

TO BE PITIED OR CONDEMNED:
THE ROLE OF THE SELF IN *DISGRACE* AND *OEDIPUS REX*

by
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This thesis analyzes the texts of *Disgrace* and *Oedipus Rex* to compare the protagonists and the message conveyed to audiences through the downfalls of each. To compare the two pieces of literature, I utilize terms from Greek Tragedies as well as their contemporary counterparts. Both Greek tragedies and postcolonial novels endeavor to educate their audiences through stories. When discussing *Oedipus Rex* I analyze the evil acts Oedipus commits that anger the gods (hubris), as well as his fatal flaw of character that leads to him committing these acts (hamartia). In my analysis of *Disgrace*, I discuss how David's arrogant personality coupled with his ignorant views that linger from apartheid contribute to his fall from grace. Oedipus is a character who suffers misfortune due to no fault of his own. His suffering evokes pity from the audience since he is a righteous individual whose human error has led to his fall from grace. Where Oedipus embodies the Aristotelian tragic hero, David is the antithesis of it. David's actions are guided by his unconscious stereotypes towards the role of women and blacks in post-apartheid South Africa. While his downfall may display many similarities to the fall of Oedipus in *Oedipus Rex*, his suffering reveals the dangers of maintaining attitudes that were widespread across white communities in South Africa during apartheid.

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Introduction

Disgrace written by J.M. Coetzee has been mired in controversy since its publication in 1999 due to its portrayal of white and black race relations in post-apartheid South Africa. The African National Congress (ANC) submitted the novel to the South African Human Rights Commission's inquiry into racism in the media in 2000.¹ The ANC argued that the novel reinforced negative stereotypes popularized during apartheid regarding black Africans in South Africa.² The criticism from the ANC centers around interactions between the protagonist, David Lurie, his daughter Lucy, and the Africans within the novel. The story is told from the perspective of David, a professor in communications who engages in sexual relations with a person of color who is also his student. As a result, David loses his job and moves in with Lucy in rural South Africa. The climax occurs when David and Lucy are attacked by a group of Africans, leaving David with severe burns and Lucy pregnant after she was gang raped by the group. Given David's exploitation of his student, it is difficult to interpret whether the novel itself portrays race relations in post-apartheid South Africa in a controversial manner, or if the story purposely presents a warped view of post-apartheid South Africa, influenced by David's beliefs and biases. Though the novel does not shy away from debates regarding race in post-apartheid South Africa, understanding David's character and Coetzee's portrayal of David in the novel is crucial towards understanding the message behind it.

As a piece of literature, *Disgrace* lends itself to comparisons to Greek tragedies in a variety of ways. Greek tragedies often take place within societies that are undergoing some kind

¹ Atwell, David, "Race in *Disgrace*," *Interventions* 4, no. 3 (June 1, 2011): 332, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369801022000013761>.

² Atwell, "Race in *Disgrace*," 334.

of transition.³ In a similar fashion, *Disgrace* takes place during the aftermath of apartheid—an oppressive system that was instituted for nearly 50 years, causing the segregation of white and black African communities—exposing the struggles that all South Africans endured following the system's upheaval. Furthermore, Greek tragedies sought to teach the audience morals through their performances. The concept of sophrosyne (living with moderation) was a theme present in many Greek tragedies to persuade audience members to practice ethics in their day-to-day lives.⁴ Postcolonial novels offer similar reflections on the history of a country, giving the author an opportunity to provide commentary on past practices. Analyzing the tragic nature of *Disgrace* allows us to infer Coetzee's position on apartheid and the messages he is trying to convey to the audience regarding the future of the country. Is David's downfall framed as a tragic tale of a white man who has lost status due to the end of apartheid, or is his downfall symbolic of the need for South Africans to embrace the end of apartheid and address the harm the system has done to their society? To answer this question, I will compare David's downfall and character in *Disgrace* to the infamous downfall of Oedipus in Sophocles' ancient Greek tragedy *Oedipus Rex* to understand whether *Disgrace* could be interpreted as a colonial tragedy. To facilitate this analysis, I will consider several prominent themes that overlap in both pieces of literature, and how they operate differently within each piece.

Aristotle and scholars throughout history have cited the play *Oedipus Rex* as the exemplary tragedy. Several aspects of the play parallel *Disgrace*. Both protagonists experience a disconnect not only from their identity, but reality as a whole, and embark on a journey that deepens their understanding of themselves and the world around them. Scholars have argued that

³ Allen, Richard O, "Hysteria and Heroism: Tragic Dissociation and the Two Tragedies," *College English* 32, no. 4 (1971): 401, <https://doi.org/10.2307/374389>.

⁴ North, Helen F, "The Concept of Sophrosyne in Greek Literary Criticism," *Classical Philology* 43, no. 1 (1948): 4, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/267134>.

