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Introduction

The aim of this thesis is to examine the work of J. M. Coetzee through the lens of disability. So far, readings of Coetzee's fiction have mainly been concerned with questions of politics, history, alterity, language and style; Yet hardly anything has been said about the role that disability plays in his novels. A closer look reveals that the theme of disability – physical, cognitive or social – features prominently in his work. Since an analysis of the representation of disability in all of Coetzee's fiction would be beyond the scope of this paper, the thesis only focuses on his apartheid novels, more specifically, on *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), *Life & Times of Michael K* (1983) and *Foe* (1986). In his speeches and essays, J. M. Coetzee has emphasised the deforming and disabling conditions of the apartheid system. It is therefore timely to read his fiction through the perspective of disability since the consequences of such a system have inevitably deformed not only human relations, but also the literature written during that time. In the three literary works by Coetzee, the author repeatedly stages an encounter between a non-disabled and a disabled character. In *Waiting for the Barbarians*, the magistrate has an unusual relationship with the barbarian girl, whose feet have been mutilated and whose eyes have nearly lost the ability to see. *Life & Times of Michael K* centres on the character of K, who is born with a harelip and who exhibits a strange form of cognitive disability. *Foe* is constructed around the character of Friday, whose tongue has been amputated and whose subsequent silence gives rise to hermeneutical problems for Susan.

It is the purpose of this present study to shed a different light on Coetzee's fiction by examining not only how disability is represented in the three novels, but also explore how its representation affects the structure of the text and the reading experience. What is evident is that, instead of being merely an additional component to the text, disability lies at the heart of each novel and constitutes a disruptive presence for the entire narrative structure. Therefore, it appears that disability represents a driving force which traverses the novels and demands a reconsideration of questions of ethics, aesthetics, language, power, violence and vulnerability.

Scholars working in the field of Disability Studies challenge the hierarchic binary between able-bodiedness and disability with the purpose of shifting the stigmatised way in which disabled individuals are regarded in society. Disability Studies theorists argue that the category of “disabled” is essentially a social construction fuelled by political and cultural

discursive practices. Instead of being inherently aberrant, the differently able body is made to seem deviant through the circulation of a hegemonic “ableist” discourse. In light of these arguments, the thesis wants to show that by staging the encounter between an able and a disabled character, Coetzee explores what it means to accommodate oneself with disability.

Drawing on Derek Attridge’s observation that the presence of alterity in a literary text inevitably alters the reading experience, the representation of disability in Coetzee’s apartheid novels further complicates the process of reading. In this sense, Coetzee takes Attridge’s argument a step further because while Attridge uses the concept of alterity in a more abstract way, disability suggests a more concrete attribute. Therefore, the encounter with disability distinguishes itself from the confrontation with difference in that it adds a more complex ethical dimension to the encounter.

According to Julia Kristeva, disability is part and parcel of our existence. In “Liberty, Equality, Fraternity and ... Vulnerability”, she invites to a more humane and inclusive attitude in relation to disability and the disabled individual. She argues that vulnerability is an inherent human component which renders individuals essentially equal. When looking at the typical reaction of the non-disabled person in the face of disability, she notices that the encounter determines an opening of a “*narcissistic identity wound*” at the level of the ego [emphasis in original] (Kristeva 29). Consequently, this response triggers defence measures such as indifference, ignorance, and feelings of fear, anxiety and arrogance in the non-disabled. According to Kristeva, this reaction occurs because the differently able body reminds the non-disabled of the fragility and limitations of his or her own body. Nevertheless, she firmly believes that acknowledging one’s own vulnerability enables him or her to partake in the experience of disability by constructing respect for its unknowable singularity. It is only by accepting that disability is in us that we are able to open ourselves and embrace (corporeal) difference.

As far as the structure of this paper is concerned, it is divided into four chapters which encompass theoretical concepts as well as an analysis of three of J. M. Coetzee’s novels. The first chapter establishes the theoretical framework upon which the argument of the thesis is built. It attempts to give a definition of disability and provides the social, cultural and political context within which disability has developed throughout history. It then turns to concepts taken from Disability Studies with the intention of establishing the theoretical

“tools” used later for the analysis. Finally, it looks at how the system known as apartheid in South Africa was responsible for creating socially deformed human relations.

The second chapter is an analysis of *Waiting for the Barbarians* in which the focus progressively shifts from the social deformation that Empire is responsible for to the victim of such a system and the hermeneutical problems that arise from the traumatic experience, and finally to the way in which the various representations of disability in the text affect the reading experience. Chapter three focuses on *Life & Times of Michael K* and begins by examining the mechanics of the dysfunctional system and how the disabled protagonist, Michael K, relates to that system. It then traces the development of Michael K and the significant impact of his existence upon the medical officer. The final section of the chapter examines the ethical challenge subsequent to the formal decision of placing a disabled character at the heart of the narrative and considers the lessons the reader can learn from the protagonist. The fourth and last chapter looks at *Foe* wherein the focus is on the transformative relationship between Susan and Friday which is triggered mainly by him having a disability. The chapter also considers to what extent the presence of disability affects the structure of the text and then ends by bringing into discussion the way in which the reader engages with the novel which features disability.

1. Theoretical framework

1.1 Disability: Definition and Context

The term “disability” is used to describe a limitation of performance (i.e. physical, mental, psychic, and intellectual or a combination of these) that prevents the individual from the full participation in activities regarded as “normal”. The term may be understood differently, depending on the particular society in which it is used; that is, what falls under the category of disabled in one group may not fully coincide with how disability is conceived by another group. Disability is a complex condition defined by the singularity of the experience of being disabled. Each case of disability is unique because it is experienced individually and differently by every disabled person. However, what brings together the experiences of the disabled is the feeling of difference; to be disabled is to be different.

Throughout history, the tendency has been to associate bodily difference with moral depravity, monstrosity and deviance. Antiquity considered disability as a materialization of divine punishment; the Middle Ages adopted a more positive attitude and accepted disability as evidence of corporeal variety; however, people looked at the disabled individual with pity and fear and treated him as an object of charity¹; in the Early Modern period, with the rise of institutions, there was a shift toward the medical discourse, which considered disability as a pathological problem that needed ‘fixing’. Moreover, through eugenics, the threat of disability was seen as endangering the order of the society since corporeal malformations would not allow the individual to reach full potential as far as productivity was concerned (see Davis 6). It is only in the second half of the 20th century, namely the 1960s and, more prominently, in the 1970s, in the United States and the United Kingdom, that disabled people rebelled against unfair treatment. Their ideas were inspired by other civil rights movements, which occurred in the first half of the 20th century and were led by other minority groups (i.e. feminists, black people, homosexuals and other ethnic groups) (see Watson 1-2). Disability activists demanded a stronger sense of equality in terms of opportunities and rights for the disabled people. The need for change also implied a linguistic reconsideration of certain terms used to refer to the condition of being disabled.

Despite being widely accepted and greatly used nowadays, especially in the U. K. and the U. S., “disability” and “disabled” have only entered common usage since the 1950s. Until then,

¹ For a more detailed insight into the historical development of disability, see Ato Quayson’s introduction to *Aesthetic Nervousness*, pp. 5-8.

words such as “cripple”, “monster”, “freak”, “deformed” and “handicapped” were often used by nondisabled people to refer to those having a different bodily configuration. What these etiquettes indicated was that between the so-called “normal” people and disabled people there was a strict delimitation in social hierarchy. Through the use of offensive and degrading terms, distance between the groups was also reinforced. Therefore, when disabled activists protested, their protest contained a linguistic aspect as well; that is, instead of accepting to be referred to as “handicapped” or any other dehumanizing and limiting terms, they suggested “disabled” (see Langtree). “Disability” expressed the state of being “differently able”. This marked the first step in acknowledging the person behind the impairment, and no longer regarding him or her as completely useless and helpless. Consequently, this new way of thinking about disability challenged previous norms and ideas concerning bodily variety. In a more general sense, it showed the ability of British and American societies to be more inclusive through learning to accept and deal with difference.

By the 21st century, disability has already been incorporated in various aspects of life. Changes in architecture, design, construction and transportation are indicative of a more mature way of dealing with disability. Laws, services and organizations supporting disabled people also reflect changing attitudes towards disability. But probably the clearest form of encouragement is given by the Paralympic Games. The aim of the event is to promote more acceptance, integration and opportunities for disabled people. It seeks to overcome discriminatory attitudes – whether related to politics, race, gender or sex – by foregrounding and emphasizing *ability* and competitiveness in the disabled. What these endeavors show is a more open way of thinking about disability. They also point to the fact that disability has become accepted as a part of everyday life, as a reality that is no longer ignored, but gradually acknowledged and embraced.

Beginning with the 1990s, disability has also drawn the attention of British and American academics. Initially pertaining to social and scientific studies like sociology, medicine and anthropology, disability has recently become a fertile field of study within the humanities. Known in academic research as Disability Studies, the discipline aims to investigate how the disabled body or mind is culturally constructed and represented within a particular society. It seeks to undo the dichotomies of normal/abnormal and non-disabled/disabled by arguing that they are the product of socio-political and cultural discourses rather than “natural” categories. Strictly speaking, the concern of theorists of disability, among whom are Rosemarie Garland Thomson, Lennard Davis and Dan Goodley, is not so much with the physically disabled body

or the cognitively impaired mind, but with the way in which they are framed by what the critics consider to be the hegemonic discourse of ‘normalcy’. Disability Studies scholars argue that bodily deviance is stigmatised and made to seem “other” due to the exclusivist nature of “ableist” thinking; it is the non-disabled discourse that is responsible for constructing and branding the disabled body as aberrant. In other words, what the field proposes is a shift in the way disability is regarded, namely a reconsideration of impairment no longer as a personal tragedy, a medical condition or an immoral state, but as the consequence of a social symptom.

Despite the fact that Disability Studies is a rather new field of study, theorists have sought to lay the conceptual foundation by producing a rich body of scholarly work. Their aim is to provide a critical and theoretical framework, which can help to give a clearer outline of the main concerns within Disability Studies. Among the significant contributions are Rosemarie Garland Thomson’s *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (1997), Lennard Davis’s *The Disability Studies Reader* (2013), Dan Goodley’s *Disability Studies: An Interdisciplinary Introduction* (2010), Ato Quayson’s *Aesthetic Nervousness* (2007), Nick Watson’s *Routledge Handbook of Disability Studies* (2012) and Kim Q. Hall’s *Feminist Disability Studies* (2011).

In the introduction to *The Disability Studies Reader*, Lennard J. Davis traces the genealogy of the terms “norm” and “normalcy” in order to prove that they are historical constructions originating during the Industrial Revolution in England. He explains how other influences such as the Marxist view on corporeal wholeness as a tool in economic advancement, of eugenics and of the growing importance of psychoanalytical theory, contributed to the imposition of a standardized version of the human individual. However, as Davis observes, not all bodies would fall under the category of “normal”. Consequently, this meant a significant narrowing in bodily variation which had the predictable outcome of categorizing those bodies not included in the dominant category as deviant. Davis asserts that initially, the word “disability” was used as an umbrella term to refer to a variety of disabilities that would go beyond mere physical forms. Davis writes that bodily imperfection was also seen “as contributing to the disease of the nation [...] If individual citizens are not fit, if they do not fit into the nation, then the national body will not be fit.” (Davis 6) This anxiety towards the disabled was reflected in the political domain as well as in the social and cultural spheres.

In literature, for instance, Davis observes that, embedded within narrative structures, there is an underlying normativity of the ableist discourse. To put it in his own words,

the very structures on which the novel rests tend to be normative, ideologically emphasizing the universal quality of the central character whose normativity encourages us to identify with him or her. Furthermore, the novel's goal is to reproduce, on some level, the semiologically normative signs surrounding the reader, that paradoxically help the reader to read those signs in the world as well as the text. This normativity in narrative will by definition create the abnormal, the Other, the disabled, the native, the colonized subject, and so on. (Davis 9)

What this suggests is that the centralization of the non-disabled character in a literary text helps to produce and perpetuate certain ideologies concerning corporeal wholeness, which work in detriment of the universalized figure of the other. The fragment also points to the mutual relationship between the disabled and the able and to the power relations that this relationship implies.

In “Disability, Life Narrative, and Representation”, G. Thomas Couser raises awareness of the seemingly undisputed position of the non-disabled. While the dominating position of the able body is mostly taken for granted, the anomalous body is usually the subject of social inquiry. In his opinion, “deviations from bodily norms often provoke a demand for explanatory narrative in everyday life. Whereas the unmarked case – the ‘normal’ body – can pass without narration, the marked case – the scar, the limp, the missing limb, or the obvious prosthesis – calls for a story.” (Couser 457) Even though he refers to real-life situations experienced by disabled people, the same principle is applicable to literary texts where the impairment stands as an open invitation to narrative. However, Couser remarks that it is only recently that the disabled have been granted more autonomy. The example he gives is of the field of Cultural Studies where disability has been ‘hyper-represented’. What he means by this is that the deviant body has undergone objectification through the gaze of the non-disabled. This patronizing look cast upon the anomalous body has been responsible for shaping the collective consciousness of a particular society. To explain his point, Couser asserts that the negative representation of deficiency was mainly due to the fact that disabled individuals would hardly have an active role in influencing the circulation of images about themselves. Hence, the accumulation of various negative layers of meaning resulted in how disability has been portrayed throughout history.

1.2 The Normate

The central concept of Disability Studies is the “normate”. Coined by Rosemarie Garland Thomson, it refers to the position of authority which regards the able body as natural; the concept refers to the constructed cultural identity used to designate a figure whose physical body is characterized by its wholeness. The subject position offered by the normate is occupied by those individuals whose bodies are regarded as “normal” and who subsequently use the authority that their corporeal configuration allows to their own advantage. However, the normate position is almost always occupied by the heterosexual white able-bodied male whose “superiority appears natural, undisputed, and unremarked, seemingly eclipsed by female, black, or disabled difference.” (Thomson 20). This limitation to a single defining trait from the categories of race, class and sexuality suggests the exclusivist quality of the normate position. It also implies that the categories which do not fit into the pattern are automatically inferior and based on insufficiency – whether bodily, socially or ethnically.

In this regard, Thomson makes a connection between disability and gender. The link dates back to Ancient Greece when Aristotle distinguished between the normal body (i.e. the male body) and the abnormal body, remarking that the female body constitutes the first deviation from the norm. The perpetuation of this association has led to the inextricable association of femininity with deviance. Nevertheless, there are many similarities that can be drawn between the female body and the disabled body. The association with deviance and inferiority, the peripheral position in society and the definition in relation to an alleged norm are key resemblances shared by both the female and the deviant body (see Thomson 19). Thomson asserts that “[t]he judgment that the disabled woman’s body is asexual and unfeminine creates [...] a social invisibility and cancellation of femininity” (Thomson 25). In addition to this deprivation of sexuality, the disabled female body is subjected to a further form of subjugation by the “normal” female body and the male body. Thomson refers to a triangulation between these three bodies. The position of the disabled female body situates itself in opposition to the male body and in antithesis with the female body. The female deviant body is simultaneously included and excluded from the category of woman.

As far as its relation to the deviant body is concerned, the normate always defines itself in opposition to the disabled figure, on whose existence it depends for its survival. Between the two categories lie power structures that are responsible for neutralizing the position of the normate while intentionally stigmatising the disabled individual. In Thomson’s words, the “figures of otherness are highly marked in power relations, even as they are marginalized,

their cultural visibility as deviant obscures and neutralizes the normative figure that they legitimate.” (Thomson 8-9) A closer examination of the practices fuelling the sense of alterity associated with the deviant body reveals the underlying normativity of the non-disabled body. Whereas the anomalous body is foregrounded due to its exotic appearance, the able body is pushed in the background and made to seem neutral. Moreover, the authority of the seemingly “normal” body is hardly ever questioned due to the fact that its image has managed to infiltrate itself into the collective consciousness.

Therefore, Thomson wants to shift the attention away from the common association of disability with a pathological problem and towards the politicizing of the category. What she suggests is a different approach to the study of corporeal deviance which tries to achieve a broader understanding of disability and wants to reposition it among other identity formation categories such as race, class, gender and sexuality. She aims to deconstruct the entrenched neutrality of the non-disabled body by arguing that “able-bodiedness” resembles a social construction² that comprises of a multiplicity of discourses ranging from the legal to the cultural, all of which have an exclusivist nature.

The restricted “ableist” view on corporeal difference resurfaces and is emphasised in the act of representation. Hence, Thomson argues that the physically disabled body is not natural, but a culturally encoded construct; it is the product of social circumstances. No longer does she believe in a dichotomous relation between ability and disability, but maintains that disability is the product of representation. Corporeal otherness is not strictly “a property of bodies as a product of cultural rules about what bodies should be or do.” (Thomson 6) Through the act of representation, the physically disabled body then becomes the recipient of layers of social meaning. What is noteworthy to point out is that its various ‘readings’ are not determined by the impairment itself, but by the common perpetuated ideas about deviance. These ideas, in turn, are the result of a hierarchy whose foundation is based on bodily comparison. In this respect, Thomson states that these social hierarchies naturalize and promote the physically abled body while they stigmatize the deviant body. Thus, she goes on to explain that the dominant group has the authority to legitimate or restrict the circulation of definitions regarding what defines an ordinary body and what an extraordinary one.

² Similarly, in *Disability Studies: An Interdisciplinary Introduction*, Dan Goodley aims to denaturalize the hegemony of the “able body” and prove that its naturalization is actually propped by social constructions. In addition, he maintains that disability should not be made to seem natural because, essentially, it is not; its representation and meaning are imposed by the normative discursive power of the non-disabled.

Consequently, there is a feeling of apprehension, which dominates the representation of the impaired and simultaneously diminishes his importance. According to the ableist standard, the role that the disabled should perform is to “symbolically free the privileged, idealized figure [...] from the vagaries and vulnerabilities of embodiment.” (Thomson 7) That is to say, it has a reassuring function for the able figure in that it restores confidence in physical wholeness as well as the sense of “normality”. As a result, disability continues to bear the “mark of otherness” while “able-bodiedness” maintains its corporeal authority by encouraging the sense of alterity connected with the disabled body (Thomson 9).

Furthermore, Thomson states that the act of representation serves a double purpose. On the one hand, it reinforces the discourse of disability as a discourse of otherness – whereas “able-bodiedness” is a desired and valued characteristic, bodily imperfection is something to condemn and fear. On the other hand, it promotes narratives of universality, which perpetuate the alleged existence of a standardized image of what a human being should look like and maintain the unassailability of this norm. In her analysis of the disabled body, Thomson does not restrict her examination solely to the representation of the aberrant figure, but takes one step further and questions the non-disabled narrative as well. She believes that the latter is responsible for constructing and fuelling narratives of deviance since “those bodies deemed inferior become spectacles of otherness while the unmarked are sheltered in the neutral space of normalcy.” (Thomson 8) The neutral space that Thomson mentions can be thought to represent a cocoon whose function is to protect the able individual from becoming the victim of stigmatization.

In the literary domain, Thomson asserts that the representation of the physically disabled is very often subjected to a process of oversimplification. Anomalous figures undergo instrumentalization and become tools that help the normate in his or her process of self-discovery. She writes that “[d]isabled literary characters usually remain on the margins of fiction as uncomplicated figures or exotic aliens whose bodily configurations operate as spectacles, eliciting responses from other characters or producing rhetorical effects that depend on disability’s cultural resonance.” (Thomson 9) Characters whose bodily configurations do not keep within the limits of ‘normality’ constitute a source of intrigue, which demands continuous questioning and interpretation by the normate.

For the normate, the disabled figure seems to function similarly to what Julia Kristeva refers to as the abject in “Approaching Abjection”. The concept refers to a blurring of the clear

distinction between the subject and the object. It is defined as “what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite.” (Kristeva 4) The sense of uncertainty characteristic of the abject is the result of its constant meaning deferral; its capacity to always escape interpretation due to its state of “in-betweenness” – neither subject nor object. Encountering the abject and, similarly, the disabled body, causes a feeling of unease for the normate. However, the threat of the abject and, implicitly, of the anomalous body, comes from within the self. As Kristeva argues, there is a fear of losing part of what constitutes the self. What the normate experiences during the moment of encounter is a settling of the other within himself or herself. This figure of otherness confronts the normate with a reality he or she constantly refuses to acknowledge. For the normate, the abject stands for a “*land of oblivion* that is constantly remembered” (Kristeva 8). Another way of regarding abjection is as a “*narcissistic crisis*” (Kristeva 14) [emphasis in original]. Kristeva explains that the encounter hurts the narcissistic ego of the non-disabled and opens a wound. More often than not, the effect of this ‘attack’ triggers defence measures manifested through indifference, superiority and ignorance. Besides these negative reactions to abjection, there are other, more positive ways of responding to it, one of which is fascination. The abject intrigues by being other while also a part of the self. According to Kristeva, it is in literature that abjection allows for a more complex and in-depth exploration. In the same way as the abject elicits an ambivalent reaction of attraction and rejection, the disabled body evokes similar feelings. What Thomson highlights, is that the experience of the encounter usually centres on the figure of the normate. Furthermore, in literature, the representation of the disabled body is constructed by the ableist discourse. As Thomson posits, “representation tends to objectify disabled characters by denying them any opportunity for subjectivity or agency.” (Thomson 11) Nevertheless, Rosemarie Thomson stresses that, if disabled characters were represented in a more dynamic form, they would lose their stigma.

1.3 Aesthetic Nervousness

In *Aesthetic Nervousness*, Ato Quayson has produced the first systematic analysis of the representation of disability in literature. He looks at the literary representation of disabled characters from medieval times to the modern period and shows the gradual change that occurred to the way in which the deviant character was portrayed. In medieval literature, characters with bodily imperfections were read symbolically, as morally ambiguous or evil

figures. Quayson names, for instance, the figure of the Loathely Lady, an appalling hunchbacked woman, whose role was to test the chivalry of other characters and to help them in their development. It is with modern literature that the disabled character acquires a more realistic dimension because the focus shifts towards his individuality rather than towards what he might iconically stand for; moreover, Quayson observes that in modern literary texts the representation of disability becomes more concealed and diffuse; disability begins to gain more complexity while its representation slowly becomes a central concern in the narrative.

Furthermore, the representation of disability has an active ethical dimension. In the words of Ato Quayson, “[d]isability returns the aesthetic domain to an active ethical core that serves to disrupt the surface of representation.” (Quayson 19) What this suggests is that the presence of disability within the literary text implies an active ethical involvement in the reading process. When it comes to engaging with texts that feature disability, the reader – usually occupying a normative position – witnesses a disruption of the frames within which the disabled figure is often bound. Quayson remarks that “the representation of disability oscillates uneasily between the aesthetic and the ethical domains, in such a way as to force a reading of the aesthetic fields in which the disabled are represented as always having an ethical dimension that cannot be easily subsumed under the aesthetic structure.” (Quayson 19) Hence, the very structure on which the representation of disability lies is both aesthetic and ethic. The impossibility of drawing a clear line between what should be classified as ethic and what as aesthetic suggests that, between the two, there is a constant interchange at work; they are mutually constitutive categories that are inextricably connected with the representation of disability.

In order to analyse the narratological effects of disability in a literary text, Quayson coins the concept of “aesthetic nervousness”. According to him, aesthetic nervousness happens when the representation of disability features in a literary text. Consequently, narrative devices such as point of view, plot, and symbols are *all* affected by the presence of this textual unease refracted throughout the entire narrative. He argues that the presence of disability disrupts the text in its entirety and the reactions are embedded within its structure; thus it influences the course of the narrative by means of fragmenting its seemingly linear development. Quayson refers to three key levels which are crucial during the moment when a normal character meets a disabled character. The first and most evident stage happens at the level of interaction between the able and disabled character. An examination of the narratological level reveals that aesthetic nervousness influences the very structures on which the text is built. Finally, a

more abstract level refers to the interaction between the reader and the text as a whole. He states that the reader's way of engaging with the text is influenced by the presence of disability within that text. In this respect, Quayson argues that the reader is also a function of the text, composed of "several interacting elements" among which he refers to the identification with the protagonist or with other secondary characters, the coordination between reader and the shifting point of view of the narrator and the constant need to adjust to various plot twists in order to understand and be able to form new opinions about the changing narrative situation (see Quayson 15).

Since disability in literature takes on various forms of representation, Quayson attempts to structure some of the common social attitudes linked to the way in which deviance is regarded. He provides a typology of disability of which only three such categories prove to be particularly useful for consolidating the argument in this paper. Quayson suggests that the most often encountered role that the disabled figure plays is to enable within the normate the sense of morality. Encountering the disabled figure represents a moral test that the non-disabled must take in order to evolve as a character. Therefore, the deviant figure has an instrumental function in relation to the normate. A second possibility of representing disability is as a means of creating, maintaining and enforcing the discourse of otherness upon the able figure. Lastly, Quayson examines disability as a "site of a major hermeneutical impasse" (Quayson 49). The deferral of meaning is what characterizes the interpretation of the disabled figure; there is no closure to the interpretative process triggered by the presence of the deviant body. In this case, disability functions as an hermetically sealed category, whose decryption ultimately results in failure. Quayson refers to this act of constantly returning to and trying to decipher the disabled body as a "manic urge to interpret" (Quayson 49).

1.4 South Africa: A Disabled Society?

"Deformation. My life as deformed, year after year, by South Africa."

