legitimately be included in what Said called the 'worldliness' of a particular text, as the manner in which the writer addresses his concurrent moment in time will echo in the text, as will the way in which the writer would wish to change it. In other words, how does the author formulate and define his ethical responsibilities towards history, real or virtual? Graham (2006:218) indicates the necessity of keeping the author as "site of origin" of a text distinct from his private existence.

3.4 Coetzee and ethics

Particularly in the postcolonial world there is a growing interest in ethics. I would venture to link this with the inherent qualities of the liminal status experienced in literature. Fahraeus (2005:7) explains that the growing concern amongst writers, readers and critics with forms of repression and usurpation proves this interest. Ethics, defined as the moral principles governing behaviour, is contextualised by a heavy concern with discussions of power, of voice or agency, in textual discussions of the effects of presence/absence, and aporias. All of these aspects are considered by the writer in *Slow Man*.

Fahraeus (2005:8) discusses that 'good' seems to be an essential quality of the literature that we deem fit for studying. She mentions Eaglestone (1997:1), who queried whether criticism should have ethical obligations. Eaglestone admits that ethics, having been central to the inception of criticism, has all but disappeared in the wake of modernist and postmodernist theory, echoing Baker's concern that Coetzee is one of only a few writers who seem to ascribe to writing on the level of ethical

responsibility. As mentioned earlier, Fahraeus (2005:9) reminds us that the concern with the ethicality of interpretation is a meta-critical concern and warns that many critics regard it as a secondary concern in the relationship between ethics and texts. It is probably impossible for the reader to ignore this concern in Coetzee. It therefore follows logically that Coetzee, as first writer, constructed his texts intentionally with a view to raise the ethical responsibility of his readership.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines ethics as “the branch of philosophy that deals with moral principles” (2007:498). According to Fahraeus (2005:7), ethics as a field of literary interest is especially involved with four basic concerns: the overall ethics of reading, the ethics of writing, how a text promotes/contributes to positive ethics, and how ethics is operative in a text. Fahraeus (2005:8) defines modern ethical criticism as the explicit concern with the relationship between ethics and texts.

Baker (2005: 27) draws attention to the following utterance in *The Lives of Animals* (1999:35): “There is no limit to the extent to which we can think ourselves into the being of another. There are no bounds to the sympathetic imagination.” The presumption is that these words can be attributed to Coetzee as author of the text. Yet in *Disgrace* Coetzee paradoxically adopts the opposite stance, which seems to suggest that the affective aim of Coetzee’s fiction is to reverberate in the global discussion of the public role of the intellectual or writer. The paradox here is that Coetzee draws attention to the unlimited range of sympathy whilst presenting his text in the most frugal manner: sparse, sober and devoid of any sentimentality.

The role of intellectual or authorial influence that Coetzee seems to suggest is that the author at this elemental level comes into existence by being constructed through the agency of the reader. In the case of *Slow Man*, as in other texts, Elizabeth Costello must not only read herself through the eyes of others, but write herself as well, and construct her own self through the other. Baker (2005:39) explains that Costello maintains in *Lives of Animals* that one’s own literary imagination can serve as a means of cultivating or realising sympathy with oneself and may even breed sympathy in others/readers. Baker (2005:39) remarks that the kind of fiction-writing which opens the limitless sympathetic imagination begins with the real, practical physicality of the human body and the damage it may sustain – strongly suggestive

of the rape metaphor in *Disgrace*. If one is willing to regard the physical damage sustained by Rayment during the accident that cost him his mobility as a (marginally less barbaric) continuation of the rape metaphor, this theme echoes throughout *Slow Man*. The less than flattering descriptions of Costello as an elderly and “decaying” person confirm the suspected subjection to mortality, both in *Slow Man* and *Elizabeth Costello*. She is described as frail, having a bad cough that worsens (Coetzee, 2006:181, 226), suffering from a heart condition (Coetzee, 2006:189), a “foul hag” with lifeless hair (Coetzee, 2006:237).

When the reader tunes his ear to it, the fictive narrative voice of Elizabeth Curren from another Coetzee text, *Age of Iron*, and Elizabeth Costello in the eponymous novel speak in unison, and Coetzee’s sympathetic approach to the writer’s intellectual endeavour and fictive imagination becomes more distinct. Coetzee has famously disavowed that social progress or effecting change is his role at all, and yet this seems to be the intrinsic result of his fictions. Baker (2005:40) admits that neither *The Lives of Animals* nor *Age of Iron* seems to provide optimistic outcomes: at the conclusion of both works, it is unclear that any change in the real world has come about. However, since Baker’s observation, time has passed and it is my contention that Coetzee’s work has evolved towards the subtle admission of hints regarding the notion of growth, especially in *Slow Man* and *Diary of a Bad Year*.

In a subjective but informative piece entitled “The Ethics of Reading” (2008), Brooks convincingly defends the notion that “teaching to read literature ... can be an ethical act” (2008:5). It is no coincidence that Brooks’s article bears the same title as Hillis Miller’s influential 1985 work on literary criticism. McDonald (2010) uses Brooks’s article as the basis for a discussion of the renewed combined attempt by scholars and critics to conduct an ethical discovery regarding the generation of meaning in texts and how language works (2010:484). Brooks advocates a renewed attempt *not* to read “at face value”, according to McDonald (2010:485). Brooks’s argument continues by commenting on the Al Qaeda passage in *Diary of a Bad Year* which is presented as the seventh “Strong Opinion” by the evasive author JC. McDonald (2010:485) comments that Brooks’s response to JC’s response to the documentary’s response to the prosecution’s response to the video “was itself multilayered”, emphasising the fact that the novel itself also presents multiple layers to the reader.

The act of reading challenges and changes the autonomy of the world as it was prior to the act of reading. Therefore reading itself constitutes a subversive activity as it unsettles the significance of the *status quo ante*.

An ethics of reading focuses on, and departs from, the very real context of a reader situated in time and space. This is in short what Miller, Brooks and McDonald mentioned above, warn against as a method of investigation which may otherwise remain vague and unhelpful. To me, this is precisely what we mean by exacting responsibility from the reader. While McDonald (2010:489) goes to great lengths to discuss Lévinas's distinction between politics and reading, he finally concludes that the distinction seems not to figure sufficiently in Derrida's thinking (2010:488, footnote 4). Miller (1985:4) reiterates that although the situatedness of the reader branches out to involve many contexts, it begins with and returns to the reader.

A reader of literature may be tempted by a sense of guilt to replace literature with history, politics, or the class struggle. The latter are suggested as more realistic and as such, worthier of study than novels and poems, which are deemed trivial and unconnected to real life by critics who oppose Lévinas, Miller and others. McDonald justly remarks that by directing attention away from the politics of interpretation towards the ethics of reading, Miller has made it possible to focus on the question of literature once again. McDonald's (2010:489) criticism constitutes the argument that all ethical readers seem to be de-contextualised, disembodied or scattered as they are situated outside of history. In conclusion, McDonald is not convinced by Miller's argument that ethics is a superior alternative to politics, but I would disagree with him.

One of the issues that Coetzee confronts the reader with is Rayment's deep regret regarding his childlessness. As Rayment's anguish over his inconclusive life is portrayed the reader must of necessity consider the same issue:

He used to think it made sense: in an overpopulated world, childlessness was surely a virtue, like peaceableness, like forbearance. Now, on the contrary, childlessness looks to him like madness, a herd madness, even a sin. What

greater good can there be than more life, more souls? How will heaven be filled if the earth ceases to send its cargoes? (Coetzee, 2006:34).

This theme continues in Rayment's thoughts and develops to the point where he admits "... the son he does not have is the one he truly misses...unimaginable perhaps, but the unimaginable is there to be imagined" (Coetzee, 2006:44). The point here, Coetzee seems to suggest, is that if something can be imagined, it may be brought into existence merely by its being imagined. The argument itself can be regarded as deconstructionist, as Rayment is described as missing something that he never had, but the fact that he misses the unknown defines the very thing that he cannot define, which in turn defines that which cannot be defined.

3.5 *Slow Man* and literary strategies

The protagonist of *Slow Man* is an ageing Australian photographer, living quietly on his own in Melbourne, when a near-fatal bicycle accident literally turns his life upside down. He is Paul Rayment, a given name not without allusive meaning, as he himself identifies with and compares himself to the apostle Paul of the Bible. He reckons that standing at the gates of heaven, it will be Paul rather than Peter who will welcome him there – "When he arrives at the gate, St Paul (for other new souls it may be Peter but for him it will be Paul) will be waiting" (Coetzee, 2006:34). The rhetorical question probably at the back of the reader's mind could be why an exception should be made for Rayment so that specifically St Paul will be waiting to usher him in. It could be the common bond of their names that predisposes Rayment to an affinity for St Paul. Alternatively, the suggestion could be that the original meaning of the name Peter as a "rock" of stability renders him an inappropriate host for someone as dissimilar to a rock as Rayment. His surname bears semblance to the archaic Middle English literary word *raiment*,²⁴ also known in French, which means clothing. To me it suggests the embodiment of a fragile individual, a tiny little fragment (*ray*), often associated with a positive influence such as *ray of sunshine* or *ray of hope*, as opposed to the desperate and anonymous masses. Paul Rayment's name predisposes him, therefore, to be an individual, a lonely figure against the overwhelming odds of fate, his encroaching age and his solitude. The character Wayne Dwight has a very vague and generic name, which may equally easily have

²⁴ South African Concise Oxford Dictionary, 2002. 10th edition. Cape Town: Oxford University Press. p965.

been Wayne Bright or Dwayne Blight, and which is indeed often thereafter incorrectly cited by Rayment (Coetzee, 2006:21, 69, 81). He is the archetypal embodiment of the anti-hero, the young and reckless driver who brutally knocks down the philanthropic Rayment and causes him to lose his leg, his freedom of movement as well as, symbolically, his independence. On a metaphorical level it is possible to read the trauma of Rayment's loss of a limb as Coetzee's loss of his fatherland when he emigrated to Australia, as the events seem to echo on different textual levels. When Elizabeth Costello is introduced in chapter 13 of *Slow Man*, Rayment, who vaguely recalls prior knowledge of such a person but who has never made her personal acquaintance before, feels personally affronted by her mentioning that her bad heart is not "nearly as much of an impediment as a bad leg" (Coetzee, 2006:80). He probably feels offended because of Costello's dismissal regarding his pain and suffering and that they have not been duly acknowledged.

Although Wayne Dwight has a profound impact on Rayment's life, he is mentioned only perfunctorily and never becomes a complete character. At any rate, he is not credited with growing insight and awareness of the influence his actions have had on another person's life; he merely shrugs it off and gratefully flees the room after coming to see Rayment in the hospital after the amputation:

So the puzzle resolves itself. Wayne is waiting for a signal, and he wants Wayne out of his life. 'Good of you to come, lad,' he says, 'but I have a headache and I need to sleep. So goodbye' (Coetzee, 2006:21).

On the long and painful route to recovery after the amputation of his leg, Rayment begins to interpret his losses in this world as stretching beyond the physical loss of his leg. The fact that he has no close relatives, no wife or children, suddenly seems like a major *lacuna* in his existence. He longs for the son he never sired, especially now that such a son could have looked after him in his frailty. He even invents wildly unrealistic schemes to procure a son, and later on in the novel subconsciously desires Drago Jokić to embody such a role – a subconsciously intuitive scheme which turns out to be very disappointing, to say the least.

It is customary in Australia to have health care professionals drop in at a patient's house to monitor his progress, especially after such a profoundly traumatic experience as an amputation. Rayment finds this personal contact demeaning and degrading, especially as the succession of nurses seems increasingly unsuitable. Finally he obtains the services of Marijana Jokić, who not only attends to his infirmity and performs household duties such as shopping, cooking and cleaning, but also ministers to his deeper emotional needs. Her name is also rich with suggestion, as the popular drug *marijuana* immediately comes to mind. Indeed, Rayment becomes as addicted to his "day help" (Coetzee, 2006:57) as to a drug. It is also possible to link her name with the symbolic significance of Mary/Maria, the mother of Jesus of Nazareth, and as such the archetypal caring mother figure.

Indeed, Rayment is so infatuated with her that she increasingly seems to drug his sense of realistic propriety and decency. After Marijana's absence from work that provides the gap for Costello to enter Rayment's apartment and life, he finds himself "drunk with the pleasure of having her back" (Coetzee, 2006:93). Rayment is so obsessed with her strong physique that he, after some deliberation with himself, proposes a deal to her in which he will sponsor her son Drago's education at an expensive college (which the Jokićs as Balkan immigrants cannot afford) and in a certain sense imposes himself on their family as a kind of benefactor-cum-grandfather. Here Coetzee's acrid humour surfaces when Rayment describes himself as "...a godfather: one who leads a child to God. Does he have it in him to lead Drago to God?" (Coetzee, 2006:92). It is evident, however, that Rayment has no intention whatsoever of leading a religious life.

Rather, he definitely plans on supplanting Marijana's husband Miroslav Jokić, whom he regards as an irritating obstacle preventing him (Rayment) from becoming the substitutive *paterfamilias* of the Jokić family. In this sense Rayment fantasises about usurpation and in himself constitutes a threat to the "original/ real". It is interesting that the theme of copy/original echoes throughout the pages of the novel in many different ways: Rayment wants to supplant Jokić; Marianna must replace Marijana; Costello needs a character in her novel with enough juicy and unsuitable passion to misbehave; love becomes confused with physical attraction (Coetzee, 2006:63); Drago and friends graft their faces on the historical photograph. All are echoed by

Rayment's yearning for the son he never had: the one that he believes can be brought into being by mere imagination.

The suggestion here is that Rayment presses the argument regarding the inheritance of attributes from a father to a son. Just as the two are bound by likeness of blood and genes, a photocopy (or a photoshopped picture) carries within it the seeds of the original. Discerning between original and copy becomes increasingly complex and contested.

Along the way Marijana starts to distrust Rayment's *bona fides* and tries to disentangle her and her family from his grip. This is easily enough done except for Drago who, having temporarily moved in with Rayment after a tussle with his father Miroslav, borrows one of Rayment's most valuable historic photographs. Drago and his friends tamper with the photograph, substituting the original faces for their own and thus in a very graphic sense, changing the face of Australian history – (re)creating the Australian forebears and historical roots which Drago, an immigrant like Rayment, has to do without.

As an immigrant with no specific history, Rayment, a Dutch boy with a French stepfather, brought to Australia, is adopted by the Australian system. Although he shares in the social and structural welfare, he does not feel totally assimilated by the Australian people. Coetzee as first author definitely planned his protagonist as a cosmopolitan citizen in order to erase the restrictive national identity – a situation of imprecision that is experienced, possibly, in the liminal world. Rayment is intensely aware of his total isolation from others, as he has no family (Coetzee, 2006:9, 43). He asks Marijana,

You mean, where are the castles and cathedrals? Don't immigrants have a history of their own? Do you cease to have a history when you move from one point of the globe to another? (Coetzee, 2006:49).

In this sense Rayment and the Jokićs are in similar situations. Yet, how Rayment intends to address the fact that there is nobody to care for him (Coetzee, 2006:43) –

engrossing himself in the Jokić household – is different from the strong family ties honoured by the Jokićs.

3.5.1 Aporia

As defined in chapter 2²⁵, aporias are certain points in the novel that provide entrance to alternative outcomes. One such is when Rayment imagines what his life would have been like without the interference of Elizabeth Costello: “For there is an alternative story, one that he finds all too easy to make up for himself” (Coetzee, 2006:115). This is a crucial point, because it indicates how different characters take on authorship for their own lives. In the final event, they all have choices – which entail concomitant responsibilities. He muses that, contracted for the role by Costello, Marianna-Natasha-Tanya may even be wearing the dark glasses to hide the fact that she is *not* blind – a suspicion that Rayment finds growing inside him, giving rise to the *pseudo caeca* status that he attributes to her. In short, he laments the intrusion of Costello into his life and implores the possibility of a different existence; the ‘ideal’ but also possibly ‘real’ one that could have occurred without Costello. Ironically, he imposes himself on a family when he resents Costello doing the same to him! He recalls the accident that took his leg, moaning “I want my old life back, the one that came to an end on Magill Road” (Coetzee, 2006:123). A major aporia occurs when he suspects

... there is a second world that exists side by side with the first, unsuspected. One chugs along in the first for a certain length of time; then the angel of death arrives in the person of Wayne Blight or someone like him. For an instant, an aeon, time stops, one tumbles down a dark hole. Then, hey presto, one emerges into a second world *identical with the first*, where time resumes and the action proceeds ... (Coetzee, 2006:122; italics in the original).

3.5.2 Phasing

The technique of phasing slows down the narrative by breaking up the action at axial points. Coetzee cleverly applies this technique in *Slow Man*. It functions to retard the action but also to build up tension, as any conclusion is postponed and sometimes repeatedly so. When Rayment has mustered up his courage to tell Marijana that he

²⁵ Refer to 2.7.3 *Aporia* for the interpretation given to this term by this study.

is in love with her, phasing occurs in the form of a cameo memoir about Rayment's childhood and his mother (Coetzee, 2006:76). Then chapter 12 ends inconclusively with the reader having to guess Marijana's reaction to Rayment's offer. The suspense is maintained until well into chapter 14, when Marijana nonchalantly returns to the job, suddenly eager to take up Rayment's offer of sending Drago off to a college – without so much as a hint at the underlying tension that Rayment experienced (Coetzee, 2006:90). Earlier in the novel, mention is made of Drago listening to Rayment's words to discern the intention behind them (Coetzee, 2006:70); yet now Marijana seems oblivious to the intention behind Rayment's words, and he fumbles around clumsily, unable to verbalise his thoughts.

Another incidence of phasing occurs in the anecdote about the needle travelling up the veins of a woman until it reaches her heart and pierces it (Coetzee, 2006:55). Although Rayment himself is at a loss as to the significance of this memory, it is nevertheless disclosed in the novel, and therefore must be considered as significant, having a deeper meaning for the novel as a whole. Rayment muses whether he should tell it to Ljuba as a cautionary tale about sharp objects, then decides to refrain. It is ironic to realise that although the story is never revealed to Ljuba, denying the story the benefit of being heard, it is nevertheless accounted for in print and, by implication, read by the implied reader. Costello notes to Rayment that stories invariably come to some conclusion:

Nothing that happens in our lives is without a meaning, Paul, as any child can tell you. That is one of the lessons stories teach us, one of the many lessons. Have you given up reading stories? A mistake. You shouldn't (Coetzee, 2006:96).

Quite a few stories are recalled by Rayment during the course of the novel. In an attempt to comprehend Marijana's lack of reaction to his confession of love, Rayment recalls how his mother had read the sentimental *Librairie Hachette* novels (Coetzee, 2006:76). Rayment himself remembers trying to read one of Costello's novels (Coetzee, 2006:82) but then losing interest. Once again, with Costello in a very ambiguous phrase "composing herself" in his study, he tries to concentrate on a book to no avail (Coetzee, 2006:84). When Costello seems to know too much about

Rayment, he suspects her of reading a diary of his, which he admits he doesn't keep (Coetzee, 2006:97), being more attracted to photos than to written records. In truth she comments about her uncanny insight into Rayment's privacy: "Don't dissemble, Paul, I can read you like a book," (Coetzee, 2006:101) and "Don't deny it, it is written on your face, plain for all to see" (Coetzee, 2006:99).

One of several phasing episodes is the tale of Sinbad and the old man, related to Rayment by Costello (Coetzee, 2006:128). This is followed by the recollection of the Golden Legends in his childhood and the legend of Narcissus (Coetzee, 2006:163), apparently to contrast with Drago, who is described as being "too handsome, too luminous" (Coetzee, 2006:87); "one with the air of the gods about him" (Coetzee, 2006:89; 69). In addition, Rayment comments on feeling "unstrung" like the hero in Homer (Coetzee, 2006:160), layering the atmosphere with lore and legend. Further mention of fairy tales is made (Coetzee, 2006:237) when Rayment comments that this should have been the moment that the hag turns into a lovely princess, and yet she doesn't. This evidence of intertextuality serves to expand the interpretation of characters and readers, proving the influence of idioculture on creating an individual experience for every reader.

The role played by love in the relationship between Miroslav and Marijana Jokić is interesting. Miroslav, in Australia diminished to an auto repairman, was in another context a "famous man", celebrated in Croatia for his ability to technically resuscitate from the past a valuable mechanical duck (Coetzee, 2006:86, 91). Marijana is "an educated woman" with a diploma in art restoration. Once again the echoes reverberate, because Marijana has an uncanny ability to nurse – to restore to life, which is one of the qualities that Rayment so adores in her. Costello explains to him that the reason why he finds Marijana so attractive is because "she is bursting because she is loved. Loved as much as one can expect to be in this world" (Coetzee, 2006:87). It is ironic that Rayment desires to replace Miroslav because he claims to feel old-fashioned love for Marijana (Coetzee, 2006:94); something that is obviously already there in the Jokić household. This brings a resounding echo to the theme of usurping or replacing the original by a copy, and the concomitant tussle for authenticity.

The theme of finding and experiencing different kinds of love is further developed throughout the novel. This fact of expansion seems to drive home the idea of repetitive/embedded narratives, emphasising the possibility of copies and imitations of themes. The act of sexual love between Rayment and Marianna is stripped so bare as to become a physical experiment in copulation, an experience that reminds Rayment distinctly of animal instincts: not only is it performed anonymously between an unseen and unseeing couple, it must also be executed in absolute silence (Coetzee, 2006:106). Also, Costello admonishes Rayment “whatever you get up to, get up to it in the dark. As a kindness to her” (Coetzee, 2006:98). Rayment questions the validity of the experiment to which he feels that Costello is subjecting him and the blind Marianna:

Did Costello really believe that a few minutes of inflamed physical congress could like a gas expand to fill up a whole night? Did she believe she could throw two strangers together, neither of them young, one positively old, old and cold, and expect them to behave like Romeo and Juliet? How naïve! And she a noted literary artist too! (Coetzee, 2006:113).

