

## **J. M. Coetzee: Writers and Political Responsibility**

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Office Hours: TBD

### **Course Description:**

This tutorial offers a survey of the fiction of J. M. Coetzee, a Nobel Prize laureate widely regarded as the world's most important living English-language writer.

The course's chief goal is to immerse you into Coetzee's disturbing and powerful writing and let your own questions and ideas emerge from his rich imaginative work. But the course also follows a main through line. Coetzee's fiction repeatedly asks: What political and ethical responsibilities, if any, do writers have, and to whom? (I speak here of responsibilities *as writers*, assuming that the normal obligations of citizenship, friendship, family and so forth apply to writers as much as they do to anyone else.) What connections, if any, exist between literary greatness and moral goodness?

As a white South African, Coetzee was deeply aware of the injustice of apartheid, and deeply ambivalent about how South Africa's writers, especially whites, ought to respond to that injustice. Must writers speak back to an unjust regime? Speak up for people who are silenced? How might an author's political and moral commitments nourish—or impede—his or her artistic aspirations? How does literature change when it bears a political burden?

To address these guiding questions, we will place Coetzee in dialogue with other notable African writers—Nadine Gordimer, Andre Brink, Es'kia Mphahlele, and Ngugi Wa Thiong'o among them—as well as such figures as Franz Kafka and Samuel Beckett. We will also draw on moral philosophy, aesthetics, and postcolonial theory to refine, and challenge, our intuitions about the ethics and politics of literary art.

Part I, "Fundamentals," links together Coetzee's novels with philosophical accounts of how aesthetics intersects with ethics and with politics. The goal is to give us a shared vocabulary for discussing the moral and political functions of art, without subordinating aesthetic value to other kinds of value.

Part II, "Forms," looks at pressures weighing on politically engaged authors to adopt certain literary forms. Here, Coetzee's allegorical, ironic writing is juxtaposed against Nadine Gordimer's humane and nuanced psychological realism. At this stage in the course, we will drill deeper into Coetzee's style and assess his place in literary history and world literature.

Part III, "Figures," surveys a number of writer-protagonists in Coetzee's fiction. This recurring character type is a tortured, often ineffectual figure who wants to do good, but can't. In this category we might find—in his fictionalized memoirs, and elsewhere—images of Coetzee himself.

By the end of the course, students will produce a 20- to 25-page paper on a topic of their choice.

**Course Goals:**

- To gain deep knowledge of the fiction of J. M. Coetzee
- To gain fluency in the critical debates surrounding Coetzee's work
- To develop nuanced views about art's relation to morality and politics, and to be able to defend those views persuasively to someone who might disagree
- To develop familiarity with some key literary-critical concepts (e.g. allegory, postmodernism, postcolonialism)
- To gain a sense of Coetzee's historical and political context (including some knowledge of apartheid South Africa)
- To gain an understanding of Coetzee's literary influences and his place in literary history
- To learn how to write an upper-level and extended (20-25 page) work of literary criticism
- To learn how to identify and engage with criticism and secondary sources related to a literary work
- To improve clarity, vigor, and organization of writing and argument

**Note on Course Content:** Coetzee's fiction is famously disturbing. His writing includes graphic descriptions of violence, rape, and torture. The course readings deal with mature and challenging topics, including genocide, war, and racial hatred. These are all real problems that exist in our world, and Coetzee examines them with intelligence. However, this course will not be right for everyone. For students who enroll: I am committed to helping you succeed and will work to make the classroom a place where everyone feels comfortable discussing these hard topics.

This is a very reading-intensive course, especially in the early weeks; however, virtually all of Coetzee's novels are under 200 pages, so the syllabus, though challenging, is less onerous than a first glance might suggest.

**Required Texts** (other readings will be excerpted or posted on Canvas):

J.M. Coetzee, *Age of Iron*

Coetzee, *The Childhood of Jesus*

Coetzee, *Diary of a Bad Year*

Coetzee, *Disgrace*

Coetzee, *Dusklands*

Coetzee, *Foe*

Coetzee, *The Life and Times of Michael K.*

Coetzee, *The Lives of Animals*

Coetzee, *Scenes from Provincial Life: Boyhood, Youth, Summertime*

Coetzee, *Waiting for the Barbarians*

Nadine Gordimer, *Burger's Daughter*

## Assignments:

1. **Two mini-writing assignments (~100 words each)**, emailed to me by 8pm the night before class.

“Definitions” is due in Week 2, and “Summary” is due in Week 4.

**Definitions:** Drawing on the secondary reading from Nadine Gordimer and Martha Nussbaum, as well as any reference works of your choice, write a ~100-word definition of “responsibility” in your own words, as you understand the term (no quotes). Then rewrite your definition in ~50 words. Then rewrite it again, in 10 words or fewer (short sentence or phrase). Send me all three definitions.