(J. M. Coetzee, *Boyhood Papers*)

This is how Coetzee describes his experience growing up as a South African. The words he uses evoke the semantic field of disability. The deformation that he refers to has the function of a symbolical burden from which he could not seem to separate. His ethnic neutrality – manifested through reluctance toward the Afrikaner identity – and his linguistic detachment –

not having a definite mother tongue – contributed to a feeling of alienation which implied a gradual inner withdrawal. For Coetzee, living in South Africa during the apartheid regime had an almost claustrophobic dimension due to the fact that it was not the consequence of a voluntary choice, nor was it one from which he could easily free himself.

In his “Jerusalem Prize Acceptance Speech”, Coetzee speaks about his relationship with South Africa. In his speech, he seems to offer a diagnosis of the cause and effect of the apartheid regime. He remarks that South Africa had been built on a system of masters and servants, which, subsequently, implied a relationship of mutual dependence, granting neither party the freedom it aspired to. Furthermore, Coetzee notices that the rules and regulations, which prevented the peaceful coexistence of and interaction between whites and non-whites, possessed a symbolical meaning whose “origins [...] lie in fear and denial: denial of an unacknowledgeable desire to embrace Africa, embrace the body of Africa; and fear of being embraced in return by Africa.” (Coetzee, *Doubling the Point* 97) He notices that the cause of this defensive and rigid attitude was due to “a failure of love” (Coetzee, *Doubling* 97) – a misinterpreted type of love, which was not directed towards the South African people, but towards the South African land.

A further point he makes is that political deformation is inextricably connected to psychic distortion. South Africa’s traumatic past is mirrored through the spiritual malformation of its people. As Coetzee puts it,

[t]he *deformed* and stunted relations between human beings that were created under colonialism and exacerbated under what is loosely called apartheid have their psychic representation in a *deformed* and stunted inner life. All expressions of that inner life, no matter how intense, no matter how pierced with exultation or despair, suffer from the same stuntedness and *deformity*. (Coetzee, *Doubling* 98) [emphasis added]

The fragment suggests the inescapable condition of deformity that colonialism in general and apartheid in particular brought on its non-white citizens; it maimed people, it stunted lives and it malformed the soul. Moreover, it caused a psychic wound to open, whose consequence was a permanent damage to the inner life of black people.

The ramification of the system is explained by Hendrik Verwoerd, leader of the National Party and architect of apartheid:

Apartheid comprises a whole multiplicity of phenomena. It comprises the political sphere; it is necessary in the social sphere; it is aimed at in Church matters; it is relevant to *every* sphere of life. Even within the economic sphere it is not just a

question of numbers. What is of more importance there is whether one maintains the colour bar or not. [emphasis added] (qtd. in Davenport, and Saunders 392)

What he talks about is the intricate power of the operational programme of apartheid to cover all aspects of South African life. Due to its white policy and, subsequently, its inherently biased structure, apartheid had serious repercussions for those categorized as non-white. The consequences of such a crippling system were experienced most severely at the level of human relations, which, during the nearly five decades of constant oppression, inevitably underwent a process of deformation. In “South African Novelists and the Grand Narrative of Apartheid”, Annie Gagiano speaks about violation as the mark of apartheid. She refers to Antjie Krog’s *Country of My Skull* as a contribution which provided an account of the multiple forms of invasion that the non-whites experienced, namely “not so much of land, but of rooms, and houses, of bodies, and of minds.” (Gagiano 102) It is noteworthy to observe the power of the white rule to invade even the most intimate parts of non-white existence. In this respect, Gagiano believes that literature represents the most suitable medium to record the changes experienced by the psyche of a particular society. In the case of South Africa, the non-white psyche was the victim of the effects of the regime.

Therefore, apartheid can be described as both a disabled and a disabling system. The series of acts that were passed to ensure social, geographical and political segregation are evidence of the obsession with racism that apartheid had. The Immorality Act (1927), the Mixed Marriages Act (1949) and the Immorality Amendment Act (1950) eliminated the possibility of intimate interaction between non-white people and white people; the Group Areas Act (1950) and the Native Laws Amendment Act (1952) assured a spatial distance between them while the Bantu Education Act (1953) restricted black people from receiving equal education with the whites³. Imposing English and Afrikaans as the dominant languages also meant that the non-white population was beginning to lose its own language. Due to the rapidly decreasing importance of native languages, black people were forced to adopt a different language than their own. What all these measures show is that the entire system of apartheid was built on power relations meant to privilege the whites and keep the non-whites under dominance.

Despite the fact that Coetzee wrote under apartheid, unlike his fellow writers (Nadine Gordimer, Sol Plaatje and Breyten Breytenbach), he tends to opt for an apolitical stance

³ A systematic and comprehensive presentation of these acts is offered in Nancy L. Clark and William H. Worger’s *South Africa: The Rise and Fall of Apartheid* and in Robert Ross’s *A Concise History of South Africa*.

rather than to actively engage in political issues. He seems to work in a different tradition and this is reflected in his texts, which are constructed as multi-layered, focusing more on questions of ethics and aesthetics rather than aiming to do political justice. In the introduction to *J. M. Coetzee: South Africa and the Politics of Writing* (1993), David Attwell observes that Coetzee's use of historical inaccuracy and socially implausible narrators mirrored his endeavours to keep himself at a distance from the South African context in which he was writing.

Drawing on Attwell's statement that the writer's "relationship to society rests on the way in which he or she transmits the discourses of fiction", it could be argued that Coetzee's position in South Africa had a certain degree of authority, which was reflected in his work (Attwell, *Politics of Writing* 130). Coetzee talks about an ethics of writing and distinguishes between two types of duty: an impersonal duty imposed by society and a personal duty imposed by the self (i.e. one's consciousness). When it comes to one's impersonal duty, however, Coetzee exhibits reluctance towards the passive acceptance of and submission to the normativity of the dominant discourses. The acceptance of the hegemony of the dominant discourse should not unquestionably be accepted. This doubtful attitude is also exemplified in his fiction. Instead of being an addition to history, Coetzee's work reflects the power of narrative to rival history. Despite the burden of the oppressive regime Coetzee experienced, through his work, he managed to restore a certain authority to the novel and the novelist.

In his texts, Coetzee shows what it is like to accommodate oneself to alterity. The form this otherness has is the tortured bodies of his characters. This preoccupation with the (disabled) body represents a recurrent motif in his fiction. The body functions as a way of validating the existence of his characters. No matter what they are or are not, they are first and foremost body. Coetzee explains that "[w]hatever else, the body is not "that which is not" and the proof that it *is* is the pain it feels. The body with its pain becomes a counter to the endless trials of doubt." (Coetzee, *Doubling* 248) The awareness of the body is raised the moment when the body becomes the victim of suffering. Throughout the history of colonial South Africa and culminating with apartheid, the non-white body has been exposed to levels of pain. Coetzee draws attention to the authority of the disabled body when he observes that "in South Africa it is not possible to deny the authority of suffering and therefore the body. [...] it is not that one *grants* the authority of the suffering body: the suffering body *takes* this authority: that is its power. To use other words: its power is undeniable." (Coetzee, *Doubling*

248) Hence, there is an inextricable connection between the history of South Africa and the body.

As far as the reasons for choosing to represent disabled characters are concerned, there stands an open invitation to debate. As mentioned previously, one of the possible explanations might be connected to the disturbing past of colonial South Africa. Under apartheid, disability seems to be an ever-present phenomenon among its non-white majority. Therefore, what J. M. Coetzee is doing is he is fictionalizing historical facts while maintaining a degree of narrative authority. It is not factual truth that he aims to represent in his work. Rather, a kind of truth, which goes beyond the historical sphere – an elusive, universal truth. In trying to reach this deferred truth, one of the methods he uses is the focus on language. Linguistic experimentation allows him to play with different voices. Even though, strictly speaking, he does not give a voice to the marginalized characters, there is a constant struggle to try to understand the other.

2. Waiting for the Barbarians

In South Africa, the 1970s were marked by significant political changes. In the aftermath of the Soweto student uprising in 1976, the country was characterized by an incipient state of paranoia. What the government promoted was the idea that “a ‘total onslaught’ was being waged against the country and against Western Christian civilization in Africa.” (Attwell, “Writing Revolution” 81) Moreover, the alleged threat upon the country inevitably led to a strengthening of censorship. In 1977, one year after the student uprising, the arrest and death of the Black Consciousness leader, Steven Biko, drew international attention and had a great impact on South African politics. The stir around the event was mainly due to the uncertainty regarding the exact cause of Biko’s death. It is during these political changes that *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980) was being written. The Biko affair, although not immediately perceivable, can be identified in Coetzee’s *Waiting for the Barbarians* through the presence of the torture chamber, the pressure exerted by the state security, and the consequences they had on men of liberal conscience (see Attwell, “Writing Revolution” 93).

Despite the fact that Coetzee began to sketch his first ideas for the novel on July 11th 1977, it was only in 1980 that it had finally been completed and published (see Attwell, “Writing

Revolution” 83). The novel was a rather short narrative of 170 pages, divided into six chapters, and spanning across a period of one year. The events unfold in a chronological order and are presented through the eyes of the magistrate in a first person narrative. Although the novel lacks geographical and historical specificity, the description of the setting tends to be naturalized. However, Attwell remarks that Coetzee’s opting for a more conventional form does not automatically show adherence to realism, but it proves to be an exorcism of “the ghost of realism” (see Attwell “Reading” 70). In this way, Coetzee still manages to create a narrative which does not completely support realism, but one which rivals it.

The narrative presents an unnamed character, the magistrate, whose quiet life on a “lazy frontier” (Coetzee, *Waiting*⁴ 8) settlement is disturbed by the arrival of Colonel Joll, an officer of Empire, whose job it is to run investigations concerning a rumoured barbarian war. Soon after Joll departs, the magistrate encounters a barbarian girl, who was left behind due to her disability – half blinded eyes, mutilated feet and marks of torture on her body – which prevented her from joining the other barbarians after they had been set free. The presence of the girl triggers the process of consciousness for the magistrate, who gradually begins to question the tactics of Empire. She also inadvertently helps him to explore his desire, but as soon as he realizes reciprocation is not possible he takes her back to her people. On his arrival back at the settlement, he is accused of “treasonously consorting with the enemy”, imprisoned, tortured and publicly humiliated (Coetzee 85). The end of the narrative presents a chaotic state of events, with people fleeing the settlement, soldiers tyrannising the town and the barbarians threatening to attack at any moment.

As far as the critical reception of *Waiting for the Barbarians* is concerned, academics have been inclined to focus on aspects regarding the difficulty imposed by the representation of torture in a literary text⁵, the problem arising from the rivalry between history and literature⁶,

⁴ For efficiency reasons, the references taken from Coetzee’s *Waiting for the Barbarians* will only feature the name of the author and page number since they are all taken from the same novel.

⁵ See Kelly Adams’s “Acts Without Agents: The Language of Torture in J. M. Coetzee’s *Waiting for the Barbarians*,” *ariel: a review of international English literature* 46.3 (2015): 165-177; Susan Van Zanten Gallagher’s “Torture and the Novel: J. M. Coetzee’s *Waiting for the Barbarians*,” *Contemporary Literature* 29.2 (1988): 277-285; Jennifer Wenzel’s “Keys to the Labyrinth: Writing, Torture, and Coetzee’s Barbarian Girl,” *Tulsa Studies in Women’s Literature* 15.1 (1996): 61-71.

⁶ See David Attwell’s “Reading the Signs of History: *Waiting for the Barbarians*,” *J. M. Coetzee: South Africa and the Politics of Writing*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1993. 70-87.

and the tendency to create a polarity between Self and Other⁷. The problem of disability in the novel has, however, only briefly been touched upon. Apart from Neimneh and Al Shalabi's essay entitled "Disability and the Ethics of Care in J. M. Coetzee's *Slow Man*", in which the word 'disabled' appears, critics often make use of terms such as 'crippled', 'tortured' and 'lamed', but rarely 'disabled' to refer to the barbarian girl. What is worth mentioning is that these readings have the potential to unintentionally brush over an aspect that, although not immediately noticeable, lies at the heart of the novel, namely the aspect of disability. As will be shown in the following analysis, the presence of disability in *Waiting for the Barbarians* constitutes a key structural element.

2.1 Empire: A Dysfunctional System

"Now what's going to happen to us without them?
The barbarians were a kind of solution."
(Cavafy, "Waiting for the Barbarians")

The words quoted above appear as the last two lines of C. P. Cavafy's poem, which inspired Coetzee to use the title for his own novel. In Cavafy's poem, the people of the Empire ceremoniously prepare for the arrival of the barbarians, who are expected to take control over the governmental affairs. However, the keenly awaited moment of their arrival fails to come. Consequently, the people are left in a state of expectation and confusion without knowing what will follow next. This collective feeling of helplessness and purposelessness is expressed through the rhetorical question "Now what's going to happen to us without them?" (Cavafy 7) The "solution" brought by the barbarians would have reinvigorated and refashioned the politically and culturally inert Empire. Yet the people find themselves forced to face the fact that they must try to imagine the future of the Empire without the 'help' of the barbarians.

There are certain aspects from Cavafy's poem that are mirrored in Coetzee's novel. The existence of an Empire, which is constantly under threat by the coming of the barbarians, the

⁷ See Derek Attridge's "Against Allegory: *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *Life & Times of Michael K.*" *J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading: Literature in the Event*. Chicago: The U of Chicago P, 2004. 32-64; Mike Marais's "Writing With Eyes Shut: Ethics, Politics, and the Problem of the Other in the Fiction of J. M. Coetzee." *English in Africa* 25.1 (1998): 43-60.

measures taken in anxious anticipation of their arrival, and, eventually, the failure to arrive echo the poem written by the Greek poet. Both texts seem to underline the idea that a powerful system such as Empire necessarily depends on the (imagined) existence of a weaker system, which fuels and enforces the former's power and authority. This reveals that the core of imperialist thinking is self-negating and, consequently, bound to fail. David Attwell remarks that, in contrast to Cavafy's poem, Coetzee "breaks open the enclosed world of signs on which Empire depends." (Attwell, "Reading" 71) In contrast to Cavafy, who does not exhibit the structure of the Empire in his poem, Coetzee explores the way in which the system operates and, in so doing, reveals its mechanism.

In *Waiting for the Barbarians*, Empire functions both as a disabled and a disabling system. It is a disabled system because in its desire to achieve and maintain power and control, it transgresses ethical parameters by resorting to questionable physical and psychological techniques. Torture – whether behind closed doors or before the eyes of the people – together with the extreme pain and suffering accompanying it represent the 'tools' with which Empire operates in physically disarming its alleged opponents. Regarding psychological forms of disempowerment, Empire 'disables' its individuals by exerting a subtle but constant psychological pressure on them. Whether it is by creating scenarios that interfere with the general tranquillity of life on the frontier, or by showing how violent the consequences of not sympathizing with the regime may be (i.e. the deprivation of certain physical abilities), Empire manages to both psychologically and physically 'cripple' its people and, by doing so, preserve its position of authority.

Empire works by spreading paranoia among its members. This state of psychic disorder begins with the circulation of stories about an impending war declared by the barbarians. Despite the uncertainty of the news, the nervousness produced by the act of *waiting* endlessly for the arrival of the barbarians gives rise to the suitable conditions for paranoia to develop. In *Paranoia* (2003), David Bell writes that "[i]n those who develop acute paranoid illnesses, suspiciousness and wariness give way to delusional conviction. Such individuals do not feel *suspicion* that others are threatening them in some way but instead become *convinced* that this is so, and this conviction may become elaborated into a sophisticated delusional system." [emphasis in original] (Bell 7) Similarly, the initial suspicion regarding the barbarian war becomes the assurance that this event will occur. The chaotic state in which the settlement finds itself towards the end of the narrative can be interpreted as a mirror image of the acute paranoid mental state of the minds of the townspeople. With the garrison gone, the provisions

emptied, families fleeing and winter slowly settling in, paranoia witnesses its triumph. Therefore, due to its power to shape the perception of reality, paranoia proves a useful tool for Empire to ensure control over its individuals.

However, paranoid thinking requires constant renewal. In this regard, Bell speaks about the “self-generating” quality of the paranoid thought process (Bell 59). The imperative need for regeneration arises from its self-negating nature; that is to say if the system is to acknowledge its constantly repressed vulnerability, it would break down. Bell underlines the necessity of renewal by explaining that since the “collapse of the paranoid system brings with it a discovery that all that has been hated is not external but internal to the self, and also the shocking realisation that the worldview that dominates thinking is based on distortion, with all wastage of life that such recognition brings, it must be resisted at all costs.” (Bell 59-60) In the same way, for Empire, the risk of exposure to its own repressed aggression, hostility, weakness and fear of its vulnerability needs to be avoided for it endangers its cohesion. To preserve the feeling of unity among its people, the system must project any unwanted impulses upon a weaker group, in this case, the barbarians. As far as group psychology is concerned, Bell remarks that in order to deflect an internal conflict which might arise, the system chooses as its “projective target” a particular group which then becomes the recipient of any destructive impulses within the dominant group (Bell 66). Thus, the idea of the barbarians as potential danger is created in order to justify the violent deeds of Empire.

Paranoia is not there from the very beginning but develops from a continuous anxiety. Drawing on Freud’s categorisation of anxiety⁸, Bell explains that internal anxiety represents the site responsible for the development of paranoid mental conditions. The fear and panic at the thought of the barbarians function as catalyst for the development of paranoia. The magistrate remarks

that once in every generation, without fail, there is an episode of hysteria about the barbarians. There is no woman living along the frontier who has not dreamed of a dark barbarian hand coming from under the bed to grip her ankle, no man who has not frightened himself with visions of the barbarians carousing in his home, breaking the plates, setting fire to the curtains, raping his daughters. These dreams are the consequence of too much ease. (Coetzee 9)

⁸ Freud distinguishes between two types of anxiety. One is caused by external factors while the other arises from within the mind. Whereas the first type appears less frequently, the second proves almost impossible to avoid since its effects are perceived by the mind.

What this passage suggests is the ‘paralyzing’ effect that the existence of the barbarians has upon the townspeople. Moreover, it highlights the constant need of the system to renew the threat posed by the barbarians in order to maintain its power.

Another reason as to why Empire is a dysfunctional system lies in its “blindness”. Empire is “blinded” by the will to power; its ruling ideology seems to be the achievement of omnipotence. In this way, the system can have unassailable authority and control over its people. What this implies is that any kind of inimical behaviour that would endanger the safety of the system must be immediately detected, interrogated and, if considered a threat, annihilated. The interrogations that the Third Bureau orders Joll and other members of Empire to run indicate the masked desire of the system to establish itself as the unique authority across the country.

However, in its desire to achieve might, Empire is “blind”, oblivious to its own potential weakness and vulnerability. Since the barbarians play a fundamental role in the construction of the system (i.e. the dependence of Empire on the existence of the barbarians as the repository of all the negative impulses throbbing inside it), by attempting to annihilate their existence, Empire implicitly annihilates a part of itself and thus determines its collapse. In other words, it can be stated that Empire is “blind” to the existence of difference. A more material form of blindness is suggested through Colonel Joll’s dark discs. In the first scene which opens the novel, the question of the magistrate regarding Joll’s blindness is straightforward – “Is he blind?” (Coetzee 1). As Joll retires to his room, he “picks his way *uncertainly* among the strange furniture but *does not remove* the dark glasses” [emphasis added] (Coetzee 1). Even though as the narrative unfolds, it becomes clear that Joll does not have difficulty seeing, his dark discs indicate a desire to shield his eyes from everyone thus blocking any kind of mediation between himself and the external world.

Not only is Empire “blind” and “blinded”, but it is also “blinding”. Several victims, who have been subjected to torture, exhibit a destabilization of vision. The most relevant example in this sense is the partially blinded barbarian girl. As she recalls what her torturers have done to her, she tells the magistrate that “[t]hey did not burn me. They said they would burn my eyes out, but they did not. The man brought it [a fork with two heated knobs] very close to my face and made me look at it. They held my eyelids open.” (Coetzee 44) There is another reference to blindness when the magistrate discovers the corpse of the old barbarian man in the granary. The magistrate describes the lifeless body in the following way: “The grey beard

is caked with blood. The lips are crushed and drawn back, the teeth are broken. One eye *rolled back*, the other eye-socket is a *bloody hole*.” [emphasis added] (Coetzee 7) Finally, there is a moment in which the magistrate is temporarily blinded by the blow he receives across the face; his exclamatory remark is “‘I am blind!’ I think, staggering back into the blackness that instantly falls.” (Coetzee 117) Based on these examples, it can be argued that in the act of blinding its opponents, Empire eradicates the possibility of having to ‘see’ its own deformity in the eyes of its victims. By blinding the barbarians, Joll does not have to experience the possible feelings of shame and guilt which might arise from his unethical behaviour towards them. Having blocked any form of visual communication between torturer and tortured, the latter becomes a mere *body*. From the perspective of the torturer, this objectified view of the barbarians simplifies the (ethically charged) act of torture.

Another form of establishing distance between the people of Empire and the barbarians is through conceiving them in abstract terms. Drawing a parallel to Bell’s idea of asylum seekers being perceived by the dominant group as a “homogenous mass removed from history” instead of actual individuals with emotions and fears, the barbarians are similarly viewed by the people of Empire (Bell 67). Instead of having a material reality, the barbarians exist in the minds of the townspeople in the form of an image, which nevertheless produces nervousness. According to Bell, this abstract conceptualization facilitates an *en masse* feeling of hatred towards the weaker group. He goes on to explain that “[t]he more the in-group is whipped up into such hatred, the more difficult it becomes to confront the damage caused, which would bring unmanageable feelings of guilt.” (Bell 68) This *en masse* perception that Bell refers to helps Empire to project its pulsating aggression on the image of the barbarians. Thus, the system delays the moment when it will have to face its own weakness.

At the heart of the paranoid system’s rigid structure lies its vulnerable point, namely thoughtfulness. As long as Empire manages to ‘blind’ its people either through inducing paranoia, fear or anxiety, it ensures that the process of consciousness is maintained in a ‘paralyzed’ state. Despite the efforts of the regime to block any form of autonomous thinking, the magistrate’s ‘awakening’ can symbolically be interpreted as the ‘crack’ in the system. Even though, like Joll, he is part of Empire, he distinguishes himself from the Colonel. This distinction lies in his attitude to vulnerability. Whereas Joll mercilessly exposes the human body to various degrees of suffering while he remains seemingly untouched during the process, the magistrate cannot remain idle in relation to the tortured and vulnerable victims; although the magistrate situates himself neither on the side of Empire nor on the side of the

barbarians, he acts according to basic principles of what he calls “civilized behaviour” (Coetzee 25).

The consequences of the magistrate’s beliefs have both psychological and physical forms. After having returned the girl back to her people, he is accused of “treasonously consorting with the enemy” and imprisoned (Coetzee 85). During his arrest, he is taught by Officer Mandel “what it meant to live in a body, as a body, a body which can entertain notions of justice only as long as it is whole and well, which very soon forgets them when its head is gripped and a pipe is pushed down its gullet and pints of salt water are poured into it till it coughs and retches and flails and voids itself.” (Coetzee 126) The public humiliation, the beating and the scaffold which the magistrate is subjected to serve as a lesson not only for him for refusing to comply to the restricting rules of Empire, but also for the townspeople who witness the system’s overt display of power. In regard to the general spectacle of torture, in *The Spectacle of the Scaffold* (2008), Michel Foucault writes that “public torture and execution must be spectacular, it must be seen by all almost as its [the law’s] triumph. The very excess of the violence employed is one of the elements of its glory: the fact that the guilty man should moan and cry out under the blows is not a shameful side-effect, it is the very ceremonial of justice being expressed in all its force.” (Foucault 42) The violent punishment of the magistrate indicates the triumph of the political over the ethical. Moreover, the lack of involvement evidenced by the townspeople when one of their own people is punished reveals the blind and fearful acceptance of the law. In this way, Empire exposes its ideology, which does not allow for any digression from the rule to occur. Hence, those who do not comply must pay a price and this price is to be paid with the body. The methods of punishment used by Empire target the fragility of the body. After justice has been served, all the victims are left either physically disabled or severely wounded. Thus, the permanent mark on the body of the victims works as a constant reminder of the system’s prevailing power. Through the application of these ‘crippling’ methods, Empire ensures that it annihilates any possibility of its ‘enemies’ to rebel.

The ‘malaise’ of Empire is further passed on to its faithful members. Rather than having a physical disability, Colonel Joll and Officer Mandel show signs of being socially deformed. Their flaw is the inability to ‘see’ beyond the political and into the ethical. Both are blindly driven by the leading idea of power – either the preservation or the achievement of it. Despite having important roles in the system, their position of power is also increased by the authority of their ‘able’ bodies. Drawing on Thomson’s categorisation based on bodily particularities, it

can be argued that Joll and Mandel occupy the position of the normate; they are male, white and ‘able-bodied’ and live in a patriarchal society. However, their encounter with alterity (i.e. the barbarians) seems to harden their normative positions rather than to help them understand and accept difference. Their reaction is characterised by fear and denial⁹, which negatively affect the relationship established between them and the barbarians. The consequence of continuously being exposed to fear determines within the normate an accumulation of tension, which, when released, takes on a violent form. The torture chamber¹⁰ can be regarded as the space where an intimate encounter between bodies occurs. Nevertheless, in the duel, it is always the body of the normate which imposes its authority upon the body of the other. The intensity of the pain exerted may be read as an indication of the intensity of the normate’s nervousness in the presence of the other’s body. By disabling the bodies of the barbarians, the normate strengthens its position of authority and eliminates the possibility of competition. What this behaviour also discloses is an underlying insecurity in relation to the authority of the able body. Inflicting pain on a body represents a refusal to acknowledge its fragility. Moreover, by denying the vulnerability of the barbarians’ bodies Joll rejects his own vulnerability.