3.5.3 Embedded narrative

Authorial intrusion in the novel is cleverly effected by embedded narratives. The novel follows the interference into Rayment’s life by the almost supernatural figure Elizabeth Costello. She appears, as if by magic, from nowhere (the extra-textual world) and enters his life unsolicited, gradually entwining the persons near and dear to him in her grasp, turning them into characters featured in her novels. In this way she reduces them from being “real-life” people, substituting their lives for that of being characters, totally at the mercy of the whim of their author. This constitutes an embedded narrative, as the people in Rayment’s life are in the first place the figments of the author’s (= JM Coetzee’s) imagination, who exist in the novel as *people* in Rayment’s eyes, and whom Costello tries to kidnap as *characters* for her novels, very much as she tries to coax Rayment into acquiescing to her authority over his actions, which he resists. In the same way that it was previously argued that Rayment’s amputated leg alludes to the loss of his fatherland, this constitutes a metafictional paralleling of the struggle for authority over the plot, the text, and authorship of the text itself.

“Is this woman privy to something that he is not?” (Coetzee, 2006:83) Rayment thinks, subtly nudging the reader into accepting the authorial intrusion engendered by Costello but also by Coetzee. Rayment protests that

It is as if she is reading his diary. It is as if he kept a diary, and this woman crept nightly into the flat and read his secrets. But there is no diary, unless he writes in his sleep (Coetzee, 2006:97).

Although Rayment tolerates her presence in his flat and his life, he insists on calling her not a friend or acquaintance but “an associate” (Coetzee, 2006:93). Costello maintains she is on a mission but never confesses by what authority she has made her appearance in Coetzee’s text *Slow Man* and in Rayment’s life. She merely hints: “like it or not, I am going to be with you a while yet.” And when Rayment protests, she replies, “You must put up with it. It is not for you to say” (Coetzee, 2006:87). When Rayment objects to her interference with his “unsuitable passion”, she “gives a wintry smile, shakes her head. ‘It is not for you to tell me my business,’ she replies softly” (Coetzee, 2006:89). Rayment comments to the blind (substitute) Marianna that they have a mutual friend: “The first impulse. She issues instructions, we follow. Even when there is no one to see that we obey” (Coetzee, 2006:111). The implication is that reader and author are caught in a reciprocal relationship. Just as the author is sovereign and the reader cannot prescribe to him, the reader too should be granted the autonomy of choice on which the author should not impose.

3.5.4 Authorial intrusion

Costello is figured by Coetzee as a very astute vehicle for his authorial intrusion. In her presence the battle for authority over the text becomes metafictional to the bone. If she is a writer, she indeed seems to have a claim to authority over the fictional text that she is in the process of constructing, but then she is only a writer living by the grace or whim of Coetzee, the first writer. Rayment’s unwillingness to submit to her unsolicited interference in his life is metafictionally conveyed in the hints that she is tired out and ready to fade into forgetfulness – a forgotten figment of the imagination: “The tiredness that I refer to has become part of my being” (Coetzee, 2006:160). When Costello refers to Homer, drawing on extratextual proof of her historicity, she implies that she knows enough about Rayment to remember that he is familiar with her allusion (Coetzee, 2006:160).

Rayment refuses to refer to Costello as a friend when he speaks to Marijana, insisting that she is “an associate” (Coetzee, 2006:93). Costello professes that she is forced to “sleep under the bushes” while she is “killing time, being killed by time, waiting.” (Coetzee, 2006:203). The ironic deduction is that both Rayment and Costello are puppets, characters staged in the author’s conceptualisation. In this sense, Rayment can protest innocence, because his infatuation with Marijana is something not willed by him but by a strange external force: “Forgive me too! I mean no harm, I am in the grip of a force beyond me!” (Coetzee, 2006:125). This same ‘external force’ – the heterodiegetic narrator – comments that Rayment waits for Marijana to criticise her husband: “He waits for more, but there is no more” (Coetzee, 2006:74).

Costello’s audacious entrance into Rayment’s life is tolerated, although at times with growing impatience. She tells him that she did not choose him (as subject):

I’m sorry. I am intruding, I know. You came to me, that is all I can say. You occurred to me – a man with a bad leg and no future and an unsuitable passion. That was where it started. Where we go to from here I have no idea (Coetzee, 2006:85).

This quote clearly suggests that the character or the reader is responsible for creating his own future. It cannot be forcibly imposed on the reader or the character by the author.

She also makes it clear that she has always been conducting her life in this way, acting on intuition:

“You may not see the point of it, Mr Rayment, the pursuit of intuitions, but this is what I do. This is how I have built my life: by following up intuitions, including those that I cannot at first make sense of. Above all those I cannot at first make sense of” (Coetzee, 2006:85).

Like a reporter onto a lead for a story, via Rayment's questioning, "Am I to infer ... that you have come knocking on my door in order to study me so that you can put me in a book?" (Coetzee, 2006:88) the reader is coaxed into accepting that Costello is more than just an interesting intertextual device: she is more like a metaphor for the creative writing process. Yet the feeling is created that being "put in a book" would curb the creative process and inhibit any further spontaneous actions. Through the act of reading, the reader holds the key to unlock the creativity of the character and therefore becomes the author in the process.

Authorial intrusion is also effected by the technique of aporias. Seating herself on his couch in his flat, Costello "explains herself" to Rayment by speaking in riddles. She quotes from the opening lines of *Slow Man*, from the very novel in which they both find themselves cast as characters and creatures of the imagination. This in itself would be puzzling to explain, and no explanation is offered. Instead, both Rayment and the reader are tricked into complicit comprehension, being as it were witnesses with prior knowledge of these words – the reader through having read these pages, and Rayment through having experienced the accident on Magill Road, fabricated and confabulated by the invisible but omnidiegetic narrator/author. Costello answers Rayment why she should be interested in him by deflecting the question: "You came to me," she says. 'In certain respects I am not in command of what comes to me,' (Coetzee, 2006:81). She elaborates on this by saying that she chanced upon Marianna as substitute for Marijana in the same way:

'She came to me as you came to me,' says Costello. 'A woman of darkness, a woman in darkness. *Take up the story of such a one: words in my sleeping ear, spoken by what in the old days we would have called an angel calling out to me in a wrestling match*' (Coetzee, 2006:115, his italics).

The subtle hint at authorial intrusion compares it to inspiration, the muse of old. This theme is elaborated on when Rayment starts to wonder whether he or the blind Marianna is the "passing character" and with whose life story Costello is truly engrossed (Coetzee, 2006:118):

Or might the Costello woman be writing two stories at once, stories about characters who suffer a loss (sight in the one case, ambulation in the other)

which they must learn to live with; and, as an experiment or even as a kind of professional joke, might she have arranged for their two life-lines to intersect? He has no experience of novelists and how they go about their business, but it sounds not implausible (Coetzee, 2006:118).

The ever so slight mention of “arranging” their lifelines to intersect suggests the existence of an extratextual controlling force, whether it be the author or the gods, creating an embedded narrative.

As Costello continues to offer unsolicited advice to Rayment, he becomes increasingly irritated by her interference in his existence. During an argument on the topic of control, the following conversation occurs:

Costello smiles a secretive smile. ‘Perhaps I am already there,’ [sitting on top of Rayment’s shoulders figuratively and controlling his every move] she says, ‘and you do not know it.’ ‘No, you are not, Mrs Costello. I am not under your control, not in any sense of the word, and I am going to prove it. I request you to kindly return my key – a key you took without my permission – and leave my flat and not come back’ (Coetzee, 2006:129).

After some time she explains to Rayment:

It does not have to be this way, Paul. I say it again: this is your story, not mine. The moment you decide to take charge, I will fade away. You will hear no more from me; it will be as if I had never existed (Coetzee, 2006:100).

As most of Coetzee’s writing testifies, these words are indeed ironic if not self-refuting. When a resentful Rayment finally musters up enough force to fling her out of his flat, she insidiously tries to leave “a small suitcase” (Coetzee, 2006:130), just enough to keep a foot in the door of his life, and, sure enough, after no more than two pages, she re-enters along with Drago.

In the intercourse with Marianna episode, Rayment is acutely aware of them being on the stage or on show:

'If you would sing, that would be best of all,' he says. 'We are on stage, in a certain sense, even if we are not being watched.' *Even if we are not being watched.* But in a certain sense they are being watched, he is sure of that, on the back of his neck he can feel it (Coetzee, 2006:103; italics in the original).

Rayment, in an attempt to set himself and the largely unidentified/ unidentifiable Marianna at ease, clumsily concludes, "There is no need ... for us to adhere to any script. No need to do anything we do not wish. We are free agents" (Coetzee, 2006:105). As so often, the reader realises that these words are false. The image of the stage is repeated when Costello, unable to ask Marijana's opinion regarding the affair with Rayment, remarks, "[she] is not available. She is not on stage, so to speak" (Coetzee, 2006:140).

In the final paragraph of the novel, Rayment rejects Costello's offer of combining what they have left of their lives and kisses her goodbye "in the formal manner he was taught as a child: left right left" (Coetzee, 2006:263). The ending is open and may be regarded as inconclusive, in much the same way that the novel has applied aporia as a strategy to indicate repetition with the added possibility of change. It is possible for the reader to choose to regard it as a new beginning for Rayment: he is portrayed in a phase of his life in which he ostensibly starts to take control, to take charge, as a result of which he will be free of Costello's interference as she had promised.

However, Baker (2005:46) comments that the complications and suffering of harshly lived experience in Coetzee's latest novels deny their readers the validation of a fantastical solution. It is impossible to preclude that this constitutes an exclusively happy ending; on the contrary, the liminal state of possibility is left hanging for the reader to authorise.

How does Coetzee involve the reader in this very intricate process of establishing liminality in this text? Very subtly, almost undetected, except for tiny hints that there may be a greater force at work. This is illustrated by furtive comments or hints of an authorial voice, slipped into the narrative as casually as only a truly great storyteller could. An excerpt from the *Observer's* review, reprinted on the inside front cover of

the Vintage 2006 edition, tellingly remarks that Coetzee's "attention [is] always revealing a great deal more of his characters' intentions than they know themselves".

3.6 Themes in *Slow Man*

3.6.1 Art and fiction

His liaison with Marianna, the unsatisfactory blind substitute for Marijana, is related in purely clinical terms, while he acknowledges the existence of passion and a life ruled by passion, the life he yearns for with Marijana (Coetzee, 2006:137). Rayment in truth questions the validity of admitting that he and Marijana do not have a (sexual) relationship: "But what counts as sexual intercourse nowadays? And how do we weigh a quick deed in a dark corner as against months of fevered longing?" (Coetzee, 2006:136). From the start Rayment muses over the significance of unity between man and woman, when in a phasing incident he recalls the education instilled by his catechism classes (Coetzee, 2006:33). With Marijana he experiences love, although it is decidedly one-sided. Even the nursing actions she performs on him seem to him like the embodiment of love, because this is the way that he chooses to interpret it: "It is not a cure, it is not done with love, it is probably no more than orthodox nursing practice, but it is enough. What love there is is all on his side" (Coetzee, 2006:63). However, Rayment experiences eros, saying that he usually feels amorous in the mornings and that is why he should advance upon Marijana right now (Coetzee, 2006:93). Costello comments that Rayment's infatuation with Marijana is nothing other than "old-fashioned love" (Coetzee, 2006:94). There is a very real probability that these words once again belie their true meaning, for Rayment's intention with the Jokićs is not without a hidden agenda; something that is not part of "old-fashioned love". When Rayment speaks to Drago, he states that one should be listening not for the mere words; one needs to discern the *intention* behind them (Coetzee, 2006:70). Although Rayment is not at all interested in Miroslav, he

"...has not the slightest malign intent towards him, he will swear to that. He wishes the husband all happiness and good fortune. Nevertheless, he will give anything to be father to these excellent, beautiful children and husband to Marijana – co-father if need be, co-husband if need be, platonic if need be" (Coetzee, 2006:72).

Of course the words belie themselves, because wishing Miroslav well does not, in Rayment's mind, include allowing Miroslav his autonomy as head of the Jokić family.

On the other hand, Costello proposes a deal to Rayment so that they can spend their last days together, touring the country. She muses, "What an idea! What a capital idea! Is this love, Paul? Have we found love at last?" to which Rayment rather flatly replies, "No, he says at last, this is not love. This is something else. Something less" (Coetzee, 2006:263).

3.6.2 Copy and original

A neat example of Coetzee's delicate sense of humour, the fictive French surname "Fauchery" sounds peculiarly close to "forgery", which could allude to the question of copies/originals. Also, *faucher* as verb in French has a colloquial meaning of pilfering, pinching²⁶ – exactly what Rayment intends to do to Miroslav, what Costello does to Rayment, and what Drago does to Rayment's photograph.

Rayment carefully formulates his attachment to his photographic collection, not so much as a question of

...fidelity to their subjects, the men and women and children who offered their bodies up to the stranger's lens...rather, he saves them too out of fidelity to the photographs themselves, the photographic prints, most of them survivors, unique (Coetzee, 2006:65).

Once again this opens the debate over what is original and what is copy – the image/likeness of the original, in the absence of the original (i.e. the people whose likeness was captured onto film) becomes the original as a representative, a 'survivor'. Rayment confesses that when photography became technologically advanced, "he gave up recording the world in photographs, then, and transferred his energies to saving the past" (Coetzee, 2006:65). This also introduces the difference between reality and fiction. History seems to present a moment of reality that may be the breeding ground for fiction.

²⁶ Online dictionary <http://www.larousse.com/en/dictionaries/french-english/faucher> Date of access: 30 July 2014

The theme of copy/imitation versus original is one of the most salient in *Slow Man*. When Rayment discovers the theft of his “precious picture” (Coetzee, 2006:222) he immediately tries to regain it from Drago. However, Drago is unreachable and the original photo seems to have disappeared from the face of the earth, leaving only a trail of multiple and falsified copies in its place. This seems like a dead end, bringing Rayment none the closer to the catharsis he is hoping for.

The issue of originals and copies becomes an insoluble dilemma when Rayment cannot get his original Fauchery back. Mrs Jokić and Drago do not comprehend his obsession with “preserving the past” (Coetzee, 2006:65) and prefer to proliferate the photographs, substituting Ljuba for the girl with mud on her face, Miroslav and Drago also finding bodies with which their faces can be teamed up. In this way they can be said to create the Australian forebears which they, like Rayment, have to do without. In a sense Rayment and Drago are similar: Drago creates for himself an Australian heritage by falsifying the photos, and Rayment lays claim to Australian heritage by strength of harbouring the photos, keeping them safe in his possession. Neither of them is in reality entitled to the familial strings engendered by the photographs.

Therefore it is in fact ironic that Rayment intends to *bequeath* his collection to the Museum. If one has no blood descendants then a bequest would seem to be the only option left if one wants the world to inherit something from your estate. In this sense the question of usurpation is closely related to the photographs. Costello usurps Rayment’s life by trying to secure him for her novel; Rayment usurps Marijana and Miroslav’s family life when he insidiously tries to involve himself in their affairs; and Drago usurps Rayment’s life by stealing and altering his (adopted) past. When the original photo is lost, it becomes a dilemma to decide if even a photocopy of an unchanged photo can still pass for the original. In the same way, Costello confesses to Rayment that she has nowhere else to go; if he kicks her out, she will be homeless and forced to live on the streets (Coetzee, 2006:130), having lost her autonomous existence which she gained by virtue of her dependency on Rayment’s life. In the last instance it seems as if Rayment takes charge of his own fate sufficiently to kiss her goodbye.

Rayment surmises that in order to be blessed one needs to be surrounded by family, and, at this stage in his life, realising that his entire life had been a waste, “a frivolous affair” (Coetzee, 2006:3, 19, 51), he is prepared ruthlessly and without scruples to attain this for himself (Coetzee, 2006:34, 45).

He is like a woman who, having never borne a child, having grown too old for it, now hungers suddenly and urgently for motherhood. Hungry enough to steal another’s child: it is as mad as that (Coetzee, 2006:73).

This, Rayment confesses to Costello at a much later stage, is the reason why he desperately needs to “bless the world” through providing money for Drago’s education:

Why, you ask? Ultimately, because I have no child of my own to bless as a father does. Having no child was the biggest mistake of my life, I will tell you that. For that my heart bleeds all the time. For that there is a *blessure* in my heart (Coetzee, 2006:155).

The pun on the English word *bless* and the French *blessure*, a wound, links together the bleeding heart and its desire to spread love.

Procreation is linked to re-creation; in securing a progeny for oneself, one is assured of perpetuity. Rayment witnesses this between Marijana and Ljuba: “From the kitchen comes the murmur of their voices. Mother and daughter: the protocols of womanhood being passed on, generation to generation” (Coetzee, 2006:31). Procreation provides as much as it proves the vitality of life. Rayment comes to this realisation almost as an epiphany when he has to provide Ljuba with a meal while Marijana is fixing up his flat:

Even in the ones who arrive damaged, with funny limbs or a brain that send out sparks, each cell is as fresh, as clean, as new as on creation day. Each new birth a new miracle (Coetzee, 2006:56).

The theme of the original being substituted by a copy echoes the notion of a palimpsest, in which imprints are superimposed on the original, creating a multiple reality, much like the kaleidoscope image that can change at the slightest twist of

hand. When Costello suggests that Rayment should give up on the wildly unsuitable feelings for Marijana, she offers the substitute of Marianna. Although Rayment vows to having never made her acquaintance, other than momentarily seeing her in the lift at the hospital, Costello alleges that in some happier time of their lives Rayment had taken her photograph (Coetzee, 2006:98). The photograph that was taken constitutes a pre-existing relationship between them and as such bears witness to the fact. Yet Rayment is able to deny this relationship because the photograph has become lost and he bears no recollection of it; therefore its existence seems to be annulled. Coetzee leaves the reader to consider whether the absence of the picture or the loss of memory has any consequences for the present. In other words, the reader must discern whether the recollection or proof of an event in the past validates the fact that it actually took place. If it is true that documentary proof of the past validates its existence, can that history then be annulled by destroying or losing the evidence of it? This is the question with which Coetzee confronts the reader of the text, and he does not offer any assistance in coming to a decision. That privileged responsibility belongs to the reader.

3.6.3 Truth

This novel allows the reader many possibilities of judging what is truth, what is real, and what are the alternatives. It is interesting to note that when Costello suggests that Rayment give up on Marijana, she refers to his '*imbroglio*' with the Jokić family, and she tries her level best to dissuade him from pursuing Marijana. A while later, when Rayment is facing Miroslav, he uses the same word in order to shift all the blame to Costello, alleging that the whole affair is something that she suggested as she needed sensational material for her novel.

Rayment himself confesses that truth is fragile: "Truth is not spoken in anger. Truth is spoken, if it ever comes to be spoken, in love" (Coetzee, 2006:161).

Being a retired photographer and collector of photos, Rayment admits to attaching more value to a photo than words. This, he maintains, is "not because pictures cannot lie but because, once they leave the darkroom, they are fixed, immutable. Whereas stories ... seem to change shape all the time" (Coetzee, 2006:64).

The reader, of course, realises that this statement will soon belie itself. In fact, Rayment himself admits that his most prized photograph, one noted to be by Antoine Fauchery, of Australian outback people unrelated to Rayment, conveys ambiguity:

It is of a woman and six children grouped together in the doorway of a mud and wattle cabin. That is to say, it could be a woman and six children, or the eldest girl could be not a child at all but a second woman, a second wife, brought in to take the place of the first, who looks drained of life, exhausted of loins (Coetzee, 2006:52).

3.6.4 Imperfection versus perfection

Costello tries to persuade Rayment to trade his infatuation with Marijana for a substitute affair with a woman called Marianna. After a brief fling with her, Rayment realises that it is impossible to substitute one person for another. It is ironic to note that Rayment deems it absolutely possible for Marijana to forsake her life as Mrs Jokić to become his wife, while he protests that it is not possible for him to accept the substitute Marianna for Marijana. This new possible object of desire, proposed by Elizabeth Costello as an alternative to Rayment's "inchoate attachment" (Coetzee, 2006:82) is literally blind, graphically illustrating that handicap is the common denominator for the two of them, yet it does not help them in any way to draw emotionally closer to one another. Tellingly, Rayment becomes aware of the introduction of this mysterious lady in his life who will be discovered to be blind *in a vision* that he has one night (Coetzee, 2006:39).

The theme of the acceptance or acceptability of handicap, exemplified by blindness/vision is raised powerfully by Rayment's predicament. Rayment's accident leaves him feeling less than a man – although Madeleine the rehabilitation facilitator tries her level best to persuade him to view himself as having "a new body, not (our) truncated old body" (Coetzee, 2006:61). The question raised by Rayment has a powerful appeal: "Why? Why can the fragmentary image of a woman be admired but not the image of a fragmentary woman, no matter how neatly sewn up the stumps?" (Coetzee, 2006:59). This argument indicates that incomplete representation is acceptable as long as the imagined original is perfect. In my opinion this once again

raises the issue of copies and originals, as the Venus of Milo²⁷ statue is alleged to having once had arms: “Once she had arms, the story goes, then her arms were broken off; their loss only makes her beauty more poignant” (Coetzee, 2006:59). Although the incomplete copy of the original constitutes a representation, its incompleteness is ignored as long as the original can be imagined as perfect. Then one could ask to what extent can the copy be deemed to truthfully represent the original, for instance if the arms of the Venus of Milo statue are removed, the statue still represents the beautiful woman on which it was modelled. By the same token Drago stealing Rayment’s photographs and substituting only the faces should be acceptable, but Rayment is not only infuriated but feels that his heritage has been stolen from him. The question seems to be whether double standards have been set, and then Coetzee leaves the reader to formulate his own judgment.

The novel draws to a close as Rayment seems to acknowledge that old age is gradually gaining on him, as it is on Costello, and that soon they both will be dead. He hopes to be drawn from the dregs of forgetfulness, ironically by a photo yet to be taken (Coetzee, 2006:65). In fact the transience of life is excruciatingly clear to him as he realises that *he* is in fact *the* “Slow Man”, the very one conjured up by the title, (Coetzee, 2006:258), somebody to be ridiculed and laughed about by the lovely little Ljuba, and not so much the author of his fate as he would have hoped to be. In truth he is poised in his existence as a figment of the imagination of the author(s) and therefore in no position to make any demands.

An obviously ethical question arises in the following incident. Rayment bails out Blanka Jokić, after she had pinched a cheap piece of jewellery from a store selling “gear” ((Coetzee, 2006:169). She is referred to as the daughter he is as “yet to clap an eye on” (Coetzee, 2006:72) which subtly alludes to the fact that Rayment cannot prove her existence as he had not yet seen her with his own eyes. While Rayment may still question the fact of her existence, as he had not yet seen her, the reverse position applies when she is caught stealing in a shop, probably by means of closed circuit television which captured her image in the moment of committing a transgression. Ironically therefore, while she cannot be proved to exist, she can be

²⁷ The Vintage 2003 edition of *Elizabeth Costello* portrays this sculpture on the front cover.

proved to have committed a petty crime. This begs the question whether the crime itself can be proved by documentation showing the moment of misconduct when it has not been established that the perpetrator indeed exists. Once again, this harps on the strings of proving one's existence, whether by a copy or by the original.

