



وقائع المؤتمر العلمي السنوي الثالث لكلية التربية الأساسية
في مجال العلوم الانسانية والتربوية والنفسية والموسوم:
(مؤتمر كلية التربية الأساسية في مجال العلوم الإنسانية والتربوية والنفسية)
وتحت شعار (نحو رؤية إنسانية وتربوية رائدة لبناء مجتمع معرفي متكامل)
يومي الاحد و الاثنين 14-15/6/2026

**Aesthetic Exploitation of Animal Cruelty in
J M Coetzee's *Disgrace*
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Abstract

The main objective of this research is interpreting what this paper will refer to as “dog euthanasia scenes” in J M Coetzee’s *Disgrace* in the light of Josephine Donovan’s aesthetic exploitation of animal pain. The research employs a structural and narratological approach to examine the function of specific narrative and stylistic strategies. First, it adopts Roland Barthes’ narratological distinction between “nuclei” and “catalysts” to analyze episodes of animal suffering, dog euthanasia scenes, so as to determine their structural role within the narrative. The analysis specifically examines whether these scenes form necessary plot center supporting human-focused narrative development or function as auxiliary elements. Second, the research additionally illustrates how Coetzee’s deliberate use of emotionless style, has effectively stripped the dogs’ suffering of its ethical weight, representing it as mere aesthetic display of ritualized animal sacrifice. The scenes also show how both David Lurie, the main character in the novel, and the dogs are unjustly punished for their instinctual drives, thereby linking animal vulnerability to human disgrace. In Coetzee’s *Disgrace*, David Lurie identifies his grim fate with that of the euthanized dogs. Therefore, sacrificed, the euthanized dogs symbolically wash off human disgrace. The results of the research are deduced by means of Josephine Donovan’s critique of aesthetic exploitation with concentration on aestheticizing animal pain in literature. The research further examines how the interdisciplinary collaboration of literary narratives with animal ethics may sometimes be employed to normalize violence against animals by embedding it within anthropocentric ideologies.

Keywords: Coetzee, *Disgrace*, ethical criticism, structural narratology

1- Introduction

Throughout history, the significance of literature has been evaluated from perspectives encompassing both artistic and ethical considerations. Moreover, ethical criticism posits that aesthetic form and ethical content are intrinsically linked. However, this intersection between ethics and aesthetics makes one wonder whether literature, in its illustration of cruelty towards animals, exposes the creatures' suffering or aesthetically exploits it. Donovan (2011) believes that writers often aestheticize suffering, changing pain into a show, while prioritizing human-focused allegory over non-human suffering. She also has posited that ethical representation requires resistance to aesthetic exploitation, specifically encouraging literature that considers animals as beings of moral importance. Other scholars in the field of animal ethics have argued that animals are not only exploited physically, but also figuratively through their use as tropes in literary texts. They are utilized solely as tools or symbols for human purposes. Berger (1991) explains that anthropomorphism was once essential to human-animal relations, born of continuous metaphorical use. He also shows that animals as tropes chart the history of symbolic thought but also reveal the ethical erasure of animals as beings, reduced to figures of speech and cultural devices. Dimino et al. (2018) maintain that, historically, animals have been treated as allegories or symbols, which are made to serve human-centered narratives, thence, artistic richness is attained at the cost of ethical considerations. Donovan's 'aesthetic exploitation of animal pain'(1) is also referred to by Norris (2019, p. 196) as "aesthetic and idealistic rationalization of violence". Norris notes that the acknowledgment of animals as kin was pioneered by Darwin, but writers like Kafka and Hemingway frequently utilized this kinship for aesthetic representation, and instead of supporting ethical responsibility, they employed evolutionary continuity as a means for artistic development. They employed animals as tropes of violence, struggle and fatality, aestheticizing their pain and suffering rather than addressing them in an ethical manner. This tension is effectively depicted in J M Coetzee's *Disgrace*. The novel's portrayal of dog euthanasia might emphasize the profound reality of cruelty, yet it could also risk the aestheticization of dogs'

suffering along with associating them with human disgrace. To analyze the dog euthanasia scenes in the novel, the current research adopts an interdisciplinary approach, which integrates ethical criticism with structuralist narratology in view of Josephine Donovan critique of the aesthetic exploitation of animal pain demonstrated in her “Aestheticizing Animal Cruelty,”. The research also argues that although Coetzee's novel forces readers to confront animal suffering, its artistic methods that displayed dog euthanasia scenes as symbolical and ritualistic rather than mere chores, might transform cruelty into a form of literary performance.