The discrepancy concerning the attitude of the magistrate and that of Joll in relation to the treatment of the barbarians creates a tense relationship between them. The more the magistrate becomes familiarized with Joll’s ways, the more he feels his anger intensify. When the magistrate realizes that, like Joll, he is using the body of the barbarian girl for his own obscure purpose, he experiences a feeling of horror (see Coetzee 47-48). Even though they both use her body, the magistrate neither inflicts pain nor leave a permanent physical mark on it, whereas Joll does. The Colonel transforms her body into a disabled one while the magistrate tries to repair the damage that has been done to it. During the last encounter between the magistrate and Joll, the suppressed anger and frustration of the former resurface in the form of a simple yet ethically powerful message, namely “[t]he crime that is latent in us we must inflict on ourselves. [...] Not on others.” (Coetzee 160) This is the lesson Joll had been carefully avoiding but which he nevertheless must face. What makes the words even

⁹ This brings to mind Coetzee’s words in his “Jerusalem Prize Acceptance Speech” about the denial and fear to accept and be accepted by the other.

¹⁰ The torture which Joll applies is reminiscent of what Michel Foucault referred to as judicial torture. Foucault explains that the goal was to obtain the ultimate truth from the guilty person, which was in the form of a confession. Besides the investigative aspect of judicial torture, there was also the aspect of a duel involved (see Foucault 52-53).

stronger is that behind the magistrate's voice are the innocent voices of the tortured barbarians. In other words, the magistrate speaks both for himself and in the name of the barbarians.

2.2 The Disabled Girl

The barbarian girl represents the most prominent example of a disabled character in the novel. Her disability consists of her "broad" twisted feet with "stubby" toes, and "large, puffy, shapeless" ankles, with "the skin scarred purple", which affect the way she stands and walks (Coetzee 30-31); a further indication of her disability are her partially blinded brown eyes, which look "through and past" the object of their focus and which make her see "a blur in the middle of everything" she looks at (Coetzee 44, 33); in addition, the marks of torture are physical remnants of a body that has been severely wounded and disabled as a consequence of inhumane treatment. The high amount of pain that she is subjected to in the torture chamber brings her body in a state of "irremediable damage" (Coetzee 36).

At the beginning of the narrative, the magistrate is presented living a quiet, unperturbed life, "waiting to retire", while working in the service of Empire as the one responsible with running the affairs of a frontier settlement (Coetzee 8). His days follow a rather monotonous sequence, marked by the rising and setting of the sun, eating and sleeping, and by a general feeling of contentment. The event that disturbs the quiet life of the magistrate is the arrival of Colonel Joll, an official sent from the capital to investigate the rumoured unrest among the barbarians who, the Third Bureau claims, are preparing a war against Empire. The turbulence caused by the arrival of Joll only spans until the end of the first chapter, which ends with his departure and the freeing of the captured barbarians. In the following five chapters, however, it is not Joll who perturbs the life of the magistrate; it could be argued that there is, instead, another event which influences the turn of events, namely the encounter with the barbarian girl.

The moment when the non-disabled magistrate meets the disabled girl represents a crucial turning point for his development. The encounter with disability constitutes a powerful experience, which affects the magistrate on an emotional, psychological, moral and social level. From the perspective of emotions, Dominic Head argues that the encounter triggers the quest of the magistrate for "self-discovery" (Head 49). The initial surprise and intrigue he

feels when he sees the barbarian girl spirals into fear and revulsion when he realizes the negligible distance between himself and her torturers, and further transforms into feelings of frustration and helplessness, which spring from his inability to explain or understand his desire, confessing that he is “simply bewildered” by her presence (Coetzee 47); finally, on their journey to take her back to her people, he experiences remorse for having failed to warm up to her from the start: “Perhaps if from the beginning I had known how to use this slap-happy joking lingo with her we might have warmed more to each other. But like a fool, instead of giving her a good time I oppressed her with gloom. [...] Futile bitterness, idle melancholy, empty regrets!” (Coetzee 68) As for the psychological effects of the encounter, the magistrate experiences a drama of consciousness. He grows more conscious of the ‘crippling’ power of Empire and of his indirect complicity with the system. The consequence of his moral ‘awakening’ are projected on his relationship with Empire from which he gradually distances himself. The violent methods used by Empire to treat any possible threat come in conflict with the magistrate’s understanding of ‘civilized’ behaviour. Based on Quayson’s typology of disability, it could be argued that the magistrate’s sense of morality is ‘activated’ through the presence of the disabled girl. Therefore, the encounter with disability has complex ramifications in the way in which the magistrate evolves as a character.

The first image of the barbarian girl is of her kneeling and begging. This image leaves such a powerful imprint on the mind of the magistrate, that despite the strenuous efforts to remember her before she was ‘marked’, he is not able to overwrite the initial image, which remains of “the kneeling beggar-girl.” (Coetzee 36) Besides the fact that the presence of the girl in the town after the barbarians have left intrigues the magistrate, what he first notices when he passes her in the square where she begs is her “strange regard” (Coetzee 27). When the magistrate makes inquiries, he immediately learns about her disability, that is, the fact that she is blind. In addition to blindness, her manner of walking “slowly and awkwardly with two sticks” hints to a locomotor impairment (Coetzee 27). Therefore, it could be argued that the interest of the magistrate is sparked both by the fact that she is a ‘barbarian’ and by her disability¹¹. As their relationship slowly unfolds, the preoccupation, on the verge of obsession, with the body of the barbarian girl suggests the endeavours of the magistrate to familiarize and understand the workings of the wounded, disabled body. In his undertaking,

¹¹ He behaves similarly, but manifesting a more diminished interest, in relation to the surviving young barbarian prisoner. When the magistrate learns about the disabled condition in which the boy has been temporarily left (i.e. loss of the ability to stand as a result of Joll’s barbaric torture methods), he makes sure that the boy is fed and that he receives medical care.

he unavoidably becomes aware of the vulnerability and fragility of the human body and how easily the condition of being 'able-bodied' can change.

Regarding the encounter, Thomson writes that

[w]hen one person has a visible disability, however, it almost always dominates and skews the normate's process of sorting out perceptions and forming a reaction. The interaction is usually strained because the nondisabled person may feel fear, pity, fascination, repulsion, or merely surprise, none of which is expressible according to social protocol. Besides the discomforting dissonance between experienced and expressed reaction, a nondisabled person often does not know how to act toward a disabled person: how or whether to offer assistance; whether to acknowledge the disability; what words, gestures, or expectations to use or avoid. (Thomson 12).

Drawing on Thomson's statement, it is worth mentioning that the nondisabled magistrate experiences similar reactions. He is hesitant but curious when he sees her in the square; when she is brought to his room and is lectured by him on the ways of Empire, he cannot but feel self-disgusted for reacting in an automatic way; the peculiar way in which he 'uses' her body to approach "strange ecstasies" is also indicative of the uncertainty with which he relates to her (Coetzee 50).

Nevertheless, the fact that she is visibly disabled constantly interferes with and governs his thoughts and perceptions: "[w]hile I have not ceased to see her as *a body maimed, scarred, harmed*, she has perhaps by now grown into and become that *new deficient body*, feeling no more *deformed* than a cat feels deformed for having claws instead of fingers." [emphasis added] (Coetzee 61) The deformation of her body determines the magistrate to see her in a different way than he sees other normative bodies. In her essay "Ways of Staring", Rosemary Thomson produces a classification of ways of looking and names three forms, namely arrested, separated and engaged staring. Thomson contends that, in contrast to the arrested and separated ways of looking – which either petrify the stare or redirect the gaze away from the perceived –, engaged looking contains a participatory element. The staree exerts a magnetic attraction upon the starrer, whose intense looking stems from "a pressing need to know, to make sense of the epistemological challenge before one's eyes. Engaged staring reaches out rather than shrinks back. It meets rather than dismisses. It intrudes, most often benevolently, because it is on an urgent mission for knowledge." (Thomson "Ways of Staring" 188) Similarly, what characterizes the magistrate's way of looking is an engaged staring. Rather than being put off by it, the extraordinary body of the girl draws the attention of the magistrate immediately. Throughout the narrative, there are several references to the

act of looking, either in the form of looking, gazing or staring¹². Thomson goes on to explain that rather than the conventional, aesthetically pleasing face, it is the unusual face which constitutes “a visual hermeneutic challenge” to the starrer (Thomson, “Ways of Staring” 178). However, mutual scrutiny is not possible due to the girl’s partial blindness; she can neither respond to nor negotiate the intense looking of the magistrate. What this implies is that staring becomes a one-way act of intense looking and not a “social choreography between two individuals.” (Thomson “Ways of Staring” 180)

In spite of the agency which gets lost by not being able to retort, the magistrate still does not have full authority over the girl. Thus, his insistent look can be interpreted as the desire to have some form of control. When she looks at him, her sight is obstructed by her hazy vision, which makes the magistrate seem “a blur, a voice, a smell, a centre of energy”, and not a person with clearly defined features (Coetzee 31); hence, she unavoidably becomes the object of his stare without the chance to reciprocate:

I watch her eat. She eats like a blind person, gazing into the distance, working by touch. [...] I watch her as she undresses, hoping to capture in her movements a hint of an old free state. But even the motion with which she pulls the smock up over her head and throws it aside is crabbed, defensive, trammelled, as though she were afraid of striking unseen obstacles. Her face has the look of something that knows itself watched. (Coetzee 31-36)

The state of uneasiness that she has in his presence can be thought of as a consequence of his cumbersome stare: “in the bated silences which make up so much of our intercourse she cannot but feel my gaze pressing in upon her with the weight of a body.” (Coetzee 60) Although the thoughts of the girl are merely the speculations of the magistrate, the vehemence of the stare has an almost tangible dimension. This sustained curiosity for the girl transcends cultural differences and is channelled directly to her disabled body – its movements, its gestures and its ‘language’.

The magistrate responds to her disability by showing an active ethical involvement. As Neimneh and Al-Shalabi write, the magistrate is “confronted with the body of the other he should care for [...] In her crippled state, with broken ankles and half-blinded eyes, the disabled woman demands his attention in the form of lodging, nursing, and employment he offers to her.” (Neimneh and Al-Shalabi 35) What this indicates is that disability creates a

¹² See pages 28, 31, 33, 34, 36, 44, 60, etc.

relation of dependency between the disabled and the non-disabled¹³. The magistrate feels that it is his *responsibility*, whether ethical or social, to take care of the disabled body of the girl. To put it into his words, “I am the same man as I always was; but time has broken, something has fallen in upon me from the sky, at random, from nowhere: this body in my bed, *for which I am responsible, or so it seems*, otherwise why do I keep it?” [emphasis added] (Coetzee 47) The impulse to take care of her seems to be an imperative for the magistrate; thus, his dedication and, to a certain extent, self-abandonment in order to attend to the needs of the vulnerable other not only deflate his ego, but also leave a mark on his being.

The behaviour of the magistrate does not bloom only from an ethical concern for the disabled body, but also out of an inexplicable fascination, which the body of the girl exerts upon him. His way of taking care of her body follows the stages of a ritual – the washing, which starts with the deformed feet and then continues upwards, the paring and cleaning of the toenails, and the oiling and rubbing of the body. The washing of the feet finds resemblances in the biblical scene in which Jesus washes the feet of his disciples; thus, the episode could be read as the magistrate’s way of atoning for the ‘sins’ committed by Joll and other supporters of Empire; it is a metaphorical way of ‘washing’ the guilt that stems from this awareness. Similarly, Attwell remarks that the magistrate’s attentions, which include the washing of her feet, constitute the “basic form of atonement or expiation.” (Attwell, “Reading” 80) Moreover, it could also be interpreted as a way of showing humility and, in a symbolic sense, subordination and servility toward the more vulnerable. This ethics of care that the magistrate adopts levels the gap created by the almost unquestioned power structures based on racial and social differences which are established between them. In addition, the language that is used to describe the ritual is indicative of the tenderness and great care – caressing, massaging and kneading the feet – with which he handles the disabled body. The effects of the ritual are described by the magistrate as a “rapture” which gives him a feeling of “blissful giddiness” (Coetzee 30-31).

Silence also increases the mystery of her body. The fact that the girl seems to be enveloped in silence implies that attention is automatically diverted to her maimed body and so it makes it resonates differently. What this means is that the body ‘speaks’ a non-verbal language, which requires careful attention and observation in order to be understood. This “non-verbal

¹³ In this respect, Rosemarie Garland Thomson writes that “Making disabled women the objects of care risks casting them as helpless.” (Thomson 26) It is important to stress here that, initially, the girl refuses the offer of the magistrate to be looked after by him and given work and this episode could be read symbolically as the girl asserting her independence *vis-à-vis* the magistrate.

signifying system” has an empowering effect in that it bestows the girl with agency (Parry 153). Although silence is usually read as a sign of oppression and subordination¹⁴, it could be argued that silence is also a manifestation of an underlying resilience. If this is true, it can be inferred that she is not a victim of her disability, but that she has the *ability* to adapt to her new environment without protesting; her disability does not make her inferior to the magistrate but empowers her status. The power structures initially established between them are continuously negotiated through the ‘equality’ given by the vulnerability of their bodies.

Her disability also functions as a form of empowerment. The more the magistrate attends to her deficient body, the closer he feels himself drawn to it, to the point in which he admits to feeling “enslaved” to the mysterious body (Coetzee 46). This disempowering quality of her body gives her agency and, in doing so, stabilizes the misbalance between the magistrate and her. In the introduction to *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (1985), Elaine Scarry talks about the invisibility and singularity of pain. Her argument is based on the idea that pain is transparent for the person who is not experiencing it. Despite efforts to translate pain into language, pain can only be understood by the person who has been exposed to it. She then goes on to argue that pain has two simultaneous aspects, namely “that which cannot be denied and that which cannot be confirmed.” (Scarry 4) On the one hand, the fact that the girl is physically disabled gives the experience of pain a material confirmation. The disabled body functions as a way of telling the truth about its exposure to pain. The disability of the girl makes the magistrate *acknowledge* the undeniability and tangibility of pain. On the other hand, the experience of pain is not translatable into language. Pain causes language to collapse through its self-referential quality. According to Scarry, “pain is not *of* or *for* anything. It is precisely because it takes no object that it, more than any other phenomenon, resists objectification in language.” (Scarry 5) Hence, the pain that her body has been subjected to invests the girl with a sense of subtle power and authority over the magistrate. All his efforts to understand the causes that led to the girl’s disabled condition are more often than not met with silence.

Drawing on Thomson’s triangulation between the male, female and female disabled body, a parallel can be drawn to the antithetic relations established between the body of the disabled barbarian girl and the normative body of the woman whom the magistrate visits at the inn. The linguistic description of the two bodies – one, trim, bird-like, the other, stocky, “closed,

¹⁴ see Parry 152-153

ponderous”, “alien” – is suggestive of the way the magistrate relates to the women (Coetzee 45). The normative body of the girl at the inn plays a catalytic role for the magistrate in terms of aesthetic value judgement. Through the non-disabled, ‘whole’ body of the girl at the inn, the magistrate realizes the ‘incompleteness’ of the body of the barbarian girl. It is worth arguing that this lack has to do with the fact that she is disabled. Since physical disability is often based on some form of corporeal insufficiency, the loss of the ability to see and to walk properly is a clear indication of a lack in ‘bodily wholeness’ (see Thomson 6).

Apart from obscuring the desire of the magistrate, the “incomplete body” of the barbarian also works in the detriment of the girl by desexualizing her (Coetzee 50). In spite of the fact that her body is often presented as emanating a glow¹⁵, this aura is insufficient to wake the capricious desire of the magistrate. Nevertheless, her condition does not completely annihilate her sexuality. At one point in the narrative, she is the one to suggest intercourse although her suggestion is declined by the magistrate. Arguably enough, the main reason for his refusal has to do with her physical appearance. When he tries to reconstitute her image in his mind, he finds, to his astonishment, that she lacks outer beauty: “[i]s she truly featureless? With an effort I concentrate my mind on her. I see a figure in a cap and heavy shapeless coat standing unsteadily, bent forward, straddle-legged, supporting itself on sticks. How ugly, I say to myself. My mouth forms the ugly word. I am surprised by it but I do not resist: she is ugly, ugly.” (Coetzee 50) What can be inferred from this passage is that her ugliness is inextricably connected to her disability. Her overall bodily posture – the awkward walk, the “blind gaze”, the tactile eating habit and the manner of undressing – all significantly contribute to the cancellation of her appeal in the eyes of the magistrate (Coetzee 33).

2.3 Hermeneutical Impasse

In the manuscript to *Waiting for the Barbarians*, Coetzee writes that “This is a novel in which meaning is continually held back.” [underlined in original] (qtd. in Attwell, “Writing Revolution” 104) In relation to Coetzee’s observation, Attwell refers to the suspension and deferral of meaning as “essential features of *Waiting for the Barbarians*” (Attwell 104). What contributes to the withholding of the novel’s meaning is a combination of physical, linguistic and narratological elements. The disabled body, the question of voice and its authority, and

¹⁵ See p. 29, 32, 43, 68.

the fragmentation of the narrative sequence all add to the impossibility of pinning down one single, fixed meaning for the novel and instead offer innumerable ways of reading it.

Drawing on Ato Quayson's categorisation of the different levels which 'aesthetic nervousness' affects, the encounter with disability in *Barbarians* has an impact both on the interaction between disabled and non-disabled characters and on the entire narrative structure. The 'nervousness' experienced by the non-disabled magistrate during the moment of encounter is refracted in the course of events following the confrontation. What further complicates the encounter is the fact that the magistrate is confronted with otherness (i.e. the barbarian girl) as well as with disability (i.e. her disabled body). From the moment the disabled girl is introduced, the narrative seems to be tailored around her figure. Whether in the second and third chapters, which closely focus on the girl, or the next three chapters, which illustrate the consequences of her presence in the settlement, the figure of the disabled girl significantly contributes to the plot. It could be argued that if the girl were removed from the narrative, the novel would remain rather *plotless*. Taking this one step further, if her disability was omitted, the ethical dimension which disability implies would not have such a powerful impact.

As far as the narrative is concerned, the aesthetic nervousness of the text can be perceived as narrative fragmentation. Despite the linear plot, the flow of events is occasionally interrupted by the insertion of the dream sequence. These dreams represent the magistrate's attempts to make meaning of what is subtly hinted – although not exactly clear – to be the barbarian girl when she was a child. With each dream, the magistrate gets closer to grasping the meaning of the girl, who becomes increasingly vivid in his mind. In connection to the dream sequence, Attwell states that through it, "the child acquires greater definition, offering herself as an achieved individuality, a process that contrasts directly with the Magistrate's experience in relation to the captured girl." (Attwell "Reading" 81) Moreover, the dreams can also represent the efforts of the magistrate to 'connect' with the girl. As it is indicated in one such dream, this connection is established visually:

[s]he sits up on her knees and turns her hooded face towards me. I fear, at this last instant, that she will be a disappointment, that the face she will present to me will be obtuse, slick, like an internal organ not meant to live in the light. But no, she is herself, herself as I have never seen her, a smiling child, the light sparkling on her teeth and glancing from her jet-black eyes! 'So this is what it is to see!' I say to myself. (Coetzee 57)

‘I have never seen you looking so lovely.’ She smiles at me: what beautiful teeth she has, what clear jet-black eyes. (Coetzee 120)

What can be inferred from this description is that the ability to see increases her beauty and allows the magistrate to relate to her differently. The realisation that she is not blind in his dreams comes as a pleasant surprise, almost like a relief to the magistrate, who remarks the spark in her jet-black eyes as she turns her face to him. Despite the visual bond between the magistrate and the little girl, his behaviour and gestures in relation to her are awkward, confused. In his dreams, he knows what to do with her no more than he knows how to relate to her in real-life.

However, her disability engenders problems of interpretation. Drawing on Quayson’s concept of ‘hermeneutical impasse’, it could be argued that the girl’s disabled body brings the magistrate into an interpretative cul-de-sac. Whether her mystery is enhanced by her silence regarding what happened to her in the torture chamber, by her presence which obstructs the magistrate’s desire, or simply by the fact that she is disabled, the attempts undergone by the magistrate to understand what it is that compulsively draws him to her repeatedly fail. Hence, the disabled body is a site where the process of meaning-making collapses. Her body functions similarly to a text, which requires decryption, but whose meaning is constantly deferred. The failure to ‘read’ the torture marks on the body evokes in the magistrate a “manic urge to interpret” them (Quayson 49). He realizes that “until the marks on this girl’s body are deciphered and understood I [he] cannot let go of her.” (Coetzee 33) Despite his efforts, she remains ‘sealed’, locked, impermeable – “with this woman it is as if there is no interior, only a surface across which I hunt back and forth seeking entry.” (Coetzee 46) Although the magistrate remains someone foreign, an outsider to the girl, he does not give up his attempts to interpret her meaning and continues to “search for secrets and answers, no matter how bizarre, like an old woman reading tea-leaves.” (Coetzee 47-48)

Nevertheless, his imprisonment brings him closer to elucidating the interpretative impasse associated with the ‘closed’ body of the girl. What enables him to do this is the acknowledgement of the vulnerability of the body as a first-hand experience. In the solitude and darkness of the same cell in which the girl and her father had been tortured, the magistrate tries to understand what happened. After she had come out of that cell, he believes that “she was no longer fully human, sister to all of us. Certain sympathies died, certain movements of the heart became no longer possible to her.” (Coetzee 88-89) He realizes that the longer the experience of imprisonment, the likely it becomes for him to “be touched with

the contagion and turned into a creature that believes in nothing”, an ordeal that other barbarians had also been subjected to (Coetzee 89). It can be argued that the singularity of her painful experience is, to a certain degree, shared by the magistrate, who is forced to familiarize himself with the fragility of his own body. When he comes to realise that what could have happened in the torture chamber, he confesses to her despite her absence. This process of telling the ultimate truth could be read as the confession of a non-disabled to his disabled other; it is an attempt at identification with and emotional responsiveness to the vulnerable other. Embedded in the act of confessing is also an element of absolute sincerity, implying a complete exposure to the listener and thus it represents a vulnerable moment for the confessor. The irreparable damage that Empire has inflicted on its victims cannot be undone, despite the decent attempts of the magistrate to mend the harm. Although closer to what possibly lies buried in the body and mind of the disabled girl, the magistrate still fails to arrive at a clear meaning, continuing to “swoop and circle around the irreducible figure of the girl, casting one net of meaning after another over her.” (Coetzee 89)

The ‘nervousness’ of the text is also concerned with narrative perspective. In *Waiting for the Barbarians*, the technique that is adopted is internal focalization. This implies that the events are conveyed from the point of view of the narrator (i.e. the magistrate), who interprets them through his own perspective. Consequently, the problems of reliability and interpretation arise. Apart from one episode in which the barbarian girl is described by a character other than the magistrate, her actions, movements and gestures are presented and interpreted from the point of view of the magistrate. He and, implicitly, the reader, learns of the girl’s side of the story through Mai, the mother with whom the magistrate shares a few intimate moments. The woman recalls that “‘I liked her very much. [...] We all did. She never complained, she always did what she was asked, though I know her feet gave her pain. She was friendly. There was always something to laugh about when she was around.’” (Coetzee 166) What is worth emphasising in this short passage is the reference to her feet. Despite the pain she feels, the girl manages to overcome her impairment and act ‘normally’ when engaging with other characters. In other words, she does not allow her disability to overwrite her personality, which is a frequently encountered problem between two characters when one of them has a visible disability (see Thomson 12-13). In the same way, on the journey back to her people, the girl, although timid at first, engages in a lively conversation with the soldiers. The magistrate cannot help but remark “her fluency, her quickness, her self-possession [...] she is a witty, attractive young woman!” (Coetzee 68) Once again, she shows that she can prevail

over her impairment and not let herself be defined by it. In addition, her animated way of speaking the pidgin of the frontier makes the magistrate forget about her impairment and see her in a different way than before.

The representation of disability further affects how the narrative voice is used. As Quayson's taxonomic study of disability in literature shows, disabled characters have often been subjected to marginalization, which also implied a loss of narrative voice. Along the same lines, the voice of the 'able bodied' magistrate is always the one that is 'heard' in the narrative. When the barbarian girl speaks, it is almost always in order to reply to the magistrate's constant questioning in connection to the events which lead to her becoming disabled. Whether it is about the eyes, the feet or the pain, the girl usually speaks about her disability. However, her use of language generates problems of interpretation due to the fact that, when talking about torture, she uses what Kelly Adams, in "Acts without Agents: The Language of Torture in J. M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*", refers to as the 'agentless passive'. When explaining to the magistrate how the torturers mutilated her feet, she points to her ankles and explains that "[t]hat is where it was broken. The other one too" (Coetzee 30). Adams argues that the absence of an agent undermines linguistic certainty and thus generates ambiguity. She goes on to explain that when the reader tries to recover the agents from the passive construction, he enacts a hermeneutical work similar to the one undertaken by the magistrate.

Apart from the short passive, linguistic ambiguity can also be generated by the girl's pragmatic use of language. Since she communicates in the pidgin of the frontier, it can be argued that the way in which she uses language is instrumentally, namely it serves the purpose of getting information across to the magistrate, who notices that "[i]n the makeshift language we share there are no nuances. She has a fondness for facts, for pragmatic dicta; she dislikes fancy, questions, speculations", concluding that they are "an ill-matched couple." (Coetzee 43) In this conclusive remark lies the realization that due to the linguistic impediment, there can never be unobstructed communication between them. However, it is not just the magistrate who cannot understand her, but she repeatedly fails to understand him. As Mai, the mother, remembers, "[s]he could not understand you [the magistrate]. She did not know what you wanted from her. [...] Sometimes she would cry and cry and cry. You made her very unhappy." (Coetzee 166) It is worth mentioning that neither the barbarian girl, nor the magistrate is able to fully understand one another. This time, the difference is not physical, nor cultural, but linguistic.