In order to clear her name and simultaneously dissuade the store from pressing charges, Rayment offers to buy an exorbitant amount of "gear", which, of necessity, would appeal mainly to Blanka's age group. This hasty action of redemption by Rayment is not entirely applauded by Marijana, who – ethically correct – argues that it is out of the question to bestow all these gifts on Blanka, the only person to whom they would appeal, as it would send out an unethical message of "reward" after the shoplifting episode (Coetzee, 2006:173). It is ironic to realise that in Rayment's quest to "bless the world", more specifically, to bless Marijana's children in an insidious and altogether unacknowledged agenda of securing their affection, he is "wasting" his resources in similar manner as he experiences his life up to that point had been wasted (Coetzee, 2006:83; 19; 3). His attempts at redemption remain futile and sterile.

3.6.5 Animals

There are numerous examples of animals used with a symbolic or deeper significance in this novel. Rayment fondly speaks of Marijana in equine terms. She is described in terms of haunches, calves (Coetzee, 2006:260) and flanks. He even describes her as "strong as a mare" (Coetzee, 2006:50). Dogs also feature quite noticeably, as Ljuba is portrayed as a little dog (Coetzee, 2006:122) known on occasions to whine (Coetzee, 2006:127), and Drago utters excited little barks (Coetzee, 2006:140). A sick dog suffering from canine distemper is one of the flashback scenes from his childhood, in which his stepfather steps in to 'take care' of the situation; not a pleasant memory for Rayment (Coetzee, 2006:44). Rayment self-consciously admits that as a lover he would probably fall into the 'doggy' class; not passionate as much as comforting (Coetzee, 2006:45). When Rayment and Costello find an empty bench in a park, a dog

... trots up: it gives him a quick, jaunty once-over, then moves on to her. Always embarrassing when a dog pushes its snout into a woman's crotch. Is

it reminding itself of sex, dog, dog sex, or is it just savouring the novel, complex smells? (Coetzee, 2006:194)²⁸.

The nature of animals as creatures attracted to their own species is touched upon briefly – at least the question is set but no clear-cut answer is provided (Coetzee, 2006:149). A relationship between Rayment and Marianna is equated to animal mating in which both of them are delightfully denoted by fictive biological names declaring their natures: “Paul Rayment – *canis infelix*. Marianna Popova: *pseudocaeca* (migratory)” (Coetzee, 2006:117)²⁹. The Latin element is repeated when Marijana assists Rayment in massaging his stiff muscles and he calls himself “*felix, felix lapsus*” (Coetzee, 2006:187).

The faces fixated into eternity in the famous Fauchery photograph resemble that of oxen at the slaughterhouse: “frightened, frozen” (Coetzee, 2006:52). The overwhelming feeling of love for Marijana convinces Rayment that he alone is able to detect the “shy, sloe-eyed gazelle hiding within” (Coetzee, 2006:162), while Miroslav, his great rival, has an “aquiline” nose (Coetzee, 2006:143) signifying connotations with Roman royalty, as well as bear-like attributes (Coetzee, 2006:144), which suggest Rayment’s slightly arrogant but clumsy dislike of him. Weary of Costello’s jibes, Rayment confides: “Half the time he feels like a poor old bear in the Colosseum, not knowing which way to turn. The death of a thousand cuts” (Coetzee, 2006:236).

It seems that there is a connection between Elizabeth Costello and ducks. Everywhere she goes the ducks seem to surface. When Rayment finds her by the River Torrens she is feeding the ducks (Coetzee, 2006:158), or at least, the speculation in the following argument is that she seems to be feeding the ducks (Coetzee, 2006:159). It is interesting to note that Miroslav Jokić is credited for being able to fix mechanical ducks in Croatia; yet in the changed setting of Australia and with regard to living ducks there is no possibility of him being a functional presence. This is probably a subtle hint that all facts are true only in context. Costello is also

²⁸The dog as central symbol of a dehumanised existence echoes in *Disgrace*. Falling from a position of grace into disgrace, Lurie earns the grace of redemption and finally attains a status of modified grace through disgrace.

²⁹ *Felix lapsus* = past bliss/ happiness; *pseudocaeca* = allegedly blind; *canis infelix* = unfortunate dog.

associated with a fox, described as having more vulpine characteristics than canine (Coetzee, 2006:123).

The marine world³⁰ offers another recurrent animal image. Rayment makes no secret of regarding his stump with revulsion as he describes it as an “eyeless fish” (Coetzee, 2006:28). Describing humans in terms of fish is suggestive of a process of animalisation, a subtle hint at being a cold-blooded amphibian. Rayment finds an old photo of a younger Costello and, in derogatory fashion, describes her to be as much like a mermaid as a seahorse is a fish (Coetzee, 2006:120). Costello consoles Marianna when the affair with Rayment doesn’t work out, that there are plenty other fish in the ocean (Coetzee, 2006:153). Next Costello refers to Rayment as being a small fish by some standards (Coetzee, 2006:155). The hero in the *Golden Legends* wades knee-deep through churning waters, oblivious of the heroism of his deeds. And then Rayment reflects, “How can he be the missing piece when all his life he has been missing himself? Man overboard! Lost in a choppy sea off a strange coast” (Coetzee, 2006:100). Finally Rayment admonishes Costello with her own words, spoken previously to console Marianna: “That is up to you, Elizabeth. There are plenty of fish in the ocean, so I hear. But as for me, as for now: goodbye” (Coetzee, 2006:263).

Initially Rayment admires Marijana for her strong and healthy physical appearance, her vitality. Then, in another anecdotal incident of phasing, Rayment remembers about a copy of a book by Plato he had as a child, with a depiction of a Greek god – the I – with two horses, one black and one white, representing the baser emotions and the more exalted passions (Coetzee, 2006:53). Coetzee then describes Rayment’s very derogatory version of himself as a caricature of the Greek edition, presumably indicative of Rayment’s humiliation after having suffered the accident on Magill Road. In the final chapter to the novel, Costello has a wildly insane idea devoid of any dignity or realism, suggesting that Miroslav could help fix up a bath chair – *deux chevaux* (two horses) – or another kind of motorised wheelchair to enable Rayment and Costello to tour around the countryside (Coetzee, 2006:262).

³⁰ In ancient mythology, the sea was commonly regarded as source of all evil (Van Gemeren, 1997:314). It is revealing that Rayment voices his revulsion towards himself as something that emanates from the sea. It seems that the sea as source of all evil provides the context for *fish* as a related image.

This possibly alludes to the episode that introduced the novel, when Rayment lost his freedom of movement. The bicycle of the first scene is now comically replaced by a converted bath chair, suggesting an ironic parallel of ridiculous proportions which leaves Rayment, in much the same way as Lurie and Señor C, at the mercy of forces greater than himself.

3.6.6 The threshold

Rayment is intensely aware of a threshold that he and Marianna need to cross. In terms of their relationship it means overcoming the barrier of their handicaps – he struggling to adapt to the inflicted blindness and she with having to compensate for his unbalanced body. Referring to Costello, he explains to Marianna,

She is of the opinion that until I have crossed a certain threshold I am caught in limbo, unable to grow. That is the hypothesis she is testing out in my case. She probably has another hypothesis to cover you (Coetzee, 2006:112).

The threshold is regarded as a ludicrous image by the sceptical and unidentifiable figure Marianna-Natasha, who ridicules Rayment for his seriousness (Coetzee, 2006:116). Likewise, Rayment's dignity is dealt a heavy blow by Ljuba, who refers to him not as "Rocket Man", the way he would honour himself, but as "Slow Man", as he is depicted as a figure of ridicule on the brink of the threshold (Coetzee, 2006:256). "Caught in limbo" is an apt description of what chanced upon Rayment's life during the accident on Magill Road: "Relax! He tells himself as he flies through the air (flies through the air with the greatest of ease!), and indeed he can feel his limbs go obediently slack' (Coetzee, 2006:1). Rayment's matter-of-fact mention of the words *limber*, *limbre* or *limbo* (Coetzee, 2006:112) is no mistake, as this conjures up associations of suspension, thus adding depth of meaning to the innuendos of juxtaposition and also emphasising the elasticity of the threshold as liminal space. This echoes the incident on Magill Road as described in the opening paragraph of the text³¹:

Relax! He tells himself as he flies through the air (*flies through the air with the greatest of ease!*), and indeed he can feel his limbs go obediently slack. *Like*

³¹ The same paragraph is recited by Costello (Coetzee, 2006:81) when she tries to convince Rayment to become "a character" in her book.

a cat he tells himself: roll, then spring to your feet, ready for what comes next.
The unusual word *limber* or *limbre* is on the horizon too (Coetzee, 2006:1).

3.6.7 Hands

The idiomatic expression 'giving a hand' is explored in various instances in this novel. Early in the novel, Mrs Putts decides that Rayment will not manage without "someone to give him a hand" (Coetzee, 2006:16). Rayment holds little Ljuba's hand when he wipes clean her sleeve, and for a moment the wrist lies limp in his hand – "perfect" (Coetzee, 2006:56). When Rayment has professed his love for Marijana, he is described as "an old man with knobbly fingers" (Coetzee, 2006:78). Then Costello asks an incredulous Rayment to give her a hand (Coetzee, 2006:80), which refers to him assisting her with her research.

A comic moment occurs when Marianna, coming to give him a hand with his wasted sexuality, literally and vulgarly "sits on his hand" (Coetzee, 2006:104), temporarily incapacitating his actions. In their intercourse, emphasis is laid on their hands, guiding their actions, because the sense of vision has been blocked. In a phasing episode Rayment fantasises about the yarns Costello probably had to tell Marianna to convince her to take a taxi to visit him; an old man with a broken body: "...here is the fare, I am putting it in your hand, no need to be nervous ..." (Coetzee, 2006:113).

Miroslav Jokić, a manual labourer, good at working with his hands, is described in minute detail pertaining to his hands, finally creating the impression that he resembles an animal, a bear: "He glances at Jokić's hands. Long fingers with tufts of black hair, clipped fingernails. Hair at his collar too. Does Marijana like all that hair, that bear's pelt?" (Coetzee, 2006:144). One could also bear in mind that puppets are manipulated using strings which are held by hand. Rayment complains to Costello that she took charge of his autonomy as one takes charge of a puppet (Coetzee, 2006:117) and then Rayment pleads with Miroslav to accept his gift of money "with no strings attached" (Coetzee, 2006:151). Finally, Rayment concludes to Costello that he doesn't have loving hands (Coetzee, 2006:261), to which she scathingly replies that neither does he have a loving heart, suggesting his sterility, his old age and loss of vitality.

With regard to authorship, Rayment is also “delivered” into Costello’s “hands”: Costello pointedly reminds him that he is not in a position to dictate to her at all (Coetzee, 2006:89). In a moment of confession, although it remains in his head, Rayment cries out, “*I mean no harm, I am in the grip of a force beyond me!*” (Coetzee, 2006:123). Only a couple of pages later Rayment contradicts himself: he tries to coerce Costello to leave his flat and his life but she would not succumb (Coetzee, 2006:129).

3.7 Intertextuality

Introducing figures from history as fictional characters allows Coetzee to achieve a degree of intertextuality in his texts. Elizabeth Costello is a historical figure employed by Coetzee to pose as a fictional literary character in his novel by the same name. In the postscript letter from Lady Chandos, he employs the fictional wife of a historical figure to obscure the difference between real and imagined text. To my mind this brings about a layering of the textual structure. It is commonly accepted that Costello is in a certain sense an alter ego for Coetzee, but Szczurek (2009:44) argues that Costello could have been modelled by Coetzee on the real-life Nadine Gordimer. According to Attwell (2006:29), Coetzee embeds her speech within fiction, thus allowing her to play the role of interpreter, mediating between Costello’s world of intuitions, opinions and rights, and that of the reader. When she is casually introduced in *Slow Man*, she is definitely “her own person” in Szczurek’s words (2009:44), “just a fictive character created by the real-life Coetzee, stripped of all her grace”. An interesting layering twist is brought about when Costello, imitating Rayment’s intended hostile takeover attempt towards the Jokićs, appears out of nowhere and worms her way into Rayment’s life in order to kidnap the people in his life to become characters in her embedded novel.

In the final analysis the suspicious conviction stubbornly persists that Coetzee, the author, is staging himself as the central character in this novel, as he had done by various degrees in previous novels: Lurie in *Disgrace* bears obvious although superficial similarities to Coetzee, and Señor C in *Diary of a Bad Year* is “an ageing seventy-plus writer”. Of course, as noted by Lowry (2007:3), the mirror that is held towards the reader is warped, cracked and deceives in the last instance, creating reverberating echoes along the way and multiplying the voices speaking out. The

Glasgow Herald, inside the back dustcover of the 2006 Vintage edition, mentions the author's inimitable and "almost religious" tone. In his trademark style, Coetzee declines to explain himself, leaving this to his protagonists Elizabeth Costello, Rayment, Lurie, JC/Señor C, Susan Barton, while all – in the words of Szczurek (2009:44) – have a fascinating story to tell. Many a truth is spoken in jest, and many a riddle hides the truth spoken by Coetzee.

3.8 Summary

This chapter has traced the importance of the writer in terms of establishing liminal qualities in Coetzee's texts which constitute the focus of this study. It would seem that Coetzee's approach as writer has evolved in terms of metafictional qualities as well as a growing awareness of the self as author and character. Following the kaleidoscope progress from the multilayered and intensely metafictional *Foe* to a realistic narrative style in *Disgrace* to the semi-autobiographical allusions of *Slow Man*, it is clear that Coetzee is journeying beyond his own limits as a liminal author.

The author's move to Australia, painstakingly if metafictionally portrayed in *Slow Man*, increases the suspicion that the author has an affective agenda with his texts. While *Elizabeth Costello* attempts to present the implied author's points of view through the mediation of the fictional character Costello, it is clear that *Diary of a Bad Year* has progressed in terms of divulging more intimate personal details regarding the author's interpretation of his responsibility towards effecting change in postcolonial society. Both texts include references to the concurrent postcolonial world and current political affairs that provide an anchor in spatial and temporal terms, emphasising the credibility of the texts as "real".

The conclusion is that the route followed by Coetzee via these texts culminates in an acceptance of the responsibility of exercising change and therefore reaching liminal status. Liminality *in itself* is not a goal; it functions as a gateway for ethical responsibility, illustrating the basis of change in postcolonial society. Coetzee as first writer instates the reader with as much authority to inscribe meaning and conclusion to his fictional texts as would be accepted by the reader. By giving up the freedom of sole authority over the text, the writer truly gains it in terms of ethical responsibility. Coetzee the writer prefers his protagonists, Costello, Rayment, Lurie, JC/Señor C,

Barton, to tell their fascinating stories, ideally to an involved reader/co-writer, hoping, in the words of Szczurek (2009:44) that those who would listen, would become the wiser in terms of liminal adjustment. In this process the writer affords the reader co-authorship, and the concomitant responsibility of both reader and writer in the final instance of striving to attain liminality.

Chapter 4 Liminal characters as narrators

Every text requires a narrator in some form or other. Traditionally it is accepted that narrators may be present as first-person or third-person narrators. A second-person narrator is possible but not popular, as it creates the uncomfortable notion of prescriptiveness (“you sit in the corner and cry your heart out”) in the text. The appearance of the narrator is variable, while its function seems fixed. Palmer (2004:154) comments that the narrator is always involved in and thereby influencing the discourse of its characters.

This chapter aims to examine liminal narrators, specifically Susan Barton (and the subordinate male characters of Cruso and Friday) in *Foe*, and David Lurie (together with the subordinate character of Lucy) in *Disgrace*. The concept of liminal narrator will firstly be defined. Although liminal narrators have specific qualities which set them apart, individual differentiation is possible while focalisation and ascription also play a role. Susan Barton functions as a multi-faceted narrator and character within the structure of embedded narrative(s). She even speculates about Foe’s thoughts and emotions in what seems to be a prescriptive fashion: “We have taken up residence in your house, from which I now write. Are you surprised to hear this?” (Coetzee, 2000:65). Lurie is the focaliser in what seems to be a third-person narrative, liberally complemented by authorial comments. Subsequently the influence of these narrators in terms of Coetzee’s writing will be examined. It seems that both narrators have a distinctly liminal quality and function as “medium” in the postcolonial context of Coetzee’s writing to convey his comments as observer, using dialogue, different voices, and their specific angles of focalisation or perspective.

4.1 The liminal narrator – a definition

To continue the discussion of liminality as set out in chapter 1, it is important to remember that postcoloniality as a precondition of liminality provides the necessary instability to stimulate change. How the narrator faces these conditions will determine to what degree he/she can be regarded as having liminal qualities. In chapter 1 the choices available to characters, readers and narrators confronted with change were determined. These include the following clusters: their personal, moral and social choices regarding their views on society or interaction with society may

either keep them in this state of liminality, or return them to a previous, more static position, or move them beyond into a new position. It was established that reactions to a society in a process of transition elicit these possible responses from the narrator: denial, rejection, equivocation or acceptance and participation regarding the status quo. Barton and Lurie as narrators will be discussed in terms of their liminal status. The non-narrators in *Foe* have no voice – Cruso and Friday – and are caught in a time-warp or a suspended, liminal space as “survivors”, while in *Disgrace* Lucy learns humility and makes a choice to accept the inversion of order.

4.2 Liminal narrator(s) in *Foe*³²

4.2.1 Susan Barton

The main protagonist of the plot is Susan Barton. She is also the main, but not only, narrator of most of the novel. In section IV, the unnamed first-person narrator focalises from Foe’s perspective. Liminal characters in the novel are Susan Barton, the unnamed daughter that she disowns, Friday, Cruso and Foe, each in his or her own way. Susan Barton provides most of the focalisation of the narrative as well. Palmer’s (2004:124-127) concept of first-person ascription applies to Barton, as she is a first-person narrator who ascribes intention and motives to others’ actions. Palmer notes that, ironically, first-person ascription can be less reliable than third-person ascription, a point that was previously generally regarded as valid. According to Palmer’s speech category classification (2004:13), Barton’s narration is mostly in the form of direct thought.

The character/narrator Susan Barton is first “rescued” by Friday and Cruso who are introduced into the plot as survivors of a shipwreck on a deserted island. As time passes Barton comes to think of herself in an inverted relationship to Cruso: that while Cruso and his henchman Friday at first saved her life, she would be their saviour whose attempts to save them from the island life ironically brought about Cruso’s demise on board a ship, the John (H)obart, that having seen the signals from the island, picked them up en route back to England. Ironically, while Barton

³² Coetzee, J.M. 1987. *Foe*. Harmondsworth: Penguin. All subsequent references regarding *Foe* will be to this edition.

views herself as Cruso's and Friday's redeemer in bringing them to England, she ruefully admits "He was a prisoner, and I, despite myself, his gaoler" (Coetzee, 1987:43).

In order to make life easier for herself, Barton explains that she assumed the identity of Cruso's wife "and so was known as Mrs Cruso to all on board" (Coetzee, 1987:42). Once they arrive in England, fate leads her to Mr Foe, "the author who had heard many confessions and were reputed a very secret man" (Coetzee, 1987:48). The narrative continues, now recognisable as a letter or diary, addressed to Foe. Curiously Barton often relays information to Foe of matters that the reader could reasonably presume that he must know, such as

I climb the staircase (it is a tall house, tall and airy, with many flights of stairs) and tap at the door. You are sitting at a table with your back to me, a rug over your knees, your feet in pantoufles, gazing out over the fields, thinking, stroking your chin with your pen, waiting for me to set down the tray and withdraw. On the tray are a glassful of hot water into which I have squeezed a citron, and two slices of buttered toast. You call it your first breakfast. (Coetzee, 1987:49).

It seems self-evident that Foe should be aware of himself wearing "pantoufles" or "stroking his chin". Yet Barton goes one step further when she casually comments on Foe's frame of mind: "waiting for me to set down the tray and withdraw". She is confident of being able to predict the words that Foe would speak: "You call it your first breakfast". This example illustrates the very subtle manner in which Coetzee combines descriptive and prescriptive narratives.

The unreliability of Barton's tale is illustrated by her correspondence to Foe. In the long letter which she is writing to Foe, commencing at the onset of the narrative, she has focused almost exclusively on her experiences and her point of view. Yet she remarks:

Who but Cruso, who is no more, could truly tell you Cruso's story? I should have said less about him, more about myself. How, to begin with, did my

daughter come to be lost, and how, following her, did I reach Bahia? How did I survive among strangers those two long years? Did I live only in a rooming-house, as I have said? Was Bahia an island in the ocean of the Brazilian forest, and my room a lonely island in Bahia? (Coetzee, 1987:51).

Susan Barton, accompanied by Friday who is entirely at her mercy in these displaced surroundings, is given board and lodging in Clock Lane by Mr Foe for the duration of time in which Foe is supposed to reformulate Barton's account of her life with Crusoe on the island into what will probably, in a future time, come to be known as the historical novel *Robinson Crusoe*. Of course the fact that we as postcolonial readers are aware of the historical existence of the *Robinson Crusoe* text provides a certain legitimacy or authoritativeness to Barton's allegations, and although it seems plausible and credible, the text that is referred to remains fictive. During this time she sends regular correspondence to Foe at his house in Stoke Newington, but then, after one of her letters had been returned to her unopened, she investigates and finds "the bailiffs in occupation of your house" (Coetzee, 1987:61). Apparently Foe flees from the location and Barton, accompanied by Friday, soon moves into Foe's house.

By inhabiting his space Susan Barton imagines what it is like to be Foe:

"We have taken up residence in your house, from which I now write. Are you surprised to hear this? There were spider-webs over the windows already, which we have swept away. We will disturb nothing."

Note the irony in these last two sentences: Barton contradicts herself almost in a single breath, which to me indicates that her rendition of any history is not to be trusted or accepted as the truth without investigation. "When you return we will vanish like ghosts, without complaint... So your life continues to be lived, though you are gone" (Coetzee, 1987:65). She soon realises that representation or substitution cannot equal the real thing, but clings desperately to this assumed identity:

It is not wholly as I had imagined it would be ... There is no ripple in the glass. The chest is not a true chest but a dispatch box. Nevertheless, it is all close

enough. Does it surprise you as much as it does me, this correspondence between things as they are and the pictures we have of them in our minds? (Coetzee, 1987:65).