**Summary:** Locate and read a scholarly article or book chapter that makes an argument about *The Lives of Animals*. Write a ~150 word summary of the argument. Come to class prepared to describe the argument and explain how you might use the article’s findings to build an argument of your own.

2. **Two “seminar starters.”**

Twice during the semester, each student will circulate a written reflection (~300 words) by 8pm the night before class; your reflection should consider the week’s readings and raise questions for discussion. In class, you will open the conversation by presenting your findings / reflections for 3-5 minutes and invite your classmates to raise additional questions for discussion and share what they most wish to cover during the seminar time.

3. **Short paper (5 pages)** that makes an argument based on a close reading of one of our literary texts from the first five weeks. Due in Week 5.
4. **Junior Essay (20-25 pages)** on a topic of your choice. The final essay is due at the end of reading period and is preceded by several intermediate deadlines:

**Week 7: 1-Hour Research Workshop at Widener Library** (in class)

**Week 8: 2-Page Prospectus** outlining topic and provisional argument AND **Annotated Bibliography** of at least 8-10 sources, with a brief description of each work’s argument and how the essay will engage with it

**Week 10: 10-Page Partial Draft of the junior essay**

**Week 11: 20-25 Page Full Draft of the junior essay**

**Reading Week: Final Junior Essay due** to the English Department (date and time TBD)

**Reading Week: 5-Minute Presentation** on your research, to be delivered aloud at the Junior Tutorial Conference (time and location TBD)

## Grading Breakdown:

Attendance & Participation: 15%  
 Short writing exercises (seminar starters & mini-assignments): 10%  
 Short paper: 10%  
 Prospectus & annotated bibliography: 10%  
 Junior essay draft: 10%  
 Junior essay: 45%

## Part I: Fundamentals

### Week 1: Introduction: The Writer's Role

J. M. Coetzee, *Age of Iron*  
 Coetzee, introduction to *White Writing*  
 Coetzee, "Jerusalem Prize Acceptance Speech," in *Doubling the Point*  
 Nadine Gordimer, "The Essential Gesture: Writers and Responsibility"  
<https://tannerlectures.utah.edu/documents/a-to-z/g/gordimer85.pdf>  
 Ezekiel (Es'kia) Mphahlele, "African Writers and Commitment"

Optional but recommended:

Edward Said, "Representations of the Intellectual" and "Speaking Truth to Power" in *Representations of the Intellectual*  
 Jane Poyner, introduction to *J. M. Coetzee and the Idea of the Public Intellectual*

### Week 2: Aesthetics, Morality, Politics

Coetzee, *Youth*

Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories*, pp. 1-28 (first half of introduction)  
 Martha Nussbaum, "'Finely Aware and Richly Responsible': Literature and the Moral Imagination," in *Love's Knowledge*  
 Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind* (excerpts)

Optional but recommended:

Susan Sontag, "Literature Is Freedom" and "At the Same Time: The Novelist and Moral Reasoning"

\*Due 8pm the night before class: "Definitions" mini-assignment on term "responsibility"\*

### Week 3: Literature and Ethics

Coetzee, *The Lives of Animals*

Franz Kafka, "A Report to an Academy"

Commentaries on *The Lives of Animals* from Marjorie Garber, Peter Singer, Wendy Doniger, and Barbara Smuts

Stephen Mulhall, "Realism, Modernism, and the Novel" in *The Wounded Animal*

#### **Week 4: Transitional Justice**

Coetzee, *Disgrace*

Read for context: Rachel Donadio, "Out of South Africa,"

<https://www.nytimes.com/2007/12/16/books/review/Donadio-t.html>

Patrick Hayes, "'Is this the right image of our nation?' *Disgrace* and the Seriousness of the Novel," in *J. M. Coetzee and the Novel: Writing and Politics After Beckett*

Choose one:

Helen Small, "Now or Never," in *The Long Life* OR

Rob Nixon, "Environmentalism, Postcolonialism, and American Studies" in *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*

Optional but recommended:

Jacqueline Rose, "Apathy and Accountability: The Challenge of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission to the Intellectual in the Modern World," in *The Public Intellectual*

\*Due 8pm the night before class: "Summary" mini-assignment\*

#### **Week 5: Speaking for Others**

Coetzee, *Foe*

Derek Attridge, "The Silence of the Canon" in *J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*

Andre Brink, "Writing Against Silence"

Gayatri Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?"

Entry on "postcolonialism" in the *Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms & Literary Theory*

Optional but recommended:

Susan Sontag, "The Aesthetics of Silence"

\*5-page paper due\*

## Week 6: The Problem of Evil

Coetzee, *Waiting for the Barbarians*  
 Coetzee, “The Problem of Evil,” in *Elizabeth Costello*

Elaine Scarry, “The Structure of Torture,” in *The Body in Pain*  
 Bruce Robbins, “Bad Atrocity Writing”

## WEEK 7: NO READING – WIDENER LIBRARY VISIT / RESEARCH WORKSHOP

This is a great week to read ahead if you think you want to write on a text from the second half of the course.