As far as silenced characters in Coetzee's fiction are concerned, Benita Parry notes in her article "Speech and Silence in the fictions of J. M. Coetzee" that silence does not denote "lack and affliction, or [...] sullen withdrawal", but "an absence or economy of speech which is, in all cases, associated with sexual passivity or impotence" (Parry 154). However, sexual passivity and impotence are also consequences of silenced characters having a physical or intellectual impairment. Although Parry omits this detail, Ato Quayson notes that there is a link between inarticulacy and racialization *and* disability. Quayson states that silenced characters have some form of disability, either physical or cognitive, which "performs an insistent invitation to interpret while frustrating the possibility for interpretation at various levels" (Quayson 149). Moreover, what further contributes to the silence of the characters is what Parry refers to as the lack of access to Western canonical knowledge. Due to the cultural and linguistic discrepancies established between the magistrate and the barbarians, silence functions as a way of bridging the gap between the groups. Therefore, silence does not resemble lack, but "plenitude of perception" (Parry 154).

2.4 Reading the Marks of Disability

According to Quayson, the presence of disability in a literary text not only influences character interaction and narrative structure, but also the way in which the reader engages with the text. As far as the last aspect is concerned, the use of the first person narrative facilitates and, to a certain extent, encourages the reader to identify with the protagonist. Because it is written from a first person perspective, the thoughts, feelings and emotions of the magistrate can easily become those of the reader. However, this easier identification with the main character offered by the narrative might prevent the formation of the reader's own value judgements due to the constant exposure to what might be a slightly different opinion than the reader's own. It can be argued that another aspect which eases the identification with the protagonist is related to 'able-bodiedness'. The 'normally' functioning body of the magistrate places him in an advantaged position in comparison to other characters whose bodies are not in accordance with the imposed standard; this privileged position is almost taken for granted by the reader who, usually able-bodied himself, identifies with the protagonist. What is worth noting is that, despite his non-disabled, white body, the magistrate does not occupy a normate subject position like, for instance, Colonel Joll or Officer Mandel.

His attitude in relation to the disabled girl is rather empathetic, considerate, which also influences the reader to adopt a similar stance in relation to disability.

All the more so given that the barbarian girl does not have a congenital disability, but an acquired disability. She is not born disabled, she *becomes* disabled by being exposed to torture. Witnessing the transition of the barbarian girl from being non-disabled to being disabled has a more powerful impact on the reader than if her disability was innate. What gives the reading experience its power is that the reader is forced to become aware of the vulnerability of the body. As Julia Kristeva remarks in her essay “Liberty, Equality, Fraternity, and ... Vulnerability”, awareness of one’s own vulnerability increases the ability to empathise and understand the disabled. However discomfiting the acknowledgement that disability lies *within* individuals may be, the reader is required to admit the existence of this underlying disability. Drawing on Kristeva’s argument, by acknowledging the reality of disability, the reader is able to apprehend and show compassion for the disabled other in general and the disabled girl in particular. Although the experience of having a disability is characterised by its singularity, the reader can bring himself one step closer to understanding the experience of the disabled through what Alice Halls calls “empathetic identification” (Hall 171).

Furthermore, the representation of *physical* disability, as opposed to mental disability, also alters the reading experience. Whereas mental forms of disability may be more prone to generate feelings of pity towards the disabled and, in so doing, influence the reader to regard him or her as an object of charity, physical disability determines a different set of reactions (see Hughes, “Fear, Pity and Disgust” 70). Through the torturing of the barbarian girl as well as through the public whipping of the barbarian prisoners, the reader witnesses the violation of human rights, which consists in attributing the victim a less than human status. The injustice of punishment through torture arises from the act of trespassing into the unwritten rules of ethical behaviour. By choosing to represent the other as physically disabled, Coetzee subtly draws the attention of the reader to the fragility of the body. He tactically chooses to transmit this message in a delicate moment right before the flogging of the barbarian prisoners. Through the voice of the magistrate, Coetzee emphasizes the fact that “[w]e [people] are the great miracle of creation! But from some blows this miraculous body cannot repair itself!” (Coetzee 117) Thus, the reader is left to face a discomfiting reality which he might want to forget.

The fact that the disabled victim is a female character enables a more intimate exploration and understanding of what it means to be impaired. The reason that makes this possible is her strange relationship with the magistrate. His fascination with and the inexplicable attraction he feels for the girl and her ‘marked’ body allows for the raising of aesthetic questions, namely what does it mean to be beautiful and what exactly renders someone ugly? Despite the marks of torture on the body, the partially blinded eyes, with a puckering in the corner of one of them, and the maimed feet, which all have the potential of rendering the girl as disfigured, the mystery that emanates from the girl has the power to attract and keep the magistrate ‘enslaved’ to her. It could be argued that her deficient body challenges the socially constructed beauty standards and proves that feminine beauty does not always have to strictly conform to socially prescribed norms. Instead of being to the detriment of the girl, her impairment seems to work in her favour and empower her femininity. The short description offered by Mai providing a different perspective on the girl is, in this sense, highly relevant because it offers the reader the chance to see the character beyond her physical imperfection.

Careful observation of the development of the disabled girl throughout the narrative discloses a hidden lesson about survival. Arguably enough, her compliant behaviour may be justified by her own acknowledgement of her physical disability as well as her social inferiority. Without complaining, she constantly adapts to the unusual behaviour of the magistrate and his inexplicable attentions. Although her comportment in relation to him may be perceived as being merely submissive, there is an underlying element of endurance in the way she behaves and reacts. Embedded in her remark that “there is nowhere else to go” is the awareness that her stay in the settlement is a matter of patience (Coetzee 43). This ability of the disabled to adapt to the needs and desires of the non-disabled without expressing any kind of dissatisfaction or resentment can be read as an important lesson about the capacity of modern literary characters to compensate for their physical lack by showing that they have the power to endure not only their new bodily condition, but also their new environment.

3. Life & Times of Michael K (1983)

The initial idea for what would later be known as *Life & Times of Michael K* was that of a vendetta narrative. As David Attwell explains in “Suburban Bandit: Michael K as outlaw”, Coetzee’s plan for the novel was the desire to foreground an already existent problem in the

suburbs of Cape Town, namely household burglary. His idea for the novel was to portray a man of liberal conscience, who is the unfortunate victim of a housebreaking. Despite the protagonist's efforts to obtain justice, the police avoid dealing with his complaint and dismiss it as too meagre. Not receiving the proper attention from the local authorities only infuriates the main character and turns him into a rebel, who, after committing an act of violence, decides to participate in the struggle of the middle class (see Attwell 129).

Although this preliminary idea for the novel was sketched in 1979, the narrative would undergo considerable transformation regarding its form and content until 1983 when it was published. What constituted the main literary source of inspiration was Heinrich von Kleist's *Michael Kohlhaas* (1810), and, interestingly enough, not Franz Kafka. This is not to say that the influence of the Czech author did not play a significant role; on the contrary, at one point in the development of the novel, Coetzee entertained the possibility of using the title *The Childhood of Josef K* – the name of the character taken directly from Kafka's *The Trial* (1925) (see Attwell 131). What is more, the connection between Kleist and Kafka was not arbitrary. Kafka had also read and highly esteemed Kleist's novel (see Attwell 131). One aspect, which immediately drew Coetzee to the German author's novel, was the theme of the protagonist who becomes an outlaw. Attwell summarizes Kleist's novel as a story "about the failure of law and government, followed by the disintegration and disaffection of the hero, who later comes to represent a pure, post-Enlightenment idea of freedom." (Attwell, "Suburban Bandit" 131) Apart from the theme of Kleist's Romantic novel, what also interested Coetzee was a formal aspect, namely the picaresque style which characterized *Michael Kohlhaas*.

However, Coetzee had trouble adapting Kleist's *Michael Kohlhaas* – with its theme and literary style – to the novel he was writing. Despite his endeavours to develop a character, who would carefully resemble Kleist's hero, the South African author found himself unable to directly appropriate the character Michael Kohlhaas to his own narrative. Consequently, he began to experiment with the figure of Michael K. After deciding to push into the background the initial idea of making his own protagonist an academic, as in Kleist's novel, Coetzee tried to shift the focus to a coloured man and woman, who would eventually become son and mother. In choosing to depict the life of his coloured characters, he confronted himself with his inability to write from an underclass position. By the final version of the novel, the author would discretely diminish the importance of the role of ethnicity in the novel and focus on developing K into a rebel, who transcends the concept of the law. Nevertheless, there was

another brief change concerning the age of Michael. After being turned into a nine year old child, then into an adult again, Coetzee finally decided that the only solution was to “make him older and simpler (getikt).¹⁶” (qtd. in Attwell 137) In this respect, Attwell remarks that a significant step in the development of the figure of Michael was the complete abandonment of the connection to Kleist’s hero and the decision to turn K into a “quietistic gardener by vocation rather than an incendiary.” (Attwell, “Suburban Bandit” 138)

Even if Coetzee, in his labouring on the figure of Michael, gradually distanced himself from the model offered by Kleist’s hero, he nevertheless appropriated other aspects presented in the German author’s narrative. The situation described in *Michael Kohlhaas* concerning the protagonist who is stopped and asked to present a pass is replicated in *Life & Times of Michael K* where it is required of K to carry a pass, which allegedly allows him to move freely across the country. Taking into consideration the political context in South Africa (i.e. the apartheid era) during the years when *Life & Times of Michael K* was being written, a comparison can be drawn between the world described by Kleist and the actual context in which Coetzee was writing. Although it is possible, if not, tempting, to make a direct connection between the fictional problem of passes portrayed in Kleist’s world and the actual reality of the problem in South Africa¹⁷, there is no clear indication that Coetzee intended to foreground the (fictional) reality of the problem based on one of these contexts.

After a lengthy process of drafting and re-drafting, in 1983, *Life & Times of Michael K* was given its final form. The narrative that ensued is set in the near future, in a South Africa where civil war has been pulsing for an unspecified period of time. It presents the story of Michael K, an individual marked from birth by a disfigurement and a cognitive impairment, who works as a municipal gardener in Cape Town. After his mother falls ill, he agrees to take her to the farm in the Karoo where she had spent part of her girlhood. Along the way, his mother dies and K is left with her ashes, which he buries on the farm that he believes is the one where his mother grew up. The scattering of ashes on the earth re-awakens in Michael K his passion for gardening. Soon, he dedicates most of his time to the sowing and tilling of a garden of pumpkins and melons which becomes his only preoccupation. The arrival of a man,

¹⁶According to Attwell, “getikt” is used in Afrikaans as a colloquial word meaning “crazy”.

¹⁷ Subsequent to the Population Registration Act in 1950, whereby the government demanded the classification of the population according to racial criteria, the National Party took a step further and in 1952 issued the Native Laws Amendment Act and the Documents Act, that served to limit the free movement of the African population by creating passes which later changed into reference books (see Robert Ross’s *A Concise History of South Africa*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999).

who claims to be the grandson of the real owner of the farm, determines Michael to abandon the farm and retreat into the mountains. Having escaped the work camp at Jakkalsdrif where he had spent a short time, he returns to the farm and resumes his tilling and planting. He is eventually discovered by a group of soldiers, who take him to a rehabilitation camp partly due to the malnourished state in which they find him. While in the camp, Michael is looked after by a medical officer, who takes a peculiar interest in him. His stay there is also brief as he manages to escape once again. The novel ends with his return to the house where his mother used to work at Sea Point.

At the time when *Life & Times of Michael K* was published, South Africa was still torn by political turmoil and social unrest. As far as the literary world was concerned, the South African readership in general and the critics in particular expected a type of literature which would actively engage with the then contemporary problems that the country was experiencing. Coetzee's *Life & Times of Michael K*, however, failed to meet general expectation. The novel's oblique engagement with the politics of the country as well as its socially and historically detached protagonist only gave rise to controversy and immediately drew critical attention. In her famous review entitled "The Idea of Gardening", Nadine Gordimer argues that "Coetzee's heroes are those who ignore history, not make it." ("The Idea of Gardening") Instead of offering political solutions to the problematic situation in South Africa, what *Michael K* ultimately narrows down to is, according to Gordimer, the idea of gardening embodied in its "simple" protagonist. From a critical point of view, the figure of Michael K has also generated divided opinion regarding his mental condition. While for some critics¹⁸, K's mental state is no less different than that of other literary characters, for others¹⁹ K's mental process has been the subject of an on-going analysis. Apart from the focus on the main character, critical attention has also been given to the novel's potential for being read as an allegory. As David Attwell remarks, "what kind of allegory this might be, however, is

¹⁸ In "Against Allegory: *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *Life & Times of Michael K*", Derek Attridge argues that K's "innocent consciousness" allows him to have a "naïve perception" of the experiences that befall him (see Attridge 58-59). Yet there is no mentioning of or allusion to K actually being cognitively impaired. Similarly, in "Ability in disability: J. M. Coetzee's *Life & Times of Michael K* and the empowerment of the disabled", Ayobami Kehinde only emphasizes Michael's physical disability while arguing that his mind is "alert" (Kehinde 64). In "Books of the Times", Christopher Lehmann-Haupt contends the implausibility of K's feeble-mindedness and argues that it is only a narrative technique. In the same fashion, Sam Jordison perceives K as a "borderline simpleton" whose function in the text is more of a plot device rather than of a character.

¹⁹ See Richard Adelman's "Ventriloquism and idleness in J. M. Coetzee's *Life & Times of Michael K*," *Textual Practice* 30.4 (2016): 599-619, and John Bolin's "Modernism, Idiocy, and the Work of Culture: J. M. Coetzee's *Life & Times of Michael K*," *Modernism/modernity* 22.2 (2015): 343-364, and Marijke van Vuuren's "Beyond Words: Silence in William Golding's *Darkness Visible* and JM Coetzee's *Life & Times of Michael K*," *English Studies in Africa* 48.1 (2005): 93-106, and Michael Valdez Moses's "Solitary Walkers: Rousseau and Coetzee's *Life & Times of Michael K*," *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 93.1 (1994): 131-156.

largely left unexplored.” (Attwell, “Writing in the “cauldron of history”” 93) Moreover, there has also been a tendency to read the novel in terms of its connection to or separation from politics. That is to say, in its indirect engagement with the South African state of affairs, the novel is in fact “implicitly and highly political” (Gordimer, “The Idea of Gardening”). Challenging this reading is the critical belief that in *Michael K*, Coetzee tries to distance himself from the South African context by deliberately omitting the political and historical specificities of his time.

3.1 Dis-abled Resistance or Acceptance?

In “Writing in “the cauldron of history”: *Life & Times of Michael K* and *Foe*”, David Attwell offers a comprehensive account of the social and political situation in South Africa at the time when *Life & Times of Michael K* was written. According to Attwell, in the early 1980s, the country was trying to establish an inclusive democratic policy of “multinationalism”. Behind president P. W. Botha’s idea of multinationalism was in fact the desire to validate and preserve the authority of the whites while allegedly incorporating other minorities. By 1984, there was already a tricameral system in parliament which included whites, coloureds and Indians; however, the blacks were completely barred with the stipulation that they belonged to Bantustans, which were self-governing territories that were already represented in parliament by white legislators. In other words, instead of acknowledging the crisis it was facing, the government was trying to sidestep the question of equal political rights while focusing its attention on an alleged expanding democracy.

As far as *Life & Times of Michael K* is concerned, Attwell contends that, to a certain extent, the novel is a response to the socio-political situation in South Africa during the 1980s. Through its depiction of strong military control and social turmoil, Coetzee was challenging current policies and, in doing so, was only strengthening the power of literary representation to rival history. In the novel, Coetzee envisages the possible repercussions which the country was facing as it was slowly making its way towards insurgency and repression. As Attwell rightfully remarks, *Life & Times of Michael K* “exploits the unreality of the state’s efforts at constitutional reform” (Attwell, “Writing” 91). In addition, the novel is probably “the most accurate of several attempts in South African fiction of the period at giving concrete shape to an imagined future.” (Attwell, “Writing” 91)

The idea behind *Life & Times of Michael K* was to engage with the politics of the time while also to assert an appropriate distance from them. Before deciding on the historical reality that he wanted to illustrate in *Michael K*, Coetzee wrote in the manuscript of the novel that “[w]hat one wants is *chaos*: jeeps roaring through the streets at night, sabotage, executions, fear everywhere, people sheltering behind locked doors, rumors.” [emphasis added] (qtd. in Attwell, “Suburban Bandit” 133) The onerous conditions referred to in this sentence are also characteristic of the times portrayed in *Michael K*. The society described in the final version of the novel is one in which an unending civil war cripples the general welfare and is responsible for the spread of anxiety, apprehension and suspicion amongst its people. The South Africa Coetzee describes is a society of curfews, permits, patrolling police, aircraft, military convoys and camps. What characterizes daily life is “the careless violence, the packed buses, the food queues, arrogant shopkeepers, thieves and beggars, sirens in the night, the curfew, the cold and wet.” (Coetzee, *Life & Times of Michael K*²⁰ 8) As a result of the society’s failing economy, homelessness, destitution and a rising crime rate are also ever-present conditions in the South Africa of the near future illustrated in *Michael K*. In addition, ransacked apartments, “the demolition of burnt-out buildings” and a “ghostly industrial quarter” offer a symptomatic image of violence, destruction and decay which characterizes the state of affairs (Coetzee 20-21).

Similar to the social and political disintegration portrayed in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, the system in *Life & Times of Michael K* is also a dysfunctional system. The most significant argument in this sense is the state of civil war simmering in the country. Interestingly enough, the epigraph which opens the novel already announces that the war theme will be present throughout the narrative. Although Coetzee omits the name of the author, the three lines are taken from Heraclitus’s *Cosmic Fragments*. According to the Greek philosopher, “[w]ar is the father of all and king of all. / Some he shows as gods, others as men. / Some he makes slaves, and others free.” It is around the message encoded in these three lines that Coetzee’s South Africa seems to be shaped. The ubiquity of the state of war paralyzes the development of the society as far as the social, economic and political life is concerned. Paradoxically, the reason as to why there is an on-going war is explained by Major Noël van Rensburg, who states that “[w]e are fighting this war so that minorities will have a say in their destinies.” (Coetzee 157) The reference to Botha’s multinationalist policy is subtly alluded to in Noël’s

²⁰ All subsequent references in this chapter are taken from Coetzee, J. M.. *Life & Times of Michael K*. London: Vintage, 2004.

answer. What also adds an ironical undertone to the situation is the subsequent exchange of “empty looks” between Noël and the medical officer following the former’s statement (Coetzee 157). This visual exchange can be read as a silent assertion of a conscious disbelief concerning the truthfulness of the cause of war.

However, the state of war has the inevitable consequence of stunting the social life²¹ of its people. Thus, increasing violence, rising crime and a general feeling of insecurity become aspects of daily life. One example that indicates the growing hostility between individuals and the gradual loss of safety is the brief episode in which Michael K, on his way home from work, is beaten, robbed and left with a “slash across his arm, a dislocated thumb and two broken ribs” (Coetzee 4). Although it might be argued that Michael’s countenance may render him defenceless to the people around him, the arbitrariness of the incident is a legitimate indicator of the gradual loss of safety which threatens social order. Similarly, the confrontation with the three men who want to take advantage of the vulnerable situation of Michael and his mother and “strip them of their possessions with impunity” is also a relevant incident (Coetzee 25). Compelled by circumstances, Michael takes hold of the situation and, advancing towards the robbers, threatens them with a knife. This short episode illustrates the fact that the times in which Michael K lives are dangerous times and that, in order to survive, each person must try to look after himself or herself even if this means resorting to violent means. Furthermore, the example of the hospital with the overcrowded corridors bearing the “victims of stabbings and beatings and gunshot wounds” and the nurses who work twenty-four hour shifts offers a more panoramic image of the general violence which dominates society (Coetzee 5).

The deformed social relations take on a material reality through the existence of camps situated outside towns. Whether designed with the purpose of being internment, rehabilitation or resettlement camps, their presence automatically implies the existence of a dominant group, which exerts power and imposes social control on a subjugated group. Robert, who might be considered to have an active critical consciousness in the novel, opines that the “real” reason why the camps are used is “to stop people from disappearing into the mountains and then coming back one night to cut their fences and drive their stock away.” (Coetzee 80) Although the group he refers to is not explicitly named, the story he tells Michael of him and his family being dismissed from a farm where he had lived and worked for twelve years

²¹ See “Theoretical Framework”, p. 12.

points to the fact that they belong to an ethnical category different from that of the whites. Despite the unreliability of his statement, what is worth emphasizing is the paranoid thinking behind the construction of camps. The following description carefully captures the fear of white people to co-exist with racially different people and is therefore worth quoting in full:

[t]hey don't want a camp so near their town. They never wanted it. They ran a big campaign against the camp at the beginning. We breed disease, they said. No hygiene, no morals. A nest of vice, men and women all together. [...] What they would really like – this is my [Robert's] opinion – is for the camp to be miles away in the middle of the Koup out of sight. Then we could come on tiptoe in the middle of the night like fairies and do their work, dig their gardens, wash their pots, and be gone in the morning leaving everything nice and clean. (Coetzee 82)

The social division referred to in this fragment reminds one of the period between 1960 and 1983 when 3.5 million black South Africans were forcibly dispossessed of and removed from their land into resettlement camps in the homelands²². Based on Robert's statement, the further away the blacks were pushed, the more at ease the whites felt for they would not be reminded of their own violent impulses, which were projected onto the black population of South Africa.

In *Paranoia* (2002), David Bell addresses the question of group mentality. He writes that “[n]ational groupings are capable of *really* believing they have a god-given superiority to some other group, that they have a messianic mission to save the world.” [emphasis in original] (Bell 66) What Bell's statement suggests is that there is a self-empowering quality typical of the dominant group which works by deprecating the image of the subjugated group. Nevertheless, the immorality, vice and other unmanageable thoughts or practices that are associated with the less powerful group are also inherent characteristics of the dominant group, except that they have been projected on a different recipient and thus have the result of partly unburdening the latter group of the feeling of guilt. To put it in the words of Robert, “[t]hey [whites] prefer it that we [Africans] live because we look too terrible when we get sick and die. If we just grew thin and turned into paper and then into ash and floated away, they wouldn't give a stuff for us. *They just don't want to get upset. They want to go to sleep feeling good.*” [emphasis added] (Coetzee 88) That is to say, what white people desire is to be able to have a clear conscience. Hence, they provide the vulnerable group with the minimum living standards which then grants the normative group a sense of satisfaction; for the thought

²² For a more detailed account, visit <http://overcomingapartheid.msu.edu/multimedia.php?id=65-259-6>

of being confronted with disability and degeneration would hurt the narcissistic ego of the normate body and would remind it of its own vulnerability.

Nevertheless, the sense of empowerment has the almost inevitable consequence of degenerating into a form of oppression exerted upon the powerless group. In keeping with this idea, Bell argues that the existence of human suffering and deprivation within a society automatically fuels an inherent pull towards despotic states of mind as far as the dominant group is concerned. In the case of the novel, camps provide suitable ground for the exertion of authority. As Noël states, there is need for an “iron man to run an iron camp.” (Coetzee 154) One such “iron camp” is Brandvlei, which is described as a place of “penal servitude, hard labour, brickfields, [and of] guards with whips” (Coetzee 78). Jakkalsdrif, although a resettlement camp, is not compared to a prison, but is presented as the most favourable option for those who have nowhere else to go (see Coetzee 78-80).

Similarly, Huis Norenius is also an institution, which imposes strict rules and injunctions on its members. It is a school for the “variously afflicted and unfortunate children”, where they are taught the most basic skills in order to be suitable for society (Coetzee 4). Apart from the minimum amount of food it provides the children with, which turns them “into animals who stole from one another’s plates and climbed the kitchen enclosure to rifle the garbage cans for bones and peelings”, the teachers also take cruel pleasure in mistreating the children (Coetzee 68). As punishment, Michael recalls how “[o]ne of the teachers used to make his class sit with their hands on their heads, their lips pressed tightly together and their eyes closed, while he patrolled the rows with his long ruler.” (Coetzee 68) Consequently, for Michael, Huis Norenius becomes associated with a set of rules and regulations which govern and shape his childhood.

In “J. M. Coetzee: Speech, Silence, Autism and Dialogism”, Ato Quayson argues that the exposure to a system of rules – characteristic of Michael’s childhood years – lays the foundation for the development of Michael’s sense of self as well as that of his social behaviour. Based on Quayson’s statement, there is a particular episode worth paying close attention to and that is Michael’s reaction to the teacher’s unfair treatment. Instead of experiencing fear and anxiety at the thought of being punished, “[i]n time, to K, the posture grew to lose its meaning as punishment and became an avenue of reverie; he remembered sitting, hands on head, through hot afternoons with doves cooing in the gum trees and the chant of the tables coming from other classrooms, struggling with a delicious drowsiness.”

(Coetzee 68-69) Drawing on this description, it is worth arguing that Michael possesses an inherent malleability which helps him adapt not only to this particular situation as a child, but also, later, as an adult. That is to say, he learns to divert his attention away from the state he is in by focusing on other aspects of the situation that do not disturb him. If Quayson's argument is taken to be true, then, in the same way in which Michael shapes his sense of self during his stay at Huis Norenius, he also learns to develop the capacity to be resilient.