Here Barton addresses not only Foe, but also the reader who is by this process invited to acknowledge that truth and reality sometimes overlap only in a severely mediated way. The rhetorical questions are functional in eliciting a response from the reader too, suggesting that truth/imitation or reality/representation are incomplete and limited.

4.2.2 Crusoe and Friday

Coetzee introduces the theme of representation by a medium in *Foe*. In subsequent novels this theme has been repeated in varying guises. Barton as narrator must represent the largely incapacitated Crusoe and the mute Friday – with detrimental consequences for both male characters. In *Slow Man* Elizabeth Costello calls herself a secretary, one who merely notes down, and in *Diary of a Bad Year* JC's thoughts and opinions are filtered and watered down by the ignorant but opinionated Anya. Crusoe is the captain on whose ship Susan Barton "finds herself" as a castaway. Crusoe, having ties with the historical and intertextual figure of Crusoe from Daniel Defoe's novel, sets out as the embodiment of the coloniser. Soon, however, through some interventions by forces of nature (or perhaps, by the author), Crusoe finds himself a captive to Barton in whose care he perishes. This is an ironic subversion of the traditional role of the coloniser, who is regarded as an enterprising and pioneering figure. Likewise, Friday is a mute Negro slave who is incapable of speaking for himself. Barton professes that her goal is to give him a tongue by representing his story, but ironically it must be imagined because Friday, as a mute, could not have related it to her in the first place.

Both Friday and Crusoe are configured as characters who depend on Barton to speak for them, although in different ways: Friday as a mute and captive slave, and Crusoe as a fatally sick shipwrecked person relating his life story to Barton in order to have it relayed to posterity. Pinker (1997:67) explains that language is used by most people as a medium of gaining insight into the head of another, to be able to "talk to each other about the nature of thinking". Pinker states that language systems help their

speakers to make sense and to construe their worlds in terms of what makes sense in their language system, which may include variations between cultures (Pinker, 1997:18). In both Friday and Cruso's cases, they are subjected to mediation or representation by Barton. This results in a loss of individuality and humanity for both Friday and Cruso.

4.3 Narrative strategies in *Foe*

4.3.1 Embedded narrative

Palmer (2004:230) describes a double embedded narrative as a character's mind as contained within another character's mind. This seems applicable to *Foe*, in a repetitive manner, as Foe narrates Barton's account regarding Friday's and Cruso's as well as her own rendering of their respective histories. Of course, all of these are framed within the context of Coetzee as actual author of the text *Foe*.

The narrative commences with Susan Barton, first-person narrator, ostensibly relaying to an as yet unknown listener (later distinguished in the first instance, as Mr Foe) her experiences as a castaway. The first frame of an embedded narrative is therefore provided merely by the quotation marks with which the novel commences.

Very soon the reader realises that this relayed account (or embedded narrative) hints at a vast amount of past knowledge and that this account of past events fits, in terms of chronology, at the end of the novel. "On all sides stretched the shimmering sea, while to the east the ship *that had brought me* receded under full sail" (Coetzee, 1987:8, my emphasis). The reference to a ship which is currently sailing away and which had hitherto been unheard-of by the listener/reader suggests that the narrator had already progressed quite far into the history of what she is at present narrating. Another hint that this account is not without a past history is provided:

"I sat on the bare earth with my sore foot between my hands and rocked back and forth and sobbed like a child, while the stranger (*who was of course the Cruso I told you of*) gazed at me more as if I were a fish cast up by the waves than an unfortunate fellow-creature." (Coetzee, 1987:9; my emphasis).

Almost immediately the first frame gives way to another frame, as Susan Barton, cast away by the mutinous shipmates referred to above, meets with first Friday and then Cruso and proceeds to tell Cruso her story; indeed a story within a story: “Let me tell you my story,” said I; “for I am sure you are wondering who I am and how I come to be here” (Coetzee, 1987:10). Interesting to note is the fact that Barton’s self-centredness is illustrated quite pointedly by the fact that the reader, having already made her acquaintance, is subjected to this further frame/ account of the basic information already intimated, while Cruso’s story ironically remains untold. Additional and sometimes conflicting or self-incriminating information is also provided in the course of the narrative. Yet the fact remains that the interest is rather one-sided, as Barton the narrator/ character seems positively uninterested in hearing the explanation of Cruso’s presence on the desert island. In this regard one should also add that Friday as a character is introduced rather unceremoniously – tending to Susan Barton the castaway, he is introduced only as “the Negro” (Coetzee, 1987:6), and immediately thereafter, in an objectified manner, referred to by name: “Even Friday’s hard skin was not proof against it: there were bleeding cracks in his feet” (Coetzee, 1987:7).

The next frame is produced by Susan Barton, having explained how it happened that she was cast away and consequently discovered and rescued on the deserted island by Friday and Cruso, proceeding to relay everything about “Robinson Cruso” (Coetzee, 1987:10). However, it soon becomes evident that the number of tales, accounts and filtering media makes for a very unreliable narrative. During the course of the narrative in which she addresses “Mr Foe” (Coetzee, 1987:45) the following frames or embedded narratives can be discerned:

- i) Susan Barton telling her own story;
- ii) the story of “Mrs Cruso”, an assumed identity; and
- iii) Barton’s story as heiress to the story of Cruso’s island, the above are all logically reproduced by an author who may presumably be called “Foe”, “Mr Foe”, or the historical Defoe; and
- iv) in the last (but not final) instance, JM Coetzee who has affirmed his rights to be regarded as author of this novel. In this way Coetzee

created an almost infinite number of embedded narratives. One should also mention the direct address by Barton in many instances (“Let me tell you my story”) which immediately and irrevocably involves the reader, via the text, in establishing meaning in the story.

4.3.2 Metafiction

The story that Susan Barton tells is precisely this: the story of how she attempts to tell her own story – therefore a metanarrative. Following the evidence observed in this study, I believe that this is the story told in all of Coetzee’s novels, as it is probably in much of postmodernist writing. Dovey (1988:341) discusses *Foe*’s four sections, which mark the progression of Susan Barton and of the novel itself toward and beyond the achievement of authorship. Section 1 tells of Susan Barton’s stay on the island; it is, in Dovey’s words (1988:341), Susan’s retelling of the story of Robinson Crusoe. Within this story addressed to Foe is the story of how Susan Barton arrived on the island, a story which she addresses to Cruso, saying “Let me tell you my story ... for I am sure you are wondering who I am and how I came to be here” (Coetzee, 1987:10). Dovey (1988:343) notes that “this is perhaps an allegory of women’s attempt to appropriate, or reappropriate, their own writing”.

Section 2, consisting of the dated letters, is addressed to the by now recognisable recipient Foe, but the *reader* is implicitly and inclusively implied in the ambiguous “you”. In this way Coetzee uses the liminal narrator to invite the reader into the text. In this section Mr Foe tells a fable in which the daughter figures as the woman’s story, or metaphor for writing. Dovey (1988:393-395) offers a discussion of this metaphorically rich section and especially of Barton’s relationship with Friday, identifying mimicry, repetition, simulation, pastiche and blank irony as strategies employed by Coetzee to link the discourses in his novel to centre around the crisis of representation.

Section 4, the final section, Dovey (1988:395-6) explains, provides some provisional supplements, similar to *Life and Times of Michael K*. Here an unnamed narrator, allegedly the “Daniel Defoe” suggested by the plaque on the wall of the house

(Coetzee, 1987:155) recounts the discovery of the bodies of Susan Barton, Foe and Friday, making the final descent into the heart of the wrecked slave ship. Diving becomes a metaphor for the descent into the underwater world of the unconscious that reveals further scenes of sexual differentiation (the Oedipal triangle: father, mother, and daughter). As explained in chapter 2, the sea in *Foe* indicates a liminal space, and diving would then constitute a conscious effort to penetrate into and beyond this boundary line.

Section 3 is imitated by suggesting that the unconscious functions as medium (language): “The staircase is dark and mean” (Coetzee, 1987:113, 153). The narrator describes three successive scenes of discovery, and in each the girl, Susan Barton, Foe, and Friday, appear in the attempt to penetrate to a deeper level of the unconscious. In the first scene of discovery, an unidentified couple “lie side by side in bed, not touching” (Coetzee, 1987:153). This encounter closely echoes the earlier scene in which Susan Barton and Foe share a bed: “For a while we lay in silence, Foe on his side, I on mine” (Coetzee, 1987:137). The second scene of discovery states that “the couple in the bed lie face to face, her head in the crook of his arm” (Coetzee, 1987:155). Dovey (1988:397-8) credibly explains that the face-to-face positions of these characters suggest that each sex subverts the other from a position of fixed identity and of mastery.

This re-enactment by Friday and the unnamed, unsexed narrator of the scene between Susan and Foe provides a vision of a future in which the absolute opposition between self and other will infinitesimally be replaced by a variation of infinity. This could potentially be interpreted as an allusion to the narrator Scheherazade in *The Arabian Nights*, who managed to continue telling stories during 1001 nights. In *The Arabian Nights* the narrator perpetuates the tales she tells in order to postpone the verdict that would ensue after the conclusion of her stories. She manages to keep her captor captive for a prolonged period of time, even giving birth to offspring sired by the prince. The inversion brought about by the captive Scheherazade developing tales of such interest that she manages to keep her

execution at bay creates an interesting twist: the captor is captive, while the act of recreation (in the form of stories) provide time and occasion for procreation.

Dovey (1988: 399) argues that access to identity is a metaphor that constitutes a conflict of authority. Indeed, the identity of the Other is not only prone to transgression but in fact verified by it. In Section 3, Foe as first-person narrator proposes two possible attitudes towards writing, or authorship, both of which refer to writing's relationship to death. Illustrating the first, Foe (Coetzee, 1987:124) tells of a condemned woman who delays the moment of execution by means of a potentially infinite number of confessions. When he illustrates the second (Coetzee, 1987:125), he tells of a woman who is content to die only once her daughter has been taken care of, claiming that all she will leave behind is the husk a butterfly leaves behind when it is born. Foe comments (Coetzee, 1987:125): "There are more ways than one of living eternally." Mindful of Palmer's observation ((2004:10) that insight into another character's mind is often more accessible and credible than into that of a first-person, Coetzee seems to indicate through Foe's words that there are more ways than one of stimulating change in a postcolonial context. Although approached differently, Coetzee also promotes the development of change in the postcolonial context by means of *Disgrace*.

4.4 Liminal characters in *Disgrace*³³

4.4.1 David Lurie

The protagonist is David Lurie, a professor at the Cape Technical University whose job as lecturer of Ancient and Modern Languages has been rationalised so that he is now forced to offer Communications. The novel employs a third-person narrator with third-person focalisation (from Lurie's point of view). If one merely regards Lurie as focaliser then it is possible to describe the narrator as heterodiegetic, not a character in the novel, but it is also possible to describe Lurie as a third person homodiegetic

³³ COETZEE, J.M. 2000. *Disgrace*. London: Vintage. All subsequent references regarding *Disgrace* will be to this edition.

narrator with third-person focalisation. In terms of Palmer's (2004:13) speech category classification, most of the narrative is free indirect thought.

After two failed marriages, the latter lasting twelve years, Lurie has been in various dire straits regarding relationships. Apparently he is not close to his daughter, who is mentioned only in passing, and properly introduced into the story only after her presence becomes essential for his escape. The entire first and second chapters are dedicated to an exposé of his failed love life. After second wife Rosalind came

... a day it all ended. Without warning his powers fled. Glances that would once have responded to his slid over, past, through him. Overnight he became a ghost. If he wanted a woman he had to learn to pursue her; often, in one way or another, to buy her. He existed in an anxious flurry of promiscuity. He had affairs with the wives of colleagues; he picked up tourists in bars on the waterfront or at the Club Italia; he slept with whores (Coetzee, 2000:7).

Then came Soraya the sophisticated sexual worker, who seemed to be a perfect solution to his needs, eventually followed up by an imagined Soraya, then Dawn the secretary and finally he chanced upon Melanie Isaacs. Melanie is a coloured student on whom Lurie forces his attentions until things begin to go sour. Melanie's name is suggestive of the signification of coloured skin, melanine.

Heavy irony prevails when Lurie, with a total lack of insight, discusses the significance of the verb *usurp upon* with his students (Coetzee, 2000:21). But the wheel turns when Lurie, who usurps the youthful eagerness and uncertainty of Melanie, is taken advantage of by Melanie who suddenly and unexpectedly moves in with him, also usurping his life and personal space. Gradually Lurie is drawn into a vicious spiral that sucks him out of his comfort zone into deep and troubled waters.

Very early the theme of dignity or respect is established, when Melanie is said not to dignify the word (= respect) with a reply (Coetzee, 2000:35). Also, it is hinted that Lurie himself suffers from lack of respect – because he does not respect the subject

he is forced to teach (Communication), he makes no impression on his students (Coetzee, 2000:4).

Through a series of misfortunes, misunderstandings and abuse of cosmic proportions, Lurie is eventually removed from his position of superior leadership and privilege, jolted to the margins of society. Here he enters the domain of the liminal as he bitterly experiences the rejection of society. He takes refuge on the plot of land owned by his lesbian daughter Lucy, who is also disassociated from mainstream society due to her sexual orientation. Therefore Lucy herself is also cast as a liminal character: hovering on the periphery of society, but eventually gaining access to a “new” identity.

Yet another chain of misfortunes causes Lurie and Lucy to lose everything but their lives, being subjected to the most brutal incidents of abuse imaginable. This signifies a subversion of their respective roles. Lucy and Lurie become dishonoured second-class outcasts, surviving by the “grace” of Petrus, who used to be Lucy’s foreman on the plot but who is now deemed the master. In this grand reversal of fortunes Lurie descends from a former position of ostensible grace (as a privileged professor) to a new status of the underdog, dejected and cast out. However, in the process he attains grace, resulting in the reversal of fortunes from disgrace to grace. Of course, it is ironic that the process by which he attains this status is fraught with indecency and disgrace. Finally Lucy gives birth to the son sired by an act of brutal mastery, which may suggest the future legacy.

4.4.2 Lucy

Lucy as a character in *Disgrace* is literally forced into liminal status. As a lesbian, she already finds herself on the periphery of society, consciously disassociating with the establishment. In this sense she was a marginal character from the outset. However, her tranquil and idyllic existence is rudely disrupted by the visit of the three young men who raped her. This incident is foreshadowed by the allegorical reference to the visit of the three geese to the “chosen one” (Coetzee, 2000:88). The violent transgression by which she was impregnated forcefully thrusts her into a liminal state. Being a carrier of a new generation, she seems to have no alternative than to

accept her liminality, and yet she excels in this regard as she gracefully submits and adapts to the new conditions of life under Petrus's rule over her former smallholding.

Lucy is hopeful that she and her child will be accepted by society, but there is no guarantee, as her child will be of mixed race with no specific affiliation and her role or position within Petrus's family is uncertain. However, she attempts to create a place to survive as a victim of rape for herself and her baby. In the process it is hinted that she progresses from the status of a victim to one of a survivor – positively enforcing the grace that she attains by sacrificing everything. In this sense, Lucy is an example of everything that Lurie does not attain. He fails miserably to earn the grace that he lacks and only in the very final instance, when giving up the last thing that he owns, the dog, attains a sense of redemption.

4.5 Narrative strategies in *Disgrace*

4.5.1 Allegory

Head (1997:20) remarks that allegory is a specific and recurrent feature of Coetzee's writing, as it is of much postcolonial writing and criticism, for example Yann Martell's *Life of Pi*. Allegory is an ideal vehicle to get the message across without compromising the non-commitment of the author. It creates distance and anonymity, which support Coetzee's stance of non-specific and non-prescriptive observation. Allegory requires a novel to be regarded almost in terms of symbolic significance, similar to the biblical parable.

Lurie as symbol of (the white) privileged man is preoccupied with retaining his position of power in the previous dispensation, which is now threatened by the process of rationalisation. The same process forces him to forego his one real passion, the Romantic poets (which seems indicative of any subject taught for aesthetic purposes and not with a view to functionality), and to offer Communications instead, indicating the breakdown of lofty ideals to the bare necessity of communication as a universal but impersonal (impassionate) act. Lurie's immoral attitude to exercising his dominance is portrayed graphically in his sexual prowess, where he purposefully preys upon a coloured girl and overpowers her, convincing himself that it is his right; Melanie 'has a duty to share [her beauty]' (Coetzee,

2000:16). Lurie elaborates on this train of thought when he speaks to his students about beauty and divinity, and it becomes clear to the reader that in actual fact he is describing Melanie as a goddess: “A week ago she was just another pretty face in his class. Now she is a presence in his life, a breathing presence” (Coetzee, 2000:23). This idea is confirmed by Birks (2007:21) who notes that, as lover of poetry and women, Lurie would be well acquainted with imagination as a poetic device; yet imagination seems to feed itself out of violence.

The word-play present in the similar names *Lurie*, *Lucy* and *Lucifer* - referred to by Lurie himself when he casts Lucifer as “a thing not to be sympathised with” (Coetzee, 2000:34) – seems too obvious to ignore and to my mind suggests the similitude between Lurie and the biblical Serpent, the seducer of old. *Lucy* is a diminutive and therefore less vile version but nevertheless onomatopoeically related to both Lucifer and Lurie. Lurie adds the dimensions of suggesting the verb *lure* which is what he did with Melanie; also, the sound is reminiscent of the name of the Cape *Loerie*, an indigenous bird of the Cape. This probably suggests that Lurie should not be regarded as an impostor to the political situation but as a person who has indeed a birthright to be there, whether it be as a dominant force or not. It also seems to suggest that the serpent inhabited paradise from the very beginning and should therefore, like Lurie, be acknowledged. Lucy, Lurie, Lucifer, all three are interconnected and therefore have the following in common: their right to exist, their right to appropriate and their right to dominate.

In chapter 4 of *Disgrace*, Lurie the lecturer discusses Byron’s poem ‘Lara’, which has Lucifer the fallen angel as its topic. Then the similarities between Lurie and Lucifer are subtly illuminated, although he himself unashamedly recognises nothing:

‘So, what kind of creature is this Lucifer?’

By now the students must surely feel the current running between them, between himself and the boy. It is to the boy alone that the question has addressed itself; and, like a sleepwalker summoned to life, the boy responds. ‘He does what he feels like. He doesn’t care if it’s good or bad. He just does it’ (Coetzee, 2000:33).

Totally oblivious of his similarity to “this monster”, Lurie comments on the fact that there is “something constitutionally wrong” with this being:

On the contrary, we are invited to understand and sympathize. But there is a limit to sympathy. For though he lives among us, he is not one of us. He is exactly what he calls himself: *a thing*, that is, a monster. Finally, Byron will suggest, it will not be possible to love him, not in the deeper, more human sense of the word. He will be condemned to solitude (Coetzee:2000:33).

It is ironic that while Lurie seems to foretell his own fate, himself being the ‘monster’ who should not be loved or pitied, he has no insight into his actions. Earlier on Lurie mentions that Byron had fled to Italy in order to avert a scandal (Coetzee, 2000:15) and this also seems to foreshadow the events to come, reinforcing Lurie’s association with the Romantics. As mentioned previously Lurie associates himself with the aesthetically-minded Romantics but is then “brutally” confronted with the reality of Pragmatism which is introduced to his workplace when he is forced to start teaching Communication.

It is very easy to interpret the whole plot as an allegory of the political situation in the concurrent historic time and place, where power that had been previously reserved for the privileged whites is now being shared by others, with the whites largely cut off from any position of influence. The flagrant misuse of a position of dominance is criticised through the portrayal of the immoral advantages taken of the disadvantaged people by those in power. The fact that they deemed it their unquestionable right to do so, is definitely criticised.

The reversal of the roles with regard to landowner and foreman is a logical extension of the result of this inversion of roles. Lucy’s lesbian status seems to suggest that she is not unwilling to participate in the new dispensation, being opposed to the previous order of patriarchy. An act of brutal mastery forces her as much into cooperation as submission and also fathers an heir. It is ironic that Lucy seems more than willing to submit but is then brutally overpowered, an act that cancels out her spontaneous cooperation. This hints at the legacy of submission on which the future, bleakly criticised, must be built.

While events in *Disgrace* may appear realistic, their narrative purpose is not authenticity; instead, Cornwell (2002:314) and Reef (2005:254) argue that at certain critical junctures an underlying symbolic or allegorical tendency in the novel emerges to subvert the credibility of the book's mimetic pretensions. Samuelson (2006:184) comments that in general the past continues to exert control over the present through the allegorical tendency of novels published during the transition period from apartheid to rainbow nation. In these novels race is prioritised before gender in portraying the plight of its characters which often results in it being silenced. The violence inflicted in terms of race is regarded as much more important than violence across gender. This argument is developed in the section on rape which follows below.

4.5.2 Anti-allegory

Smit-Marais and Wenzel (2007:3) discuss the "rather bleak apocalyptic vision of gender roles, racial relationships and family relations in post-apartheid South Africa" offered by *Disgrace*. I agree when they argue that, even though the events that are portrayed appear to be realistic, the verisimilitude of their representation is not the purpose of their portrayal. Attridge (2006) cautions against reading Coetzee as mere allegory, and yet the benefits of including this level of significance are immensely rewarding. Smit-Marais and Wenzel describe the novel as presenting, instead of the traditional farm-novel which exalted the utopia of pastoral life, a dystopic view of life in South Africa, in which society at large is required to make drastic sacrifices in order to sustain the new order.

The fact of Lucy's pregnancy suggests that Coetzee innovatively applies allegory in representing women's maternal function as bearers of the future. Samuelson (2006:186) describes the stoep as a liminal space as Lucy steps over the veranda (*stoep*) into the sunlight to greet her father. The transitional moment symbolised by the *stoep* and emphasised in the novel's persistent use of the present tense will be broached only when she bears her child, "spawned in interracial rape". The completion of actions – the endings of the past and the entry into the sunlight – symbolising the celebrated "new" South Africa that Lurie seeks in the perfective tense would only be reached when Lucy's pregnancy completes the cycle. Only

then, Samuelson (2006:186) notes, will the future come into being. The fact that Coetzee employs Lurie as white male focaliser ironically subverts the simplistic conclusion of reading the novel as a traditional allegory. Although it does not logically follow that if a text is not to be read as an allegory, it should be read as an anti-allegory, it seems feasible to regard *Disgrace* as an anti-allegory, because the apparent similarity to allegorical status is subverted by the realism presented by the novel.