David Lurie's identity is dependent on imposing his power as a white man on the less privileged people of color within South Africa.⁵ South Africa's transition from the oppressive system of apartheid has left David with a crisis of identity. Following what he believes to be consensual sexual relations with his student, Melanie Issacs, David is dismissed from his job as professor of communications at the technical university of Cape Town. Without a means of income, David is forced to start a new life away from the city in rural South Africa with Lucy. David is not only tasked with adapting to his new environment, but also with discovering his new identity detached from his career in an ever-changing post-apartheid South Africa. The historical setting of *Disgrace* connects to tragedies which portray a shifting society controlled by forces outside of an individual's control.⁶ Similarly, David's traditional beliefs are challenged by new ideologies following the fall of apartheid. While Oedipus in *Oedipus Rex* is a character to be pitied by audiences, scholars have condemned the character David Lurie in *Disgrace* for the actions he takes throughout the novel. My thesis will compare the actions both men take in their respective pieces of literature, their reasoning behind their actions, and their self-concept to understand why Oedipus is a character to be pitied, but David Lurie is met with disgust from audiences. I will utilize the classical terms of hubris and hamartia as defined by Aristotle and other scholars in my analysis of *Oedipus Rex*, and more contemporary terms similar to them in my analysis of *Disgrace*.

⁵ Abootalebi, Hassan, "Collapse of White Authority," 77.

⁶ Allen, Richard O, "The Two Tragedies," 412.

Historical Context of *Disgrace*

Apartheid was originally defined as a means of maintaining the separation and significance of African and white, European culture within South Africa.⁷ Apartheid was instituted in 1948 by the National Party government in South Africa, leading to the segregation of whites and non-whites until 1994.⁸ Under apartheid, people of color experienced various forms of oppression, including the inability to own land, an increased mortality rate, and having to work taxing jobs that the more dominant whites were unwilling to do.⁹ In the 1970s, various boycotts and strikes occurred in response to the brutal treatment of black African workers, and protests erupted with the goal of ending apartheid.¹⁰ The release of Nelson Mandela from prison in 1989 and the democratic election of a new regime led by President Clerk led to the end of apartheid, and a new constitution was established in 1996 giving all citizens equality under the eyes of the law.¹¹

The new constitution did not erase all the societal attitudes that were ingrained in South African culture through apartheid. Due to a lack of resources and education, black South Africans have continued to live in poverty, struggling to find employment while their white counterparts often live in more affluent neighborhoods.¹² Statistics from 1996 demonstrated that around 50% of black South Africans within urban and rural communities lived in poverty.¹³ Even more shocking is the fact that in 1995 black South Africans accounted for 95% of the

⁷ Abootalebi, Hassan, "The Collapse of the White Authority over the Black in J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* in Post-Apartheid South Africa," *Epiphany* 13, no. 2 (2020): 74, <https://doi.org/10.21533/epiphany.v13i2.341>.

⁸ Abootalebi, Hassan, "Collapse of White Authority," 74.

⁹ Abootalebi, Hassan, "Collapse of White Authority," 75.

¹⁰ Abootalebi, Hassan, "Collapse of White Authority," 75.

¹¹ Abootalebi, Hassan, "Collapse of White Authority," 75.

¹² Abootalebi, Hassan, "Collapse of White Authority," 76.

¹³ Møller, Valerie, "Quality of Life in South Africa: Post-Apartheid Trends," *Social Indicators Research* 43, no. 1/2 (February 1998): 36, <https://doi.org/10.1023/a:1006828608870>.

population considered poor (the 40% of the population with the lowest income).¹⁴ Overall happiness of the black South African community peaked in 1994 following the election, before declining back to statistics measured from the apartheid era,¹⁵ demonstrating both the enthusiasm for societal change in South Africa following the end of apartheid and the failure of South African government officials to deliver on promises of drastic change within black communities. To expect a complete shift in South African society following the collapse of an oppressive system enforced for almost 50 years is irrational, but the lack of progress demonstrates that little action was taken to change the oppression experienced by black communities following apartheid. It is fair to say that these statistics would not have noticeably shifted three years following the studies when *Disgrace* was published. The studies reveal the tension among South Africans following the fall of apartheid and provide important context for analyzing the novel.

While the statistics do not demonstrate a shift in racial power structures, the fear of retribution from the oppressed within South African society was a popular attitude following apartheid. From 1994 to 1997 public concern of crime in Cape Town, South Africa increased from 6 per cent to 58 per cent, demonstrating the mutual distrust between white and black South Africans following the end of apartheid.¹⁶ Other statistics further demonstrate white South Africans' fear for the future following apartheid, as a study conducted in 1998 found that white South Africans had lower expectations of living a more satisfying life in the future than black South Africans.¹⁷ Fear was especially prevalent among white women given that societal attitudes in South Africa deemed white women to be submissive and vulnerable, while black men were

¹⁴ Møller, Valerie, "Post-Apartheid Trends," 36.

¹⁵ Møller, Valerie, "Post-Apartheid Trends," 55.

¹⁶ Lemanski, Charlotte, "A New Apartheid? The Spatial Implications of Fear of Crime in Cape Town, South Africa," *Environment and Urbanization* 16, no. 2 (2004): 105, <https://doi.org/10.1630/0956247042310043>.

¹⁷ Møller, Valerie, "Post-Apartheid Trends," 59.

viewed as aggressive.¹⁸ The events within *Disgrace* clearly acknowledge the existence of these post-apartheid beliefs in white communities, which reveals the importance of analyzing the portrayal of race relations in the novel. Considering the differing attitudes between white and black South Africans following the end of apartheid, Coetzee's framing of David could embody either attitude. From a surface level, David's downfall could be interpreted as an unjust consequence of South Africa abandoning apartheid, which is why comparing his character to a tragic hero like Oedipus will reveal whether Coetzee encourages the audience to sympathize with David's suffering.