As far as the nature of Michael's relation to the socio-political and historical context is concerned, the polemic that arises concerns the idea of whether or not he accepts or resists the system. Although arguing for or against Michael's position in society opens up the possibility of an exhaustive analysis, which would exceed the scope of this paper, there is an aspect regarding his social and political status that is worth drawing attention to and that is his disability – his corporeal and mental otherness. Therefore, it is worth raising the following questions: does Michael's mental disability influence the way in which he relates to his milieu? And, taking one step further, does his congenital disability facilitate a form of disabled resistance or, on the contrary, does it ease social and political detachment? Before discussing the consequences which Michael's disability might have upon his relationship with the external world, the question of the body should not be overlooked.

The body of Michael K automatically places him in a disadvantaged position in society. On the one hand, he belongs to the racial category of coloured people, as indicated by the initials "CM", which stand for coloured, male. Being coloured, however, raises ethical problems different from those which whites and particularly blacks might be faced with. Consequently, Michael K's skin colour immediately situates him in a category considered inferior in the society he lives. On the other hand, what further lowers K's social status is his disability. Having a mental as well as a physical impairment inevitably pushes Michael towards the margins of society. It is not only that K is inferior in comparison to the white body, but he is also in a lower position in relation to the able body. In other words, he occupies a rather powerless position in society.

However, this does not seem to affect his behaviour in society. In fact, he seems to take no notice of the war. In the words of the medical officer,

[H]e is like a stone, a pebble that, having lain around quietly minding its own business since the dawn of time, is now suddenly picked up and tossed randomly from hand to hand. A hard little stone, barely aware of its surroundings, enveloped in itself and its

interior life. He passes through these institutions and camps and hospitals and God knows what else like a stone. Through the intestines of the war. (Coetzee 135)

The description only serves to enforce K's own words concerning his position in society, namely "I am not in the war." (Coetzee 138) This statement clearly indicates Michael's desire to live outside the world of power. As Dominic Head has suggested, the protagonist "resists all forms of social connection and political affiliation." (Head 55) K's behaviour can be explained if one turns to Ato Quayson's enumeration of the features characteristic of autistic individuals. Among them, Quayson writes that the person "show[s] relatively little interest in what the social group is doing, or being a part of it;" (Quayson 152) A similarity can be drawn between Quayson's description and Michael's desire to live outside the camps. It becomes his objective to try to escape each time he is confined to a camp. His ability to do so only proves that Michael is neither helpless, nor powerless, but that he "embodies a capacity to survive the nightmare of history." (Attwell, "Karoo" 78)

3.2 Michael's Ethics of Care

The most evident way in which disability is presented in the narrative is through the figure of Michael K. In the first sentence which opens the novel one learns about the physical disfigurement with which Michael is born, namely a harelip, which "curled up like a snail's foot, the left nostril gaped." (Coetzee 3) A medical inspection of his disfigurement done later in the narrative confirms the existence of "[a] simple incomplete cleft, with some displacement of the septum. The palate intact." (Coetzee 130) An immediate consequence of his facial imperfection is that it prevents him from being fed properly by his mother while he is still an infant and leads to his experiencing hunger. Apart from the initially problematic feeding procedure, which ceases once he grows older, his cleft lip also affects his manner of speaking to the point in which it renders him to the others as difficult to understand. A few paragraphs later, it is indicated that, besides the physical defect, Michael K also has a cognitive impairment. The narrator suggests the presence of a mental condition when he explains that "his [K's] mind was not quick" (Coetzee 4). Due to this slowness of mind, Michael's early years are spent in Huis Norenius, "where at the expense of the state he spent the rest of his childhood in the company of other variously afflicted and unfortunate children." (Coetzee 4) Consequently, his mental disability prevents him from growing up together with other "normal" children and is a contributing factor to the development of his later social life.

In spite of Michael K's social withdrawal, he illustrates a strong capacity for empathy – whether out of duty or compassion. In the relationship with his mother, Anna K, Michael exhibits great filial duty. After he brings her home from hospital, he dedicates his evenings to tend to her needs, not “shirk[ing] [from] any aspect of what he saw as his duty.” (Coetzee 7) Once Anna K can no longer look after herself given her incapacitated condition, namely dropsy, she becomes the object of her son's relentless care, since it is Michael's belief that “he had been brought into the world to look after his mother.” (Coetzee 7) With no friends or relatives other than his mother, looking after her becomes his sole concern. Whether his behaviour arises from a strong sense of duty either for his mother or for his mother's disabled state, he never fails to show his support and assistance. When Anna K expresses her wish to return to Prince Albert, he accepts “without question the wisdom of her plan for them”, and decides to quit his job as a gardener at De Waal Park (Coetzee 8-9). The journey to Prince Albert proves challenging with his mother's visibly declining health state, the difficulty of managing the wheelbarrow he had built for her, and the subsequent slowness of pace by which they are forced to travel. Despite his own apprehensions and fatigue, he does not betray himself, but tries to encourage his mother throughout the journey. What this suggests is that the leading idea behind his actions is his desire to be a catalyst of his mother's happiness and well-being. The fear of being humiliated in her presence determines Michael to instantly defend her when they are threatened by the three men with knives. In Michael's reaction, there is a desire to prove himself worthy and make her feel proud of him.

Yet his behaviour in relation to his mother when she is hospitalized seems to trigger an ambivalent reaction in K. Before her death, Michael regularly checks on her condition and there is a moment when, barely detecting breathing from her, he feels “fear gripping his heart” (Coetzee 27). It is worth drawing attention to the reason behind this anxiety concerning Anna's declining health. On the one hand, K's nervousness at the possibility of her death might be a typical reaction, which a dutiful son would be expected to have in relation to his mother, in which case the reaction would be generated by a sense of responsibility. On the other hand, K's concern for his mother could stem from a genuine feeling of love for her. A closer analysis of his behaviour subsequent to Anna K's death seems to be in favour of the former possibility rather than the latter. After being informed about his mother's passing away, Michael's first reaction is absent-minded; that is, “[h]e clasped his hands and stared hard at his feet [...] He separated his hands and clasped them, over and over.” (Coetzee 31) Following the initial shock, Michael then experiences a form of

linguistic alienation whereby he perceives language as a code foreign to him. Not long after this episode, in order to pay his respects, “[h]e tore a black strip from the lining of his mother’s coat and pinned it around his arm. But he did not miss her, he found, except in so far as he had missed her all his life.” (Coetzee 34) The numbness Michael feels could be explained as an aftershock to his mother’s death; however, it can also be argued that his mother’s death brings about a ceasing of filial obligations and with it a lack of purpose. Hence, his aimless wanderings and his spending most of his time in the vicinity of the hospital after his mother dies are examples of a kind of behaviour which only supports his feeling of purposelessness.

Whereas, in relation to his mother, Michael’s actions derive from a sense of familial duty, the relationship he establishes with his garden seems to be based on a feeling of genuine affection. However, the initial relation he establishes with gardening is a professional one: after leaving Huis Norenius at the age of fifteen, K decides to join the city’s municipal division of Parks and Gardens, aspiring to become a gardener, grade 1. Yet it is only years later, after the scattering of his mother’s ashes over the earth that K develops a more intimate connection with the earth and, implicitly, with gardening. As the narrator explains, the moment marks “the beginning of his [K’s] life as a cultivator.” (Coetzee 59) Soon after this episode, Michael discovers that his true nature is to be gardener when he realizes that “[t]he impulse to plant had been re-awoken in him; now, in a matter of weeks, he found his waking life bound tightly to the patch of earth he had begun to cultivate and the seeds he had planted there.” (Coetzee 59) What can be inferred from this short fragment is that gardening awakens in him a dormant desire to care out of a sincerely affectionate impulse rather than out of duty.

In “The Human Gardener”, Robert Pogue Harrison speaks about the ethics of care. He remarks that the gardener represents the embodiment of “the care-dominated nature of human beings” (Harrison 25). Hence, a gardener’s vocation is a vocation of care. According to Harrison, care functions as a dynamic force within the individual which determines him or her “to act, to take the initiative” (Harrison 27). Moreover, caring implies an act of both giving and receiving, yet Harrison draws attention to the fact that it is the act of giving which is more valuable. As far as Michael’s way of caring is concerned, he selflessly dedicates himself to attending to his garden whether it is by chasing away potential predators or making sure to regularly water the seeds. When he thinks about his garden, he cannot help but feel “a cord of tenderness that stretched from him to the patch of earth beside the dam” (Coetzee 65-66). In relation to the garden, K exhibits two different forms of caring, namely a paternal and

a brotherly kind. After the destruction of the garden and the dam which the men from the mountains leave behind, Michael thinks of himself as “a woman whose children have left the house, he thought: all that remains is to tidy up and listen to the silence.” (Coetzee 111) However, he evinces great perseverance when he immediately seeks to save whatever is left of his garden. After being able to recover the melons, he realizes that “he loved these two [melons], which he thought of as two sisters, even more than the pumpkins, which he thought of as a band of brother.” (Coetzee 113) Thus, for Michael, the garden becomes a supplement to his family.

Furthermore, the garden functions as a catalyst for inner transformation. Were it not for the garden, K would not have been able to detect a change within himself. Drawing on Harrison’s statement that “[g]ardening is an opening of worlds – of worlds within worlds – beginning with the world at one’s feet”, it can be argued that, for Michael, the garden offers the possibility of turning his attention towards his inner world (Harrison 30). Therefore, the garden helps him to discover an aspect about himself, that is, his nature, whose existence he had not been aware of. Michael comes to learn that “[i]t is no longer the green and the brown that I want but the yellow and the red; not the wet but the dry; not the dark but the light; not the soft but the hard. *I am becoming a different kind of man*, he thought, if there are two kinds of man. [...] I am becoming smaller and harder and drier every day.” [emphasis added] (Coetzee 67) David Attwell identifies this inner change as a “growing resilience within himself [K]” and argues that by acknowledging the inner transformation, K develops “a sense of inviolability.” (Attwell, “Writing” 94) The resilience that Attwell refers to develops gradually as a consequence of the events – either the arrival of the Visagie grandson, the mountain men or the police – which prevent Michael from cultivating his pumpkins and melons uninterrupted. In spite of the disruptions, Michael does not feel demoralized nor does he lose hope in the idea of gardening. His leading thought derives from the fact that “enough men had gone off to war saying the time for gardening was when the war was over; whereas there must be men to stay behind and keep gardening alive, or at least the idea of gardening; because once the cord was broken, the earth would grow hard and forget her children.” (Coetzee 109)

As David Attwell contends, the idea of gardening and, implicitly, the idea of care, becomes “a mode of life and an existential principle” for Michael K (Attwell, “Karoo” 77). Caring inevitably becomes part of his life. The dedication with which he attends to the garden seems to absorb him to such an extent that he begins to slowly distance himself from the socio-

political world which he inhabits: “[h]e lives by the rising and setting of the sun, in a pocket outside time. Cape Town and the war and his passage to the farm slipped further and further into forgetfulness.” (Coetzee 60) What also may be thought to represent a contributing factor to K’s social withdrawal in general and to his dedication to the garden in particular is his cognitive impairment. Arguably enough, his mental condition enables him to intensely focus on one activity at a time²³. Consequently, the experience of time acquires new dimensions for Michael K. As far as the perception of time in *Michael K* is concerned, Marijke van Vuuren distinguishes between a historical time and a cyclical time. Whereas the former occurs chronologically and is measurable, the latter is characterized as an indeterminate, unending flow. Accordingly, Michael K acquires a different temporal perception while he cultivates the garden whereby a distinction is made between the time of war and “a time flowing slowly like oil from horizon to horizon over the face of the world” (Coetzee 115); it is this second perception of time which allows him to live “beyond the reach of calendar and clock in a blessedly neglected corner, half awake, half asleep.” (Coetzee 116)

What also characterizes Michael K’s life-style is minimalism. However, minimalism always already implies modesty. Drawing on Robert Harrison’s observation that “[c]are humbles its subject”, it could be argued that, through gardening, Michael cultivates his latent sense of moderation (Harrison 28). The episode which indicates the existence of an underlying ability of self-restraint in Michael K is the one in which he accidentally discovers the vegetable patches past the orchard. Michael’s instant reaction is to start pulling the vegetables from the earth, excusing himself by thinking that “[i]t is God’s earth, he thought, I am not a thief.” (Coetzee 39) Nevertheless, “[w]hen his pockets were full, he *stood nervously erect*. Instead of taking the carrot-tops with him to scatter under the trees as he had intended, he left them where they lay.” [emphasis added] (Coetzee 39) The nervousness arises from a feeling of guilt – indicated by the self-explanatory thought expressed through negated sentence “I am not a thief” – which the act of stealing triggers. This scene represents the first indication of an underlying tendency towards moderation in K’s behaviour. With time, he comes to realize that “[w]hat grows is for all of us. We are all the children of the earth.” (Coetzee 139) The statement suggests an acknowledgement of the equality between human beings which, taking

²³ In “J. M. Coetzee: Speech, Silence, Autism and Dialogism”, Ato Quayson provides a list of some of the features encountered in people with autism or Asperger’s syndrome among which he enumerates a “[t]endency to follow their own desires and beliefs rather than paying attention to, or being easily influenced by, others’ desires and beliefs” and a “strong, persistent interest[s], sometimes stretching for months only to be switched to new, equally intense interests;” (Quayson 152)

one step further, would imply an awareness that one's desires should be characterized by a sense of moderation.

Furthermore, Michael K exhibits moderation even in nourishment. As it is explained by the narrator, "his [K's] own need for food grew slighter and slighter. Hunger was a sensation he did not feel and barely remembered. If he ate, eating what he could find, it was because he had not yet shaken off the belief that bodies that do not eat die. What food he ate meant nothing to him. It had no taste, or tasted like dust." (Coetzee 101) Gradually, the habit of eating acquires an extra-ordinary significance for Michael, who thinks that "eating, picking up things and forcing them down his gullet into his body, seemed a strange activity." (Coetzee 119) In order to understand the reason behind Michael's gradual refusal to eat, it is important to look at the relationship he has to the idea of eating prior and subsequent to the cultivation of the garden. Interestingly enough, in the early years of K's life, there is no reference to his eating habits. What can be inferred from the lack of attention initially given to alimentation is that it plays no significant role²⁴. Once he starts to cultivate the pumpkin and melon seeds, the meaning of food acquires a new dimension, namely food is associated with (the idea of) life. Taking into consideration Michael's revelation with regard to his nature (i.e. to be a gardener), it could be argued that, for him, being a gardener implies eating from one's own cultivated garden. If this is taken to be true, then K's rejection of the camp food could be explained as a refusal to eat what does not come from his own labour. What supports this argument is the moment when he repeatedly tells the doctor that "'[i]t's not my kind of food'" (Coetzee 145). In comparison to the camp food which K is offered, the food he cultivates is "alive", it is life. There is a passage in the text which illustrates Michael's relationship to his harvest and therefore deserves to be quoted in full:

[a]ll that remains is to live here quietly for the rest of my life, *eating the food that my own labour has made the earth to yield*. All that remains is to be a tender of the soil. He lifted the first strip to his mouth. Beneath the crisply charred skin the flesh was soft and juicy. He chewed with tears of joy in his eyes. The best, he thought, the very best pumpkin I have tasted. For the first time since he had arrived in the country he found pleasure in eating. The aftertaste of the first slice left his mouth aching with sensual delight. [...] Such pumpkin, he thought, such pumpkin I could eat every day of my life and never want anything else. [emphasis added] (Coetzee 113-114)

²⁴ A parallel can be drawn here between K's initial relationship to gardening, namely a strictly professional one and his attitude towards food; that is to say, prior to the garden, K's motivation to eat is the result of a survival instinct – eating as "profession" – rather than a desire to look after himself.

The idea that this passage suggests is that eating from one's own harvest represents the solution to Michael K's rejection of normal food since it is only the pumpkins and the melons which are able to offer him true satisfaction.

As a result of Michael K's mental and physical condition, his uncommon ethics of care and his atypical mode of being, the encounter between him and the medical officer proves to be a crucial one, with noteworthy consequences for the latter. The first aspect which strikes the medical officer about Michael K is his poor bodily condition which presents signs of "prolonged malnutrition: cracks in his skin, sores on his hands and feet, bleeding gums. His joints protrude, he weighs less than forty kilos." (Coetzee 129) It is only after this brief observation that the doctor sees K's facial disfigurement. The reason as to why he immediately offers to correct K's imperfection can be thought of as either a normative reaction to disability, expressed through a desire to "improve" K's condition in order to ensure his integration in society, or as a purely professional reaction in the face of disability whereby it is his duty as a doctor to guarantee the patient's well-being (Coetzee 131). What is worth stressing is that the physical imperfection neither undermines the relationship between the non-disabled medical officer and the disabled Michael K, nor does it hinder the doctor's thought process in relation to K. In fact, the medical officer easily accepts the presence of the physical flaw, paying little attention to it. Apart from the physical fault, the medical officer soon discovers that K is also cognitively impaired which determines him to classify K as a person not "wholly of our world." (Coetzee 130)

One of the effects which the presence of K has on the medical doctor is that it transforms his initial sense of responsibility into an earnest desire to care. At the beginning, his treatment of Michael arises from a professional duty for him as a patient. When K protests about the attention that the medical officer grants him, he replies saying that "you are not important. But that does not mean you are forgotten. No one is forgotten. [...] We do for you what we have to do. [...] There is nothing special about you" (Coetzee 136). The doctor acts in relation to K according to the belief that each person deserves to be treated with a minimum of respect regardless of their social, economic or bodily condition. Nonetheless, this moment makes the medical officer conscious of the fact that he harbours a particular curiosity for Michael K which goes beyond professional interest. What this acknowledgement marks is the beginning of the doctor's honest need to care for Michael.

However, before the medical officer learns to respect K's unique mode of being, he first tries to impose his authority over Michael by trying to make him renounce his individuality. Initially, the doctor tries to "protect" Michael by inventing a story for him and persuading Noël to sign the false report before handing it to the police. He justifies his intention by explaining to Noël that there is "no story of the slightest interest to rational people" which K is able to tell (Coetzee 142). Moreover, he believes that K "is not of our world. He lives in a world all his own." (Coetzee 142) It could be argued that the delimitation the doctor makes between K's world and the "normal" world has to do with K's cognitive disability. The brief replies and the heavy silence with which K responds to the medical officer's and Noël's pressing need to know his story are understood as the effect of his mental condition. Similarly, the doctor's attempts to ensure that he has control over Michael's alimentation only results in him force-feeding K, not understanding that K desires a different type of food.

Given the medical officer's failed attempts to get closer to the disabled Michael K, he finally resorts to confession. Standing beside Michael's bed, the doctor mentally confesses to him by saying that "[y]ou [K] have never asked for anything, yet you have become an albatross around my neck. Your bony arms are knotted behind my head, I walk bowed under the weight of you." (Coetzee 146) Arguably enough, the moment of confession generates a fundamental change in the relationship between the medical officer and Michael in that it destabilizes the power relations created by corporeal difference – both with regard to skin colour and able-bodiedness. What is more, it is only after the medical officer has confessed that he begins to acknowledge and respect K's (corporeal) otherness. Subsequently, his views begin to change, making him more tolerant in relation to difference. Although he learns to accept K's different mode of being, he nevertheless harbours an unanswerable question:

[f]or a long while we stared at each other. Then I found myself speaking, in no more than a whisper. As I spoke I thought: Surrender. This is how surrender will feel. 'I might ask the same question of you,' I said, 'the same question you asked: What am I to this man?' Even softer I whispered, my heart hammering: 'I did not ask you to come here. Everything was well with me before you came. I was happy, as happy as one can be in a place like this. Therefore I ask: 'Why me?' (Coetzee 149)

As far as the relationship with those around him is concerned, Michael's disability plays an important role in shaping it. Yet it is not only his bodily imperfection which determines the outcome of his social relations, but also his cognitive impairment. Drawing on Rosemarie Garland Thomson's argument that, during the moment of encounter between a disabled and a non-disabled, the existence of a visible disability almost always threatens to reduce the

impaired to a single characteristic, the set of reactions to K's visible disability – which ranges from ignorance, curiosity, disgust, pity to silence – only support her contention. An instance which illustrates indifference in relation to K is the brief exchange of words between him and the policewoman at the Relocation office when, refusing to be helpful by answering K's questions concerning the permits, she “turned back to him, to the thin moustache and the naked lip-flesh it did not hide. ‘Next!’ she said.” [emphasis in original] (Coetzee 20) Another example is the encounter in the hospital ward with the man with whom K shares a meal and whose first question concerns his physical disfigurement: “[y]ou here for stiches? [...] The man looked critically at his face.” (Coetzee 29) Similarly, the episode in which the Visagie grandson cannot help “shift his gaze from K's bad mouth” supports Thomson's argument (Coetzee 60). When he receives his mother's ashes and wants to have the certainty that they are truly hers, he is met with silence by the nurse who “refused to answer, or did not understand.” (Coetzee 32) Other characters with which K tries to interact simply exhibit distaste and unkindness and thus undermine the possibility of establishing a connection with them.

In “Modernism, Idiocy, and the Work of Culture: J. M. Coetzee's *Life & Times of Michael K*”, John Bolin argues that the presence of K's disfigurement contributes to his exclusion not only from language, but also from the socio-political discourse. To put it into Bolin's words, “K's status as a child/idiot is literally written on his face. The harelip is not simply a disfigurement, but it impedes his speech and becomes a flaw on which his listeners fixate; it is the mark by which K is recognized as a person who cannot partake in the social, ideological, and political world.” (Bolin 355) Bolin's reference to K's disfigurement – that is, the fact that it constitutes an impediment in social interaction – enforces Thomson's idea regarding the presence of a visible disability which skews the interlocutor's reaction. What Bolin seems to suggest is that K's physical imperfection represents the main reason for his social, political and linguistic marginalization; however, he fails to take into consideration K's other disability, namely his cognitive condition, which is arguably a contributing factor to his countenance.

In addition to the multifarious responses to K's external appearance, the reaction to his cognitive impairment is pity. While at Jakkalsdrif, Michael is the only one, apart from the children, who receives food from the Vrouevereniging ladies. The narrator explains that the reason for the women's charitable behaviour was “perhaps because he was so thin, perhaps because they had decided he was simple.” (Coetzee 84) Robert, Michael's friend from

Jakkalsdrif camp, tells him that he is the object of charity “[b]ecause they think you are harmless, your eyes aren’t opened, you don’t see the truth around you.” (Coetzee 89) In other words, the fact that Michael has a cognitive dysfunction conveys him as defenceless to those around him – and therefore prone to be treated with compassion - and as innocuous to society. Nevertheless, his mental deficit does not always elicit a benevolent reaction. The Visagie grandson tries to benefit from the usefulness of having K on the farm and so he proves his desire to subject K to a merely instrumental function. However, K immediately notices the grandson’s intentions: “[h]e [grandson] thinks I am truly an idiot, thought K. He thinks I am an idiot who sleeps on the floor like an animal and lives on birds and lizards and does not know there is such a thing as money.” (Coetzee 62) Embedded in these thoughts is an awareness of the fact that his mental condition significantly contributes to the attitude which the others adopt around him. At the end of the novel he acknowledges the fact that “I have become an object of charity, he thought. Everywhere I go there are people waiting to exercise their forms of charity on me. All these years, and still I carry the look of an orphan.” (Coetzee 181)

Interestingly enough, Michael K’s reaction to charity is a desire to escape it. This attitude towards the unrequired help of others proves most revealing in that it offers an empowering image of the disabled character. By refusing to become an object of charity, Michael K shows that he does not consider himself a victim of his disabled condition. On the contrary, at one moment in the narrative he tries to use his physical and mental impairment for his own purposes²⁵. What this attitude uncovers is a rather conscious acknowledgement of self-worth. Consequently, when he is regarded and treated as inferior by other able-bodied characters, K experiences displeasure²⁶. Rather early in the narrative, he realizes that “[p]erhaps [...], it was better when one did not have to rely on other people.” (Coetzee 24) More generally, this mode of thinking, which consists in an aspiration towards self-sufficiency and self-love, serves to show the often concealed desire of the disabled not to become a burden for the non-disabled individual, but a need to be autonomous; it shows that being disabled does not define one as a person and that the disabled Michael K consciously chooses a life of strength and not a life of (self-)pity; he chooses to cultivate his “inner garden”, which is “that plot of soil on the earth, within the self, or amid the social collective, where the cultural, ethical, and civic

²⁵ The reader will recall the episode in which Michael K, while waiting in line to present the permit which would allow him free movement across the country, he thinks to himself: “If I look very stupid, he thought, perhaps they will let me through.” (Coetzee 40)

²⁶ The episode with the Visagie grandson serves to support this statement.

virtues that save reality from its own worst impulses are cultivated.” (Harrison x). Therefore, Michael K’s incredible capacity to accept himself as himself, both body and mind, could be read as an ethical lesson about accepting ourselves for who we are. After all, “there is nothing to be ashamed of in being simple.” (Coetzee 182)

3.3 Voicing Disability

A closer examination of the narratological effects that the representation of disability has in *Life & Times of Michael K* reveals a pulsating textual nervousness. Drawing on Ato Quayson’s contention that the tension ensuing from the representation of disability in a literary text permeates the whole narrative structure, it could be argued that the experimental form of *Michael K* is partly a result of the presence of disability. An almost inevitable consequence of the existing disability in the text can be perceived as narrative fragmentation. As far as the structure of the novel is concerned, it is divided into three chapters, the second of which exhibits formal experimentation to a greater extent. Initially, the second part opens with a series of brief, undated diary entries written by the medical officer about a new patient in the ward whom he refers to as Michaels. In what follows, the medical officer, confused yet intrigued by Michaels’s presence in the rehabilitation camp, addresses him in epistolary form, in an effort to understand his meaning. The last and lengthiest diary entry is partly written in the form of a confession of the medical officer to the disabled Michael, culminating with the imagined pursuit of Michael and, ultimately, his escape. Moreover, what also contributes to the fragmentary character of the narrative is its open-endedness. The final chapter ends with Michael’s return to Sea Point and the discovery of his true nature, that is, that of being a gardener. The closing image of the novel with Michael lying down on the cardboard, wrapped in a blanket and allowing his thoughts to wonder freely entertains the possibility of a new narrative (of the self) to emerge.