4.5.3 Narrative stance

The narrator can be described as a third-person narrator speaking from Lurie's point of view. Smit-Marais and Wenzel refer to this technique as an authorial narrator (2007:1). Lurie the protagonist is also a liminal character, simultaneously providing his personal views and commentaries in the narrative stance, affording the reader glimpses into his glib excuses for his morally reproachable behaviour. In chapter 2 of the novel Lurie tries to coax Melanie into sharing her beauty freely with all interested parties (obviously, trying to seduce her morally into a liaison with him) and then the narrator – and I believe this to be Lurie – comments:

“Smooth words, as old as seduction itself. Yet at this moment he believes in them. She does not own herself. Beauty does not own itself” (Coetzee, 2000:16).

I would classify Lurie's narration as free indirect thought, as there are frequent shifts between reporting and Lurie's inner thoughts. For example, when Melanie asks him if she can take up residence with him:

“Does she know what she is up to, at this moment?” – Authorial comment.

“When he made the first move, in the college gardens, he had thought of it as a quick little affair – quickly in, quickly out. Now here she is in his house, trailing complications behind her.” – Lurie's comment.

“What game is she playing? He should be wary, no doubt about that. – Lurie's comment. But he should have been wary from the start.” – Authorial comment. (Coetzee, 2000:27; my analysis).

Lurie, the protagonist, albeit an anti-hero, features as the narrator in third-person guise who offers the reader sole insight into his mind. In this way he may definitely be regarded as a liminal narrator. While enjoying the privileges of the previous dispensation which afforded him much freedom, he did not live up to the expectation of also honouring his obligations and in a real way shirked his responsibilities, *de facto* precluding himself from eligibility for a privileged position. In this way he was personally responsible for being regarded as unsuitable and as a result being pushed to the margins of society – literally illustrated by being ‘exiled’ to the smallholding where Lucy, herself an outcast of society due to her sexual orientation, was eking out a living. The development witnessed in terms of Lurie’s character is the pointed shift from being ostensibly privileged, although undeserving and therefore out of grace or in disgrace, towards being literally disgraced by circumstance, finally evolving and in an ironic sense culminating in a state of acceptance where his contrition and humanitarian work towards dogs in the end render him the grace or absolution he lacked previously.

The reverse process is also evident in *Disgrace*. Petrus as previously disadvantaged foreman and therefore only marginally important gradually moves into the centre of power; the same process is repeated by women in general. At the beginning of the novel women fulfill only a peripheral role in Lurie’s life, being more necessary for the satisfaction of his sexual appetite than being acknowledged as fellow human beings. Later on Bev becomes his guide towards attaining the grace that he has been lacking as she shows him how to perform acts of mercy on the abused dogs. Birks (2007:18) notes that Lurie’s fondness of Katy, the aging crippled bulldog, foreshadows his irrelevance in future as he once again identifies with the ageing and widowed figure of Teresa, middle-aged and abandoned by Byron her lover, as she represents the Other that Lurie learns to identify with.

Lurie’s direction changes when he leaves for Lucy’s home near Grahamstown. Lucy’s departure from Salem seems to indicate the need for a new beginning – not so much blessed – Salem – to go to a new Bethesda. It hardly needs mentioning that there can be no mention of sympathy without suffering (pathos). Baker (2005:41) comments that Lurie’s involvement with the dogs soon develops into identifying with them – a central theme of being aware of the otherness of animals. It is ironic that

women, who constitute another type of alterity, are not easily comprehended by him. From the outset, Lurie's emotional engagement with other people is suspect, probably even absent – consider his references to Soraya. It is interesting that while Lucy seems to achieve the grace required to evolve to a fully liminal state, Lurie does not and in fact regresses to a former position. The liminality that Lurie attains is only by grace of his association with dogs – as a humble and humiliated underdog.

4.6 Violence and liminality in *Disgrace*

As a result of change, liminality will never be a permanent state. As argued and defined in chapter 1, liminality is caused by change and development and the reactions of characters or people on this changed situation. Often liminality comes as a result of a person's conscious choices, but it is possible to have liminality thrust upon one, as explained in chapter 1. Sexual violence – and the consequent pregnancy – is a good example of liminal status that is forcefully thrust upon a person. In a certain sense, colonialism with its imperialistic desire of appropriating a space (whether geographical or temporal) functions on first exploring and setting the boundaries; inevitably going beyond those borders and eventually extending the boundaries. Liminality is at its core a subversive action because it constantly re-invents itself: it is never static.

Reef (2005:254) praises *Disgrace* as foregrounding the social issue of rape both through the representation and lack of it. Although critics such as Reef take the view that access to *Disgrace* is less restricted than to Coetzee's (earlier) novels, they argue in Coetzee's ethical favour that it is the novel's apparent accessibility and realistic structure that has lured some readers into perceiving it as a realist text. This is the exact strategy that Attridge cautions against in reading Coetzee's work. Reef (2005:254) suggests instead reading *Disgrace* as "an exploration of the failure of the liberal tradition to come to terms with the historical and present conditions of Africa".

Just as land is never neutral but rather culturally constituted, the body is never a neutral space that just happens to be there. The body is always contaminated by signification, even more than land. The body as a visual sign has often functioned as a site for the cultural coding of a multitude of ideas, of beauty and ugliness, the normal and abnormal, self and other, the familiar and exotic. Garuba (2002:105)

notes that in racist and sexist discourses, it has served as the site for the visual coding of naturalised difference.

Although frowned upon by Reef (2005:255), there are critics who advocate that the reader should remain alert to the possibility that representation obscures suffering and effectively dismisses the sexually violated body, which is a locus of brutality and subsequent pain, from the space occupied by the reader. In my opinion this technique results in creating distance and perspective for the reader.

In such novels the women symbolise the land and the nation that, though injured, withstand adversity to become the physical and metaphorical storeroom of the potential future. Reef (2005:257) concludes that rape as a metaphor obscures and misrepresents transitional South Africa's social and political realities, where rape is an endemic and proliferating social disorder.

Reef (2006:255) argues that it seems logical that consent precludes rape. While neither Lucy nor Melanie consented to the sexual act, they are both silenced when it comes to narrating their rape experiences. Both girls experience their violations in similar terms – going slack, as if “to die within herself for the duration, like a rabbit when the jaws of a fox close on its neck” (Coetzee, 2000:22). However, silence generates its own interpretations that remain valid until refuted.

According to Reef (2005:257) there seems to be a tradition of silence after physical violation. Ironically, the secrets that Lucy and Melanie are unable to relate to anyone are divulged to the reader. Coetzee ostensibly follows the tradition of silence but effectively subverts it. He forces the reader to become involved in such a way as to expose the immorality of such a tradition.³⁴

It is also possible to view rape as a metaphor for patriarchy's induction of its sons into its ideological framework. Reef (2005:258) suggests that rape inflicted on a male

³⁴ Proof of Coetzee's intent in this regard is found with the character Foe. If the reader is mindful of Palmer's observation (2004:10) that insight into another character's mind is often more accessible and credible than into that of a first-person, it seems that Coetzee indicates through Foe's words that there are more ways than one of stimulating change in a postcolonial context.

body subverts it into becoming female.³⁵ By this process the sons are conscripted into defending patriarchy and its ideology, especially in a military context.

Violence is multiplied as domination of same-race girls seems to be unsatisfactory to a perpetrator of violence. Such a warped mind views the disempowerment of, for example, coloured girls as an invitation to abuse them. Reef (2005:260), drawing on work done by Gane, comments: "It is as if Melanie's racial alterity both inflames Lurie's desire and bolsters his own entitlement." This is echoed by the fact that Soraya too seems to be of Oriental origin, and conversely the violence inflicted upon Lucy stems from a different race than her own.

Samuelson (2006:186) suggests that the novel's temporality and its inscription of racialised rape can best be understood by reading it as a diptych structure which sets up a partial mirror between two sets of sexual relations. The first is located in Cape Town and comprised Lurie's arrangement with Soraya, an exotic sex-worker of Asian descent, and his affair (which is nothing less than rape) with Melanie Isaacs, a coloured girl. The scene then moves to the Eastern Cape where Lucy is gang-raped by three Black men. They escape in a white Toyota Corolla which is, according to Samuelson (2006:186), a subtle hint that Lurie's sexual relations with Soraya and Melanie are to be seen as "corollary" of Lucy's rape.

The white Japanese car along with the descriptions of Melanie's "almost Chinese" cheekbones reminds us of the arbitrariness of racial classification in which Japanese was classified white and Chinese non-white in order to suit economic interests of the government. According to Samuelson (2006:187) *Disgrace* grapples with the racialisation of rape, ironically subverting the image of the black woman as promiscuous or the black man as rapist, as Lurie in the first place unleashes the powers of hell in his sexual prowess regarding Soraya and Melanie. The image of Lurie as rapist is later on in the text replaced by the unnamed, and therefore unidentified, black men who raped Lucy.

³⁵ Rape between homosexual persons explains the notion of "a male body rendered female", a formulation used by Reef (2005:258).

Samuelson (2006:188) notes that Coetzee's decision to specify the spatial locations of the novel's actions is a historicising act –the two panels that make up the diptych's actions are laden with historical significance. Cape Town recalls the history of slavery, so that Lurie can regard his relations with Soraya and Melanie as innocuous, but the text adds layers of history to them, rendering them ominous as the history of slavery embedded under the surface informs its inscription of racialised sexual violence.

The setting of Salem, where Lucy lives, is equally evocative of a history of frontier wars. In the time of the novel, the tide is once again turning so that the land is being reclaimed from settler ownership by Petrus as representative of the black majority. The name bears a link to the witch trials of New England, and beyond this, to the general persecution of witches in Europe. Both of these examples warn of the ways in which women have in history supplied justification for transitional states. Anxieties around ownership and inheritance lay at the heart of the Salem witch persecutions. Female sexual behaviour beyond or in excess of the patriarchal family's reproductive requirements caused such instability in the patriarchal system that eradication or submission of these women seemed to these societies the only solution. Samuelson (2006:188) concludes that Lucy's lesbianism, together with Melanie's mention of Adrienne Rich, an eminent feminist, is pivotal. Samuelson suggests that rape, following a similar logic to the witch-hunts, forcibly reinserts Lucy into the patriarchal system as reproductive body and annuls the menace of the self-sufficient, landowning woman.

Living under the threat of further rapes Lucy is forced to take refuge under Petrus's wing, a relative of one of the rapists. Thus Lucy cedes ownership of the land after being seeded by the rapists and retains ownership only of the house, the domestic space, symbolic of her autonomy. Samuelson (2006:188) comments that the carefully historicised act of rape acknowledges the act of violence and power being performed over women's bodies.

Lucy's remarkable acquiescence to this scenario is in sharp contrast to that of Lurie's reaction. She is prepared to adapt, sacrifice anything for the sake of peace – Salem – so that Lucy's location is firmly placed in the discourses of reconciliation, along

with a specific appeal to bear the messianic son. Lurie also notes this when he thinks of being “a Joseph” (Coetzee, 2000:217). Lucy is visited by three wild geese and is exhilarated to be “the chosen one”, but this is later subverted by the return of the three rapists. Here Samuelson (2006:189) remarks that the hope for reconciliation through a redemptive narrative is subjected to the author’s biting irony, as oppression is revisited upon the farm and the hope for peace and reconciliation is subverted. The question arises whether Gallagher’s³⁶ theory of constructing a counterfactuality is implied by the author. If this is the case, it seems credible to state that Coetzee is indeed actively involved in promoting a reality that is different to the historical one – proof of his intention to effect change in the contemporary postcolonial context. At the very least, it would be possible to state that change is at least conceptualised in the imagination of the reader.

4.7 Liminality and identity construction

Miscegenation creates a twofold problem for the racist mind – first, that of the sexual union between white and non-white; second, the possible offspring of mixed race. In apartheid South Africa the barriers to miscegenation were perceived as biological, theological and symbolic. Prohibiting miscegenation stopped just short of making an explicit link between sexual and territorial segregation. Reef (2005:259) notes that South African authors such as Coetzee, protesting against immoral and unethical behaviour and using a mixed-race conception and birth for this purpose, shrug off the fundamental tenets of apartheid, yet the symbolically positive existence of mixed race children is undermined by their conception not through love but through interracial violence. It is my conviction that this proves the destructive nature of rape.

The new entity that is represented by Lucy’s unborn child is described by Elizondo (1999:47) as a *mestizo*, the product of the process of *mestizaje* or mixing races. The identity of a child is inherited from the parents, which not only implies a mix of traditional races but also a hybridisation of cultures. According to Elizondo (1999:47-53) the identity of such a child will be either lauded or shunned, depending on the stereotype honoured by the society in which the child is born. Some of the deepest crises to be faced by such a person are determining with which culture he sides;

³⁶ Catherine Gallagher, not to be confused with Susan Van Zanten Gallagher.

dealing with the rejection by the other cultural group; and finally accepting and establishing his own unique identity as part of a group. Elizondo (1999:47) is adamant that this process should be mutually beneficial to all parties involved, the parent cultures as well as the new emerging identity, but admits that it is often not the case, as stereotypes, traditions and simplistic binary oppositions detract from the success of the on-going process. The warning, therefore, is that typical of the postcolonial context, the probability of finely nuanced possibilities must be acknowledged. Stereotypes and simple dyads are not perceptive to sensitive differentiations and would deny variations their existence. Identity as liminal concept cannot be bound to simple binaries – the existence of the hybrid absolutely demands the possibility of degrees. This in turn asserts the existence of the liminal.

Lurie fails miserably in achieving the grace needed for liminal status, while Lucy performs exceedingly well. Samuelson (2006:189) says of *Disgrace*

... [the] redemptive narrative that Coetzee caricatures is one in which sexual violence is erased even as it is written. This is the rhetoric of nationhood that would write Lucy's womb as a vessel for future-oriented reconciliation and redemption. Woman is currently cast as *mater dolorosa* offering the fruit of her womb for the national good, eclipsing her personal suffering.

The novel denies the optimism conveyed by a pastoral image of the pregnant Lucy cutting flowerbeds. This pastoral idyll is ironically subverted, as Petrus's pureblood son will already be born in spring and Lucy's only in autumn, symbolically facing the frost of early winter.

Reef comments (2005:256) that no reader could be blamed for feeling affronted and even prejudiced by *Disgrace* as a literary text. In other words, the possibility of experiencing Coetzee negatively and even as traumatic is great, especially given Coetzee's authorial status. If the reader allowed the values that could possibly be assumed from his prior works to influence one's reception of it, it is likely that the reader would be left with a feeling of desperate isolation. Reef notes that the way in which the story is told and received in the world outside of the text undermines the author's ethical sensitivity and acceptability. The result of this would leave the reader

feeling very confused and probably mystified about Coetzee's intent. Given the extreme likelihood that Coetzee could have a trick up his literary sleeve, the question arises whether Coetzee did not intentionally plan this subversion of both the text and the public's opinion of him. In this way he once again manages to surprise the unsuspecting reading public by using the hapless Lurie as narrator in order to effect change in postcolonial society.

4.8 Summary

This chapter considered the use of liminal characters as narrators, with special focus on *Foe* and *Disgrace*. In the former the narrator is a first-person character, Susan Barton, who provides most of the narration but from various points of focalisation (as Susan Barton, as voice of Friday, as voice of Cruso, as the daughter that she disowns, and as Foe who is writing the whole text), while in *Disgrace* Coetzee employs a third-person narrator that speaks from the focalisation of David Lurie. The issue of first-person and third-person ascription, roughly equal to focalisation, has also been touched upon. The speech category classification of narrators has enabled us to identify direct thought in *Foe* and free indirect thought in *Disgrace*. Embedded and double embedded narratives have also been indicated to assist Coetzee in staging the liminal narrator as an important agent of change in his texts.

The narratives of both *Foe* and *Disgrace* pose many questions which are left open-ended. These often concern points of view, or views on society. The reader (or Mr Foe, in the first instance) is confronted with regard to morality: should Friday be sent "back to the cannibals", or should he be taught to communicate and thus express himself, or should he forever be left dependent on the translation of his needs and experiences by such persons as Cruso or Susan Barton? What is the importance of words, and by extension, of languages and tongues (literal and figurative)? Who should decide about the importance of society's values? Applying a liminal narrator who is capable of associating with both ways, Coetzee thrusts these questions to the attention of his readers and heavily implies their responsibility to exercise a choice. This will be further investigated in chapter 5 when the responsibility of the **reader** is examined, focusing on *Diary of a Bad Year* and *Elizabeth Costello*.

Chapter 5 The implied reader as liminal figure

5.1 The role of the reader

This study argues that Coetzee portrays postcolonial society in a liminal or transitional stage. This is reflected by his use of narrators and characters, as well as by narrative strategies and conventions that affect the reader's interpretation. In this process, liminal characters/narrators respond to choices in diverse ways that were indicated in chapter 4. However, Coetzee is not content with effecting change within the textual world itself; he skilfully elicits response from his *readers* by inviting them to accept co-authorship of the text. This chapter aims to examine the role of the implied reader in dealing with a liminal society in Coetzee's texts. If one accepts the argument that the reader also contributes to the creation of the text through its reception, it follows that Coetzee would assume that his texts would be subjected to reading by an implied reader. Although her lectures are broadcast over the radio, the character Elizabeth Costello³⁷ argues that "the novel has made a virtue of not depending on being performed" (Coetzee, 2003:50). This is ironic as the argument repudiates itself in the act of being read by a reader.

The inevitable result of implying the role and impact of the reader is that Coetzee surrenders his absolute authorial responsibility. This opens up a discussion in the text regarding liminal characters, the role of the narrator and the use of strategies that compel the reader to assume responsibility or admit complicity. It is argued that readers could react in one of the following ways: by accepting and embracing change and adapting to circumstances, criticising or simply denying the imperative for change before reluctantly effecting it, or affirming the status quo – even minimising the effects of change by refuting all possibility of change.

Morton (2010:810-811)³⁸ suggests that Coetzee's strength of character probably resides in his ability to "self-consciously create inconclusive conclusions" to novels that appear straightforward but are in effect misleading. Morton emphatically cautions against delimiting Coetzee as a novelist purely concerned with a specific

³⁷ Coetzee, J.M. 2003. *Elizabeth Costello*. London: Secker and Warburg. All subsequent references to this text will refer to this edition.

³⁸ Review of Hania Nashef's study on Coetzee, *The Politics of Humiliation in the Novels of JM Coetzee* (2009).

historical phase but to grant him the freedom of addressing the human condition at large – in other words, Morton advocates that the reader should be graceful enough to allow Coetzee the writer to be universally applicable. In itself this argument allocates a weighty responsibility to the reader to “allow” the author to keep his authority.

In accordance with Morton’s contention and in order to illustrate Coetzee’s adeptness at using narrative strategies to elicit reader response, this chapter will focus on the elements of secrecy and phasing, idioculture and generic identity. The first two elements of secrecy and phasing are presented together as they display similarities, but then branch off to include a discussion of the narrator as a homodiegetic character as well as a consideration of the waiting space created by the limen. Also, the influence of mediation as misrepresentation is grouped under this broad category. Next, idioculture is examined and subdivided into intertextuality, embedded as well as double embedded narratives. Generic identity is subdivided into the text as diary and the issue of copies and originals. In the last instance, the impact of ethics and its relation to reader responsibility is examined in both *Elizabeth Costello* and *Diary of a Bad Year*.

5.2. Narrative strategies to elicit reader response

5.2.1 Secrecy and phasing

Secrecy refers to the textual phenomenon of omitting certain facts or neglecting to describe the occurrence of certain events. This technique is effective as a tool to snare the reader into co-responsibility for the text, as it implies knowledge of acts or events which are incompletely referenced by the text – without actually revealing what is referenced. Birks (2007:13) draws attention to the fact that secrecy or dissemblance is an important rhetorical device employed by Coetzee which manifests as a recurrent theme or motif in his work. Birks explains that research in psychopathology indicates the reasons why certain things have to be left unsaid, for example the rape in *Disgrace*. Ultimately, Birks asserts (2007:13), the representation of handicap and physical molestation on an imaginary level allows Coetzee to reflect on the nature and position of South African subjects in their complex relation to history and society. This is reminiscent of the technique called phasing by Aguirre

(2006:19), which is understood to imply withheld or insufficient information, fragmented manuscripts, interrupted narratives, and labyrinthine spaces. The author controls whether information is withheld or expanded. As Aguirre (2006:14-20) indicates, phasing as a narrative technique functions on the Russian Formalist assumption that form conveys meaning. The ability of the threshold or the liminal to function as a site that expands or shrinks, depending on the occasion and the decision of the writer, therefore defamiliarises reality and creates the possibility of perspective for the reader.

5.2.1.1 The narrator as homodiegetic character

Elizabeth Costello (2003) casts a fictional character as a historical (although imaginary) novelist who also poses as narrator. The novel consists of a series of eight lectures given by an ageing historic writer of modest fame from Australia, invited to visit different parts of the world in recognition of her work, and cameo scenes depicting her private life concurrent to delivering the lectures as connective tissue. Attwell (2006:29) remarks that while Coetzee embeds Costello's speech within fiction, it is arguably possible to regard these "lectures" as exercises in "intellectual autobiography". In so doing, Coetzee configures Costello as a mediator, a translator who intercepts between her (fictional) world of opinions, intuitions and rights and that of the reader. I believe that this issue will be settled in the fiction itself, by virtue of the reader's contribution to the text. Graham (2006:219) convincingly argues the point that Coetzee subverts the notion that there is nothing special to be derived by applying a female gender narrator. In 1999 Coetzee published the text *The Lives of Animals* which reverberates throughout *Elizabeth Costello*, in fact providing all of the "lectures" ostensibly authored by (the fictional) Costello. Attwell (2006:33) admits that Coetzee previously employed characters/narrators in his novels who were

challenged at critical moments to step out of their circumscribed roles and speak to the general *malaise* around them; each, in his or her own way, fails the test and then becomes painfully detached from the rules of discourse which he or she is being asked, or sometimes forced, to play.

He deems Costello the narrator to be unique in that Coetzee attempts through her somewhat to address the demands placed on him to step into the public limelight. As Costello represents a sounding board for the reader, to choose whether to believe her or not, I am convinced that Costello as a medium invites the reader's participation in the text. In fact, Graham (2006:225) notes that the wordplay in "medium" suggests that the writer not only records voices from another realm but also draws attention to the imperfection of the medium of writing itself. Costello pointedly mentions the fact that a[n Australian] readership as opposed to a writership has in the recent past been actively promoted by authors, when "we got out of the habit of writing for strangers" (Coetzee, 2003:52).

