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Implicating the Reader:

Narrative Strategies and Thematic Development in J.M. Coetzee's *Foe*

“If I were the Irishwoman, I should rest more uneasy in my grave knowing to what interpreter the story of my last hours has been consigned” states Susan in J.M. Coetzee's *Foe* (124). This quote epitomizes the overarching themes of the novel: that of authorship and authority, and the complicity of readers within the writing/reading process. Post-colonial literature is often used as a site to “write back” against the ideological assumptions and dominant discourses of the coloniser. In *Foe*, Coetzee uses the strategies of various patterns of narration, concepts of voice and silence, and the metatextual nature of his work to implicate the reader in the ideological encoding of meaning, and to interrogate how language is used to colonize. The novel is not merely about interrogating dominant discourses of feminism, patriarchy, race and politics. Rather, it is created to be an interaction with the reader, implicating him/her from beginning to end through the combination of these narrative strategies.

By writing back to the canonical text of *Robinson Crusoe*, Coetzee draws attention to the metatextual nature of his novel, and, therefore, the fictonality that so-called realist writings consist of. In this way he challenges the idea that the world can be realistically rendered through writing and pushes the ideologies that inscribe such texts to the foreground. Sarah Kossew asserts that “rather than replacing one set of canonical texts with another, Coetzee is dismantling narrative in order to ‘seek the continual erosion of any perspectives which might constitute or reconstitute themselves as conquering or containing ones’” (Tiffin

qtd. in Kossew 162). In Part One of the text, Susan Barton tells her castaway tale to an unidentified “you.” We later discover it is Mr. Foe she addresses, but that “you” immediately opens up a space for the reader to become complicit in the events of this novel. This reader complicity will be carried throughout, making the reader increasingly aware of his/her own acts of inscription on the world.

The similarities and differences of the first part of the novel to Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* are used by Coetzee as deliberate strategies to reveal the ideological constructs of our own reality. The most obvious of these differences in *Foe* is that it is narrated (from parts one to three) by a woman, a figure absent from the original *Robinson Crusoe*. At the most simplistic level, by using a woman to speak the events of the text, Coetzee gives voice to someone who was originally silenced. However, this strategy achieves more than merely giving voice. Gina Wisker points out that “by focusing on the colonised Other and a woman, the novel destabilises race and gender norms, but more radically challenges that other oppressor, the form of the canonical novel” (90). Like Crusoe in the original, Susan tells her tale as though she is confessing a realistic account. The use of repeatedly placed speech marks implies she speaks directly to her listener, and this further underscores the supposed truthfulness of her testimony. However, as Chris Bongie points out, details in her account (such as explicit characterisation of Friday as black, the emphasis on fruitless terrace building, and even the alternate spelling of Cruso(e)) directly contradict details in the original Crusoe story (264). By this strategy, Anne Haeming claims that “Coetzee illustrates how the presence of an eyewitness alone is not sufficient to convey an impression of authenticity” (175). Therefore, by using Susan to tell her own supposedly “realist” narrative in Part One, Coetzee undermines Western realist forms of writing the idea that the world can be realistically rendered through writing. And even more significantly: “it also suggests that

historians have done the same,” that is, they, like storytellers “can certainly silence, exclude and absent certain events- and people” (Linda Hutcheon, qtd. in Kossew 164).

Susan continues to narrate in Part Two, now in London with Friday, in the form of letters to Mr. Foe. Susan comments extensively on the writing process, which allows Coetzee to examine those frameworks which shape stories in general, and underline the selective nature of those stories. Susan, when comparing the author to a painter, says that “the storyteller, by contrast,...must divine which episodes of his history hold promise of fullness, and tease from them their hidden meanings, braiding these together as one braids a rope” (88-9). Authorship and the question of who holds authority over given stories are a central anxiety of Susan’s, and of the text as a whole. She desires to tell the “truth” of her story, but feels as though she needs a male author, i.e. Mr. Foe, to write it with her and give it “substance”：“Return to me the substance I have lost, Mr. Foe: that is my entreaty. For though my story gives the truth, it does not give the substance of the truth” (51). However, as the narrative progresses she (and the reader) gain awareness of the fruitlessness of this exercise and the way Foe slowly appropriates her story. Furthermore, Susan’s commentary on the writing process highlights deeper questions surrounding authorship. Brian Macaskill and Jeanne Colleran state that “what Susan comes to recognize is that she herself can no longer afford to ignore the extent to which representation carries out ideological work in determining the production of meaning” (445). “I ask myself what past historians of the castaway state have done-whether in despair they have not begun to make up lies,” Susan says as she begins to doubt her ability to tell a “true” account (88). And: “Who but Crusoe, who is no more, could truly tell you Crusoe’s story?” (51). In this way, Coetzee undermines the supposed authenticity of the epistolary narrative model and makes readers conscious of their own acts of authority when reading meaning into texts.