The presence of disability not only disrupts the narrative as a whole, but it also affects the way in which the point of view is employed. Particularly interesting about *Michael K* is the switching between the use of the third person narration in the first and third chapter and that of the first person narration in the second chapter. Whereas in part two there is a homodiegetic narrator embodied in the figure of the medical officer, who describes his encounter and interaction with Michael K, the events in chapter one and chapter three are conveyed through a heterodiegetic narrator, who adopts indirect narration as a mode of storytelling. Based on the double shift in perspective (i.e. first from the third person to the

first person and then to the third person once again), what can be perceived at a textual level is a particular unease. If this is considered true, then it is worth arguing that embedded in the switching between points of view lies the author's desire yet difficulty to represent disability in general and a disabled character's mind in particular. Initially, Coetzee seeks to explore the consciousness of his cognitively impaired character, Michael K, by trying to get "inside" his mind. However, the presence of an omniscient narrator in chapters one and three inevitably interferes with and in doing so alters the process of mediating K's thoughts. As David Attwell and other critics have suggested, "the narration shifts between K himself and an observer, puzzlingly located inside K's consciousness." (Attwell, "Suburban Bandit" 140)

In "Ventriloquism and idleness in J. M. Coetzee's *Life & Times of Michael K*", Richard Adelman proposes a new concept to refer to the mediation of K's thought process, namely 'narrative ventriloquism'. The founding idea behind this concept derives from Adelman's emphasis on the impossibility of there being an unobstructed, direct access to K's consciousness. He goes on to argue that between K and the reader there is a space, which is necessarily inhabited by the narrator, whom Adelman describes as a "particularly active, or sensitive, interpreter [...] who translates the subtlest of thoughts into poetic images." (Adelman 606) Consequently, Adelman observes that the thoughts subjected to narrative ventriloquism are endowed with a particular philosophical complexity which significantly contrasts with the "simplicity and plainness" characteristic of K's idiosyncratic thinking (Adelman 609). According to Adelman, K's thoughts are "a species of contemplation" (Adelman 609), which only serves to counter Michael Valdez Moses's argument posited in his essay "Solitary Walkers: Rousseau and Coetzee's *Life & Times of Michael K*" that Michael most often finds himself in a state of reverie.

John Bolin similarly argues that there are two dynamics present in the text. One dynamic is represented in the omniscient narrator's endeavours to bestow upon Michael "a serious, consistent meaning" (Bolin 351-352). In this sense, Bolin remarks the discrepancy created by the narrator's use of "elevated abstractions" to represent K's consciousness and Michael's own thoughts (Bolin 346). The other dynamic consists in "Michael's own attempts to tell his story." (Bolin 352) To support his argument, Bolin gives the example of the title, which, he believes, already seeks to outline K's story and "clearly sets up K's life as a story reflective of or influential upon history." (Bolin 352) While he questions the appropriateness of the solemn epigraph taken from Heraclitus's *Cosmic Fragments* to begin a story like Michael

K's, Bolin suggests that the presence of the epigraph only adds further emphasis to the importance of K's narrative.

The shift in perspective from a heterodiegetic narrator to a homodiegetic narrator in part two suggests a desire to engage with disability and the disabled from a different standpoint. It can be argued that by resorting to a first person narrative there is a need for proximity to the impaired Michael K. Whereas the use of the third person inevitably implies an unbridgeable gap between the narrator and the unfolding events, having the medical officer's personal account of Michael K's life and times in the rehabilitation camp suggests a particular familiarity and closeness to the character. It is also worth drawing attention to the fact that the narrative provided by the medical officer is ultimately the narrative of a non-disabled, white character about a character that is coloured, and physically disfigured and cognitively impaired. This evidence only supports Ato Quayson's argument that narrative power in Coetzee's fiction is consistently associated with able-bodiedness.

Therefore, the question that arises in the text is not only concerned with the issue of reliability, but is also related to bodily wholeness. In other words, the problem facing the medical officer is that of understanding the otherness of Michael K on the one hand, and understanding the otherness of Michael K's body on the other hand. It is only if the medical officer undergoes these stages that he can begin to comprehend the meaning of K's existence. Nevertheless, the aspect of reliability governing the narrative of the medical doctor is undermined from the onset when Michael is given a new name, Michaels, and becomes the protagonist of an invented story, that is, the official story featuring in the register of the rehabilitation camp. Apart from the unreliability given by the new narrative within which Michael is inscribed and which prevents the medical officer from ever discovering the true story of K, his thoughts and feelings in relation to Michael also undergo significant change – from bewilderment to fascination – and therefore threaten to undermine the authenticity of his story.

As has been stated above, the corporeal aspect also influences the medical officer's characterization of Michael. Taking into consideration Rosemarie Garland Thomson's argument that the body is inseparable from matters of power, socio-political status and privilege²⁷, the doctor's corporeal wholeness ineluctably grants him not only a physical but

²⁷ See Thomson, Rosemarie Garland. "Disability, Identity, and Representation: An Introduction." *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature*. New York: Columbia UP, 1997. 5-18.

also a social advantage over the impaired Michael K. Consequently, the medical officer writes his account from a position of undisputed (bodily) power which is capable of hindering his capacity for empathy. Despite his attempts to understand K's mental as well as physical condition, the medical officer remains foreign to the singularity of Michael's experience of disability. Nevertheless, he seeks to make sense of K's alternative mode of being through the use of metaphors. For instance, he compares Michael to a "pebble", a "hard little stone, barely aware of its surroundings", a "city mouse, [who] did not know how to live off the land" and ultimately to "a figure of fun, a clown, a wooden man" (Coetzee 135-136, 149). What lies at the origin of these associations is the desire of the medical officer to get closer to Michael's cryptic meaning. David Attwell has suggested that "it is only after he [the medical officer] is introduced that K becomes the elusive figure who is able to slip past all attempts to capture and to understand him." (Attwell, "Suburban Bandit" 140) A possible explanation with respect to Attwell's statement is that the medical officer can be said to represent the repository of the hermeneutical suspicion governing the reader's own opinions in relation to Michael K. Therefore, the effect that the insertion of the medical officer's narrative has is to give a voice to any potential reservations concerning Michael's meaning.

Similar to the hermeneutical impasse produced by the disabled girl in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, the meaning of Michael K also determines an interpretative crux. As Attwell notices, in the manuscript to the novel

Coetzee felt that [...] he ought to keep K as an indeterminate figure who had no natural or cultural home. [...] Coetzee steadily transformed K into a figure whose meaning is neither obvious nor immanent, but who nonetheless gestures towards a meaning that cannot be understood by the world in which he lives. K's apparent lack of meaning (or his absenting himself from meaning) is his very strength. (Attwell, "Suburban Bandit" 145-146)

In connection to this observation, Attwell distinguishes between two types of elusiveness concerning the figure of Michael K, that is, a literal one (i.e. the successful escape from the camps) and a hermeneutic one. The description offered by the omniscient narrator only supports the idea of an interpretative impasse characteristic of K: "[a]lways when he tried to explain himself to himself, there remained a gap, a hole, a darkness before which his understanding baulked, into which it was useless to pour words. The words were eaten up, the gap remained. His was always a story with a hole in it: a wrong story, always wrong." (Coetzee 110) Based on this account, it could be argued that it is the existence of the hole in K's story that is partly responsible for generating a hermeneutical impasse. While it preserves

a touch of the unknown, the gap in Michael's story constantly defers his meaning; it confounds any attempt undergone by the medical officer and other characters to decrypt what he stands for.

Consequently, the existence of a silence in Michael's story thwarts a complete understanding of his meaning and demands a constant re-evaluation of and return to his significance. Ato Quayson refers to this persistent need to understand the disabled other which takes hold of the non-disabled as a "manic urge to interpret"²⁸. Drawing on this concept, it can be argued that the medical officer finds himself in a similar position when he acknowledges that Michael is "[t]he obscurest of the obscure" (Coetzee 142). He, the doctor, seeks to find out the truth about Michael K, to understand "how scandalously, how outrageously a meaning can take up residence in a system without becoming term in it." (Coetzee 166) Nevertheless, the true story of Michael K remains unknown and unknowable to the medical officer. Attwell sheds a new light on the relationship between the doctor and Michael when he argues that the urge to know K's meaning renders the doctor as a "hermeneutic parasite" which makes Michael its host (Attwell, "Writing in the "cauldron of history"" 97). Although the medical officer tries to "feed" on every detail he is able to extract from Michael's story, the only conclusion he can produce is that "Michaels means something, and the meaning he has is not private to me." (Coetzee 165)

In "Professional Subjectivity and the Attenuation of Character in J. M. Coetzee's *Life & Times of Michael K*", David Babcock argues that the nervous compulsion exhibited by the medical officer with regard to K's secret pushes the former to fixatedly return to K's past experiences in the – what proves to be a hopeless – attempt to make sense of Michael's current mode of being. Babcock notices a tension between two different attitudes which the medical officer's adopts in relation to K. The first way of trying to understand K is through idealization, that is to say "[h]e [the medical officer] entertains fantasies of imitating K's life-style (as he imagines it) and thus attaining a more fully human existence [...] In the medical officer's worldview, K's life appears as a kind of vacation, and the freedom it offers is a merely subjective disengagement from the political." (Babcock 898-899) The second mode of approach is the compulsion, bordering on obsession, with which the medical officer reacts to Michael's enigmatic story. Despite the doctor's "more humane" sentiments, "his means of gaining access to K's purported otherness remain firmly within the violence of the camp. [...]"

²⁸ See "Theoretical Framework" pp. 9-11.

Paired with the institutional structure of the welfare-security state, the benevolent desire to make contact with the other devolves all too easily into another form of domination.” (Babcock 899) Both reactions indicate that Michael “has become a kind of fetish for the medical officer, an object that holds the other’s secret inside itself.” (Babcock 898) What is worth emphasizing here is that the second response of the medical officer as proposed by Babcock simply enforces Quayson’s idea of the non-disabled’s manic urge to interpret the disabled other.

Babcock accurately captures the medical officer’s anxious reaction to Michael K, but his idea of domination deserves closer scrutiny. Moses remarks that because K is not able to tell his story, other characters impose a story on him, they demand a story from him and thus they “compel K to reenter the world of recorded history, the world of politics and written laws.” (Moses 152-153) Despite the efforts to inscribe Michael into language, it can be argued that every attempt to do so eventually fails. No matter how persuasive the medical doctor and other characters try to be, they are denied access to Michael’s story. A possible explanation for this failure is Michael’s elusiveness, that is, his ability to defer meaning. As David Attwell puts it, K manages to escape “ad infinitum.” (Attwell, “Suburban Bandit” 146) Therefore, the medical officer’s endeavours to unearth K’s secret are unsuccessful. Although he tries to impose his authority upon Michael (i.e. to dominate him), after he escapes from the Kenilworth camp, the medical officer still remains unenlightened with regard to K’s meaning.

A contributing factor to the sense of empowerment given to Michael K is his silence. In “J. M. Coetzee: Speech, Silence, Autism and Dialogism”, Ato Quayson reads Michael’s silence as an inevitable result of his cognitive impairment, that is to say he understands Michael K to be an autistic character. He goes on to argue that the literary representation of autism necessarily demands the existence of an implied interlocutor to maintain a dialogic relationship between the autistic character and the reader. Since silence for the disabled character indicates an “extreme discomfort with extant forms of social communication”, Quayson stresses the need for an implied interlocutor whose function it is to translate the thoughts and feelings of the impaired character (Quayson 150). In this sense, autistic silence proves to be rather productive in that it facilitates a smoother transition to his consciousness. What is more, it can be argued that apart from contributing to K’s sense of agency, his silence renders him hermeneutically impenetrable. The medical officer observes with growing certainty that “around one bed among all there was a thickening of the air, a concentration of darkness, a black whirlwind roaring in utter silence above your [K’s] body, pointing to you,

without so much as stirring the edge of the bedclothes.” (Coetzee 164) It is this darkness around K’s presence which protects him from social intrusion. Similarly, the long, pressing moments of silence that characterize most conversations between the doctor and Michael K are cause for distress as far as the medical officer is concerned. The conscious or unconscious exemption from language that Michael gradually undergoes only confuses the interpretative process even further and thus only grants him more authority.

3.4 Responding to the Disabled

Whereas in *Waiting for the Barbarians* the condition of being disabled is embodied in a secondary character (i.e. the barbarian girl), in *Life & Times of Michael K* disability is pushed to the foreground when the eponymous protagonist exhibits a physical disfigurement as well as a form of cognitive impairment. In his essay “Modernism, Idiocy, and the Work of Culture: J. M. Coetzee’s *Life & Times of Michael K*”, John Bolin raises the issue of the power of a literary work which features disability to give offense. On a more general scale, he notices that the representation of idiocy has the capacity to offend discourses such as the historical, the philosophical and the literary through its ability to challenge the universal assumption about what “*the work of culture*” should feature (Bolin 357). More particularly, Bolin argues that K’s idiocy prevents him from occupying a position in the socio-political domain and is therefore an affront not only to readers in general, but also to literary critics²⁹. What is more, he remarks that idiocy “cannot speak for itself”, but is generally that “which is *spoken for*” [italics in original] (Bolin 357); however, if the silence that is intricately intertwined with the representation of idiocy proves impenetrable, that is to say, it does not facilitate the reaching of a conclusive meaning, then this only serves to frustrate even more the reader’s desire to reach a clearer meaning. Therefore, despite the resulting (critical) attention which the figure of Michael K, as a protagonist, draws on itself, it simultaneously frustrates the hermeneutical enterprise not only through the presence of disability, but also through the silence emanating from Michael K.

Interestingly enough, while K is the protagonist of the story, Coetzee does not turn him into a heroic figure. On the contrary, the more the narrative unfolds, the clearer it becomes to the reader that Michael K is anything but a hero. In relation to this, Dominic Head suggests that

²⁹ Bolin’s argument brings to mind Nadine Gordimer’s review of *Life & Times of Michael K*, “The Idea of Gardening”, in which she overtly criticizes Coetzee’s political spinelessness and his distancing himself from the historical situation in South Africa instead of a more daring engagement with it.

K is in fact an anti-hero. The deliberate choice of stripping the main character of heroic traits while also making him disabled only adds ethical complexity to the reading and understanding of *Michael K*. As far as character construction is concerned, it is arguably the case that if the author chooses to disadvantage the protagonist by making him mentally impaired and physically disfigured, he would then supplement the bodily and cognitive lack with other qualities. Nevertheless, Coetzee sidesteps the attempt to try to maintain such a sense of balance, and instead pushes the limits of conventional characterisation and opposes any straightforward endeavour to directly relate to the main character in the story; that is to say, Coetzee transforms the figure of Michael K into “a principle of Being”, through which one is to understand “a state of existence prior to knowledge” (Head 31).

What is more, the hermeneutical impasse triggered by Michael K invites to a responsive reading. With regard to the meaning of K, David Babcock writes that “his [K’s] distinctive character survives only as a figure of *unknowable otherness*, which demands a particular ethical response from the reader.” [emphasis added] (Babcock 892) He then goes on to state that “[b]y refusing readers any straightforward sympathetic identification with K, the text forces them to formulate alternative ways of engaging with him, from a position without epistemological or interpretive security.” (Babcock 893) Babcock seems to suggest that the attempt to discover the secret meaning of Michael K is superfluous. If one abandons the desire to identify the character’s cryptic significance altogether, then the reading experience acquires more value in that it becomes an invitation for the reader to draw his or her own conclusion concerning the meaning of Michael K. As a result, the relationship between the narrative and the reader acquires a more personal dimension.

An aspect that Babcock fails to address but which nevertheless contributes to K’s otherness is the character’s disabled condition. In connection to this, one may recall Ato Quayson’s similar statement offered in *Aesthetic Nervousness* that a literary text which features disability necessarily demands an ethical involvement from the reader. Arguably enough, the effect that the presence of K’s disability has upon the reader is that he or she is forced to acknowledge the existence of corporeal and mental difference; thus, the reader becomes aware of his or her own vulnerable body and mind. Although the experience of disability, and particularly the literary representation of disability, remains untranslatable to the typically able-bodied reader, and to the able-bodied character, respectively, Coetzee nevertheless experiments with ways of engaging with the disabled.

A way through which the reader is able to experience K's mental and bodily otherness is through the account provided by the medical officer. Whether premeditated or not, the decision to introduce the doctor's account in chapter two offers the reader the possibility to engage with Michael K more closely. What facilitates this slightly more intimate engagement is the use of the first person narrative. Hence, the account provided by the medical officer subjects the reader to a more personal experience of disability. In this sense, the use of the first person ensures a smoother transition into the mind of the medical officer and thus helps the reader with the process of identification. The anxiety, frustration and confusion the doctor initially experiences as a result of K's presence in the camp almost inevitably become the reader's own feelings. A rather subtle aspect that often tends to be dismissed but which nevertheless contributes to the reader's identification with the thoughts and emotions of the doctor is connected to able-bodiedness. The doctor's corporeal wholeness eases the identification process for the reader who, arguably enough is most often able-bodied himself. Consequently, this situates the medical officer and, by the same token, the reader in an advantageous position in relation to the disabled. Taking this into consideration, when faced with corporeal and mental otherness, there is an initially powerful, normative reaction that the doctor exhibits, and with which the reader might easily identify. However, as the medical officer gradually acquaints himself with Michael K, his attitude changes and he begins to distance himself from the normative subject position which he occupied in the beginning. By the end of part two, the doctor learns to respect K's corporeal and mental difference thus encouraging the reader to follow suit.

Furthermore, through the experimental form shown in the switching between a heterodiegetic and a homodiegetic narrator, Coetzee offers the reader the possibility to engage with disability and the disabled from two different perspectives. It could be argued that this double identification contributes to the reader's capacity to empathize with the (disabled) other. Whereas the use of the first person encourages the reader to identify more closely with the thoughts and opinions of the medical officer and is likely to infringe upon the forming of one's own opinion, the third person narrative, through its objectivity, enables the development of autonomous judgement. Therefore, what Coetzee manages to achieve is to offer the reader the opportunity to experiment with what it means to engage with disability both subjectively and objectively. Yet it is not necessarily the case that one should be compelled to choose between one relational mode over the other. Instead, the identification with two separate viewpoints constitutes a mind-opening experience in itself.

Finally, the lesson that can be drawn from the thoughts and behaviour of the disabled Michael K is one about endurance. The scene which closes the novel is emblematic in this sense and deserves closer scrutiny. Resting on the cardboard, in the room where his mother used to live, Michael K imagines his return to his former dwelling on the abandoned farm together with an old man, whom he would transport there in a barrow. As a response to the old man's question concerning the water supply from the well, which had been blown up by the soldiers,

“he, Michael K, would produce a teaspoon from his pocket, a teaspoon and a long roll of string. He would clear the rubble from the mouth of the shaft, he would bend the handle of the teaspoon in a loop and tie the string to it, he would lower it down the shaft deep into the earth, and when he brought it up there would be water in the bowl of the spoon; and in that way, he would say, one can live.” (Coetzee 183-184)

To David Attwell, this final scene represents “a memorable image of survival.” (Attwell, “Suburban Bandit” 147) Nonetheless, he stresses the need to “deliteralize” the teaspoon in order to obtain a more powerful rhetorical effect. The act of lowering the teaspoon in order to find water demonstrates his ability to persevere in spite of difficult conditions. What the gesture also foregrounds is the fact that “there seem[s] no limit to his [K's] endurance.” (Coetzee 35) Apart from being capable of adapting to new circumstances, Michael K also has the ability to survive his disabled condition. He shows awareness concerning his impairment – “I was mute and stupid in the beginning, I will be mute and stupid at the end” (Coetzee 182) – which only enables him to surpass his condition instead of becoming a victim of it. Therefore, although Michael K may not be a hero, he is nevertheless a survivor of his own story.

4. *Foe* (1986)

Similar to the socio-political context in which *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *Life & Times of Michael K* came about, the publication of *Foe* in 1986 also occurred in the midst of political unrest. Following South Africa's two previously declared states of emergency, in 1985, president Pieter W. Botha had extended the period for a third year. As Mike Marais in “Disarming Silence: Ethical Resistance in J. M. Coetzee's *Foe*” observes, South Africa's political turmoil during apartheid was expected by the readership to be faithfully depicted in the literature of that time. What also supported this form of writing devoted to the accurate representation of reality was the realist literary tradition, which was believed to be the only

one able to accurately capture and in doing so serve justice to the events happening in the country during the apartheid regime (see Yousaf viii-x). J. M. Coetzee's novel, *Foe*, breaks with this literary tradition in which the presence of the political is represented and thus maintained in the literary. As Marais notes, apart from the postmodernist techniques, which are employed in *Foe*, the novel also seems to make "a virtue of silence" (Marais, "Disarming Silence" 131).

With regard to the genesis of the novel, *Foe* takes as its point of departure the novels of Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) and *Roxana: The Fortunate Mistress* (1724). Although *Foe* is mostly a rewriting of Defoe's former novel, the story is told from the perspective of Susan Barton. Whereas in Defoe's *Roxana*, Susan Barton is the name of the daughter in search of her mother, who has abandoned her while seeking to make her own fortune in the world, in *Foe*, Coetzee reverses the roles of the characters but keeps the name and so Susan becomes the mother who looks for her lost daughter. As Attwell points out in *J. M. Coetzee and the Life of Writing*, Coetzee had the idea for a novel foregrounding Roxana's daughter even as far back as 1982, at which time *Life & Times of Michael K* was being published (see Attwell 126). Nevertheless, Coetzee had to abandon several storylines before deciding on the structure by which readers know it today. The consequence of the initially unsuccessful attempts made by Coetzee was that the daughter figure was pushed further into the background of the narrative while a tension between Susan and Foe was still preserved.

Nevertheless, the figure of Friday is the one that deserves closer scrutiny. It is worth drawing attention to the substantial transformation that occurred to the character from the initial sketches to the final form he was given. In the first few drafts, Friday was a dynamic, sexually potent and articulate character. He had a tongue, and, implicitly, voice, which he used not only to express himself, but also to teach Susan his 'cannibal' language while she would, in turn, teach him her 'civilized' language. However, what Coetzee knowingly wanted to avoid was to render Friday as a simplistic, almost stereotypical figure. He also wanted to circumvent the reproduction and perpetuation of Friday's voice as it had been represented in the decolonizing literature (i.e. affirmative or negative utterances). In the manuscript of *Foe*, Coetzee writes that "[t]here has to be a stronger passion than for Friday merely to 'win a round' against Cruso/Defoe." (qtd. in Attwell 131) Consequently, Coetzee chose to turn Friday into a disabled character by removing his tongue and so depriving him of his speech. This change placed the mystery around Friday's silence at the heart of the novel while it also constituted a hermeneutical challenge, different from previous representations of the

character. What is more, before deciding to title his novel *Foe*, among the various titles Coetzee had taken into consideration was *Friday* (see Attwell 130).

The final version of *Foe* is a narrative which, even if it echoes Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* and *Roxana* to a certain extent, stands as an independent story. The novel opens with Susan Barton, who, after embarking on a sea voyage from Bahia to Lisbon, in search of her lost daughter, is set adrift by the ship's crew, who rebels against their captain. On the remote island where she is cast ashore, she encounters Cruso and his companion, Friday, whose tongue, she learns, has been cut off. Despite Susan's best efforts to make Cruso yield to her request by telling her the story behind Friday's severed tongue, she repeatedly fails. After more than a year spent on the island, they are eventually rescued by a ship travelling to England. On the journey back, Cruso dies, making the mute Friday the responsibility of Susan. In London, she seeks the help of Daniel Foe, a renowned man of letters, with the intention of having her story truthfully told. Seeing that Foe tries to reshape her story by turning it into a saleable narrative, Susan struggles to be in control of her tale about Cruso, Friday and the island, and not surrender to the power of narrative seduction which threatens to undermine the authenticity of her tale.

As far as the structure of the novel is concerned, it consists of four chapters. The first chapter is Susan's narrative of the time spent on the island with Cruso and Friday. The second part is a series of letters, written by Susan and addressed to Foe, which remain unopened because they do not reach him since he tries to avoid his creditors. The third chapter focuses on the relationship between Susan and Foe, and her efforts to be in control and preserve the authenticity of her story. Finally, the last chapter offers two accounts of an unnamed narrator, who enters the home of Friday and tries to understand the secret behind his silence and his meaning. With the exception of the final chapter, which is written in first person present tense by a different narrator, the narrative is told in a chronological order from the perspective of Susan Barton, in first person present and past tense. Moreover, the story is set in 18th century London as well as on a remote island, not far from Bahia.