This very idea is reiterated by Szczurek (2009) in a comparison between Coetzee's fictional character Elizabeth Costello and the real-life novelist Nadine Gordimer. Szczurek brilliantly and humorously draws on Coetzee's writing in configuring an imaginary figure, Eliza Coetzee, to pose as the historical JM Coetzee's fictional relative. The fictional figure is then deftly applied as a vehicle for conveying Szczurek's own thoughts, ideas and interpretations regarding Coetzee, specifically as featured in *Elizabeth Costello*.

Using the fictional Eliza Coetzee, Szczurek (2009:37) convincingly draws attention to all the obvious similarities between Elizabeth Costello and Nadine Gordimer, explaining that

... to expose the parallels between the two women, and talk about E[lizabeth] C[ostello] as a fictional vehicle for conveying John's ideas...I will attempt to grasp John's elusiveness as an author in the process.

Speaking through the fictional voice Eliza Coetzee, Szczurek estimates that Coetzee's deeper involvement with Nadine Gordimer's writing started after the 1990's when he started commenting on her work as a literary critic by directly reacting to it in his own fiction (2009:37). Costello as a fictional construct came to life during the time that Coetzee delivered the Belitt Lecture at Bennington College in 1996. He subsequently staged her reappearance at the Tanner Lectures at Princeton University two years later. *Elizabeth Costello* is mostly composed of

rewritten versions of these earlier lectures, now represented as “Lessons”. Szczurek (2009:38) asserts that their heroine has from the beginning shared some obvious characteristics with Nadine Gordimer, but only in the “Lessons” final revised versions is her unmistakable resemblance conclusively revealed. What cannot be contested, though, is the fact that *Elizabeth Costello* is largely compiled from the essays published earlier as *The Lives of Animals*. The latter was ostensibly intended as semi-factual essays. Now that they are incorporated into the fictional text and presented by the fictional figure of Elizabeth Costello borrowed from history, the intention seems to be to erase the boundaries between fact and fiction. In fact, Ogden (2010:471-474) concludes that the novel itself, in true Coetzee fashion, does not so much offer final conclusions, but rather presents a “challenge to convention” which depends heavily on the willingness of the reader to become co-creator of the text.

The final chapter or “lesson” is entitled “At the Gate”(Coetzee, 2003:193), and is reminiscent of Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* and of the inevitable passing of (the) Pilgrim through the pearly gates. The heavenly city is here transformed into a terminal (pardon the pun) little Australian town. Manzanas Calvo (2006:89) notes that Kafka’s parable *Before the Law* comes to mind. This parable narrates the vain attempts of a farmer to gain access to the gates of law. The gate remains open but guarded by a keeper who questions the farmer over many years. Kafka subverts the expectations of a gate that remains open, yet precludes entrance: this makes the wait even more agonising. At the same time, Manzanas Calvo (2006:91) notes, the parable shows the seemingly unproductive status of gates as both static objects that unleash a plethora of productivity and processes which produce change. Once the farmer loses interest in gaining access to the gate, the keeper remarks that he will now close it, for nobody but the farmer could have gained access by it in any case. The gate which granted no admittance while open is closed now that the detainee is no longer detained and no longer desires to get across to the other side.

Coetzee allows the same idea to surface as Costello waits at the new gate; the last gate she will cross before embarking on the voyage to the New World. Before entering Costello must comply with a simple task: to write a statement of belief. The task, on the surface deemed easy, becomes impossible for the experienced writer

Costello. Throughout all her lectures across the world, she has proved herself averse to beliefs and messages. Costello detaches herself from the word 'belief' because she says her profession is to write, not to believe: "I do imitations" (Coetzee, 2003:194). Against the need to contain, circle and delimit, Costello offers a formulation of provisionality, of a personality that refuses to be limited by the gates of belief (Manzanas Calvo, 2006:91). It is my contention that she is definitely transgressing the limitations, and therefore very much a liminal character. In typical Coetzee fashion of never prescribing but merely describing, he never really reveals what is beyond the border – we are not told what the gate separates and what it guards – the reader is left to figure this out for himself.

5.2.1.2 The liminal waiting space

For Manzanas Calvo (2006:92) the waiting area suggests a time and space in transit, an inter-medium where memory does not accumulate and without established paths, creating a sense of insecurity through the absence of a past. This correlates with the definition of liminal space as set out in chapter 1. In this sense the liminal waiting space is associated with the technique of secrecy, as it resembles a bottomless hole into which time and memory would spiral into indeterminacy. Ogden (2010:475-477) confirms the hypothesis that the textual construction of *Diary of a Bad Year*, together with *Elizabeth Costello*, constitutes an experiment in liminality, one that interrogates the traditional boundaries between fiction and "knowledge". Costello, as a liminal character, stands not as acclaimed writer but unknown and unremembered, alien to a common heritage or burden of remembering (Manzanas Calvo, 2006:92). In my opinion this signifies that no growth or development is possible.

Costello insists that she only writes down – like a secretary :

It is not for me to interrogate, to judge what is given to me. I merely write down the words and then test them, test their soundness, to make sure that I have heard right (Coetzee, 2003:199).

It is significant to note that this is in sharp contrast to what Coetzee expects of his readers – *they* are forced to judge, to participate! In *Diary of a Bad Year* Anya is also

alluded to as a “secretaria”, adding a little Filipina flavour. Coetzee’s intention of irony is very clear in that Anya’s lack of interpretative skills and basic knowledge precludes her recording of JC’s opinions and arguments without mediation. To be fair, she does make her own interpretations and draws her own conclusions, which shows an enterprising spirit. The positions of Anya and Costello are different. Costello acts as a medium, as indicated by Graham (2006:225), but ironically denies her authority to intervene, while Anya is supposed only to write down while she actively tries to interpret.

Eliza Coetzee, the fictional voice of Szczurek (2009:41), implores us to approach Elizabeth Costello as a fictional vehicle in which JM Coetzee, Nadine Gordimer, other writers both fictional and real, are fused into one character that JM Coetzee uses for transmitting some ideas about fiction and reality. Critics such as Graham (2006:15) and Reef (2005:255) echo the hypothesis that female narrators in Coetzee are of special significance, sharing the traits of writing and reflecting on the process(es) of writing, or interrogating authorship.

Reader involvement is evident in *Elizabeth Costello* in raising ethical and aesthetic questions. Szczurek (2009:41-42) also comments that the text blurs the boundaries between fact and fiction, asking what it means to be human. Bearing in mind the significant input of *The Lives of Animals* on *Elizabeth Costello*, it can be accepted that Coetzee indeed subtly erodes the boundaries between fact and fiction. Counter to tradition, *Elizabeth Costello*’s frame story is told with

... laconic metafictional interpolations by the implied author, drawing attention to the conventions of realism that are employed, and occasionally flouted in the narrative itself – a mediation on the nature of storytelling that only a writer of the calibre of Coetzee could pull off (Szczurek, 2009:41).

In confessing before her jurors, Costello does not establish a beginning or end, but rather a middle ground where all voices are legitimate in their own right. This seems to create a new version of existence where the borders between the self and the other have been dismantled. Manzanas Calvo (2006:93) remarks that it is interesting that self-fashioning is similar and simultaneous to self-unfashioning. It is a space full

of intellectual possibilities, inviting moral hybridity and moral possibility. This fact reminds one of the irony that is conveyed when the reader realises that “grace” is inherently part of “disgrace”, an intimation that is hinted at in the novel *Disgrace*. The point here is that, as discussed in previous chapters, identity is not established without allusion to what is excluded. Just as identity cannot be defined only by the self without reference to the meaningful other, and liminality hinges as much on inclusion as on exclusion, just so disgrace is indicated to be a part of grace – as Lurie only learns in the final instance.

The concept of purgatory is introduced in *Elizabeth Costello* as part of a tertiary system that dismantles the binary oppositions inferior/superior, powerless/powerful, rich/poor of the colonialist system³⁹ to be replaced by a more complex triad. The notion that liminal space, a waiting area, is associated with purgatory with its connotations of penitence and purification is an interesting one that could be investigated further.

5.2.1.3 Mediation as misrepresentation

Coetzee’s technique of representation through absence is especially pertinent in *Diary of a Bad Year*, in which Señor C allows a medium – an agent of dilution – to filter his ironically entitled *Strong Opinions*, which results in some loss of original meaning and acumen, albeit humorously – for example, the abovementioned reference to Brezhnev’s generals (Coetzee, 2007:25).

A fourth distancing frame or point of interference is brought about by Anya, who “hands it over to spellcheck” (Coetzee, 2007:26), thus exposing JC’s opinions after her editing to the computerised scrutiny of a machine that “has no mind of its own” (Coetzee, 2007:26). Attwell (2010:220) suggests that the name Anya probably derives from Anna or Anya Snitkina, the stenographer credited with the production of the text of *The gambler*. She allegedly had a relationship with Dostoevsky and later on married him. An example of Coetzee’s recognition of his metafictional situation, it is acutely humorous to realise that Coetzee is in real time also subjecting his text to

³⁹ Talib (2002:3) discusses the identity of English as a language in a postcolonialist phase, remarking that the English have come to regard themselves and their language as necessarily bearing the evidence of both having been colonised but also potentially colonising others.

the interference and interpretation of the implied reader, thereby creating yet another frame.

As Anya progresses with the typing she increasingly narrates her own tale: one in which morality is an essential issue. It is clear that she revels in her own sexuality and indeed is pleased by JC's obvious admiration of her body. Although she gently derides JC for being a "poor helpless babe" (Coetzee, 2007:69), she nevertheless takes the opportunity to let him peek at her (which, interestingly, he claims he did not) when she chases him out of her dressing room to change into the same tomato-red house smock "in which she first appeared to me" (Coetzee, 2007:75). This is a subtle suggestion that Anya acts rather like a muse, an apparition that serves to inspire JC as he is creating his *Strong Opinions*. An interesting alter ego for JC is created by Anya, who starts to call him "Señor C" – even this persona is not sufficient for Coetzee as he immediately suggests the alternative "Senior C", both of which apply to the ageing Australian writer that functions as the main character.

Anya's relation with Alan is based purely on physical excitement. Anya is initially a rather one-dimensional figure who is content to be Alan's trophy. As long as the sexual relationship is "hot as fire" (Coetzee, 2007:87) she is pleased, although it is gradually revealed that she and Alan do not share many opinions. She even argues with Alan only in order to impress him on a sexual level:

... and Alan argues back, so he can see for himself that the woman he dumped his wife for is not a dummy who happens to have a nice body, but someone with a mind of her own, someone with spunk, as he puts it (but not as much spunk as my lord and master, I usually reply) (Coetzee, 2007:79).

Anya is gradually changed by her exposure to Señor C. When it becomes clear that Alan wants to push ahead with his plan to redirect JC's dividends to his own account, Anya gives him "formal notice": not only is she displeased with this scheme, but she also begins to see Alan in a different light (Coetzee, 2007:143) – as being a professional swindler (Coetzee, 2007:139). Then she consciously chooses to disassociate from him, breaking off ties, leaving behind all her "stuff" and going off to Brisbane to live with her mother for the time being. It is interesting to note that, while

Anya makes a conscious decision to choose honesty, disassociating from Alan, on the same page she and JC have a discussion regarding honour/dishonour, in which she claims that honour has lost its power, dishonour is dead (Coetzee, 2007:139). In this way Coetzee links the three separate narratives by applying the same theme – honour/dishonour – in all three. In the *Strong Opinions* honour as a theme is recurrent: Blair, Bush, Guantanamo Bay, and Pinter. Coetzee uses this technique to knit together the three narratives. Lowry (2007:4) advises reading all three narratives concurrently, “as each ligament of this hybrid is held in a weirdly elegant tension with the rest.”

5.2.2 Idioculture

As Costello explains, the author(s)

... seem to be glancing over their shoulder all the time they write, at the foreigners who will read them. Whether they like it or not, they have accepted the role of interpreter, interpreting Africa to their readers (Coetzee, 2003:51).

Coetzee uses a universally accessible language and style, affording his fictional texts a deceptive simplicity, but also inclines towards sophisticated strategies that may escape casual readers. In fact, he is often accepted by intellectual readers, but rejected by the broad public reader who wishes to escape harsh reality. The fact that his novels have even seen Japanese translations bears witness to the contention that he is favoured either as an exotic or intellectual taste. He specifically considers the postcolonial market as his target audience, preferring a postcolonial milieu such as Australia or South Africa. His novels carry a strong cosmopolitan flavour with French and Balkan immigrants in Australia, a Filipina girl, the coloured Melanie Isaacs, Friday from the cannibal tribes of Africa, and Susan Barton’s daughter from Bahia. One could assume that the presence of so many cultures would make the context of his texts seem credible and recognisable to the postcolonial reader. Also, it would increase the possibility of liminality in the context as so many different cultures create an environment conducive to instability and change. The interplay of different fictional texts and different levels of textuality (historical, fictional, real, imagined, semi-autobiographical) combine to produce a fertile perception of idioculture.

5.2.2.1 Intertextuality

This term indicates the complex sense of textual corroboration of authorial presences in fictive worlds. This also includes textual penetration of the actual world. As in many instances, nothing is unequivocally simple when speaking about Coetzee. He creates a plausible textual world by applying real historical figures such as Costello. In the process of borrowing her from real life, he casually creates the verisimilitude that many committed writers so desperately try to achieve. Also, bringing in the (fictional) African writer Emmanuel Egudu⁴⁰ positions the novel in postcolonial space. Furthermore, presenting the text as a series of lessons fortifies the presumption that this text, loosely based on *The Lives of Animals*, is something distinctly different from a text that must be deemed completely fictive. The inclusion of the postscripted letter by Lady Elizabeth Chandos, a fictional wife to the fictional Lord Philip Chandos, created by Hoffmansthal (1902) further anchors *Elizabeth Costello* in a virtual world inhabited by quasi-historical characters by different authors. Graham (2006:227) suggests that Elizabeth Chandos seems intended to act as a literary ancestor to Coetzee, as her historical anteriority dates to 1602, the date that her husband supposedly composed the letter that was documented in 1902 by Hoffmansthal. I would interpret this as indicating Coetzee's literary heritage as firmly rooted in a succession of figures: Elizabeth Chandos, Elizabeth Curren, Elizabeth Costello, sharing a first name and the first letter of his surname. It is intriguing to realise that it is possible for a writer to author the existence of a character in a historical time that is anterior to his own. Although this technique in fiction is not limited to Coetzee, anchoring the character in actual history (as Coetzee repeatedly does), provides a sense of a historical credibility, a legacy in literariness so to speak, which echoes Rayment's and Drago's actions in *Slow Man* – attempting to create a history by hindsight. In this way Coetzee as author echoes the content of his fiction on another level in actual life.

5.2.2.2 Embedded narratives

Various embedded narratives form the fabric of the fictional *Diary of a Bad Year* text. On the surface the first is that of JC, writing a book to be named *Strong Opinions* for a German publisher. These opinions are presented in an impersonal third-person

⁴⁰ Obiwu wrote a convincing internet article (2009) arguing that Egudu is a “thinly disguised” rendition of the Nigerian scholar Emmanuel Obiechina.

narrative but every so often the reader may discern that through various focalisers, personal views are subtly suggested. The process of writing the book, however, is not completed, as even the title is still under discussion with the Germans. In fact the completed narrative only unfolds in the process of the reader reading, which frame involves JM Coetzee as the ultimate creator of the narrative.

Second in line are JC's personal comments, narrated in the first person, presented almost as a diary of comments on meeting Anya and everything that follows from that introduction. Third is the absolutely personal diary of the character Anya employed by JC to do the typing. Her first-person narrative provides personal, social insight into the *mise-en-scène* set up by Coetzee. Of course her involvement in the *Strong Opinions* is also ironic, for not only her human errors, but spellcheck too combine with JC's narrative to form a new, more complex and evolved set of *Strong Opinions*. The question arises as to whom this new narrative belongs. After all, the combined product which is presented to the reader consists of more than the mere sum of JC's composition, Anya's editing and spellcheck "corrections". The next, more deeply embedded narrative develops as JC comments on Anya's involvement in generating his *Strong Opinions* and the narrative becomes increasingly embedded as Anya reports her own or Alan's narratives, all of which are ultimately recorded by Coetzee the author.

Authorial views or comments pop up everywhere in the narrative, although especially in the uppermost sections of remarks. For instance, the heading "On terrorism" reveals the following observations:

What intelligent person would want to speak well of Islamist terrorists – of rigid, self-righteous young men who blow themselves up in public places in order to kill people they define as enemies of the faith? No one, of course. So why be concerned at the ban, except in the abstract, as an abstract infringement of free speech? (Coetzee, 2007:21).

This technique forces the implied reader to formulate his personal point of view on the issues raised by the text, as Coetzee never prescribes a solution. The questions are nonchalantly left in the air, leaving the sole responsibility for his reaction to the

reader. Yet the statement is so obviously biased that it compels the reader to adjust his assessment of the speaker.

In the same section authorial comments or explanations are inserted as parentheses within sentences:

This new contest, however (so proceeds the explanation), is not being played by the rules of rationality. The Russians made survival (national survival, which in politics means the survival of the state and in the game of international chess the ability to go on playing) their least negotiable demand. The Islamist terrorists, on the other hand, care nothing about survival, either at the individual level (this life is as nothing compared with the life after death) or at the national level (Islam is larger than the nation; God will not allow Islam to be defeated) (Coetzee, 2007:20).

An example of JC/Coetzee inserting his personal details into the narrative, referring ostensibly to his publication *Giving Offence*:

In the 1990's, I recall, I published a collection of essays on censorship. It made little impression. One reviewer dismissed it as irrelevant to the new era just dawning... (Coetzee, 2007:22).

The reader is offered the opportunity to share in multiple perspectives in the unique presentation of different sections on each page. This is reminiscent of the fragmented or kaleidoscopic image suggested in chapter 1. It is quite easy to distinguish between JC's dated *Strong Opinions* and undated day to day comments (*Second Diary*), both of which he tries (unsuccessfully, as he is completely side-tracked by the baser emotions that kick in when Anya makes her appearance) to separate into a personal and public persona, Anya's editing as well as her own personal thoughts, and Alan's point of view, presented through Anya's mediation.

5.2.2.3 Double embedded narrative

This intricate narrative technique is also applied in *Diary of a Bad Year* by at first presenting the reader with two frames, soon divided into three. Each of these frames presents a different, although interwoven impression on the situation of the novel.

This text offers the simultaneous presentation of a fictional text – *Strong Opinions* – and the editorial comments/personal thoughts of the *author* of the comments (let us call him Señor C, as it later becomes evident that he bears some resemblance to Coetzee but never admits to more than merely being called JC) and Anya, the object of his desire who also features in the production of the *Strong Opinions*. This novel, published in 2007, was the second by Coetzee to appear since his relocation to Australia.

The novel opens with the first of the *Strong Opinions* (“On the origins of the state”) presented on the top half of the page. The bottom half of the page presents the reader with comments, private thoughts, obviously those of the writer of the strong opinions, presented almost as circumstantial evidence or a diary of the events that happened concurrently to the writing of his opinions. As the novel progresses a third point of view is soon added at the bottom of the page: Anya’s rendition of the developing relationship between her and “Señor C”.

Each section provides a distinct and clearly distinguishable point of view. Logically, JM Coetzee, the author, is author of all three, but the first narrative also represents the supposedly objective academic views of his narrator character, as is the middle narrative which supplies the protagonist’s personal views almost as in a diary. The third narrative provides Anya’s narrative in which she discusses her experience of JC/Señor C and his strong opinions. All three narratives combine to present the reader with different and complementary perspectives of a rich and diverse postmodernist and postcolonial tale; each one being wholly separate but not separable.

The dust jacket of the 2007 Harvill and Secker (British) edition provides a succinct summary of the plot, without which explanation the possibility exists that the reader

at large would perhaps miss some of the ironic content of the fiction. Although the dust jacket commentary is provided by an unidentified author, the fact that the publisher deemed these comments worthy enough to adorn the text is a vote of faith in their validity as an informed opinion.

In my opinion, it is credible to assume that Coetzee configures himself as the fictional protagonist of *Diary of a Bad Year*. Lowry (2007:3) convincingly argues that Coetzee is deftly tricking the reader into assuming that he is personally recognisable as author of *Diary of a Bad Year*. Although there are striking similarities between JC (also referred to as Juan, Señor C, even Senior C), the protagonist/author of *Strong Opinions*, and JM Coetzee, author of *Diary of a Bad Year*, Lowry concludes that this is a skilful *trompe l'oeil* technique by Coetzee to allow the author (once again) to vanish; nothing is as straightforward as one would imagine. My opinion is that there are sufficient similarities between JC and Coetzee, however complex, to be able to associate them with one another. Of course the author's disclaimer still stands that it is permissible to refute, disown or repudiate any interpretation by the public as being precisely only that: a personal interpretation. This also provides, in typical Coetzee fashion, the possibility of subversion.

Nevertheless, Coetzee pictures himself (which immediately provides a frame, and the concomitant distance, as Coetzee the author describes the protagonist as Coetzee, or Señor C/Senior Citizen as referred to by the character Anya) as an "eminent, seventy-two year old Australian writer" who is in the process of writing up some *Strong Opinions* on a number of day-to-day topics as they seemingly present themselves in contemporary events. The metafictional context of these details is obvious: the reader of *Diary of a Bad Year* is involved – even forced, in the process of internalising the text – to contribute to the creation of meaning and interpretation of the text in a simulation of the relationship between Anya and JC's *Strong Opinions*.

5.2.3 The generic identity of *Diary of a Bad Year*

5.2.3.1 The text as a diary

The title of this text defines it as a diary, and yet the reader of *Diary of a Bad Year* may consider its generic identity one of the most puzzling concerns. McDonald (2010:493) comments that although some editions have identified this text as a novel, others are wary of this assertion and merely call it a “work of fiction”, in some instances adding that it is a book about “how we choose to read”. It does not strike McDonald (2010:493) as unusual to receive surprises from Coetzee. McDonald notes that Coetzee had consistently made it his business to interrogate the cultural, historical, epistemological and affective specifics of the form of the novel; yet displays a “singular loyalty” in applying present-tense narratives. He suggests that Coetzee regards the present tense as a “means of escape from the thrall of the novel”. The use of the present tense is consistent with the conventions of a diary. *Diary of a Bad Year* presents the reader with two concurrent present-tense narratives, forming a weirdly elegant balance between the separate threads. In this text, more than ever, the reader is required to read between the lines, as JC’s narrative and Anya’s narrative combine, supplemented and fortified by the division of the text into opinions and observations – also reminiscent of diary contents.