\*My goal is for you to come up with some concrete ideas before the prospectus is due. To that end, please email the tutorial a 2-3 sentence topic “pitch” and a starter list of 5 sources relevant to your topic by 8pm the night before class.\*

## Part II: Forms

### Week 8: Interlude: Nadine Gordimer and Realism

Nadine Gordimer, *Burger’s Daughter*

David Attwell, “Contexts: Literary, Historical, Intellectual,” in *J. M. Coetzee: South Africa and the Politics of Writing*

George Eliot, *Adam Bede*, ch. 17 (“In Which the Story Pauses a Little”)

\*Select a defense of realism from the primary sources collected in *Documents of Modern Literary Realism*, ed. George J. Becker, and be prepared to summarize the defense in class.\*

\*Prospectus & annotated bibliography due\*

### Week 9: Coetzee and Allegory

Coetzee, *The Life and Times of Michael K.*  
 Kafka, “A Hunger Artist”

Coetzee, “Idleness in South Africa”  
 Angus Fletcher, *Allegory* (excerpts)

Nadine Gordimer, “The Idea of Gardening,” <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1984/02/02/the-idea-of-gardening/>

## **Week 10: Coetzee and History**

Coetzee, *Dusklands*

Derek Attridge, “Modernist Form and the Ethics of Otherness,” in *J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*

David Attwell, “‘The labyrinth of my history’: J. M. Coetzee’s *Dusklands*”

Cynthia Ozick, “The Rights of History and the Rights of Imagination”

\*10-page draft due\*

## **Part III: Figures**

### **Week 11: Portrait of the Artist as a Corpse**

Coetzee, *Summertime*

Excerpts on autobiography from Coetzee and Arabella Kurtz, *The Good Story: Exchanges on Truth, Fiction and Psychotherapy*

“Interview,” from *Doubling the Point*

Derek Attridge, “Confessing in the Third Person,” in *J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*

\*20-25 page draft due\*

### **Week 12: Portrait of the Artist as a Crank**

Coetzee, *Diary of a Bad Year*

Samuel Beckett, *Krapp’s Last Tape*

Christopher Butler, *Postmodernism: A Very Short Introduction* (excerpts)

\*In-class workshops\*

### **Week 13: CODA: Late Style**

Coetzee, *The Childhood of Jesus*

Edward Said, “Timeliness and Lateness,” in *On Late Style*

\*In-class workshops\*

## COURSE POLICIES

**Academic Honesty:** Plagiarism is the use of another person's ideas or writing without giving them proper credit. Consequences of plagiarism can range from failure on the assignment to dismissal from the course to even more serious actions. You are responsible for understanding Harvard FAS's Honor Code: "Members of the Harvard College community commit themselves to producing academic work of integrity – that is, work that adheres to the scholarly and intellectual standards of accurate attribution of sources, appropriate collection and use of data, and transparent acknowledgement of the contribution of others to their ideas, discoveries, interpretations, and conclusions. Cheating on exams or problem sets, plagiarizing or misrepresenting the ideas or language of someone else as one's own, falsifying data, or any other instance of academic dishonesty violates the standards of our community, as well as the standards of the wider world of learning and affairs."

**Collaboration:** I encourage you to talk with other students about the course and our readings and to read one another's work. In individual assignments (including presentations and papers), academic collaboration and external sources should be always cited.

**Attendance:** Attendance in tutorial is key to your success and that of the class. I will give each student one "free" absence in case of sickness, travel, etc.: no explanation necessary. Missing more than one class will hurt your participation grade, and excessive absence could result in course failure. If you have extenuating circumstances, please speak with me as soon as possible so we can decide on a plan of action together. Being late also disrupts the work we're doing together; 2 lates = 1 absence.

**Deadlines & Late Grades:** Unless otherwise specified, assignments are due by 11:59 pm on the date listed in the schedule. Late assignments will be docked 1/3 of a letter grade (e.g. A- to B+) for each day late. I am willing to grant extensions for exceptional circumstances: if you think you will need an extension on an assignment, please talk with me as soon as possible. I cannot grant extensions for the final paper: students who fail to submit a final paper, or submit a final paper late without an official excuse, will fail the tutorial.

**Accommodations for Students with Disabilities:** "Students needing academic adjustments or accommodations because of a documented disability must present their Faculty Letter from the Accessible Education Office (AEO) and speak with the professor by the end of the second week of the term. Failure to do so may result in the Course Head's inability to respond in a timely manner. All discussions will remain confidential, although Faculty are invited to contact AEO to discuss appropriate implementation."