The Greek Tragedy

Tragedy as a genre originates from Ancient Greece and is discussed in-depth by Aristotle in his piece *Poetics*. The genre seeks to demonstrate the limitations of humanity to its audience in the hopes that they can learn from the downfall of the tragic hero. To do so, the Greek tragedy imitates reality by displaying a man, neither good in nature nor evil, who succumbs to misfortune.¹⁹ The tragic hero is considered noble or a member of high status within their society, but still suffers a fall from grace, illustrating the fact that any individual may suffer the same fate.²⁰ Enigma is the force that propels the events of a tragedy often in the form of identity or origins.²¹ Tragedy demonstrates man at his greatest confusion, forced to face their fears, bringing about madness and delirium.²² The tragic hero's quest to solve this enigma brings about a

¹⁸ Stevens, Garth, "Desire, Fear and Entitlement: Sexualising Race and Racialising Sexuality in (Re)Membering Apartheid," Essay. In *Race, Memory and the Apartheid Archive: Towards a Transformative Psychological Praxis*, 188, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.

¹⁹ Reeves, Charles H, "The Aristotelian Concept of the Tragic Hero," *The American Journal of Philology* 73, no. 2 (1952): 172–73. <https://doi.org/10.2307/291812>.

²⁰ Reeves, Charles H, "The Concept of Tragic Hero," 176.

²¹ Arvanitakis, K., "Aristotle's 'Poetics': The Origins of Tragedy and the Tragedy of Origins," *American Imago* 39, no. 3 (1982): 265, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26303703>.

²² Allen, Richard O, "Hysteria and Heroism," 405.

transformation, and the realization of the tragic hero's true identity is often the climax of the tragedy. The tragic hero believes they can act responsibly to discover truth but finds that their actions bring disaster rather than prosperity.²³

One of the main events that brings about the downfall of the tragic hero is the breakdown of the orthodox order. What were once traditional beliefs regarding reality undergo a change forcing the tragic hero to adapt, but the inability to acclimate to the new attitudes within their society causes the tragic hero to become alienated from others.²⁴ Through their alienation, the tragic hero is left to rely on their own resources to solve the enigma.²⁵ Within Greek tragedies, fate alters the tragic hero's perception of reality. Fate enables the tragic hero to uncover their limits and undergo a transformation of self. Guided by ignorance or faulty judgment, the tragic hero unknowingly commits evil acts throughout the play. Without ignorance, the tragic hero would not commit these acts as it would go against their character. The tragic hero remains isolated, blaming others for their crimes.²⁶ Upon the realization of their crimes, the tragic hero encounters the truth they sought before suffering retribution, and is forced to reconcile themselves with both their crimes and the new knowledge regarding reality that they now possess.

Greek dramas—particularly tragedies—were solemn occasions where the audience would experience a release of fears and other negative emotions through the suffering of the tragic hero.²⁷ The structure of tragedies often mirror agriculture cycles, embodying the death and rebirth that crops undergo during the transition from Winter to Spring.²⁸ In this sense, David's

²³ Allen, Richard O, "The Two Tragedies," 400.

²⁴ Traschen, Isadore, "THE ELEMENTS OF TRAGEDY," *The Centennial Review* 6, no. 2 (1962): 216, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23737871>.

²⁵ Traschen, Isadore, "THE ELEMENTS OF TRAGEDY," 219.

²⁶ Allen, Richard O, "The Two Tragedies," 405.

²⁷ Reeves, Charles H, "The Concept of Tragic Hero," 185.

²⁸ Payne, Harry C, "Modernizing the Ancients: The Reconstruction of Ritual Drama 1870-1920," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 122, no. 3 (1978): 182, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/986552>.

downfall could embody the death of racist attitudes following the fall of apartheid, but the tragic elements of the novel could also be utilized to encourage pity for David's experience. Oedipus' downfall is meant to be lamented by the audience, so comparing his downfall and character to David's will illustrate whether similar emotions should be evoked by readers of *Disgrace*.

Hubris

One of the main mechanisms that leads to both David and Oedipus' downfall is their arrogant personalities. Both men are stubborn and refuse to heed advice from others, leading them to act in an irrational manner. The term for excessive pride or arrogance within Greek tragedies is hubris. Hubris—used by Aristotle in *Rhetoric*—is defined as any action that incurs shame to a victim while the individual practicing hubris derives pleasure from harming someone they deem to be inferior.²⁹ Hubris was viewed as a crime by Athenian society, and nemesis (retribution) is necessitated when an individual commits an act of hubris.³⁰ In tragedies, hubris—no matter the circumstance—must be punished.³¹ Oftentimes, hubris is an act that goes against the will of the gods, causing the tragic hero to shoulder the guilt and punishment for their actions.³² The tragic hero's morality distances them from the audience, so the tragic hero's suffering releases the crowd's fear of retribution for their actions and teaches them to avoid hubris in their own lives. Though the tragic hero's actions anger the gods, their intentions must be good in nature for their subsequent downfall to be considered tragic.³³ While their intentions

²⁹ Cudjoe, Richard V. et al, "The Fall of the Tragic Hero: A Critique of the 'Hubristic Principle,'" *UJAH: Unizik Journal of Arts and Humanities* 12, no. 1 (2011): 3, <https://doi.org/10.4314/ujah.v12i1.1>.