The content of the material of the “Strong Opinions” seems to present statements of a public or formal nature which are balanced out by the more intimate “Second Diary”. Attwell (2010:214-215) notes the personal nature of the “Second Diary” as opposed to the “public performance of reason”. It is interesting to note that any “Second Diary” implies a “first diary” which is not explicitly identified – the reader is left to decide for himself what this would constitute. Finally, the “Diary” mentioned by the title consists of all these distinct threads that combine to form the text – with a nudge to the reader to remember that the diary is documentary of “a bad year”.

5.2.3.2 Copy and original/proliferation

Similar to the process in *Foe*, Manzanás Calvo (2006:101) remarks that the dialectics between copy and original get confused when it becomes unclear which is which in *Elizabeth Costello*. Repetition does not imply escaping the present, but

rather indicates a convergence of everything in the here and now. It is at this point that Coetzee involves the reader to establish significance in the text.

This convergence does not change the past, but can alter its assessment, as noted by Manzanás Calvo (2006:101) and also by Aguirre (2006:21)⁴¹. Manzanás Calvo (2006:101) mentions that it opens a new intermediary space beyond the gate of the real and beyond the expressive means of realism where the displaced or removed past may have a major, although intermittent presence. The lack of temporal and spatial frontiers is evident in narrative terms as well, for there is no narrative closure with which to edify the reader.

The process at the “gates” in *Elizabeth Costello*’s final lesson (Coetzee, 2003:193) functions to open the door to a locus of intersections where the past and present intermingle, where the historical and the fictional create a seamless texture, where the real and the spectral meet, and where the concept of the “real” acquires a variety of nuances. As mentioned previously in the section on the liminal waiting space, this middle arena, like Costello’s purgatory, resembles the in-between space that is metaphorised and is therefore eminently liminal in status. Liminality corresponds to the state of borderlessness that Costello clings to by refusing to acknowledge the existence of the boundary.

5.3 Ethics and reader responsibility in *Elizabeth Costello* and *Diary of a Bad Year*

Reef (2006:248) notes that since 1996 Coetzee has favoured expressing his ideas in narrative form by speaking through a fictional character such as Elizabeth Costello. It is becoming increasingly clear that Coetzee characteristically declines delivering his theoretical concerns and philosophies without mediation or in a discursive/expository style. Ogden (2010:467) suggests that Coetzee seems to intimate that “every account of fiction starts from the premise that we as the readers participate in its coming into being”.

⁴¹ “If we examine the construction of the plot not with regard to ourselves as readers but in terms of the characters’ assumptions, we will find that retardation primarily affects the characters as it shapes part of their worlds, and ... through their experience, OUR perception of reality”. (Aguirre, 2006:21)

5.3.1 Reader responsibility in *Elizabeth Costello*

Yeoh (2008:78) examines the issue of Coetzee's narrative by addressing the ethics of a globalising world. He explains that *Elizabeth Costello* as a novel endeavours to span a global world, underscoring the universality of evil in the world. Costello as Coetzee's voice questions the nonchalant treatment of evil by the world and emphatically disapproves of meat production all over the world. Yeoh identifies the major economic force of global capitalism as a core strand in *Elizabeth Costello* and indicates how the process of homogenisation is subtly deplored in the novel. Yeoh (2008:78) calls this erosion of liminality a "regime of standardisation and homogenisation ushered in by the erosion of national borders" and cites Dimock's reference to the "McDonaldisation" of the world.

Yeoh (2008:84) then convincingly argues that this state of mediocrity and normality seems to have nothing in common with ethics, resounding in the idea of indifference amongst the many 'normal' characters penned by Coetzee. Throughout the text, as Costello anguishes over ethical issues, she finds herself surrounded by either indifference or characters content to be without opinion. Here Coetzee involves the reader once again by insisting that the reader should exercise his responsibility to choose. Costello seems to insist on an ethics of guilt: "Is it possible, I ask myself, that all of them are participants in a crime of stupefying proportions?" (Coetzee, 2003:114). Coetzee manages to involve his readers in the process of taking a stance. Baker (2005:35) joins Reef (2006:248) in voicing the suspicion that Coetzee has "abandoned" the idea of purely theoretical involvement, seemingly simplifying his narratives and moving into a more realist narrative mode. After the subsequent publication of *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007) and *Slow Man* (2006), this hypothesis still remains unrefuted.

In Baker's words (2005:35), "It is true that Coetzee's more recent novels appear on the surface more realistic and less theoretically challenging, perhaps by virtue of greater historic specificity". It must be noted here that critics such as Morton (2010:811) warn against pigeonholing Coetzee into being a writer purely concerned with one geographical location, historical period, or school of criticism. Coetzee seems to suggest a movement towards compassion as a viable solution to many

issues. Baker (2005:36) identifies a turn towards sympathy in explicit fashion in the *Lives of Animals*, which can be read as an introduction to Elizabeth Costello's lectures. Mrs Curren in *Age of Iron* acts as prefiguration of Costello (Birks, 2007:13).

Up to this point, Yeoh (2008:86) has convincingly explained how Coetzee presents a vision of ethicality where the 'normal' state of affairs can be deemed 'good' while on another level still "steeped in sin, transgression and guilt". It seems that Coetzee indicates that being 'normal', middle-of-the-road is worthy of damnation, as Yeoh explains with reference to the church of Laodicea in Revelations 3:15-16. Yeoh (2008:87) concludes that Costello, in merging into or attaining 'normality', is condemned in the very moment of the assimilation.

Mendelson-Maoz (2007:111) posits that art and literature, aesthetics and ethics, have had strong associative ties throughout time. According to her (2007:113), echoing and quoting Booth (1988) and Newton (1995), literature can serve as a moral laboratory. Ethics, admittedly applying different methods, strategies and goals, can likewise be viewed as articulating the relationships between readers, narrators and authors in an ethical relationship. Yeoh (2008:79) explores how *Elizabeth Costello* as a text is concerned with the ethical issues of wrongdoing, sin, guilt, salvation and damnation. Yeoh (2008:80) explains that *Elizabeth Costello* compares the atrocities of contemporary meat production to the ghastly conditions of Nazi detention camps, ultimately proving that sin is universal, extending to the global population. Therefore *Elizabeth Costello's* concerns with sin and complicity are associated with its discussion of salvation and damnation, the "most saliently recurring ethical issue in the text".

Yeoh (2008:81) points out that the subject of salvation is also prominent in Costello's fifth lecture, "The Humanities in Africa", in which the question is raised whether literature can constitute a form of salvation. Costello refers to how readers may turn to literature with "a craving that is, in the end, a quest for salvation" (Coetzee, 2003:127). Not surprisingly, notes Yeoh, the novel ends with a focus on (denied) salvation.

While *Elizabeth Costello* is fundamentally concerned with the ethics of guilt and salvation, it cautions against the postcolonial world's tendency to shun and ignore this ethical concern. Yeoh (2008:81) argues that Coetzee seems to have forestalled the fact that it is still possible to retain the issue of ethicality in our reading of the text although the globalising culture dissipates and occludes it. Here Coetzee once again shares responsibility with the implied reader, leaving the reader enough scope to make a decision to accept or reject liminality. Yeoh (2008:83) argues that the normalisation/globalisation of the world is subtly eroding the margins, in my words resulting in a loss of liminality and moving towards an unexceptional and mediocre state that seems set to dominate the globe.

Coetzee, never satisfied with respecting the boundaries defined by and set up by conventional practice, in this way proves himself to be a liminal presence. In terms of liminality he demands even greater involvement from the implied reader of the next novel that will be discussed. In contrast to *Elizabeth Costello*, *Diary of a Bad Year* presents a much more complicated form of discourse that offers multiple perspectives to the reader.

5.3.2 *Diary of a Bad Year* and ethics

McDonald (2010:495) notes that *Diary of a Bad Year* obliges the reader to re-examine generic labels and to be wary of the customs of reading, feeling and thinking which have been rationalised by the novel. The most obvious proof of this statement is that the title defines the text as a diary. Note that although there are multiple narrators and perspectives, the title creates the expectation of a single diary. Simultaneously it raises the equally challenging issue of the role of the novelist as expressed in the dialectic between JC, the author encountered within the covers of the book, and JM Coetzee, the author identified on the cover of the book. Attwell (2010:214) asserts that the text was intended as autobiographical by Coetzee. McDonald expresses that he finds it tempting to regard the entire book as an "ingenious but inconsequential postmodern game" and Coetzee himself characteristically does not provide any assistance in drawing this conclusion. In fact, McDonald (2010:496) offers evidence that Coetzee deliberately provides misleading information in order to blur the distinctions between fact and fiction: it is even possible to indicate that Coetzee incorporates biased reporting into the whole. These

critics' comments support the hypothesis that Coetzee is advocating change by suggesting alternative outcomes.

Manzanas Calvo (2006:94) rightly comments that liminal freedom constitutes a privileged state of being, with the freedom to choose. "I am an other", the words uttered by Costello to exonerate herself (Coetzee, 2003:221), probably signify that the subject appropriates the luxury of the freedom not to choose. It is also possible to explain this as an imitation of the self that would introduce copies of the original, while it would also reaffirm or increase the limits of the self. This echoes the process of identifying and associating as much by delineation as by definition: the duality of the liminal which means that the limen or boundary includes as much as it excludes.

Ogden (2010:468) argues that liminality as a construct is subject to human reasoning, because "there is no outside because there is only another way of existing inside". As the process of establishing liminality is in itself subversive, Ogden (2010:472) explains that it is a construct that is reciprocated repeatedly by man, leaving no real possibility of the third space but emphasising that one narrates either from the inside or the outside of the textual world. This scenario is seriously challenged by the physical construction of *Diary of a Bad Year*. Ogden (2010:473) explains that the three sections of narrative seem to counteract the traditional conventions of the novel in such a manner that a new way of reading, and becoming involved in the creation of the text, is implicitly required from the reader.

In his discussion of *Diary of a Bad Year*,⁴² McDonald (2010:489) attempts to link an ethical reading as advocated by Miller (1985) to a firmly materialist analysis of literature, which self-reflexively takes into account our own position and practice as literary critics. At its core, a decidedly self-reflexive and materialist ethics of reading would have the double duty of doing justice to what Miller (1985:4) termed the "words on the page" – in this case Coetzee's project entitled *Diary of a Bad Year* – whilst consciously reacting to, and acknowledging the demands of what is unique in a specific situation of reading. According to McDonald (2010:489) such a reading, in the first instance, would entail developing the guiding questions from "Who writes?"

⁴² Coetzee, J.M. 2007. *Diary of a Bad Year*. London: Harvill Secker. All subsequent references to this text will refer to this edition.⁴²

to “Who reads?” and “For whom is the reading intended? In what circumstances?” Echoing the hypothesis of this study namely that Coetzee can be indicated to expect active or reactive involvement from his reader, McDonald admits that the ordinary reader, who in the postcolonial and specifically liminal context must be acknowledged to have an influence and make a contribution towards the public reception of a literary text, is undoubtedly included by the question “who reads?”.

In the laundry room of his opulent apartment block JC, an ageing yet prolific writer, meets a sexy but rather arrogant Filipina girl, Anya, of a scandalous background (Coetzee, 2007:70), whom he invites or rather engages to type out his *Strong Opinions* for him, as he (ironically) is no longer able to cope with the typewriter/computer and also has difficulty deciphering his own “half-blind scrawl” (Coetzee, 2007:29). Interestingly, in order to avoid misunderstanding, JC supplies Anya with both handwritten notes and a dictaphone version from which she then has to compile the typed script. Apparently this proactive stance by JC is to no avail. She confides that “the pages of writing he hands over to me are of no use to me, no practical use” (Coetzee, 2007:42). The situations brought about by her lack of comprehension and sketchy education border on the farcical. She offers her advice, rather flippantly and totally oblivious of her own ignorance: “Your English is very good, considering, but we don’t say talk radio, that doesn’t make sense, we say talkback radio” (Coetzee, 2007:51) Her ignorance gives rise to some humorous interferences in the character JC’s opinions. The nature of her comments and editorial remarks clearly indicate her lack of knowledge about the depth of JC’s opinions, as he himself muses:

What benefit she derived from that international schooling is not clear. She speaks French with an accent the French probably find charming but has not heard of Voltaire. She thinks Kyoto is a misspelling of Tokyo (Coetzee, 2007:71).

JC seems to tolerate these discrepancies, apparently enticed by her “delicious behind” (Coetzee, 2007:25). Before long, her economically minded partner Alan takes an interest in JC’s financial affairs and starts to formulate a plan to siphon JC’s funds into his own account. It is ironical that both the trouble with Alan prying into

JC's finances and Anya's meddling with his manuscript are brought about by JC himself: he indeed invited their attention and thus gave up his privacy and to a certain extent his autonomy too. The fact that this situation is similar to the author who discloses a text, thereby inviting and exciting public interest, seems to rule out the possibility of an *incognito* existence for the author. Coetzee's adamant protection of his personal privacy therefore seems ironic; something that the author should have calculated to be impossible. Also, Anya's remark that JC should remember to draw his curtains at night because people are always interested in another person's affairs, is ironic. In fact it is the invasion of his privacy by Alan, unintentionally brought about by Anya, against which he should be warned. In addition, he will have to account for the alterations brought about in his texts by Anya, some of which border on the ridiculous. Indeed Coetzee, as much as JC, reveals a dry but delightful sense of humour unprecedented in Coetzee's earlier novels. Examples of Anya's editing which bring about mistakes are "Brezhnev's generals sit somewhere in the urinals" (Coetzee, 2007:25), as opposed to the original "somewhere in the Urals" (Coetzee, 2007:19).

5.4 Summary

It has been established that no text can be engendered without the primary author, in the words of Ogden (2010:469). Likewise it seems evident that no response to a text is possible without a degree of mediation, which is produced by the implied reader of the text.

It has been argued that Coetzee expects the implied reader of his fictional texts to participate in the acceptance or rejection of liminality. Even in *The Lives of Animals*, which is to be read in conjunction with *Elizabeth Costello*, he challenges the reader to take a stand in terms of ethical judgment: concerning amongst other matters, meat production and consumption, and the origin and identity of evil. *Diary of a Bad Year* takes the imperative of action by the reader even further. Both sections, the ostensibly public *Strong Opinions* and private *Second Diary*, confront the reader with eminently ethical issues: on avian flu, religion, compassion, democracy, anarchism, paedophilia, terrorism, and tourism. Some readers may be affronted by the terse confrontations and refuse to consider the possibility of change; others may reluctantly accept the change in which direction the questions seem to nudge them,

and yet others may feel the militant desire to jump to action and ring the changes in true revolutionary style.

Following the argumentation presented in this study, it seems that Coetzee is not so much concerned with *how* the reader reacts, as being deeply concerned *that* he reacts. Be it as it may, Coetzee is gracious enough not to choose on behalf of his readership. It is not a question of only realising that he simply cannot, because many other novelists presume to take the liberty of prescribing for their readers. Coetzee merely sets the scene, subtly and obliquely gesturing in the direction of change by indicating the possibility of this option, but not in a prescriptive fashion.

There seems to be an inherent discrepancy in concluding that Coetzee never prescribes; and yet this cannot be refuted. Once the reader has been sensitised by reading a Coetzee text, his involvement with the text necessitates exercising a choice. In this way the reader attains the status of co-author. In the final instance, the reader remains responsible to react to the challenge of liminality, either by accepting or rejecting the opportunity of effecting change in his particular context.

Chapter 6 Strategies of subversion

6.1 Re-contextualisation

This study commenced by defining the concept of liminality specifically in the postcolonial context and continued by examining its application in selected texts by Coetzee: *Foe* (1986), *Disgrace* (1999), *Elizabeth Costello* (2003), *Slow Man* (2005) and *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007). What emerged from Coetzee's works may be described as a cluster formation or kaleidoscope display which allows segmentation with regard to writers, narrators and readers in various ways, and different levels of reacting to the ethical responsibility regarding liminality. Certain narratological strategies used by Coetzee in order to subvert the status quo were also identified.

6.2 Liminality as expressed in the narrative

This chapter concludes and summarises our findings of Coetzee's enactment of liminal responsibility in his texts. Throughout the study, various aspects of liminality, capable of creating the impression of a kaleidoscope that presents different perspectives through varying angles of approach, were identified. Coetzee's texts indicate, firstly, the reality of rejection or total negation of the liminal state. This position is identified by an inability to adapt to the changes required by the political realities facing the individual or community, as experienced by Lurie in *Disgrace*. The next possible reaction denotes refusal: an unwillingness to comply and evolve, as exemplified by Barton in *Foe* but also the magistrate in *Waiting for the Barbarians*. The final position is illustrated by those narrators and characters who willingly embrace the responsibility of accepting and effecting change, for example JC and Anya in *Diary of a Bad Year* and Rayment in *Slow Man*; also Lucy in *Disgrace*.

Coetzee not only incorporates the state of liminality into the structure and plot of his novels, but also uses narratological approaches that support the idea of a state of indeterminacy. It seems that there has been a progression from the ostensibly very realistic *Disgrace*⁴³ to the obviously metafictional *Foe*, and *Elizabeth Costello*,

⁴³ *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *Life & Times of Michael K*, mentioned only perfunctorily in this study, probably fall into this category.

coming almost full circle to the semi-autobiographical⁴⁴ style of *Slow Man* and *Diary of a Bad Year*, although both of the latter also display elements of metafiction. May (2007:631) argues that modernism as a literary style is well suited to a comprehension of the Other. This maturity cannot be claimed by traditional realism, as it insists on the author's absolute authority. Instead, the ongoing processes employed by Coetzee emphasise the author's simultaneous power and powerlessness to create, determine, incite, advocate and ultimately effect change in the context experienced by the reader.

Recurrent narrative techniques in Coetzee's texts contribute to expressing liminality. One of the most frequently used is phasing. This technique slows down the action and serves to alienate the reader by interfering with the eventual plot. The many embedded narratives present in *Foe* fall in this category, offering repeated scenes with subtle changes which inevitably result in layering and texturising the plot. In *Diary of a Bad Year*, the effect of dividing each page into at least two different focalisers results not only in retarding the action but also presents the reader with multiple narratives, from various perspectives: JC's (original) and Anya's (typed and spell-checked) versions of his text for the German publisher; JC's various perspectives on private and public opinions (divided into *Strong Opinions* and *Second Diary*), as well as Alan's private thoughts. The reader experiences the text as fragmented and is tempted to continue reading one line of thought, but the other interpretation is also dependent on the first. It becomes an adventurous and interconnected exploration of ideas.

In various texts Coetzee applies aporia to indicate the possibility of an alternative outcome; also a concept that is eminently suited to convey liminality. In *Slow Man*, Rayment repeatedly requests Marijana to consider replacing Miroslav with himself, while in the same novel Drago tries to usurp Rayment's historical ties with the photographs. The possibility that events might have turned out differently is also heavily suggested in the fateful incident on Magill Road which nearly cost Rayment his life, at the very least costing him a leg and his independence.

⁴⁴ Attwell (2010:214) suggests that this text abounds with clues that it was probably intended to be taken as autobiographical, although "sharply qualified".

6.3 Salient themes in Coetzee's texts

The salient themes presented in Coetzee's novels should receive some attention. Certain themes are repeatedly used and prove themselves worthy of attracting interest in terms of liminality, as the characters involved either satisfy the requirements of exhibiting growth, remain a static presence or even regress obstinately. The themes are loosely presented in terms of binary oppositions, as they form clusters of related meaning that may also be seen as overlapping and merging with one another. In this sense, the themes themselves gain a liminal quality. These themes could also be described in terms of kaleidoscopic fragmentations which change in appearance according to variables. As Costello confesses (Coetzee, 2006:204), neither the writer, narrator nor reader should display a rigidity in terms of outlook or beliefs. The themes presented include the following: grace/disgrace, dominance/subjugation, usurpation, truth/appearance; loss; original/copy/imitation; self/other; death and finally also the threshold.

6.3.1 Grace/disgrace

In *Disgrace* the theme of grace/disgrace is neatly echoed by the theme of oppression/subjugation, as Lurie who is a symbol of male dominance is gradually lured from his position of privilege. The pun suggested by Lurie/lure suggests an element of deception, of the presence of the serpent in paradise. This theme is continued down to the most personal level where it had been suggested from the start that Lurie is incapable of maintaining meaningful relationships (real communication) with the objects of his desire, a desire that is grossly inflated by his sexual persona. He even compares himself to a predator: "But then, what should a predator expect when he intrudes into the vixen's nest, into the home of her cubs?" Coetzee (2000:10) and: "He has given her no warning: she is too surprised to resist the intruder who thrusts himself upon her". (Coetzee, 2000:24). The responsibility that he shuns through his choices ultimately precludes him from a position of privilege or grace.

6.3.2 Dominance/subjugation

The theme of dominance/subjugation is subtly interwoven into the plot of *Disgrace* using symbolism in such a way that it is never obtrusive. Coetzee's portrayal of Lurie as a troubled and ageing professor is plausible and realistic. Therefore, on the most

literal level, the plot is not only realistic and credible but also incredibly compelling. However, I think the exaggerated focus on Lurie's sexuality provides the most obvious key to understanding this text as an allegory.

The two important issues of sexuality and dominance constitute Lurie's interests apart from his academic interests. These issues highlight the position of women and how they feature in the novels pertinent to this discussion.

The exposition of *Disgrace* opens with Lurie's frank and smug confession that he has solved the matter of managing his sexual needs satisfactorily; this seems to suggest that he regards his bodily gratification to warrant fulfilment without considering the obligations or responsibilities that are concomitant with such liberties. The theme of sexual fulfilment is continued throughout the first four chapters. Although Lurie admits that "without the Thursday interludes the week is as featureless as a desert" (Coetzee, 2000:11), he seems uninterested in any significant and lasting relationships. In fact, later on, the afternoon with Dawn ends frustratingly for him because she keeps on talking about her son. After sexually experimenting with tourists, colleagues' wives and tourists, he ponders the possibility of castrating himself:

A man on a chair snipping away at himself; an ugly sight, but no more ugly, from a certain point of view, than the same man exercising himself on the body of a woman (Coetzee, 2000:9).