1.1 Coetzee and the Aesthetic Inconsistency

J M Coetzee is a renowned postmodern novelist and supporter of animal rights. He is notably acknowledged as a literary voice for animal ethics, specifically through works like *The Lives of Animals* (1999). However, some critics who have examined Coetzee's work, Donovan in particular, have concluded that his writings, not so different from those of Kafka or Orwell, embrace animal tropes. In *The Lives of Animals*, Coetzee's main character, Elizabeth Costello adopts views very similar to those of Donovan. The novella delves into the ethics of animal rights and the questionable use of animals as literary tropes through metafictional narrative. It takes the form of fictional lectures delivered by **Elizabeth Costello**, a novelist who challenges her audience to confront the ethical considerations of animal suffering. Coetzee uses Costello to critique the literary tradition that turns animals into *allegories, symbols, or metaphors*, and aestheticizes their suffering, which eliminates their subjectivity.

Elizabeth Costello reveals the contradictory position of animals in literature: they exist as both ubiquitous tropes and metaphors, but are absent as ethical subjects. Coetzee reveals how violence is depicted within the narratives through Costello's voice. Accordingly, he exposes the routinized devaluation of animals being diminished into merely idioms, allegories, and symbols to support human-centric narratives. Costello, in *The Lives of Animals*, criticizes this act and considers it as an erasure of the reality of animals as it turns their suffering into an aesthetic rather than ethical matter. Coetzee presents her as the voice for the voiceless, who challenges the

vanity of literary conventions, raising awareness of how animal exploitation has become quite natural in narrative writing.

In *Disgrace*, J. M. Coetzee uses aesthetics to describe animals' death. He translates the suffering of dogs, particularly the euthanasia of dogs at the clinic, into a precise, ritualistic style that enhances their deaths into literary spectacle. This will risk *aestheticizing cruelty* by erasing the animal subjectivity, and exploit animal pain as a resource for narrative power, consequently, stripping it of moral urgency.

2. The Sine Qua Non for Emotional Transformation

In his "Introduction to the structural analysis of narrative" (1977), Roland Barthes argues that every narrative is composed of functional units, but not all units carry the same structural weight. He distinguishes between **nuclei (cardinal functions)** and **catalysts (complementary functions)**. **Nuclei forms the "real hinge points"** (p.93) of the narrative, which if removed from the narrative, its coherence would collapse. On the other hand, he refers to catalysts as "fill in" (p.93) events. He defines catalysts as minor details that accompany nuclei. They give texture and density to the narrative, but they do not alter the fundamental course of the plot, and the story still functions without them. As established by Barthes, a narrative is not built from a series of main events (nuclei), but it forms a cohesive system in which both essential as well as subordinate (catalysts) interweave to create a solid, cohesive whole. He defines nuclei as the events that form the structural skeleton of the plot with catalysts serving as the connective tissue that render the story whole.

If we applied Barthes's framework to Coetzee's *Disgrace*, the dog euthanasia scenes might be viewed as either nucleus or catalyzers, which depends on whether they contribute to character development or they serve as external action. That is to say, when conducting a psychological reading of the novel, the scene where David Lurie surrenders the crippled dog, he loves to Bev Shaw to be euthanized is the scene that marks his emotional growth. This scene is one of these dog euthanasia scenes, which integrally function as "hinge-points" that shape the key moments of David Lurie's moral transformation

In this case, the absence of dog euthanasia scenes would undermine the internal consistency of Lurie's growth. However, when considering these scenes merely as a literal survival narrative of the farm, whose absence would not alter its course, they shift into the role of catalysts. From a literal perspective, the scenes may serve as "consecutive units" (94) or descriptive padding, filling the intervals between external conflicts like the attack or neighbor tension, without directly impacting the physical outcome of those events. We may posit that Lurie has already made the crucial decisions of his life by the time he arrives at the clinic. He has already lost his job as a professor, his daughter has already been assaulted, and he has already resolved to remain in the farm. Killing the dogs does not alter these facts. It is simply a filling in of his everyday routine. Whether five or fifty, the number of the dogs killed leaves the plot's external situation unchanged. In brief, the scenes serve as nuclei due to their importance for the character's development on a figurative level, yet they could perhaps be catalysts on a literal level as they do not drive the external machinery of the survival plot.