³⁰ Cudjoe, Richard V. et al, "Fall of the Tragic Hero," 2.

³¹ Cudjoe, Richard V. et al, "Fall of the Tragic Hero," 27.

³² Arvanitakis, K, "The Origins of Tragedy," 256.

³³ Reeves, Charles H, "Concept of Tragic Hero," 179.

may be good, the tragic hero possesses some flaw of character that leads them to commit hubris.³⁴

Hubris is a common theme in many Greek tragedies, but the idea of a shameful act committed to assert oneself as superior is applicable to a wide range of literary genres. Given that *Disgrace* is not rooted within the genre of Greek tragedy, I will use arrogance as a more contemporary term to embody hubris in my analysis of David Lurie. Arrogance can manifest itself within interpersonal relations. Arrogant people view themselves as superior, and differ from people who are self-confident in the sense that their self-confidence comes from false beliefs about themselves.³⁵ This idea is similar to the ancient Greek term hubris, since the arrogant individual does what they wish, regardless of the concerns or beliefs of others.³⁶ An arrogant individual views their own knowledge and concerns as more important than those of others due to their perceived superiority in comparison to other individuals. As a result, the arrogant individual will be dismissive of the advice from others, believing that others' knowledge is useless to them. The arrogant individual's view of others creates a hierarchical relationship rather than a reciprocal one, making it difficult to maintain and sustain relationships with others. In this sense, an arrogant individual may experience a similar alienation from others as the tragic hero. For David's downfall to be considered tragic, his arrogance must be caused by an outside force rather than his own character.

³⁴ Barstow, Marjorie, "Oedipus Rex as the Ideal Tragic Hero of Aristotle," *The Classical Weekly* 6, no. 1 (1912): 2, <https://doi.org/10.2307/4386601>.

³⁵ Tiberius, Valerie, and John D. Walker, "Arrogance," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 35, no. 4 (1998): 379–80, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20009945>.

³⁶ Cudjoe, Richard V. et al, "Fall of Tragic Hero" 4.

Hamartia

If the tragic hero is a noble man who commits hubris, the act of hubris goes against his character in some way. To deliberately commit hubris would demonstrate that the tragic hero does not possess a good morality, influencing the audience's perception of their downfall.³⁷ It is not customary for the tragic hero to commit this sin, but there is some guiding force that causes the tragic hero to commit hubris. Within Greek tragedies, hamartia is the reason that the tragic hero suffers misfortune.³⁸ Hubris necessitates suffering for the tragic hero, but hamartia is the reason why the hero suffers rather than some inherent part of their nature. Hamartia is derived from archery and translates roughly to "missing the mark."³⁹ The concept is best defined as a flaw in knowledge that causes the hero to act without conscious intentionality.⁴⁰ Aristotle posits that hamartia manifests itself in the decisions the tragic hero makes. The hero lacks the ability to act rationally and demonstrates ignorance in their actions.⁴¹ Hamartia leads to the tragic hero's downfall, and it is the hero's hamartia that causes them to unintentionally commit hubris. Aristotle presents a distinction between voluntary and involuntary action in *Poetics* stating that a complete knowledge and recognition of all the circumstances behind an action is necessary to deem an act voluntary.⁴² Given that the tragic hero does not suffer due to his morality, hamartia causes the tragic hero to view his suffering as unjustified.⁴³ It is the complex interaction of hero's hubris and hamartia that complicates the judgment of the tragic hero, and incites pity and

³⁷ Reeves, Charles H, "Concept of Tragic Hero," 182.

³⁸ Schüttrumpf, Eckart, "Traditional Elements in the Concept of Hamartia in Aristotle's *Poetics*," *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 92 (1989): 140, <https://doi.org/10.2307/311356>.

³⁹ Arvanitakis, K, "Aristotle's 'Poetics': The Origins of Tragedy," 262.

⁴⁰ Arvanitakis, K, "Aristotle's 'Poetics': The Origins of Tragedy," 263.

⁴¹ Arvanitakis, K, "Aristotle's 'Poetics': The Origins of Tragedy," 263.

⁴² Schüttrumpf, Eckart, "Traditional Elements in *Poetics*," 141.

⁴³ Traschen, Isadore, "THE ELEMENTS OF TRAGEDY," 218.

fear from the audience. The hero is guilty of his actions in a judicial sense, but also an innocent man whose ignorance guided him to misfortune.⁴⁴

Hamartia demonstrates that regardless of the status or power an individual possesses, without wisdom he can never achieve true happiness.⁴⁵ In *Oedipus Rex*, Oedipus makes decisions based on faulty knowledge, leading him to commit hubris and suffer misfortune. The intentions behind Oedipus' actions were noble, but his failure to act rationally leads to his downfall. In my analysis of David Lurie, I will consider whether David's actions are noble, and whether there is an underlying force outside of David's control that leads him to commit evil acts. Understanding these factors will provide clarity to whether David knowingly utilizes his power as a white man to oppress people of color in South African society, or if his actions are involuntary in nature, like Oedipus. This division will be crucial to interpreting his downfall as tragic or justified. Since hamartia relates to the tragic hero's absence of wisdom or knowledge, the contemporary term I will use to embody hamartia in my discussion of *Disgrace* will be ignorance.