It seems evident that Lurie is obsessed, fixated by the power he wields over the women he dominates on a sexual level. For years he could count on women returning his gaze – and then:

... one day it all ended. Without warning his powers fled. Glances that would once have responded to his slid over, past, through him. Overnight he became a ghost. If he wanted a woman he had to learn to pursue her; often, in one way or another, to buy her. (Coetzee, 2000:7).

Baker (2005:40) notes that the question of sympathy seems to be the central organising principle of *Disgrace*. Lurie's opinion on the power of sympathy runs counter to that of the character Elizabeth Costello, but the fact that the language he uses to contradict her so closely matches her own calls attention to what seems to be an ongoing debate in Coetzee's recent oeuvre. Lurie's narrative begins by opposing Costello's not entirely unblemished proclamations on the sympathetic imagination, setting the groundwork for *Disgrace* to depict sympathy at its most contested.

This becomes clearer if one chronicles Lurie's anti-sympathetic beginnings in the narrative and charts his progress as he transforms himself at the novel's conclusion, an end which in Baker's words (2005:40) forces the entry of various complexities into the novel's understanding of sympathy and its power to improve anything. I am, however, not convinced that Coetzee is truly compassionate about the sympathy that Lurie seems to enact in the novel's final pages. In fact, it is likely that the reader could assess that the liminal narrator is unsuccessful in his quest to evolve beyond the character that he had been at the beginning of the text.

The theme of dominance/subjugation is one that recurs in South African literature. In his acceptance speech for the Jerusalem Prize, Coetzee himself commented that South African literature seems to be stuck on a basic level that wrestles with the question of dominance and that cannot evolve to the level of meaningful human relationships:

It is a literature which is not fully human: being more preoccupied than is natural, with power and with the torsions of power, it does not know how to pass from the elementary relations of contestation, of domination, and of subjugation, to the vast and complex human world which extends beyond.⁴⁵

Various critics accede to the notion that the infatuation with power is a recurrent indication in South African literature. Jolly's contributing chapter to Poyner's 2006 publication discusses power and abuse in *Disgrace* by emphasising that the issue of violence against women and children of the apartheid and transition eras can only be

⁴⁵ *Doubling the Point*: 1991. Jerusalem Prize Acceptance Speech, p17.

understood in terms of the hypermasculine formations within the South African context. Jolly (2006:13) argues that Coetzee has consistently, from *Dusklands* to *Disgrace*, portrayed the role of discourses of racialised and engendered hegemony as key factors in a systemic, sexualised brutality that is seen by the perpetrators of the brutality to manifest their dominance. Also, in casting *Disgrace* as an allegory, the fixation on dominance was established as a key concept.

6.3.3 Usurpation

The theme of usurpation is cleverly interwoven with the theme of idea (image) against reality (living presence), of which Melanie in *Disgrace* becomes a symbol: “A week ago she was just another pretty face in the class. Now she is a presence in his life, a breathing presence” (Coetzee, 2000:23).

After the evening of intercourse with Melanie, Lurie wakes the next morning “in a state of profound wellbeing, which does not go away” (Coetzee, 2000:21). In class Lurie discusses a poem by Wordsworth which requires a critique of the words *usurp upon*. It is ironic that Lurie himself never realises that he is in fact usurping Melanie’s life, intruding into her private life and forcing his attentions on her. However, Lurie gets much more than he bargained for when Melanie in turn invades his privacy, comes to live in his flat and also usurps his life, with catastrophic results for him.

Foe describes Susan Barton’s attempts to usurp Crusoe’s story. She also presumes to speak for Friday, as the loss of his literal tongue deprives him of a voice. Both men have to live by Barton’s rule, with catastrophic results: Crusoe doesn’t survive and Friday never adapts. In turn, the suggestion is that Mr Foe want to “put [Barton] in a book”(Coetzee, 2006:126), to borrow Rayment’s dissatisfied response to Costello’s interference in his life.

In *Slow Man* the theme of usurpation is also prevalent. The fact that Elizabeth Costello, the character, superimposes her presence on Rayment indicates that his identity is besieged by at least two characters; three if one counts the blind fate in the form of the nonchalant youngster who causes his near-fatal accident, changing his life in the most drastic manner. Drago Jokić assumes to usurp the identity of Australian ancestors of whom Rayment so meticulously preserved the images, while

ironically Rayment imposes on Marijana's life to such an extent that he thinks it will be entirely possible for him to replace her husband.

Likewise in *Diary of a Bad Year* there is mention of usurpation and assumed identity. JC/Señor C is accosted by both Anya, who tries to dominate his strong opinions through her editing attempts, and by Alan, who tries to siphon his finances.

6.3.4 Truth/verisimilitude

Truth and confabulation entwine in many of the novels. With Barton's embedded and multiple narratives in *Foe* it becomes virtually impossible to distinguish between objective truth and Barton's unreliability. Even a mirror image, which may constitute the exact opposite of the truth, could be regarded as similar to the truth because it resembles it. The confusion brought about in *Diary of a Bad Year* by Anya's unreliable editing of JC's documents illustrates this statement. This topic is very similar to the next point and therefore Rayment's predicament in *Slow Man* with the forged photographs will be discussed more fully under the next heading. The manner in which he superimposes on Marijana and her family, all in the name of love, makes it clear that his real agenda was not bona fide. His words towards Miroslav deny themselves when he flatly declares "I mean [him] no harm" (Coetzee, 2006:125) although he tries to impose on the truth.

6.3.5 Original/copy/imitation

This topic is most prevalent in *Slow Man*. Rayment is devastated when he discovers the loss of his beloved Fauchery photographs – something that he intended to "bequeath" to the Australian Museum in order to preserve their collective past. The irony that he in fact is not entitled to make such a bequest, because he was not the photographer or even the subject of the photographs is lost on him. As an immigrant, he feels entitled to graciously pass on the legacy of the history into which he has implanted himself. However, he is indignant to discover the defrauding of the photograph when Drago steals them (Coetzee, 2006:249) and creates mutilated copies in which the faces of the natives were supplanted by Drago and Miroslav. In this way Drago not only "disinherits" Rayment but also grants him and his Balkan father the historic ties with Australia which Rayment so desires. The suggestion is there that they probably are more deserving of such a past, as they are part of a

family and will in future be able to have a progeny, something that is impossible for Rayment.

Elizabeth Costello as a character also hints at the topic of copies. Coetzee supplants her in history, and then presumes to borrow her from history, which compels the reader to gauge whether she is factual or virtual. In *Elizabeth Costello* she records lectures, which cannot be regarded as fiction (or confabulation) but must rather be regarded as fact. This implies that what she says carries some weight. When she appears in *Slow Man* to look for characters to put in her book, the reader is required to distinguish between fact and fiction.

The many variations of parts of *Foe* also add to the idea of copy and original. The scene between Friday and Barton which is echoed by the unnamed couple lying face to face suggests this mirror effect, as does the appearance of Barton's long-lost daughter who suddenly appears from Bahia, much to her mother's dismay.

6.3.6 Self/Other (humans/dogs)

The similarity between humans and dogs seems to be an important theme in Coetzee's oeuvre. Baker (2005:44) suspects that Coetzee erodes the difference between animals and men, which results in subverting the alterity of non-humans. If people are more like dogs than like humans, it follows that they may be treated like a dog, in a derogatory manner. In *Disgrace* Lurie is compelled to care for dogs in their final stages of life in order for him to gain any form of grace. The slaughter of Lucy's dogs by the attackers also echoes the idea of degeneration (Coetzee, 2000:110). In *Slow Man*, the homodiegetic third-person narrator focalised by Rayment describes his intense discomfort as Costello sits on a park bench and a dog starts to sniff at her private parts (Coetzee, 2006:194). The suggestion is that the dogs recognise Costello as a fellow (sexual) being; this is elaborated by the following sentences:

“Is it reminding itself of sex, dog sex, or is it just savouring the novel, complex smells? He has always thought of Elizabeth as an asexual being, but perhaps a dog, putting its trust in its nose, will know better” (Coetzee, 2006:194).

6.3.7 Loss

Various Coetzee novels present the reader with variations on the theme of loss. In *Foe* it is illustrated by Friday's loss of his tongue and subsequent (lack of) representation, in *Slow Man* by Elizabeth Costello's homelessness; as well as Rayment's loss of his leg and the theft of the photograph proving his ancestry; in *Disgrace* by Lurie's loss of status, Lucy's rape and Lurie that finally relinquishes the dog. In *Diary of a Bad Year* it is illustrated through JC's contested ownership of his *Strong Opinions* text. The loss of vitality is illustrated by Rayment in *Slow Man*, Lurie in *Disgrace*, Costello in both *Elizabeth Costello* and *Slow Man*, and JC in *Diary of a Bad Year*.

6.3.8 Death

Death is also a recurrent theme throughout Coetzee's oeuvre. *Diary of A Bad Year's* JC often refers to his own failing health and awareness of his mortality: "That is part of my condition. That is part of what is happening to me" (Coetzee, 2007:31). He even has a nightmarish dream in which it seems that Anya, as an angel/escort is designated to guiding him "to the gateway of oblivion" (Coetzee, 2007:59). The *Strong Opinion* entitled *On the body* discusses animal suffering and dying in the top section, JC's dream about his death in the middle section and finally in the bottom section, Anya's argument with Alan, who wants to sue JC (which can be equated to a sophisticated, civilised execution) for having licentious thoughts about her (Coetzee, 2007:59-61).

Finally, when it seems inevitable that JC is dying, Anya promises to become what has been referred to earlier, the unlikely angel ushering JC on his journey to the beyond.

It is interesting to note that the novel ends with Anya wishing JC farewell on his journey to the next life, which suggests the death of the fictional character JC. While this could have been a symbolic way to announce the end of Coetzee's publications, this question has already been answered by the publication of his latest novel, *The Childhood of Jesus* (2013), which text finally disassociates him from the fictional writer/narrator/character JC. Coetzee has never failed to surprise his audience by reinventing himself and will probably manage to do so again.

6.3.9 The threshold

It is my contention that all the novels covered by this study (at least implicitly) refer to the notion of a threshold. This should not come as a surprise, seeing that the specific focus of the study attempts to examine the varying degrees of liminality in these texts. In *Foe* Susan Barton is described as floating, swimming and almost drowning, which act would constitute the crossing of a very real border in terms of existence:

“With barely a sigh, with barely a splash, I duck my head under the water. Hauling myself hand over hand down the trunks, I descend, petals floating around me like a rain of snowflakes” (Coetzee, 115-6).

Given the metaphorical quality of water it is probable that the act of moving through water should not be regarded as merely literal. It reminds one of a journey, even of birth, which also constitutes a crossing of the threshold. Apart from this instance, the many embedded narratives multiply the frames through which the reader has to process Barton’s story, and therefore her existence as well. Crossing the threshold of one frame immediately requires her to deal with the next frame, and her liminality is in the final instance verified by the existence of the historical Defoe and his fiction.

Disgrace chronicles the failed attempts of Lurie to adapt and to move into liminal country while offsetting him against Lucy who develops into a person who fully accepts and embraces the challenges and rewards of her liminality. *Diary of a Bad Year* depicts JC’s struggle to lay down the trappings of his comfortable existence and to proceed with “flights of angels” (Coetzee, 2007:227) to a new sphere. Costello has a similar experience: after waiting for what seems like eternity, she has to accept that eternity is not indeterminate.

Slow Man’s Rayment is irritated by Costello’s unsolicited meddling in his life and expresses the desire to be autonomous in his life – something that is challenged not only by the fateful accident that threw him into limbo (Coetzee, 2006:112) but also the contact with Drago Jokić which mirrors his own meddling in another person’s life.

The table below summarises the frequency of occurrence of salient themes in the novels selected for this study.

Themes	<i>Foe</i>	<i>Disgrace</i>	<i>Diary of a Bad Year</i>	<i>Elizabeth Costello</i>	<i>Slow Man</i>
grace/disgrace	✓	✓		✓	✓
dominance	✓	✓	✓	✓	
usurpation	✓	✓	✓		✓
truth/appearance	✓			✓	✓
original/copy			✓	✓	
same/other	✓	✓		✓	✓
loss	✓	✓	✓		✓
death			✓	✓	✓
threshold	✓	✓	✓	✓	

Table 1 *Salient themes in selected Coetzee texts*

6.4 The liminality of the writer

In *Disgrace* it seems that Coetzee as author denies the possibility of attaining grace by effecting change, therefore refusing the demands of liminality. In fact, it seems as if *Disgrace* yearns for a preliminal state in which ignorance is regarded as bliss. *Elizabeth Costello*, only slightly more positive, hesitantly accepts the demands concomitant with liminal responsibility. In *Diary of a Bad Year* and *Slow Man* however, it seems that some progress has been made and that the challenge of liminality is accepted, even welcomed by Coetzee as author. Graham (2006:225) points out that ...[figuring Magda in *In the Heart of the Country*] as was the case with Costello, “performs a subversion of the omnipotence of the author”. In my opinion, this equally applies to the position of granting the reader co-authority over the text.

McDonald (2010:497) claims that Coetzee

has devoted his life to defending literature as a legitimate mode of public intervention, not to escape the burdens of politics but to confront them on his own resolutely literary terms. It seems imperative to judge *Diary of a Bad*

Year at face value, partly because the work appeals to the reader to reflect on his role as critic who desires to keep writing alive, but also because it demands that we admit that, as fallible and finite readers, confined to the indefinite spaces and contexts that we frequent, we can never depend on the ethical as attaining the highest priority.

6.4.1 The ethical aspect of being a writer

There seems to be a difference between the political and ethical potential of Coetzee's novels. Discussing Coetzee's narrative politics, Baker (2005:30) suggests that there seem to be clear, "almost" prescriptive moments in his fiction that function best on a middle ground somewhere between the demand for prescribed social engagement and the call for attention to more elemental transformation. The conclusion is that it is an invalid requirement that Coetzee should exhibit the same commitment to politics as Gordimer, for instance, as Coetzee clearly formulated the parameters of his involvement in the postcolonial world at a different level. However, this fact does not preclude him from being a liminal figure as author. His liminality as author is ensured by the absence of overt political commitment.

6.5 The narrator as liminal figure

Coetzee uses a variety of narrators in different roles in his texts so that the narrative stance never becomes predictable. Susan Barton in *Foe* functions both as narrator and as character, who speculates on Foe's thoughts and emotions in what seems to be a prescriptive fashion: "We have taken up residence in your house, from which I now write. Are you surprised to hear this?" (Coetzee, 2000:65). *Slow Man* is presented in a third-person narrative from Rayment's point of view, but frequent authorial comments occur, as is the case in *Elizabeth Costello*. *Diary of a Bad Year* offers a complicated and varying set of narratives, grouped into two separate first-person accounts by JC and complemented by narratives from Anya's focalisation; one each in first-person and third-person ascription. Each page presents a differentiated narrative in which the top section is filled by JC/Señor C's *Strong Opinions*, roughly equal to his first-person professional narrative. The second and sometimes third sections on each page alternate between JC in his private first-person role, Anya's first-person editing comments and sometimes Alan's first-person

narrative. In *Disgrace* Lurie as protagonist provides the focalisation needed for the third-person narrator which is also liberally complemented by authorial comments.

The presentation of a text by a female narrator creates a radical inversion and subversion of the textual world. The traditional role was of a father creating a text and using his authority to afford the text its own existence. Employing a female narrator places the focus on the female as progenitor of the text, revolutionising, along with female narrators and writers through the ages, the patriarchal tradition in which women were part of the silenced Other. Now the female narrator affords a voice to that presence that was previously not only silenced but often also disowned.

As this technique is repeatedly applied by Coetzee it seems too obvious to be random. In *Foe*, Susan Barton constitutes a female narrator that serves as a birthing channel for not only Friday's but also Crusoe's histories. In fact, their (his)stories are subverted by being subjected to the female filter, each becoming her story of his story. Coetzee presents a variation on the theme in *Slow Man* by subjecting Rayment to the inquisitive and manipulative efforts of Costello to gain authority over his life. Anya in *Diary of a Bad Year* is probably the ironic culmination of the subversion brought about by the female influence. JC is given the name Señor C by Anya in accordance with her Filipina background, although he has no cultural attachments to the Philippines.

On a personal, as well as professional level as author of a text, he is subjected (although by his own consent) to the filters of ignorance and imprecision as embodied by Anya. The irony is not merely the subversion brought about by a male character subjected to having his story related by a female narrator (as in *Foe*) but also the fact that JC, a worldly sage with knowledgeable opinions on everything possible, is reduced and diminished in order to be represented by a much younger and inferior person.

Ogden (2010) remarks on the ostensible progress in Coetzee's work when he insists on choosing a female narrator for the text. Ogden notes (2010:233) that Coetzee seems to indicate a stepdown from absolute creative authority by applying the distancing frame of a female narrator, yet at the same time introducing the mediation

of the “Other” in order to effect authority, for example Susan’s quest for authority in *Foe* that is set against the backdrop of Friday’s alterity, or Costello in *Elizabeth Costello* who meets with the racially different African writer Emmanuel Egudu. Attwell (2006:31) describes the degree of liminal status attained by the narrators in other Coetzee novels as follows:

The Magistrate in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, Mrs Curren in *Age of Iron*, Dostoevsky in the *Master of Petersburg* are all in a sense intellectuals, who are challenged at critical moments to step out of their circumscribed roles and speak to the general malaise around them: each, in his or her own way, fails the test and then becomes painfully detached from the rules of discourse that he or she is being asked, or sometimes forced, to play.

It is concluded that the above-mentioned narrators illustrate an inability to attain liminal status. Ogden (2010:233) remarks that a new configuration of liminality is required to enable the reader to determine his own liminal options.

6.6 The liminality of the reader

McDonald (2010:492) explains the various imprints of Coetzee publications on sale in various countries as a silent testimonial to the tensions between writers and publishers in their respective struggles to appeal to, or subtly transform, the desires of their likely readership. McDonald comments (2010:493) that *Diary of a Bad Year* itself turns back and critically reflects, calling on the reader, too, to reconsider his role as critic or as reader.

It has been argued that Coetzee invites his readers to actively participate in generating meaning in his texts. The positive result of this is that he as author involves the reader in becoming co-author, not only of the text that is being read, but also of liminality in the reader’s specific temporal and spatial context. Coetzee stimulates change in the postcolonial world through his readership, which reads and actively reacts to the challenge of liminality. The conclusion is that Coetzee himself is to be regarded as a liminal figure, a liminal author; in fact no less than a creator of liminality that actively assists in bringing about change. The very fact that fiction engenders a state of liminal suspension, a zone for introspection and re-evaluation

of ideologies and customs, creates the possibility for change and adjustment. Fiction as such is an eminently liminal space, which is merely applied and appropriated differently by various authors. The kaleidoscope that is presented by Coetzee's texts creates an astonishing and seemingly never-ending array of perspectives regarding variations of author, narrator, and reader. And still the Coetzee enigma remains untouchable, because his influential intrusion is of such gossamer stuff that it only becomes apparent that he made an entrance after he had already disappeared again. Only the presence of his liminal perfume lingers; coaxing, coercing and cajoling his readership into actively accepting the responsibility to step into liminal country. Through his fiction he is challenging the boundaries and indicating the choices and responsibilities of the world, contributing to the notion of liminality all the time.

Chapter 7 Findings and overall conclusion

7.1 Findings

The study commenced with the hypothesis that Coetzee creates an awareness in the narrators and characters employed in the selected novels and also in his readers to react to their experience of liminality. The liminal status indicates a reaction to borders/boundaries/margins in terms of individual and communal identity. The hypothesis indicated the various ways in which narrators and characters could react and in what way readers could also become writers.

The first question posed by this study concerned Coetzee's portrayal of postcolonial society in his novels. This question was answered in the course of the study by indicating that Coetzee creates liminal spaces and places in which the characters and narrators have to function. The inevitable result of this process is that readers are confronted by liminality, signifying the ability to transcend barriers, and are challenged to respond to it.

The second question of the study concerned the narrative techniques and themes employed by Coetzee to emphasise the liminality of his characters. Various techniques conducive to investigating liminality were identified and discussed in the course of the study. These include aporia, allegory, phasing and embedded narrative; also ascription of identity to the narrator. Themes that appear repeatedly in the studied Coetzee texts include the threshold which is by default a liminal instance, but also mirror images, copy/original, proliferation, usurpation or the quest for authority and autonomy.

The third question interrogated what Coetzee could achieve by using liminality as a form of alienation with regard to the Other. The identification and analysis of liminal characters and narrators in the specified texts provided the answer, namely that ethical responsibility is concomitant with choice. The impact of the narrative strategies and conventions used by Coetzee successfully convey the responsibility of those choices to be exercised by characters and readers alike.

The study mentioned at the outset that a kaleidoscopic or cluster presentation seems to manifest in the novels pertinent to this study. As these fields overlap and intersect, the various chapters of this study could also display a degree of repetition. These clusters concern, in the first place, the range of reactions that a character (and also the reader) could choose with regard to his or her responsibility towards ethical choices. A second cluster concerns the relation between protagonists and liminal characters. Following the clues provided by Coetzee, the reader is likely to conclude that accepting liminality provides a key to survival in a postcolonial world. A further cluster concerns how Coetzee succeeds in involving the reader into accepting co-responsibility for authorship of the text. The study indicated that Coetzee ultimately acts as catalyst for the reader to confront his or her own fear with regard to the challenges of the unknown and to facilitate the process of accepting and embracing the Other.

7.2 Overall conclusion

The contention that Coetzee urges his readers to investigate the boundaries and borders and thereby the constraints of society was at the heart of this study. Liminality is of relevance to the existence of the postcolonial individual. Coetzee's texts send out a strong message that the fear of the unknown and distrust towards the Other can be warded off precisely by exposure to liminal situations. Coetzee is in truth contributing in a major way towards the restoration of our fragile postcolonial fragmented world. His technique allows the reader to responsibly choose and embrace the adjustments necessary to facilitate liminality in a positive fashion: accepting and embracing the challenge of inclusivity instead of enforcing the boundaries which would communicate colonial or imperial monopoly. Readers learn to understand that liminality is a concept with rewarding outcomes in terms of personal and communal life. Empowered by the sensitivity displayed in his novels, the reader faces the challenges presented by contemporary existence, not as barriers or boundaries, but as opportunities for exercising the skills of liminality such as accommodation and appreciation of the Other whilst confidently expressing one's unique identity.

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