In Part Two we become more aware of another narrative strategy of Coetzee's: that of creating a fictional pretext for Defoe's original novel, as a way to delineate the central struggles for narrative power. The novel presents a version of (fictional) events that are suggested to result in the story of *Robinson Crusoe* (Kossew 163). By doing this, Coetzee further underscores the point that the original is not a neutral text, but is a selective account that allows some voices to be heard, while others are silenced. When Cruso dies, Susan announces that "it is I who have disposal of all that Cruso leaves behind, which is the story of his island" (40). Throughout the story, Susan struggles for that narrative right, which would ultimately appropriate the voices of both Cruso and Friday, but the presence of Mr. Foe complicates this. He slowly appropriates Susan's story, and in the end (it is implied) writes her out of *Robinson Crusoe* completely, and uses Susan as a character in another of his novels: *Roxana* (Kossew 163). Coetzee suggests a fictional pretext(s) through the use of numerous clues sprinkled throughout Susan's letters to Foe. "You remarked it would have been better had Cruso rescued not only a musket and powder and ball, but a carpenter's chest as well, and built himself a boat" (55) Susan writes. In *Robinson Crusoe* this is exactly what happens, so here is an explicit reference to the origins of Defoe's novel, triggering more questions about its authenticity. Further on, Susan unwittingly predicts how she herself will be barred from any narrative authority in the final version of *Robinson Crusoe*: "'Better had there been only Cruso and Friday,' you will murmur to yourself: 'Better without the woman'" (71-2). Finally, amid desperate attempts to maintain control of her story in Part Three, she claims: "I am not a story Mr. Foe" (130), at which point the reader knows how ironic this statement is, because: of course she is! She is a character that Coetzee brought into being, and by clever placement of such "clues" he highlights not only the construction of his own novel, but also the construction of history, a history which relies on the interpretations of its readers and its power to exclude some voices in favour of others.

Part Three introduces yet another shift into the pattern of narration, in order to further highlight the complicit act readers have in the creation of texts and histories. Now we have Susan and Foe as characters on the same plain of being. It is here that their struggle for power comes to a climax, both literally in the form of sexual intercourse, and metaphorically in the battle regarding who is allowed to “father” a text. “I was not intended to be the mother of this story, but to beget it” says Susan (126). By figuring the act of writing in patriarchal terms, Coetzee alludes to the power men have had over women throughout history in terms of storytelling. But, this is not the only theme highlighted by this strategy: “The nature of the conflict between Susan and Foe is not primarily ethical or political so much as it is narratological, and, by extension, ontological, insofar as the ability to narrate the world determines a character’s presence as a ‘substantial being...in the world’” (Coetzee qtd. in Lewis Macleod 5). Substantiality is something Susan is concerned with throughout the novel, and she concludes that she cannot be as substantial as the Foe’s characters unless she can tell her story. The daughter Foe invents and tries to force on Susan threatens Susan’s substantiality, as it presents questions about her own identity and existence. In this way, the supposed substantiality of anyone written into (or out of) texts is also questioned, as in the end they are all inventions of the author, something which Coetzee demonstrates he is well aware of doing himself.

The struggle for narrative power in *Foe* is not just between Foe and Susan, but also between Friday and the oppressive force of Susan and Foe. Through Friday’s presence as a silence in the text, and Susan’s and Foe’s attempts to impose meaning on that silence, Coetzee develops the theme of appropriation through language (Kossew 162). Susan describes Friday’s silence as “a buttonhole, carefully cross-stitched around, but empty, waiting for the button” (121). The “button” is Susan’s (and the reader’s) acts of interpretation regarding Friday. Everything we learn about Friday comes in Susan’s voice, which we now

realise is fraught with inconsistencies and doubts. But it is not only Susan and Foe who are guilty of trying to interpret Friday: as Susan's narrative power shrinks over the course of the book, the readers' powers of interpretation increase. Therefore, we become complicit in colonizing Friday through language as much as Susan, Foe, and even Coetzee can be said to be complicit. Kim Worthington states that "we, like Susan, who tries to imagine the 'true' story of Friday's life, perform the inventive apprehending activity of characterological interpretation" (qtd. in Katy Iddiols 186). By withholding the answers to questions surrounding Friday, Coetzee lets us draw our own conclusions and so underscores our attempts to appropriate through language.