Self-Concept

Tragedy maintains its effects on the audience only if the hero's suffering is not a result of his moral character, but instead because their suffering is unreasonable.⁴⁶ If the hero were to act rationally, he would avoid retribution, but to do so an individual must have a strong self-concept to understand their perspective of reality as well as their own personal strengths and weaknesses. Self-concept is best defined as an individual's perception of themselves in the world they find

⁴⁴ Schütrumpf, Eckart, "Traditional Elements in Poetics," 155.

⁴⁵ Barstow, Marjorie, "Ideal Tragic Hero," 2.

⁴⁶ Traschen, Isadore, "THE ELEMENTS OF TRAGEDY," 218-219.

themselves in.⁴⁷ A self-concept that is incongruent with reality contributes to the downfall of the tragic hero. An individual with a congruent self-concept would be able to act in a rational manner no matter the situation.⁴⁸ This notion goes directly against the attributes of a tragic hero since the tragic hero commits hubris because they do not possess the wisdom to act rationally.⁴⁹ An individual with a congruent self-concept would not be infallible, but their actions would be appropriate regardless of the scenario, and they would seek to satisfy the majority of their needs.⁵⁰ Their behavior would be unpredictable depending on the situation, but the individual would be open to experiences and willing to adapt no matter the circumstances.⁵¹ The adaptability of an individual with a congruent self-concept would facilitate their ability to behave in a mannerly way. The tragic hero differs from this individual in the sense that they struggle to adapt to changes in the world around them. It is through their inability to adapt to deviations from traditional beliefs and their impulsive decisions that the tragic hero suffers misfortune. An arrogant individual would also possess an incongruent self-concept, considering that their false beliefs regarding themselves need to be constantly reinforced to maintain their self-concept.

An individual's self-concept shapes their behavior. The attributes that an individual assigns themselves through their self-concept causes certain actions to be implausible to themselves as they would be unable to maintain their self-concept.⁵² For example, if an individual believes that they are kindhearted, it would be impossible for them to intentionally harm others as it would go against their self-concept. Their self-concept is entirely subjective,

⁴⁷ Bergner, Raymond M. and James R. Holmes, "Self-Concepts and Self-Concept Change: A Status Dynamic Approach," *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research, Practice, Training* 37, no. 1 (2000): 37, <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0087737>.

⁴⁸ Rogers, Carl, "The Concept of the Fully Functioning Person," *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research & Practice* 1, no. 1 (1963): 24, <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0088567>.

⁴⁹ Barstow, Marjorie, "Ideal Tragic Hero," 4.

⁵⁰ Rogers, Carl, "Concept of Fully Functioning Person," 20.

⁵¹ Rogers, Carl, "Concept of Fully Functioning Person," 20.

⁵² Bergner, Raymond M., and James R. Holmes, "Self-Concepts," 37.

free of direct influence from others, but it also shapes the individual's perception of the world around them.⁵³ Throughout a literary piece, the audience infers the actions the protagonist will make based on their disposition and previous decisions.⁵⁴ Through narration and dialogue, the author gives the audience a glimpse into the psyche of a literary character. While the tragic hero may believe that their reasoning is, or they themselves are superior to others, their intentions remain benevolent. I will utilize this aspect of self-concept to compare and contrast the moral characters of both David Lurie and Oedipus, to understand if David Lurie possesses similar traits as the ancient Greek notion of a tragic hero. Utilizing these literary mechanisms to analyze both pieces of Literature will illustrate whether David's downfall in *Disgrace* should be interpreted as a tragic consequence of the end of apartheid.

⁵³ Bergner, Raymond M. and James R. Holmes, "Self-Concepts," 38.

⁵⁴ Gerrig, Richard J., and David W. Allbritton, "The Construction of Literary Character: A View from Cognitive Psychology." *Style* 24, no. 3 (1990): 383, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42945868>.

The Hubris of Oedipus

At the beginning of the play, the audience is exposed to Oedipus' hubris. Oedipus was crowned king of Thebes by solving the Sphinx's riddle. Following Oedipus' coronation, a plague spread across the city of Thebes. Oedipus sends Creon to an oracle of Apollo, shouldering the burden of ending the plague, "...what act or word of mine I might redeem this city."⁵⁵ Oedipus confidently asserts that he possesses the ability to cure the city of Thebes of the plague; his words demonstrate that he believes he is the sole individual capable of expelling the plague from the city. When Creon returns, he announces that to end the plague in Thebes, the murderer of Laius—the previous king—must be exiled from the city. Oedipus further emphasizes his duty to redeem the city, "Why, 'tis not for my neighbours' sake, but mine, I shall dispel this plague-spot."⁵⁶ Oedipus' confidence is unfettered by the news that there was only one surviving witness to the murder at the hands of robbers. He believes his own wisdom can solve the enigma. From the onset of the plague, Oedipus seems content to rely on his own resources, displaying his pride and sense of superiority. The following chorus cries out for help, "For whose dear sake O Goddess, O Jove's golden child, Send help with favour mild."⁵⁷ The chorus trusts that Oedipus possesses the wisdom to free the city from their suffering since he solved the Sphinx's riddle, but Oedipus' commitment to end the plague through his own methods initiates his isolation from the citizens of Thebes.