When it was published in 1986, *Foe* immediately became the object of critical attention. Ever since then, critics have sought to respond to the open invitation to interpretation which *Foe* seems to offer. In an attempt to give the text more coherence, academics tended to focus on two aspects, namely on Friday's silence and on the narrative's highly controversial ending. Hence, the novel has often been read as a postcolonial text, a postmodernist text, or a

combination of the two³⁰. Furthermore, the novel's connection to South Africa's historical and political context during apartheid has not gone unnoticed³¹. It is only recently that the role of disability has been foregrounded as fundamental to the narrative structure. In his rather recent essay, "From Virginia's Sister to Friday's Silence: Presence, Metaphor, and the Persistence of Disability in Contemporary Writing", Stuart Murray suggests that besides reading *Foe* as a postcolonial narrative, it is possible to read the novel as a narrative of disability.

4.1 Friday's Silence

The representation of disability in the novel is embodied in Friday. Yet before Susan learns about his impairment, she is first subjected to an encounter with the otherness of Friday. Fatigued, dehydrated and sunburnt, Susan reaches the sandy beaches of a remote island not far off the coast of Brazil. In the dizziness of her exhaustion, with the brightness of the sun preventing her from seeing properly, Susan manages to distinguish "[a] dark shadow [...] of a man with a dazzling halo about him." (Coetzee, *Foe*³² 5). A closer look at what she describes almost as a saint-like presence makes it clear to Susan that "[h]e was black: a Negro with a head of fuzzy wool, naked save for a pair of rough drawers. I lifted myself and studied the flat face, the small dull eyes, the broad nose, the thick lips, the skin not black but a dark grey, dry as if coated with dust. [...] At his side he had a spear." (Coetzee 5-6) Shortly after this moment, Susan senses the peculiar smell of fish and sheepswool that emanates from the "slight fellow" with strange regard (Coetzee 6). Her world knowledge determines Susan to immediately associate Friday with a cannibal, all the more so given the spear he carries with him. However, it soon becomes clear to Susan that the behaviour of Friday undermines any such unfounded correlation. The gentle manner in which he places the back of his hand on

³⁰ In "'Lost in the Maze of Doubting': J. M. Coetzee's *Foe* and the Politics of (Un)Likeness", Chris Bongie states that through *Foe* Coetzee encourages a reflexive attitude towards colonialism. Similarly, in "A Child Waiting to be born", Mike Marais argues that Coetzee is preoccupied with the literary work's relation to otherness and how this relation influences the process of reading and writing. See also Lewis MacLeod's "'Do We of Necessity Become Puppets in a Story?' or Narrating the World: On Speech, Silence, and Discourse in J. M. Coetzee's *Foe*." *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 52.1 (2006): 1-18; Laura Tansley's "To Speak or Not to Speak: An Encounter with J. M. Coetzee's *Foe*." *FORUM: Postgraduate Journal of Culture and the Arts* 9 (2009).

³¹ In *The Novels of J. M. Coetzee*, Teresa Dovey draws a parallel between the island and apartheid South Africa and argues that Crusoe exerts a neo-colonial rule on the island (i.e. once separated from the mother country, the colonizer perpetuates similar modes of oppression to the initial colonizer). David Attwell, in "Writing in the Cauldron of History: *Life & Times of Michael K* and *Foe*" also sees correspondences between the South African context and the novel and considers *Foe* a highly allegorical text.

³² Unless specifically indicated, the references in this chapter are all taken from the same novel, *Foe*, and will be referred to throughout by specifying the name of the author and the page number.

hers has a calming effect on Susan. Moreover, when she hurts her foot, he offers to carry her in what she refers to as a “strange backwards embrace” (Coetzee 6); this gesture also manages to gradually diminish her fear of him. Despite the fact that she initially thinks of Friday as her “singular saviour” (Coetzee 13), after carefully observing him, Susan cannot help but consider him “a dull fellow” and treat him like a servant (Coetzee 22).

What determines Susan to reconsider her relationship to Friday is the moment when she is told about his impairment. After listening to the humming that Friday makes when he is requested to sing, Crusoe shows Susan that the reason behind his strange singing is Friday’s cut off tongue. Although she does not actually *see* Friday’s severed tongue because of the dim light, acknowledging his disability constitutes a turning point for Susan. Being non-disabled, her encounter with disability represents an emotionally charged experience³³ through its ability to unsettle the very core of her being. When she learns about Friday’s “terrible story”, the feeling she detects in herself is amazement. From the mere “shadowy presence”, paid little attention to, Friday becomes an increasingly important existence once Susan learns about the secret behind his silence:

now I began to look on him – I could not help myself – with the *horror* we reserve for the *mutilated* [...] Indeed, it was the very secretness of his loss that caused me to *shrink* from him. I could not speak, while he was about, without being aware how lively were the movements of the tongue in my own mouth. [...] I covertly observed him as he ate, and with *distaste* heard the tiny coughs he gave now and then to clear his throat [...] I caught myself *flinching* when he came near, or holding my breath so as not to have to smell him. Behind his back I wiped the utensils his hands had touched. I was *ashamed* to behave thus, but for a time was not mistress of my own actions. Sorely I *regretted* that Crusoe had ever told me the story. [emphasis added] (Coetzee 24)

The passage offers comprehensive insight into the complex nature of a non-disabled’s reactions when confronted with the physically impaired body of the other. The description comprises a vast array of powerful feelings such as horror, fear, guilt, disgust, shame and ultimately regret. In this respect, it is important that one recalls Rosemary Garland Thomson’s observation about the uneasiness produced by bodily difference. She explains that corporeal anomalies relieve the ‘able’ body of the anxieties associated with vulnerability and give a comforting sense of normality to the physically able body. Nevertheless, in the case of Susan Barton, Friday’s maiming causes her to become aware of the fragility of the body in general and of her body in particular.

³³ As will be shown later in the analysis, Susan’s encounter with disability also activates in her a sense of (maternal) responsibility for the disabled other.

Another effect that the moment of encounter with disability has on the non-disabled is the need to stare at the anomalous body. Thomson explains that one is “drawn by the unanticipated and the inexplicable in an effort to make sense of experience. [...] Staring registers attraction at the same time that it witnesses confusion.” (Thomson, “Ways of Staring” 173-174) In spite of the anxiety Susan feels when she finds herself in Friday’s presence, she cannot help but intently gaze at him and at the movements of his (disabled) body. Staring is for Susan her response behaviour in the face of Friday’s disability; it is a form of understanding and of familiarizing oneself with the vulnerable other. Put differently, the disabled body of Friday exerts such a powerful fascination upon Susan that she is incapable of looking away from it. With every instance of looking that Susan performs, whether she observes his manner of eating, his scattering of petals out at sea or his peculiar dancing, her interest is continuously sparked. As Thomson proposes in her essay “Ways of Staring”, the act of looking need not be a one-way act nor does it have to be solely considered from the perspective of the starrer. Instead, Thomson suggests that during the act of staring, the staree is invested with power. Similarly, Susan’s gaze invests Friday with authority.

In “Fear, Pity and Disgust”, Bill Hughes puts forward the proposition that there are three foundational reactions, which the non-disabled experience in the presence of the disabled, namely fear, pity and disgust. Hughes argues that these reactions slowly gather into the collective imaginary and are responsible for creating and maintaining social distance between the disabled and the non-disabled. Moreover, he contends that emotions have the ability to fuel the normativity of the non-disabled and encourage exclusivist attitudes *vis-à-vis* the disabled. Drawing on the above quoted passage, Susan’s behaviour supports Hughes’s argument to a certain extent, but at the same time proves to be more complex. Initially, Susan’s reactions remind one of the nervousness experienced by the figure of the normate during the encounter with the disabled that Thomson talks about. However, what distinguishes Susan’s reactions from that of the normate is her power to overcome the initial shock and not allow her thoughts and actions to be solely governed by anxiety. Instead, Susan remarks the lack of justice that Friday has fallen victim to. It could be argued that this realization contains an underlying feeling of pity, which, according to Hughes, is the most frequent response for a non-disabled in relation to a disabled (see Hughes 72). Hughes goes on to explain that by regarding the differently able as inferior, he or she becomes the object of the “charitable gaze” of the non-disabled (Hughes 70). Subsequently, the latter reacts either from compassion or from contempt. In Susan’s case, Friday’s impairment stimulates her

intrigue and desire to find out more about his story, and has the effect of triggering a sense of commitment towards him.

Similar to the ethical duty with which the magistrate in *Waiting for the Barbarians* responds to the disability of the barbarian girl, the attitude adopted by Susan in relation to Friday also indicates ethical involvement. She makes explicit that “inasmuch as Friday is a slave and a child, it is *our* [her, the captain’s and the crew’s] *duty* to care for him in all things, and not abandon him to a solitude worse than death.” [emphasis added] (Coetzee 39) Using Emmanuel Levinas’s idea of responsibility³⁴, in “A Child Waiting to Be Born”, Mike Marais argues that the unequal relation between the self and the other distinguishes itself from the Hegelian master-servant relation in that it is based on the unconditional hospitality of the self. Marais’s understanding of absolute hospitality implies an abandoning of the self for the other and, simultaneously, an investment of the other with authority. Once Cruso passes away, Susan automatically undertakes the task of offering Friday her unconditional hospitality. Though she takes on the responsibility of Friday without question, he does not exhibit any form of resistance, but, with “sunken shoulders and bowed head”, silently accepts his new condition as Susan’s *protégé* (Coetzee 40-41).

Even though Susan might at first be ready to offer her wholehearted commitment, Friday soon becomes a burden nearly too heavy for Susan to bear. As a consequence of his cumbersome presence, she turns to confession as a way of discharging the discomforting feeling experienced around him. It is his unresponsiveness which makes Susan feel miserable and which causes her to confess to him that “I [Susan] am wasting my life on you, Friday, on you and your foolish story. I mean no hurt, but it is true. When I am an old woman I will look back on this as a great waste of time, a time of being wasted by time.” (Coetzee 70) Marais explains that Susan’s domination by Friday arises from “her surrender of her freedom and autonomy. It is an epiphenomenon of her hospitality, of the fact that she has become his host, a home for him.” (Marais, “A Child Waiting to Be Born” 82) Moreover, Susan alludes to a maternal kind of responsibility when she tells Foe that “[a] woman may bear a child she does not want, and rear it without loving it, yet be ready to defend it with her life. Thus it has become, in a manner of speaking, between Friday and myself. I do not love him, but he is mine.” (Coetzee 111) Nevertheless, the effects of being a ‘home’ for Friday have the potential

³⁴ Emmanuel Levinas argues that the idea of responsibility generates an unequal relationship between the self and the other whereby the former becomes subjected to the latter. For a more comprehensive account of the Levinasian philosophy, see Mike Marais’s “A Child Waiting to Be Born”, pp. 81-82 or Emmanuel Levinas’s *Otherwise Than Being* (1981).

to destabilize the power relations initially established between them. Consequently, Susan begins to doubt her own authoritative position in relation to Friday when remarking that “[s]ometimes I believe it is I who have become the slave.” (87) Her observation supports Marais’s idea of investing the other with power while yielding one’s own; nonetheless, the authority that she has over him is fuelled by linguistic factors on the one hand and by bodily aspects on the other hand.

Susan’s confession can also be read as the confession of a non-disabled to a disabled. She reminds Friday of her initial encounter with his impairment and finally admits the repugnance she experienced at the thought of his severed tongue. She explains that the reason why she refused to look in his mouth was because “[a]n aversion came over me that we feel for all the mutilated. Why is that so, do you think? Because they put us in mind of what we would rather forget: how easily, at the stroke of a sword or a knife, wholeness and beauty are forever undone?” (Coetzee 85) What is worth pointing out in Susan’s explanation is the correspondence she makes between bodily wholeness and aesthetics. In her view, only an ‘able’ body complies with the socially imposed beauty standards whereas the differently able body is forever bound to create visual discomfort. However, being able to speak about her first reaction to Friday’s difference helps Susan become more aware of as well as have more understanding for the condition of disability in general and that of Friday in particular. She acknowledges how vulnerable and delicate the body is and how easily the condition of corporeal wholeness can change. In other words, the moment she identifies the exact feelings she experienced in the face of disability, Susan accepts the vulnerable other as a part of the self.

However, Susan’s hospitable endeavours and her desire to connect with Friday are met with silence. Arguably enough, the silence of Friday is a consequence of his having his tongue cut off and not necessarily a deliberate choice³⁵. In “Disarming Silence: Ethical Resistance in J. M. Coetzee’s *Foe*”, Mike Marais argues that Friday’s silence represents a silence of authority outside (political) power. He goes on to explain that the potential of Friday’s silence to become authoritative arises from the very powerlessness of his silence:

³⁵ In ““Do We of Necessity Become Puppets in a Story?” or Narrating the World: On Speech, Silence, and Discourse in J. M. Coetzee’s *Foe*”, Lewis MacLeod draws attention to the yet unexplored possibility of Friday actually having a tongue and deliberately refusing to speak in an act of “heroic restraint, a triumph of individual agency against insistent demands that he participate in some kind of master narrative and the discourse it posits.” (MacLeod 12)

it is precisely the helplessness of Friday's silence, its sheer vulnerability, that opposes Susan Barton's careless freedom. Alternatively put, Friday derives authority, as opposed to force or power, from the weakness of his silence: his resistance is the resistance of that which has no resistance. [...] his utter helplessness *demands* responsibility from Susan Barton, it *demands* that she care and "be for the other" rather than for herself. [emphasis in original] (Marais, "Disarming Silence" 135-136)

The assumptions that the silence of Friday is a weak kind of silence and that Friday's condition is one of "utter helplessness" are debatable (Marais 135). In spite of the fact that Friday has a physical disability, which directly affects the way in which he interacts with Susan, Cruso and Foe, his impairment need not automatically render him defenceless. On the contrary, during the time Susan spends on the island, Friday proves that he is able to look after himself and, what is more, after Cruso and Susan. Once in England, Susan unthinkingly turns Friday into her responsibility and so dismisses any opportunity in which he could prove to be autonomous. However, it is not that Friday, due to his physical deficiency, demands to be looked after by Susan; rather that Susan projects the sense of helplessness onto Friday and immediately responds to the unsolicited request. Nevertheless, Marais rightfully posits that Friday's silence functions similar to a force field, which invests him with an unwavering authority that cannot be dominated. Put differently, Friday's inarticulateness conveys him agency which balances the disparity in power relations established between him and Susan.

Not being able to use language automatically draws attention to the body, which begins to resonate differently. Susan describes Friday's mode of communication as a language of "gestures and actions" and "music and dancing" (Coetzee 108, 142).

In "To Speak or Not to Speak: An Encounter with J. M. Coetzee's *Foe*", Laura Tansley argues that Friday's way of communicating is with his body. The story articulated by Friday differs in terms of how it is told because, instead of verbalizing it, he uses non-verbal means of communication and "creates the sensation, the emotion, the physical experience of his situation" (Tansley 7). A different reading of Friday's idiosyncratic "language" reveals that his artistic manner of self-expression could also be seen as a way of dealing with his traumatic experience (i.e. having had his tongue severed). In "Trauma and Art in the Contemporary South African Novel: Susan Mann's *Quarter Tones*", Ewald Mengel argues that characters which cannot verbally share their traumatic experience resort to non-discursive means of communication as a coping mechanism. He goes on to state that, in using artistic means of expression, the characters show their willingness to reconcile with their

traumatic past. Therefore, by choosing to confront themselves with the “unspeakable”, the characters (unconsciously) contribute to their own healing.

What should be pointed out is that through the artistic ways of expressing himself – that is to say, the scattering of petals, the dancing, the playing of the flute, the peculiar way of writing and drawing – Friday proves that having a disability does not cancel one’s subjectivity nor that it reduces one to a defining trait, namely his or her disability. Alternatively, Friday is able to negotiate his impairment and compensate for the lack of speech by making use of richer means of self-expression. Since the artistic language he employs is not in accordance with the “standard” language, it is not entirely understood by those around him. Whereas Cruso and Foe prove to be more willing to accept even without comprehending Friday’s unusual actions, Susan constantly attempts to situate him in a normalizing context by trying to immerse him in her own culture. She unquestionably *assumes* that it is also the desire of Friday to be reinscribed in the dominant discourse and to be given a voice. However, instead of allowing Friday to non-verbally “speak”, Susan “speaks/thinks for” him and in doing so, undermines the possibility of granting him access to language. The act of “speaking for” the oppressed reminds one of Gayatri Spivak’s ground-breaking “Can the Subaltern Speak?” In this essay, Spivak discloses the power relations at work between the Subject (the West) and the object (Subaltern). She argues that the Subject creates the image of the other by erasing its subjectivity. Drawing on Spivak’s argument, it can be stated that Susan unconsciously strips Friday of his subjectivity in her effort to responsibly look after him. Nevertheless, her endeavours to teach Friday to write in and to speak her own language repeatedly fail. In this regard, Mike Marais argues that in trying to decipher and understand Friday’s meaning, Susan fails to go beyond her “pre-existent conceptual framework” (Marais, “A Child Waiting to Be Born” 66); that is to say, she does not entertain the possibility of Friday communicating in a language different than her own, but perceives his actions and idiosyncratic gestures as a sign of inferiority, of barbarity from which she must try to save him.

Yet Friday shows that he – and implicitly, his body – has an authority of his own. Through his peculiar mode of self-expression, Friday covertly indicates that he is also, contrary to Susan’s belief, a “substantial body”, which has an agency of its own that does not allow for her to impose her authority over him (Coetzee 121). Particularly useful in this sense is the example of Susan trying to teach Friday a few words in English. When it is Friday’s turn to prove that he is able to write the words she had shown him, what he writes instead is a long row of s-h-s-h-s. When reading his message, one cannot help but think of the interjection

often used to silence an interlocutor. Arguably enough, Friday's hyphenated letters can be read as a benevolent request for silence that he offers to Susan for consideration. His message proposes an alternative to language as a way of understanding the other and emphasises silence as a more suitable means.

Similarly, when Friday is left with the slate, he starts drawing "eyes, open eyes, each set upon a human foot: row upon row of eyes upon feet: walking eyes." (Coetzee 147) David Attwell draws attention to Friday's unconventional way of writing in his essay "Writing in the Cauldron of History: *Life & Times of Michael K* and *Foe*". He reads the foot as the "trademark" of Friday while the eye represents his "silent gaze" (Attwell 114). The decision to juxtapose the two figural signs is, according to Attwell, Friday's way of engraving his "watchfulness over Susan and Foe" (Attwell 114). In addition, the silent yet vigilant gaze illustrated by Friday can also be read as a way of emphasizing his "dynamic" presence. Whereas Susan tends to conceive of him as passive and helpless, Friday challenges this oversimplified view by symbolically indicating that he is in fact closely observant. Although he is mute, the message he "communicates" to Susan and Foe by drawing the "walking eyes" goes beyond his physical condition and indicates his power. Moreover, in "'Lost in the Maze of Doubting': J. M. Coetzee's *Foe* and the Politics of (Un)Likeness", Chris Bongie speaks about the importance that the references to the eyes play in Coetzee's work and contends that the eyes are "consistently associated with power and authority" (Bongie 273). Hence, by drawing the two symbols on the slate, Friday emphasises the *mana* enclosed in the body.

Not long after these bursts of creativity, Friday is presented sitting at Foe's desk and writing in a peculiar fashion "rows and rows of the letter o tightly packed together. A second page lay at his elbow, fully written over, and it was the same." (Coetzee 152) Chris Bongie conceives this moment as highly relevant because it signifies both a beginning and an end, namely the beginning of Friday's story and the end of Crusoe's and implicitly Susan's story. Contrary to the walking feet which he immediately wipes from the slate and so prevents Susan from showing Foe the drawing, in the case of the rows of "o", Friday expresses himself in a more confident manner as is indicated by the second page which is filled with the same letter. In the opinion of Richard Begam, Friday's letter "o" represents a "divine circle" which denotes "a fundamental unity with all of creation" (Begam 124). Although Begam's interpretation of Friday's writing has a metaphysical quality, what is worth emphasizing is the *particularity* of Friday's writing. Since it does not comply with the standard language, Foe proposes a more

open approach to writing when he assures Susan that “there are many kinds of writing” (Coetzee 147).

Finally, the second part of the final chapter offers insight into the world which Friday inhabits. The way in which the home of Friday is described is “not [as] a place of words”, but one where “bodies are their own signs.” (Coetzee 157) In other words, it is a place where the authority of the body is incontestable. Yet what Friday represents cannot be separated from what his body represents. In Coetzee’s words, “Friday is body” (Coetzee, *Doubling the Point* 248) and his body is “alive”³⁶. The “slow stream, without breath, without interruption” which “flows up through his body [...] Soft and cold, dark and unending” (Coetzee 157) animates his body and gives it an incomprehensible authority. In *Doubling the Point*, Coetzee speaks about the authority of the (disabled) body and remarks that “it is not that one *grants* the authority of the suffering body: the suffering body *takes* this authority: that is its power. [...] its power is undeniable.” [emphasis in original] (Coetzee, *Doubling the Point* 248) Despite having a mutilated body, Friday proves that his disability contains an empowering element which has the ability to situate him on rather equal terms with other non-disabled characters.

4.2 Textual Nervousness

Drawing on Ato Quayson’s concept of “aesthetic nervousness”³⁷, in *Foe*, one of the effects of the representation of disability is the fragmentation of the narrative. It is not only that the narrative is divided into four chapters, but that the mode of writing differs from one chapter to the next. Specifically, the first part is written in the form of a memoir in which Susan Barton relates the story of her time on the island with Cruso and Friday, the trip back to England and Cruso’s death. What gives her story a greater authenticity is the use of single quotation marks at the beginning and end of each paragraph. This technique has the effect of distancing the author from the narrating protagonist and giving more credibility to Susan’s narrative. In comparison to the first part, the second part is written in epistolary form and is a series of letters addressed to Foe but which remain unanswered. Interestingly enough, the first ten letters are dated and cover the period between April 15th and June the 1st, whereas the next letters are undated. Moreover, starting with the ninth letter, each of them is occasionally interrupted by asterisks, the presence of which fragments the text even more. What is peculiar

³⁶ In “Writing in the Cauldron of History”, David Attwell states that “Friday’s home is the body: his existence is a facticity that simply asserts its own priorities.” (Attwell 116)

³⁷ See “Theoretical Framework” pp. 9-11.

about each letter is that, although written by Susan, they remain unsigned. In contrast to the first and second part, the third part no longer uses single quotation marks nor maintains the epistolary form, but is the narrative of Susan of the time spent with Friday in Foe's refuge.

It is in the last part of *Foe* that the textual unease is most salient. In part four, the narrative is divided in two first person accounts of an unnamed narrator. The narratives, while "partially mirroring one another", are separated by asterisks and represent the attempts of the narrator to discover the truth behind the silence of Friday (Bongie 278). While the first account shows the narrator entering Foe's chambers and listening to Friday's silence, the second account focuses on the exploration of the sunken ship in which Friday resides and the act of listening to the inexplicable silence issuing from Friday's mouth. Chris Bongie conceives of the final part's double ending as marking the necessity of closure on the one hand and the arbitrariness of closure on the other hand. However, Lewis MacLeod remarks that the final part brings no closure to the novel because of the possibilities of interpretation which it opens through Friday's mysterious silence.

Moreover, the final part has the ability to undermine the reliability and authenticity of Susan Barton's previously narrated story. One example is the opening sentence of the fourth part ("The staircase is dark and mean." - Coetzee 153), which is strikingly similar to the first line of part three ("The staircase was dark and mean." (Coetzee 113)), with the exception of the tense, which changes from past to present tense. Another example is the second account in part four that also references the first sentence of the novel "At last I could row no further" (Coetzee 5); however, it is not in the form of a memoir but as a part of Susan's informal letter.

What also contributes to the aesthetic nervousness of the text is the problematic figure of Friday. On the one hand, the presence of Friday as a disabled character is, according to Stuart Murray, *necessary* for the overall coherence of the text. Murray argues that disability is "foundational" in any literary text in which the representation of disability features (Murray 250). As far as disabled characters are concerned, Murray writes that "their embodied and material subjectivities make the text in which they feature *cohere*. They help their narratives." (Murray 250) Based on this observation, it can be argued that the silent presence of Friday, although interfering with the "wholeness" of the narrative, is essential for the text. In the manuscript of *Foe*, Coetzee writes that "Friday is at the centre of this story; but I seem incapable of conceiving for him any role in the story. [...] By robbing him of his tongue (and

hinting that it is Cruso, not I, who cut it out) I deny him a chance to speak for himself: because I cannot imagine how anything that Friday might say would have a place in my text.” (qtd. in Attwell 133) David Attwell also remarks that the silence characteristic of Friday is the root cause of Susan’s uncertainty (see Attwell, “Writing in the Cauldron of History” 112). What should be highlighted is the fact that the reason behind Friday’s silence has to do with his impairment, namely his cut off tongue. Hence, it is Friday’s disability which lies at the heart of *Foe*.

On the other hand, any attempt to disambiguate the meaning of Friday ultimately results in failure. On Friday’s elusive meaning, Coetzee writes that “Friday is always there as the other inhabitant of the island. But what Friday threatens to be or do [...] never happens. His dark presence never disappears from the background, his presence comes to carry with it an atrocious history; but further than that, further than as a jog to the conscience, *he never emerges into meaning.*” [emphasis added] (qtd. in Attwell 133) Drawing on Quayson’s typology of disability, it can be argued that Friday represents a “site of a major hermeneutical impasse” for other characters as well as for the reader (Quayson 49). Essentially, it is his disability – usually overlooked and mistaken for his silence – which encrypts his meaning and gives rise to interpretative problems. In other words, Friday’s bodily difference continuously interferes with the way in which he is read and understood by Susan, other characters and ultimately the reader.