Lurie's ritualized handling of the dead dogs humbles his character and forces him to lay aside the pride that formerly marked his life. This is demonstrated in Neimneh (2014), where he describes Lurie's walk to the incinerator as the time, he recognizes expendability as a shared condition between Man and animal. Thus, this repetitive service to creatures deemed worthless, which has instilled empathy in him, could make a catalyst for his moral epiphany. It may affect Lurie's perception of his own shame. His disgrace shifts from being personal to ethical when he recognizes suffering beyond himself. Thence, the euthanasia scenes could intensify the novel's moral texture without altering the fundamental plot sequence.

However, Cornwell (2008) states that dog **euthanasia scenes in Coetzee's Disgrace function symbolically**, not ethically: their presence is designed to **enable a transformation in Lurie**, rather than receive justice themselves. They deepen the thematic and psychological dimension of David Lurie's character. If those scenes are the primary mechanism through which Lurie's ethical transformation becomes visible, then they may function as thematic nuclei rather than simply structural catalysts. The

scenes may serve as the primary narrative device for illustrating David Lurie's moral transformation, thereby exposing an anthropocentric and speciesist structure. DeKoven (2009) posits that at the beginning of the novel, Lurie is emotionally detached from animals and views them in mechanistic terms. Additionally, his statement 'Do I like animals? I eat them, so I suppose I must like them, some parts of them.' (81) exposes his instrumental view of animal life. His remark that animal-welfare activists are so "cheerful and well-intentioned" (73) that one feels instant "itch to go off and do some raping and pillaging... or to kick a cat" (73) highlights his stubborn resistance to ethical engagement with animal suffering. By comparing such activists to excessively pious Christians, Lurie frames compassion as a form of moral excess that elicits rebellion rather than respect. He treats dogs as beings without meaningful subjectivity, projecting human emotions onto them 'Don't the dogs get bored?' (62) rather than recognizing their distinct forms. Nevertheless, Lurie's reflection may function as a turning point in his character growth. It signals the beginning of his movement from complete detachment toward a more empathetic perception.

At Bev Shaw sanctuary, Lurie's involvement in the act of euthanasia gradually exposes him to the plight of the unwanted dogs. While he holds the dogs for Bev Shaw as she administers the lethal injection, he watches them die, during which Bev makes an effort to comfort them. Due to the repeated involvement in these particular euthanasia scenes, a surprising emotional response is generated within him that he breaks down into tears. Consequently, he begins to recognize parallels between his own state of helplessness and the vulnerability of the dogs (DeKoven, 2009). These moments signify the gradual unfolding of Lurie's empathy and ethical awareness. His ethical transformation reaches a symbolic culmination when he takes responsibility for transferring the deceased dogs to the incinerator himself, which shows his movement away from professor's intellectual pride towards human quiet moral obligation. Within the narrative structure, these euthanasia scenes function as nuclei rather than mere catalysts because they are crucial events through which Lurie's ethical awakening is made clear.

That is to say, without these scenes, the reader would not witness the emotional and moral shift that defines Lurie's character development. On the other hand, this structural centrality also exposes the anthropocentric logic of the narrative; namely, the suffering and death of the dogs are repeatedly performed in order to affirm Lurie's moral transformation. Herein, the dogs' pain becomes aesthetically exploited, since their deaths serve as the narrative spine that produces meaning for Lurie's redemption. The animals therefore serve not as independent subjects but as narrative instruments that facilitate a human ethical drama, which reveals a form of speciesism, where the representation of animal pain is secondary to the demonstration of human ethical development.