The act of saving the city from the plague is selfless in nature. Oedipus is a foreigner who has been crowned King of Thebes but is personally unaffected by the plague. He displays true love for the citizens of Thebes:

⁵⁵ Sophocles, (1991), *Oedipus Rex*, Dover, 12.

⁵⁶ Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex*, 14.

⁵⁷ Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex*, 16.

If any knows another—say some stranger—to have been guilty, let him not keep silence; for I will pay him the reward and favour shall be his due beside it. But again, if you will hold your peace, and any man from self or friend in terror shall repel this word of mine, then—you must hear me say what I shall do. Whoe'er he be, I order that of this land, whose power and throne are mine, none entertain him, none accost him, none cause him to share in prayers or sacrifice offer to Heaven, or pour him lustral wave, but all men from their houses banish him; since he contaminates us all, even as the Pythian oracle divine revealed now but to me.⁵⁸

While his assertion to reward men who provide information on the murderer and punish men who withhold valuable information is noble—considering it would end the plague—much of Oedipus' character is revealed here. Oedipus lays claim to the throne of Thebes and acknowledges the power he possesses as king. It is difficult to overlook the tyrannical tone in his warning to the people of Thebes. Similarly, Oedipus exposes his poor leadership capabilities. Here it is clear to the audience that Oedipus rules through his emotions. He encourages cooperation from the people of Thebes through incentivizing the capture of the murderer, while also striking fear into those who disobey his orders. Oedipus seems to believe that these orders will be sufficient for uncovering Laius' murderer, since he goes on to state that he will, "...fight this fight...to seize the author of (Laius') murder."⁵⁹ Besides threatening the people of Thebes, Oedipus sees no other immediate action to expose the murderer, so he again sends Creon to bring "a godlike seer...who has in him the tongue that cannot lie"⁶⁰ named Tiresias to Thebes.

⁵⁸ Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex*, 18.

⁵⁹ Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex*, 18.

⁶⁰ Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex*, 18.

The Introduction of the Unorthodox

Oedipus' conversation with Tiresias exposes his inability to remove his emotions from the decisions he makes. Tiresias refuses to tell Oedipus the truth behind the king's death, prompting Oedipus to accuse Tiresias of being an accomplice to the murder. When Tiresias asserts that Oedipus was the man who murdered Laius, Oedipus disregards his account. Though Tiresias was respected for his wisdom by the people of Greece, Oedipus cannot remove his personal bias to see the truth behind Laius' murder. Through his willingness to denounce the prophecy of a respected oracle, Oedipus commits hubris, claiming to possess knowledge beyond that of the gods. Before Tiresias departs, he concludes by accusing Oedipus not only of murder, but also incest:

The man you have been seeking...That man is here; believed a foreigner here sojourning; but shall be recognized for Theban born hereafter; yet not pleased in the event; for blind instead of seeing, and poor for wealthy, to a foreign land, a staff to point his footsteps, he shall go...Related as a brother, through their sire, and of the woman from whose womb he came both son and spouse; one that has raised up his seed to his own father, and has murdered him.⁶¹

Tiresias offers Oedipus a form of redemption when he reveals that Oedipus is the murderer. If Oedipus had heeded his warning, he would not have suffered the same public fall into misfortune, and instead could have privately fulfilled his promise of ending the plague by leaving the city. Oedipus chooses to doubt the truth of the oracles, believing them to be false prophets to the gods, but the prophecy as told by Tiresias introduces an unorthodox belief into the play. Oedipus believes that he did not kill Laius and is certain that Laius is not his father, making the words of Tiresias erroneous in his eyes, but Tiresias' prophecy influences Oedipus to

⁶¹ Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex*, 25-26.

search for the truth. Regardless of the validity of the prophecy, Oedipus must know whether his knowledge regarding his origins is accurate. The chorus echoes Oedipus' judgment of the prophecy presented to him crying, "I saw how the (Sphinx) came against him, and proved him wise, by the test, and good to state...he shall not, ever, be put to shame."⁶² The chorus presents a tension between the prophecies of oracles and Oedipus' wisdom, but like Oedipus, the chorus is not untethered from the limits of human knowledge.⁶³ The admiration of Oedipus from the chorus reinforces that Oedipus is an honorable man.

The Emotionality of Oedipus

Oedipus was left enraged following his interaction with Tiresias. Though he was advised against it, Oedipus accuses Creon of coercing Tiresias to tell him a false prophecy so that he could take the crown following Oedipus' exile. His failure to acknowledge the advice of others cements his hubris. Oedipus is certain that the knowledge he possesses is superior to others, and acts on his own accord, free from outside influence. Creon defends himself stating, "...if you can think any would rather choose sovereignty, with fears, than the same power with undisturbed repose? Neither am I, by nature, covetous to be a king, rather than play the king."⁶⁴ He receives support from Oedipus' advisor, warning against a rash decision, but Oedipus continually asserts that Creon must be executed for treason. Creon's defense and his reasoning are perfectly rational, but blinded by paranoia, Oedipus refuses to consider other's logic. The prophecy of Tiresias has presented ideas that go against the traditional beliefs of Oedipus' origins, causing Oedipus to act in a defensive, hubristic manner. Through his impulsive decision making, Oedipus alienates

⁶² Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex*, 27.