The failure to interpret Friday’s meaning triggers for Susan what Quayson refers to as a “manic urge to interpret” (Quayson 49). In order to be able to tell her own story to Foe, Susan must have access to Friday’s story since “[t]o tell my [Susan’s] story and be silent on Friday’s tongue is no better than offering a book for sale with pages in it quietly left empty. Yet the only tongue that can tell Friday’s secret is the tongue he has lost.” (Coetzee 67) In connection to Susan’s narrative, Bongie explains that because her story mainly revolves around one single, controversial aspect (i.e. the muteness of Friday), it is bound to be incomplete. Bongie then offers an analysis of Susan’s writing methods which – in contrast to Foe’s *narrato-logical* tactics – are characterized by a “*hermeneutic perspective*” [emphasis in original] (Bongie 267). Whereas Foe’s narrative aims to incorporate Friday’s silence in a grand narrative comprising several episodes, Susan’s story only focuses on the mystery behind Friday’s silence. According to Bongie, it is only through the story of Friday that Susan is able to know and understand her own story and so she “lives in the hope of recovering the “secret body” that she [...] feels is lacking to her.” (Bongie 267) In the same

way, Derek Attridge considers Friday the explanation to Susan's "inner significance" during her life on the island (Attridge 80). By constantly seeking the hidden meaning of Friday, Susan proves that she is incapable of removing herself from the "hermeneutic circle", which, like a centripetal force, determines her to follow the same patterns of interpretation (Bongie 267).

In her manic urge to understand Friday, Susan resorts to various strategies meant to disambiguate his meaning. Since the behaviour of Friday does not comply with the normative rules of human conduct, Susan tries to compare it to the behaviour of animals and insects. She notices that Friday sleeps "curled on his side like a cat" and that her need to talk to him is similar to "old women [who] talk to cats, out of loneliness" (Coetzee 27, 77). As for his relationship with Cruso, Susan initially compares Friday to "a dog that heeds but one master", although she immediately after changes her viewpoint (Coetzee 21). Once on board the ship to England, she approaches Friday "treating him as we [people] treat a frightened horse" (Coetzee 41-42). On pondering about his condition as a slave and as Cruso's manservant, Susan compares Friday to "a watch-dog, raised with kindness but kept from birth behind a locked gate." (Coetzee 80) Similarly, Friday's remoteness from the world of Susan is likened to "how unnatural a lot it is for a dog or any other creature to be kept from its kind" (Coetzee 81). Finally, Susan imagines what it means to live outside language: "to live in silence is to live like the whales, great castles of flesh floating leagues apart one from another, or like the spiders, sitting each alone at the heart of his web, which to him is the entire world" (Coetzee 59). Arguably enough, Susan's zoomorphic comparisons are not intended in a condescending way, but represent her ardent desire to establish some form of coherence of Friday's elusive meaning. By looking for similitudes between his behaviour and the behaviour of animals, Susan adopts new strategies of understanding the meaning of Friday.

Apart from causing hermeneutical problems, the presence of the disabled Friday also generates tension at the level of character interaction. The on-going narratological battle – whose main reason is Friday's muteness – between Susan and Foe is a particularly relevant example in this sense. In an effort to preserve the mystery of Friday's severed tongue, Susan tries to persuade Foe to centre the story he is writing on this controversial aspect. As a defence measure, she explains that "if the story seems stupid, that is only because it so doggedly holds its silence. The shadow whose lack you [Foe] feel is there: it is the loss of Friday's tongue." (Coetzee 117) However, Foe is more preoccupied with turning Susan's

story into a narrative commodity rather than giving what she hopes will be a truthful account of her time on the island.

Furthermore, Friday's disability gives rise to a controversial discussion on the very nature of speech and writing. On the one hand, Susan adopts what Richard Begam refers to as a "phonocentric position" (Begam 122), that is, she believes speech precedes writing: "How can he [Friday] write if he cannot speak?" (Coetzee 142). On the other hand, Foe opts for a "grammatological position" (Begam 122), considering both speech *and* writing equally relevant functions with which the body is endowed: "Friday has fingers. If he has fingers he can form letters. Writing is not doomed to be the shadow of speech." (Coetzee 142) The failure to reach a consensus between Susan and Foe is reminiscent of the discussions she tries to initiate with Cruso during their time on the island. Each attempt to persuade Cruso to tell her his real story and implicitly the story of Friday and how he acquired his disability is unsuccessful. Instead, what she is told are various stories from which she cannot distinguish "what was truth, what was lies, and what was mere rambling." (Coetzee 12) Disagreement also arises when she suggests writing down the particular details which, she believes, give Cruso's story its truthfulness. However, he is not only disinterested in undertaking such authorial tasks, but also seems to be indifferent to the idea of salvation altogether. The obstinacy and the seemingly lack of *joie de vivre* detected in Cruso and to a lesser extent in Friday eventually irritate Susan as she finds herself incapable of changing his mind. Consequently, this feeling of helplessness perpetuates tension in their relationship.

It is not only that aesthetic nervousness can be perceived as narrative fragmentation and in the way in which non-disabled characters relate to one another as a consequence of the presence of the disabled, but it also influences how narrative techniques are employed. More specifically, the use of mirror characters and parallelism adds to the overall textual unease. The example that supports this statement is the insertion in the narrative of the figure of the little girl, who shares the same name with the protagonist, Susan Barton, and claims to be her daughter. According to her story, the girl has been in search of her lost mother whom she has followed "everywhere", and whom she has finally found (Coetzee 74). Regardless of the almost unbelievable similarity of their story – that is, the girl in search of her mother and the mother in search of her kidnapped daughter –, there is still an inexplicable impediment which prevents Susan from recognizing the little girl as her own daughter. Even if what the two Susans have in common is their matching names, the protagonist, Susan, is convinced that they do not share what the girl refers to as the true signs by which one recognizes the genuine

mother-daughter connection, namely the same eyes and the same hand. Arguably enough, the insertion in the story of the figure of the young Susan Barton and of her maid Amy or Emmy can be thought of as a narrative inconsistency whose effect is to further generate narrative tension. In the opinion of Chris Bongie, the girl represents a “disruptive presence” in the narrative which reminds one of Daniel Defoe’s *Roxana*, a novel which also features the abandoned daughter in search of her mother, who has decided to seek fortune in the upper stratum of society (Bongie 269).

Another parallel which can be drawn is between Jack, the young, orphaned boy, who works for Foe, and Friday. Although the age of Friday is never clearly specified, Susan still considers him to be a child. Consequently, this only encourages one to make an analogy between him and Jack. What is more, there is a silence characteristic of both of them. The presence of Jack seems to go almost unnoticed as he is described “staring curiously” or standing “motionless” (Coetzee 129-130). When it comes to his manner of speaking, he whispers or, at most, replies to Foe’s requests with “Yes, sir.” (Coetzee 131) Likewise, both of them yield to a higher authority despite being granted different levels of freedom. In this respect, the way in which Foe and Susan relate to Jack and Friday deserves a closer scrutiny. When Susan learns that the ten year old boy is a noteworthy pick-pocket, she is immediately startled by what she considers Foe’s lack of involvement in trying to correct the boy’s bad habit. Foe then explains the reasoning behind his decision and tells Susan that “Jack has his own life to live, better than any I could devise for him.” (Coetzee 128) To this she instantly replies saying that “Friday too has a life of his own, but I do not therefore turn Friday out on the streets [...] [b]ecause he is helpless.” (Coetzee 128) Whereas Susan’s thinking is marked by an overly emphatic preoccupation with Friday’s condition, Foe grants Jack the independence he needs in order to develop and become an autonomous person. What prevents Susan from adopting the same strategy is not only Friday’s different race, but also his disabled condition, which render him “helpless” in her eyes (Coetzee 128). Nevertheless, Foe subtly suggests the possibility of allowing Friday the freedom that he deserves and trusting that he is able to look after himself without being helped by others.

4.3 Disability Speaks Back?

Being at the heart of the novel, the representation of disability, embodied in the figure of Friday, unavoidably alters the reading experience. An aspect which is responsible for influencing the reader’s perception and engagement with disability is the use of a first person

narration. Since the story is told from the perspective of Susan Barton, whose attitude towards Friday proves to be rather ambivalent – neither completely hospitable, nor entirely hostile –, the reader’s mode of engaging with the text and implicitly with Friday is, to a certain extent, liable to be governed by Susan’s own conceptual framework regarding not only otherness but also corporeal difference³⁸. However, as the narrative unfolds Susan’s relationship to Friday changes in that it goes from the initial nervousness and discomfort that his impairment generates to a form of acknowledgement and understanding of his condition. By the same token, the reader is also required to constantly adapt to the changing attitude of Susan and to revise his or her own views on disability.

A different reaction to corporeal difference is presented through the characters of Cruso and Foe. Whereas Susan’s behaviour is marked by what Mike Marais calls “intrusiveness” due to the fact that she feels entitled to “violate the otherness of the other, to force the unknown into “conformity” with the known” (Marais, “Disarming Silence” 132), that is to say, she persistently invades Friday’s freedom by trying to relate to him according to her own world knowledge, Cruso and Foe adopt a more respectful attitude in relation to Friday and his physical condition. The respect Cruso shows for the autonomy of the island³⁹ is also reflected in his relationship to Friday, who “is always there as the other inhabitant of the island” (qtd. in Attwell 133). Despite occupying an inferior position in relation to Cruso as a consequence of his skin colour and his physical condition, Friday is still endowed with autonomy. Cruso respects and unquestioningly accepts Friday’s periods of seclusion as well as his silence⁴⁰. Similarly, when being told that Friday is mute, there is no description that would indicate a reaction characteristic of a normate figure as far as Foe is concerned. On the contrary, his attitude to Friday’s mutilation is neither strongly inimical nor excessively compassionate. Instead, Foe simply accepts the reality of Friday’s impairment without trying to question how the traumatic experience came about. In doing so, Foe shows respect for Friday’s otherness and for the uniqueness of his physical experience. Hence, these two attitudes offer the reader

³⁸ The example of Susan’s fixed idea that the island is an island of cannibals and that Friday is a cannibal too, assumptions which later prove to be invalid, points to the unreliability of her perspective. According to Mike Marais, Susan’s suppositions are a result of her projective intentionality by which she “consolidates herself, shields herself against his [Friday’s] alterity. By containing his otherness, she is able to *recognize* Friday and thereby affirm herself” (Marais, “A Child Waiting to Be Born” 76).

³⁹ For a more detailed analysis of Cruso’s relation to the island, see Mike Marais’s essay “A Child Waiting to Be Born”.

⁴⁰ Although it is hinted at one point in the narrative that Cruso might have been the one who cut off Friday’s tongue, the possibility of such an occurrence remains open to debate.

the possibility of adopting a more permissive, non-judgemental attitude towards corporeal otherness.

The fact that Friday has an acquired disability also influences how the reader engages with the text. The deliberate choice of Coetzee not to disclose *who* cut off Friday's tongue, *how* and *why* it happened can be thought of as a strategic move. It might be argued that by concealing from the reader the story behind Friday's mutilation, Coetzee aims to instead emphasise what it means to live in a differently able body. He explores not only how being disabled influences other non-disabled characters and how they react when encountering disability. In Susan's case, for instance, Friday's acquired disability raises an ethical dilemma. On learning about his mutilation and his supposed condition as a slave, Susan's instant reaction is to question the righteousness of Friday's faith: "Where is the justice in it? First a slave and now a castaway too. Robbed of his childhood and consigned to a life of silence. Was Providence sleeping?" (Coetzee 23) Embedded in Susan's words is her opinion of Friday, whom she sees as a victim of a long history of oppression (i.e. colonialism) as well as a victim of his physical condition. What she fails to take into consideration and what can also be easily overlooked despite being a vital point is the fact that prior to acquiring a disability, the person is also able-bodied. Nevertheless, subsequent to the transition from being able-bodied to becoming differently able, the reality of being non-disabled is often forgotten. By making Friday the object of an acquired impairment, Coetzee tries to subtly indicate how easily the condition of bodily wholeness can change while he raises awareness about the fact that before having his tongue cut off, Friday was purportedly an able-bodied individual.

Moreover, the behaviour of Friday serves as a valuable lesson in moral conduct. Taking his submission as a point of departure, it can be argued that in silently yielding to Susan, Friday also performs an act of renunciation. To be more precise, he relinquishes not only the freedom and autonomy he would have on the island if he remained there, but also his individuality. Whether a conscious choice or not, Friday accepts that his subjectivity be glossed over and turned into the *object* of Susan's care. Through his behaviour, Friday evinces a lesson in modesty and what it means to be humble. In order to appease Susan, he "sacrifices" – what could have been – his freedom by acceding to her demands to return to England. His decision might be interpreted as the ultimate gesture of self-effacement for the benefit of the other. In other words, from Friday's example, one is able to learn a valuable

lesson about the capacity of a disabled to renounce his freedom for the sake of the non-disabled other.

Another lesson which can be drawn from Friday's behaviour is the great ability of the differently able to empathize with the "normal" other. At the beginning of the narrative, when Friday finds Susan cast ashore, wearied and parched, instead of leaving her there, he chooses to take her to the place where he and Cruso reside. This gesture represents the first sign of consideration and perhaps even concern that Friday shows for the one in need. What is more, the offer to carry Susan on his back when she suffers a foot injury also stands as evidence supporting the idea that he, as a disabled character, has the ability to pay attention to the needs of the non-disabled Susan and help her if the situation demands it. However, the reverse is not likely to hold true since Susan is unable to understand Friday's physical condition; that is to say, she, as a non-disabled, fails to imagine what it means to live in a body that has been subjected to a form of torture, which leaves it "unwhole". Even so, Friday evinces the ability to show sympathy for the other and to respond with small acts of kindness and compassion.

Although his disability prevents him from speaking, Friday nevertheless communicates in his own particular language. Chris Bongie argues that the language of Friday is initially a "language of flowers" which then becomes a "language of eyes" (Bongie 273). Besides the drawing of the feet juxtaposed on the eye which is quite a clear example of Friday's writing, Bongie also interprets Friday's inexplicable yet poetic gesture of scattering petals over the water as a form of writing. However, it is not just the scattering of petals and the interesting symbols he draws that make up Friday's language, but also all the non-verbal forms of expression. Similarly, MacLeod considers Friday's language as an "avant-garde text", which remains outside the available interpretative patterns and which focuses on the process of writing more than on the possibilities of disambiguation that the reader has (MacLeod 13). What Friday's creativity indicate is that speech – or, what Friday lacks as a consequence of his disability – need not be the defining ability a person has, but that it is *one* of the possible forms of self-expression. Even if he does not speak in a language that Susan, Foe, Cruso – and perhaps even the reader – might understand, Friday nevertheless "speaks back" in his own peculiar mode and in doing so, reminds the reader of his silent presence as well as his "humanity and his human dignity." (Murray 256)

Conclusion

It has been the purpose of this thesis to examine the representation of disability, its narratological effects and its ethical implications for the reading experience in the novels of J. M. Coetzee. In these fictional works, disability is repeatedly presented as a characteristic of the ethnically marginalized characters who are also denied narrative voice. However, their presence has the power not only to produce an inner change in the able-bodied characters with which they interact, but also to significantly influence the course and structure of the narrative. Subsequent to the encounter between an able-bodied and a disabled character, the former exhibits a shift in his or her attitude in relation to the latter. From the initial misgivings and mild anxiety, which are symptomatic of what Thomson refers to as a “normate” reaction, the non-disabled character gradually moves toward a fascination combined with a desire to care for the impaired. What this shows is that the behaviour of Coetzee’s able-bodied characters seems to respond to the invitation of Julia Kristeva to partake in the experience of disability. The reason why they are able to do so is because they have acknowledged the vulnerability of their own body and thus have increased their ability to empathize with the disabled other and “to participate, without erasing the fact that each is “apart”” (Kristeva 43).

A thorough examination of the narrative structure confirms the presence of what Quayson identifies as “aesthetic nervousness”. Narrative fragmentation, open-endedness, the construction of the text around the figure of the disabled, an able-bodied point of view and the differently able body as a site of hermeneutical impasse constitute the main indicators of this textual unease. Moreover, the presence of disability meaningfully influences the reading experience. Whether social, physical or cognitive, congenital or acquired, each form of disability triggers a different emotional response from the reader. The switching between different points of view also offers the possibility of empathetically identifying with the impaired character. Subsequent to the attempts to “connect” with the disabled other, the reader’s attitude to disability in real life may involuntarily suffer a slight alteration in that he or she may learn to have more understanding for the condition of impairment.

As far as tracing the life of the disabled characters is concerned, their existence shows a remarkable capacity for endurance. In this respect, Alice Hall notices Coetzee’s persistent focus on “enduring bodies” throughout his fiction (Hall 176). Apart from their ability to bear racial, social and bodily discrimination and exploitation, Hall argues that their endurance also reveals a germinating hope for the future (see Hall 176). Accordingly, the barbarian girl very

slowly recovers her ability to see and, although with difficulty, she is able to start walking again. Similarly, Michael K does not allow his physical disfigurement, his cognitive impairment or the emaciated condition of his body to interfere with his yearning to return to the patch of earth on the farm and to replant his garden. In spite of having lost the ability to speak as a consequence of his severed tongue, Friday resorts to non-verbal means of self-expression and thus shows that his body is differently able. Therefore, this research shows that, although the disabled characters lack power and voice, they are depicted as able resilient existences.

Through the constant preoccupation with and representation of disability in his apartheid novels, Coetzee pushes the limits of aesthetic representation by refusing to look away from what might profoundly unsettle most readers and, as a consequence, might often be omitted in the literary discourse (see Hall 178-179). In choosing to represent the body of the other as disabled, Coetzee seems to want to sensitize the reader and encourage him or her to empathetically identify with the vulnerable other. To put it differently, the depiction of alternative experiences challenges the reader's capacity to imagine and empathize. By proposing new ways of embodiment, Coetzee's novels contribute to the shifting of stereotypical views of disabled bodies through the foregrounding of the singularity and uniqueness of each body. What is more, his fiction invites to a more complex inquiry into what it means to live in a (differently able) body. The fact that he is an able-bodied author writing about disability also points to his effort to embody a different consciousness and try to "communicate over a divide" despite the outcome of the attempt (Hall 172).

The ethics that Coetzee seems to put forth through the representation of disability allows for the raising of more philosophical questions such as: what is it that makes us human? Is it our bodily "wholeness", our skin colour, our ability to use language that renders us human? Or are there other ways of being in the world which, however alien to some of us, are equally authentic and true? Julia Kristeva believes that only by turning inwards and acknowledging that disability *is in* us that are we capable of "listening to those who speak, walk, hear, see, or move about bizarrely, crazily, or scarily." (Kristeva 45) As a result, "[n]ew worlds then open to our listening, difficult or enchained, neither normal nor disabled, a flowering of surprise, worlds becoming polyphonies, resonances, different yet compatible, worlds finally returned to their plurality." (Kristeva 45)

Since this thesis offers an in-depth analysis of Coetzee's apartheid novels from the perspective of disability, its scope is undoubtedly limited. However, the findings of this study may open up new pathways for future research. While the focus throughout the thesis has been on the fictional works written during the apartheid regime, it would be interesting to look at how disability is represented in Coetzee's post-apartheid novels and see whether there are significant differences between them. Another research avenue that might raise thought-provoking questions for scholars interested not only in Coetzee's work, but also in Disability Studies is the examination of Coetzee's post-humanist ethics in the apartheid and post-apartheid novels. The trauma to which South Africa has been exposed following the foundation of the apartheid regime invites to a closer analysis of the relationship between trauma and disability. Furthermore, the study has shown that for Coetzee writing under apartheid has evidently "deformed" his prose. Hence, it might be worth examining the representation of disability in contemporary South African literature in order to understand how the general attitude toward disability has developed following the country's transition to a democratic form of politics.

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vii-xv.

English Summary

This thesis looks at the fictional works of J. M. Coetzee with the purpose of examining how disability is represented, what the narratological implications of its presence are, and how it affects the process of reading. In the analysis, the focus is on three of Coetzee's apartheid novels, namely *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), *Life & Times of Michael K* (1983) and *Foe* (1986). In his critical work, Coetzee repeatedly stresses the deforming and disabling effects of the system of apartheid. Hence, the reason for choosing these particular texts is because they reflect the disabling conditions and social deformation which the system of apartheid is responsible for creating. In these novels, disability is always an attribute of the socially, ethnically and politically inferior characters, which, as a consequence of their status, are also situated outside language. However, their presence in the text considerably affects the development of the able-bodied characters that they encounter as well as the narrative events, structure and technique.

A particular focus of the thesis is on the moment of encounter between a "normal" character and an impaired character. Following the meeting, the non-disabled character undergoes a profound change in his or her set of attitudes to the disabled other. The able-bodied character gradually learns to accept and experiment what it means to accommodate oneself with (corporeal) difference. He or she shifts from what Rosemarie Garland Thomson classifies as a "normate" reaction to difference which is indicated by feelings of fear, superiority or repugnance to fascination, curiosity and an earnest impulse to look after the more vulnerable other. The ability to empathetically identify with the disabled other is a result of acknowledging the fragility of one's own body.

The thesis then looks at the narratological effects of the representation of disability only to reveal the existence in the texts of what Ato Quayson refers to as "aesthetic nervousness". Drawing on Quayson's argument, the paper emphasizes the fact that, in each case, disability is at the core of the narrative and its effects permeate the entire structure of the text. Consequently, the characterisation of the disabled character, whose presence in the text triggers a hermeneutical impasse for the able-bodied character, the point of view, which is always endowed to a non-disabled narrator, and the overall fragmentation of narrative are the main pointers of the presence of disability. For the reader, the representation of various forms of impairment inevitably alters the reading experience in that it raises awareness about one's own vulnerability and in doing so, shifts the outlook on disability and the disabled.

In conclusion, this thesis shows that, despite their position outside language and politics, the disabled characters are represented as enduring, resilient and able existences whose presence considerably affects other characters, the narrative as a whole and the reader.

Deutsche Zusammenfassung

Diese Diplomarbeit befasst sich mit den Werken von J.M. Coetzee mit dem Ziel, die Darstellung von körperlicher und geistiger Beeinträchtigung sowie deren narratologische Implikationen in Texten aufzuzeigen sowie zu erläutern, wie diese den Leseprozess beeinflussen können. Zur Untersuchung wurden die drei Prosawerke *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), *Life & Times of Michael K* (1983) und *Foe* (1986) von Coetzee herangezogen, die dem Thema der Apartheid gewidmet sind. In seinen kritischen Werken betont Coetzee wiederholt die entsetzlichen Effekte des Apartheid-Systems. Der Grund, aus dem diese Texte ausgewählt wurden, besteht in der Widerspiegelung in diesen Texten der entsetzlichen Umstände und die soziale Ungleichheit, die durch das Apartheid-System entstanden sind, widerspiegeln. In diesen Prosawerken ist die Behinderung stets ein Attribut der sozial, politisch und ethnisch untergeordneten Personen, die sich aufgrund ihres sozialen Status außerhalb der Sprache befinden. Ihr Auftreten im Text beeinflusst jedoch auch die Entwicklung der in den Werken vorkommenden körperlich nicht beeinträchtigten Personen, denen sie begegnen, sowie die geschehenden Ereignisse und Struktur und Methode des Erzählens.

Im Fokus dieser Diplomarbeit liegt der Moment der Begegnung zwischen einer körperlich beeinträchtigten und einer körperlich gesunden Person. Nach dem Zusammentreffen verändert sich die Einstellung des Nichtbeeinträchtigten dem Behinderten gegenüber deutlich. Mit der Zeit fängt der Nichtbehinderte an, diese (körperlichen) Unterschiede zu akzeptieren und zu erkennen, was nötig ist, um mit diesem (körperlichen) Unterschied zu leben. Er wechselt seine Sicht auf diese Unterschiede, die von Rosemarie Garland Thomson als "normate reaction" bezeichnet werden. Er wechselt von Angst, Überlegenheit und Abscheu zu Begeisterung, Neugier und dem Drang, sich um die beeinträchtigte Person zu kümmern. Die Fähigkeit, sich in die Lage des Behinderten hineinzusetzen, kommt von der Erkenntnis darüber, wie zerbrechlich der menschliche Körper ist.

Die Arbeit, die sich auf die These von Quayson stützt, betont die Tatsache, dass in jedem einzelnen Fall körperliche Beeinträchtigung das grundlegende Element der Erzählung darstellt. Ihre Auswirkungen auf das Umfeld sind über die gesamte Struktur des Textes hinweg sichtbar. Somit führt die Charakterisierung der beeinträchtigten Personen und deren Anwesenheit im Text die nicht beeinträchtigte Figur in eine hermeneutische Sackgasse. Der Standpunkt wird einem nicht behinderten Erzähler zugewiesen. Die allgemeine

Fragmentierung der Erzählung ist der größte Hinweis auf das Vorhandensein von körperlicher Beeinträchtigung.

Die Darstellung unterschiedlicher Formen von Beeinträchtigung verändert unvermeidlich das Leseerlebnis des/der Lesers/in, indem sie ihm/ihr die eigene Verwundbarkeit bewusst macht. Damit verändert sich die Perspektive auf körperliche Beeinträchtigung und die die davon betroffenen Personen.

Abschließend zeigt die Diplomarbeit, dass die beeinträchtigten Figuren trotz ihrer Stellung außerhalb von Sprache und Politik als starke und fähige Personen dargestellt werden, die durch ihr Auftreten andere Figuren sowie die Erzählung und die Leser/innen beeinflussen.

CV

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