Finally, in Part Four of *Foe*, Coetzee introduces a new first person narrator, speaking in the present tense. This voice describes two scenarios he/she stumbles across: both in which all the characters are dead, except Friday who is barely breathing. Macaskill and Colleran assert that "in these final moments of the narrative, Coetzee positions a new narrative voice and, in displacing that of Susan, as well as those of Cruso and Friday, dissolves all previously established authorities" (451). The bodies in the first scenario are described in terms of textuality: "dry as paper" and "quietly composed" (153), underlining their constructed nature. The second scenario, especially, when the "I" discovers Susan dead on board a boat, undermines all events that have gone on before (because if she is dead, then she never arrived in London, and none of what we just read is "true"). The only "authority" left to interpret these events is the reader. Therefore, the recurring motif of the "I/eye" allows the reader to slip into the text as a character. It is we who will fill the gaps with our own interpretations. Coetzee's strategy of letting Friday produce sound in these scenes, as his mouth is forced open has generated much speculation. How can you let Friday speak without appropriating him? This is another question Coetzee leaves unanswered, indicating its impossibility through the suggestion of speaking without language. All acts carry the burden of ideology, except

perhaps the body, and even that is subject to interpretation. Making Friday “speak” is simply another way of imposing meaning on Friday’s sounds (Worthington 29 September 2009).

Here, through allowing the reader to occupy the position of “I” in the text, as we were invited to do from the beginning, Coetzee once again anticipates reader response to Friday, and how we attempt to draw our own interpretations.

Texts are the objects of our interpretations of reading, and Coetzee forces us to acknowledge this through the strategies employed in *Foe*. As *Foe* progresses, Coetzee entwines all the strategies described above to reveal how those devices are used to impose meaning on the characters, and, ultimately, history itself. The narrative patterns of this novel undermine the authenticity of the narrator’s voice at every turn, and gradually place the burden of interpretation squarely on the shoulders of us, the readers. Acts of inscription are no longer solely the burden of the author, but are shared with the reader. This leads to greater questions about authority and power, and the ideological assumptions that encode our own stories. Echoing Susan, we can ask: “Who is speaking me? ...To what order do I belong? And you: who are you?” (133).

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thematic counterpart of *Down Among the Women and Female Friends*. These three, unambiguously feminist texts can usefully be read in conjunction with non-fictional. Narrative experimentation has always been Weldon's forte (in the early novels, for instance, she tests the possibilities of the first-person narrative voice, alternating voices and tenses), but in *Puffball* (1980), *The President's Child* (1982), *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil* (1983), *The Shrapnel Academy* (1986), and *The Hearts*. But re-reading helps readers to clarify their thoughts or go back and re-read something that was misread to find the mistake and fix it.

2. Read out loud. Sometimes it just helps to hear yourself read out loud. Struggling and reluctant readers need to SEE that proficient readers use these strategies. One SIMPLE way to do this is to model them as we read aloud to kids. We tend to use these naturally without bringing much attention to them. So much so, that a struggling reader may not even realize we're using them. Instead, we need to slow down and point them out so our kids can see how we use them. For example, as I was reading *The Indian in the Cupboard* just recently to my 3rd grader, I came to the word lorry. I honestly had no idea what it meant {UK readers: insert laugh here}. *Implicating the Reader: Narrative Strategies and Thematic Development in J.M. Coetzee's Foe*. "If I were the Irishwoman, I should rest more uneasy in my grave knowing to what interpreter the story of my last hours has been consigned" states Susan in J.M. Coetzee's *Foe* (124). This quote epitomizes the overarching themes of the novel: that of authorship and authority, and the complicity of readers within the writing/reading process. Post-colonial literature is often used as a site to "write back" against the ideological assumptions and dominant discourses of the coloniser. In Part Two we become more aware of another narrative strategy of Coetzee's: that of creating a fictional pretext for Defoe's original novel, as a way to delineate the central struggles for narrative power.