⁶³ Kane, Robert L, "Prophecy and Perception in the Oedipus Rex," *Transactions of the American Philological Association* (1974-) 105 (1975): 194, <https://doi.org/10.2307/283940>.

⁶⁴ Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex*, 30.

himself from his most trusted peers. Fearing he will lose dignity in the eyes of the people of Thebes due to Tiresias' prophecy, Oedipus places the blame onto Creon, following the traditional behavior of heroes within Greek tragedies.⁶⁵

Oedipus' wife Jocasta calms him before divulging the details behind Laius' death. A troubled Oedipus declares Tiresias was not the first oracle to reveal his fate. Oedipus was once in an altercation with a drunk man who accused him of being a changeling.⁶⁶ The rumor spread hastily, troubling Oedipus, encouraging him to consult the sun god Phoebus. Oedipus summarizes the encounter, stating:

Phoebus sent me of my quest bootless away; but other terrible and strange and lamentable things revealed. Saying I should wed my mother and produce a race intolerable for men to see, and be my father's murderer.⁶⁷

Upon hearing this prophecy, Oedipus fled to Thebes from Corinth to separate himself from his mother and father. On his journey to Thebes, Oedipus killed an old man in a manner that aligned with Jocasta's story. Oedipus received the prophecy from Phoebus, but believed he could escape fate. Oedipus commits hubris by believing that he has similar capabilities to the gods—the ability to determine one's fate— and his hubris directly caused him to fulfill the prophecy of the oracles. Oedipus recognizes that he is Laius' murderer, and is bound to be exiled from Thebes, but believes that he is destined to return to Corinth to fulfill Phoebus' prophecy. Dramatic irony⁶⁸ operates here twofold. The audience notices the parallels between Oedipus' and Jocasta's stories, while also discerning the connection between Phoebus' and Tiresias' prophecies. The

⁶⁵ Allen, Richard O, "The Two Tragedies," 412.

⁶⁶ "A child secretly exchanged for another in infancy," (merriam-webster.com).

⁶⁷ Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex*, 37.

⁶⁸ "a literary device by which the audience's or reader's understanding of events or individuals in a work surpasses that of its characters," (britannica.com)

connections could be coincidental, but the audience is able to recognize that the prophecies are true while Oedipus cannot. His knowledge of his parents is faulty, and his fate has already been determined.

Succumbing to Fate

The subsequent chorus references hubris stating, “Pride is the germ of kings; pride, when puffed up, vainly...mounts the wall, only to hurry to that fatal fall,”⁶⁹ foreshadowing Oedipus’ fall from grace. Tension is introduced between Jocasta and the chorus. The chorus implores Zeus to utilize his omnipotence:

But O our king—if thou art named alright—Zeus, that art Lord of all things ever, be this not hid from Thee, nor from Thy might which endeth never. For now already men invalidate the dooms of fate...Apollo’s name and rites are nowhere now kept holy; worship is out of date.⁷⁰

Following the chorus, Jocasta prays to the gods to free Oedipus from his anxieties regarding his fate for the sake of Thebes.⁷¹ While the chorus calls for Zeus to demonstrate his power since Oedipus and others doubt the divine power of fate, Jocasta prays for the end of Oedipus’ suffering. Oedipus’ prior hubris necessitated retribution; his suffering will not end until he is punished. Oedipus’ suffering seems to end when a messenger announces the death of his father Polybus in Corinth, but this event further cements the power of the divine. Oedipus believes to have escaped his fate, “Well, Polybus is gone; and with him all those oracles of ours bundled to Hades.”⁷² The messenger then reveals to Oedipus’ shock that he was given a shackled, infantile

⁶⁹ Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex*, 40.

⁷⁰ Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex*, 41.

⁷¹ Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex*, 41.

⁷² Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex*, 43.

Oedipus by a shepherd who was a follower of Laius. Summoning the shepherd, the truth is revealed to Oedipus. Laius received the same prophecy as Oedipus, prompting Jocasta to send their child to Corinth with the hopes of avoiding the fate of the gods. Jocasta commits the same hubris as Oedipus, directly leading to the fulfillment of his fate. Oedipus blinds himself declaring, “For why was I to see, when to descry no sight on earth could have a charm for me.”⁷³ While humans may endeavor to act in a rational manner, only the power of the gods is all-knowing.⁷⁴ Cursed from birth, any action Oedipus would have taken would have been futile to escape his fate. Though his crimes of patricide and incest embody the Aristotelian notion of hubris, Oedipus’ actions were involuntary in nature. The limitations of human knowledge are fully displayed through Oedipus, as his inability to recognize his false beliefs regarding his birth has led him to commit hubris, and experience nemesis in the form of great misfortune.

⁷³ Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex*, 56.

⁷⁴ Kane, Robert L, “Prophecy and Perception,” 199.