3. "Like a Dog": "Dog-Man" Confrontation

A deeper insight into Lurie's collapse and transformation requires an understanding of his identification with the euthanized dogs. In the clinic, he sees the lively dogs euthanized, reduced to ashes in the incinerator, and he recognizes his own condition as parallel to theirs. He does not try to prevent the act of euthanasia at all, but rather he compares his fate to theirs, expelled, humiliated, and stripped of dignity. Moreover, in an apt metaphor, he identifies himself as "a harijan" (p.146) to reveal his new identity as untouchable, subjected to social marginalization. One may note the considerable evidential support this metaphor provides for viewing the euthanasia scenes as ritualistic rather than ethical, which will be discussed later in the paper. Consequently, his actions stem not from an ethical consideration but from a personal identification with the dead creatures. He has lost his academic position, his authority, and his pride:

'Yes, I agree, it is humiliating. But perhaps that is a good point to start from again. Perhaps that is what I must learn to accept. To start at ground level. With nothing. Not with nothing but. With nothing. No cards, no weapons, no property, no rights, no dignity.'

'Like a dog.'

'Yes, like a dog.' (205)

In other implicit analogies, Lurie shows recognition of being irrationally punished, like some dogs, because of instinctual behavior beyond his

control. Just as the dogs are punished despite their unrestrainable instinct to mate; Lurie is ousted from the academic field for following his sexual instinct with a student. His wisdom and intellectual authority are denied, and like some dead dogs discarded into the incinerator because they “suffer... from their own fertility” (142), he is thrown into the darkness of disgrace. In these analogies, Lurie shows sympathy towards the dogs because he too is living the life of a being whose instinct leads to spiritual death:

One can punish a dog, it seems to me, for an offence like chewing a slipper. A dog will accept the justice of that: a beating for a chewing. But desire is another story. No animal will accept the justice of being punished for following its instincts. ... I think it might have preferred being shot. It might have preferred that to the options it was offered: on the one hand, to deny its nature, on the other, to spend the rest of its days padding about the living-room, sighing and sniffing the cat and getting portly (90).

4. Symbolic Burial of Disgrace and Self-Purgation

Frazer (1913) claims that in many ancient communities, when the **community or a ruler was thought to be morally polluted**, they perform a **purification ritual**; “Collecting the sins of the people as a preliminary to transferring them to the scapegoat dogs” (233) Hence, the euthanized dogs in *Disgrace* can also be viewed as sacrificial figures whose deaths are symbolically placed upon the altar of literary aestheticism, functioning symbolically as ritual **mediator**, carrying away Lurie’s moral and spiritual disgrace. In *Aestheticizing Animal Cruelty* (2011), Donovan uses **Ernest Hemingway’s** *The Sun Also Rises* (1926) and *Death in the Afternoon* (1932) to show how Hemingway’s bullfighting motif aestheticize animal suffering, transforming cruelty into a show and subordinating the bull’s subjecthood to human aesthetic interests. She cites Marian Scholtmeijer’s *Animal Victims in Modern Fiction* (1993), which argues that Hemingway reduces bulls to “animate objects in an artistic spectacle,” (205) erasing their pain by presenting the bullfight as “a geometric interplay of abstract forces” (As cited in Donovan, 2011, p.205). She also references Margot Norris’s *Beasts of the Modern Imagination* (1985), which critiques *Death in the Afternoon* for conceiving the bullfight as an art where the matador creates “‘art’ out of

torture and killing” (As cited in Donovan, 2011, p.206). Similarly, dog euthanasia scenes in Coetzee’s *Disgrace* are structured like **ritual performances rather than simple veterinary practices**. Happening on “(Christian) Sunday” (DeKoven, 2009, p.871) gives the euthanasia scenes the structure of a **scheduled ceremonial practice**; “On Sunday afternoons the clinic door is closed and locked while he helps Bev Shaw *losen* the week’s superfluous canines” (142). Danta (2007) maintains that Coetzee, like Kafka, employs the figure of the “scapegoat” (722) to illustrate how animals become integrated in human narratives of guilt and redemption. He reads the dog euthanasia scenes in *Disgrace* as rituals of sacrifice. Lurie’s act of **comforting the animal before killing it** “giving it what he no longer has difficulty in calling by its proper name: love” (219) looks like a **ritual sign** meant to dignify the sacrifice, as ritual sacrifice often includes **consolation of the victim**. Moreover, saving “the honour of corpses”, (146) Lurie treats the bodies of the euthanized dogs with reverence, bearing resemblance to a funerary rite, which signifies respect for the dead.

The dog euthanasia scenes can be divided into two primary phases; prior and subsequent to euthanasia. The first phase takes place in the clinic, where Bev Shaw euthanizes dogs beside other animals that are sick, injured, or simply fertile and unwanted, and the second is the way to the incinerator, when Lurie carries dead dogs to be burned. It is worth mentioning that, although Bev Shaw euthanizes different types of animals, Lurie chooses dogs exclusively to carry to the incinerator. This may emphasize his identification with the euthanized dogs, which stemmed from, as noted previously, the considerable parallels between his fate and that of the disgraced Man’s best friend after being rejected for something beyond their control. Hence, he did not feel the disgrace until rejected and discarded because of something that wasn’t his fault. As for the first phase, Coetzee’s minimalist prose in the narration of Bev Shaw euthanizing dogs maintains a state of clinical detachment. Rather than sensationalizing violence, his narration is reduced to neutral verbs to strip the act of its emotional weight, like “inject”, “hold”, and “load”. The scenes at the animal clinic, particularly David Lurie’s assistance in the euthanasia of dogs, are stripped of

sentimentality, focused only on what is being done, and concerned with the body as thing rather than being, which frames them as mere displays of vulnerability and disposability. Coetzee presents euthanized dogs' pain in passive, repetitive rhythms and short declarative sentences. He renders cruelty aesthetic by the deliberate absence of embellishment and his use of silence and understatement as opposed to violent depictions. Olson (2014) argues that the repeated acts of euthanizing and disposing of dogs has routinized them, and eventually has normalized them. On the other hand, the scenes where Lurie transfers the dead dogs to the incinerator are metaphorical, suggesting broader themes of elimination, disgrace, and the loss of dignity. These scenes are best described by Ahn (2021) as "funeral ritual[s]" (p.6). Lurie has taken it upon himself to carry out the funeral rites, when he refuses to transport the remains in a "trolley" and leaves them for the incinerator crew to treat them like waste, beating the stiffened burned legs with the backs of their shovels to finish the job. Nevertheless, he chose to do the job himself and drive the remains in Lucy's "kombi" before transferring them cautiously on the trolley, because "he is not prepared to inflict such dishonor upon them" (p.144).

The relationship between David Lurie and the dog with "a withered left hindquarter which it drags behind it", and which Lurie refuses to give a name to is marked by a quiet but profound ethical and emotional shift. Their bond is marked by care, nurturing, and an implicit reliance on each other. The dog's "generous affection" (215) and enthusiasm to remain close to Lurie, sharing with him his fondness for music and poetic arts:

The dog is fascinated by the sound of the banjo. When he strums the strings, the dog sits up, cocks its head, listens. When he hums Teresa's line ...dog smacks its lips and seems on the point of singing too, or howling (215).

This places the dog as a being that offers absolute and unconditional attachment, while Lurie, in turn, assumes responsibility for its welfare, refraining from sentimental indulgence, which is evident in his unwillingness to name it. This unwillingness to name the dog keeps it at a distance, preserving it as a figure capable of bearing meaning beyond itself, Accordingly, Lurie's awareness that "the dog would die for him" (215)

presents a sacrificial transformation in which the animal is subtly placed as a substitute victim. “Bearing him in his arms like a lamb” (220); an act which turns this incident into a **ceremony**. The scene suggests a ritualistic procession, where a sacrificial victim is carried to the altar. The physical act of carrying the dog elevates the moment from a familiar euthanasia scene in the novel into a solemn offering, thereby emphasizing intention, seriousness, and certainty. This formulation reflects the principles of sacrificial exchange, wherein a life is given in place of another, thereby suggesting that the dog symbolizes vulnerability, abandonment, and societal exclusion experienced by Lurie after his descent from grace. In the last scene of the novel, Coetzee does not directly posit the transference of disgrace from Lurie to the crippled dog; rather, it develops a symbolic context in which the animal serves as a vessel for a burden that Lurie is unable to fully express, thus, supporting the interpretation of the euthanasia scenes as occasions of ritualized moral transference.

5. Conclusion

Viewing the dog euthanasia scenes in J M Coetzee’s *Disgrace* through the lens of Donovan’s theoretical concept aesthetic exploitation reveals them to be aesthetic rather than ethical. To substantiate this perspective, the research illustrates how these scenes serve not as moments of ethical contemplation but rather as essential literary element crucial to understanding David Lurie’s character development. Applying Roland Barthes’ narratology, these scenes serve as nuclei, whose absence would result in the collapse of the narrative’s development, as they signify Lurie’s spiritual and emotional transformation. Hence, from a speciesist and anthropocentric standpoint, the suffering of the unwanted dogs is aestheticized and instrumentalized as a symbolic element, facilitating and validating the emergence of human moral awareness. These scenes clearly expose the shift of Lurie, externally, from a distinguished Assistant Professor of English to a lowly “dog-man”, and internally from apathetic to empathetic, which serves him in accepting his fate, compelling him to confront vulnerability and expendability.

The burial overshadows the actual death of the euthanized dogs. The narrative prioritizes Lurie's symbolic engagement with the dead creatures over the actual act of their euthanasia, since another character is responsible for performing the act. Lurie's role is to focus almost entirely on the symbolic and ceremonial aspects of disposal process. The burial is portrayed in a nearly scared manner, prioritizing the image of an honorable death over the reality of the animal's suffering, which demonstrates the aesthetic exploitation fundamental in Lurie's transformation. Therefore, the scenes become not a commentary on animal helplessness but more of a ritual through which Lurie sacrifices his own fallen self, when he uses the dead dogs as the medium for his spiritual purgation.

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الاستغلال الجمالي للمقسوة على الحيوان في رواية "العار" للروائي جي ام كوتزي

ا.م ايمن مهدي خضير

كلية التربية الاساسية - الجامعة المستنصرية

قسم اللغة الانكليزية

مستخلص البحث:

يهدف البحث الى تحليل ما تم الإشارة اليه فيه ب "مشاهد القتل الرحيم للكلاب" في رواية العار للروائي جي ام كوتزي في ضوء نظرية جوزفين دونوفان عن الاستغلال الجمالي لمعاناة الحيوان. تتبنى الدراسة منظور سردي وبنوي بالاعتماد على استراتيجيات سردية واسلوبية محددة. أولاً: يتبنى البحث التمييز السرد لرولان بارت بين "النوى" و "المحفزات" لتحليل مشاهد معاناة الحيوان (مشاهد القتل الرحيم للكلاب) لتحديد دورها البنوي في النص الادب. يبحث التحليل بالتحديد فيما إذا كانت هذه المشاهد ضرورية في جوهر الحكمة وتتمحور حول تطور سردي موظف للبشر او انها تخدم كعنصر ثانوي. ثانياً: كما يوضح البحث استخدام كوتزي المتعمد للأسلوب المجرد من المشاعر والذي يسلب معاناة الكلاب اعتبارها الاخلاقي، ويصورها على انها مجرد استعراض جمالي لمراسم التضحية بالحيوان. كما وتظهر المشاهد معاقبة كل من ديفيد لوري، الشخصية الرئيسية في الرواية، والكلاب لدوافعهم الغرائزية بغير وجه حق، وبذلك تربط ضعف الحيوان مع هوان البشر. يوحد ديفيد لوري في رواية "العار" لكوتزي بين مصيره المظلم ومصير الكلاب المقتولة قتلاً رحيماً. لذلك، فإن الكلاب التي تمت التضحية بها ستغسل عار البشر رمزياً. ولقد تم استلال نتائج البحث من خلال الدراسة النقدية لجوزفين دونوفان في الاستغلال الجمالي مع التركيز على التصوير الجمالي لوجع الحيوان في الادب. يدرس البحث ايضاً كيف يمكن أحيانا استخدام الشراكة المتعددة التخصصات بين الروايات الأدبية واخلاقيات الحيوان لتطبيع العنف ضد الحيوانات من خلال تضمينه في الأيديولوجيات المركزية الانثروبوية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: كوتزي، العار، النقد الأخلاقي، السردية البنوية