The Hamartia of Oedipus

Oedipus' act of self-mutilation leading to blindness is symbolic of his hamartia. Throughout the tragedy, Oedipus solely acts upon knowledge he believes to be accurate. For his entire life, Oedipus has understood his parents to be Polybus and Merope. To Oedipus, his decisions are logical, but though they may be logical in nature, Oedipus' decisions are made from ingenuine knowledge. Oedipus' rash judgements are based upon his perceptions; he perceives Polybus and Merope to be his birth parents, so he acts upon this knowledge as if it were truth when given the prophecy from Phoebus.⁷⁵ Oedipus' condemnation of Tiresias' prophecy is a logical conclusion from the knowledge he possesses, causing him to accuse Creon of Laius' murder, when in reality Oedipus is blind to the truth when it is presented to him.⁷⁶ Polybus and Merope never revealed the truth to Oedipus, so the first time his knowledge regarding his origins are challenged by a reputable source is when Tiresias discloses the prophecy of incest and patricide to Oedipus. At this point in the play, Oedipus' fate is already set. He has already killed his father Laius and married his biological mother Jocasta; there is no action Oedipus can take to change his fate. To understand why Oedipus' hamartia influences his actions, leading to his hubris and downfall, the events leading to his fall from grace must be analyzed.

Cursed from Birth

The first event that puts the forces of fate into motion is the prophecy Laius receives that his son will murder him and marry his wife. Obviously, this prophecy parallels the prophecy Oedipus received from Phoebus and Tiresias. Upon hearing this prophecy, Jocasta sends Oedipus

⁷⁵ Kane, Robert L, "Prophecy and Perception," 191.

⁷⁶ Kane, Robert L, "Prophecy and Perception," 191.

to Corinth to alter fate. An infant Oedipus had no control over these actions that directly led to him receiving false information regarding his family. Jocasta's choice to send Oedipus to Corinth mirrors Oedipus' decision to leave the city to avoid the fate that was revealed to him by Phoebus. Both Jocasta and Oedipus demonstrate hubris by attempting to alter their destinies, and both suffer retribution for their hubris: Oedipus blinds himself and is banished from Thebes while Jocasta commits suicide. When considering everyone's act of hubris, it is important to consider where Oedipus is at fault for his actions. The first occasion where Oedipus is presented with the truth behind his origins is when he is called a changeling by the drunkard in Corinth. In response to this, Oedipus seeks out Phoebus to discover if this rumor holds any merit. Oedipus seeks to verify his knowledge regarding his origins but is only met with the same prophecy that he later receives from Tiresias. There is no rationality behind believing the drunkard's statement at face value, so Oedipus' decision to leave Corinth is perfectly logical. By leaving Corinth, Oedipus demonstrates that it is not within his nature to commit hubris through murdering his father and marrying his mother.

Decisions Guided by Emotions

It is on his journey to Thebes that Oedipus unknowingly murders King Laius. Laius' entourage instigated the skirmish, but Oedipus fails to control his emotions killing all the men in his escort:

...the old man, would thrust me. I, being enraged, struck him who jostled me—The driver—and the old man, when he saw it... With his goad's fork smote me upon the head. He paid, though! duly I say not...I slay them all!⁷⁷

⁷⁷ Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex*, 37-38.

Oedipus' anger leads to his rash decisions, but his actions here can be viewed, to a certain extent, as self-defense. Being attacked by strangers in a foreign location, it may have been necessary for Oedipus to kill Laius and his men to survive the exchange. Given the details behind his act of patricide, Oedipus' hamartia led him to committing patricide without conscious intentionality. The unexpected confrontation illustrates the all-knowing power the gods wield over mortals to control their destinies. All the events following the clash with Laius signal that Oedipus will experience no consequences for his actions. He solves the Sphinx's riddle, saving the city of Thebes, and is crowned king of the city. Given that Queen Jocasta was a widow, it is noble of Oedipus to marry her upon his coronation. Here the second aspect of the prophecy is fulfilled.

Considering the events that led to Oedipus being crowned king of Thebes and achieving some prosperity, there is no reason he should have heeded the words of Tiresias, besides the fact that he is an oracle who can communicate with the gods. To Oedipus, all evidence demonstrated that Tiresias' prophecy was false,⁷⁸ but it is a combination of his hamartia and lack of faith in oracles that leads to him committing hubris. It is not his inherent nature that has led to his misfortunes, nor solely his decision to act upon the false knowledge that he holds regarding his birth. Oedipus' downfall was brought about by a combination of actions from a variety of actors. It was the will of the gods to make a spectacle of Oedipus' fall from grace to reinforce the power they wield over humanity. Oedipus is both guilty of committing hubris by ignoring the words of the oracles and attempting to alter his fate, and innocent considering no action he could have taken would have prevented his downfall. It is the will of the gods and the limitation of human knowledge that has led to Oedipus' suffering. Through Oedipus' downfall, the audience learns to avoid acting on their impulses and to remain faithful to the gods.

⁷⁸ Kane, Robert L, "Prophecy and Perception," 196.

The Arrogance of David Lurie

David Lurie—a white, twice divorced, 52-year-old South African man—represents the traditional beliefs held by white South Africans during apartheid. Like tragedies, the shift away from apartheid in South Africa has created tension between the traditional attitudes white South Africans possessed during apartheid, and the new attitudes that are emerging within society as the government has begun to recognize the rights of people of color during the post-apartheid era. Due to the societal changes within South Africa, David, like Oedipus, finds himself in a state of great confusion. Coincidentally, the story begins with David's alienation from Soraya—a hooker he frequents and has fallen in love with—and his career. Prior to the events of the novel, David taught English at the Technical University of Cape Town, before becoming a professor of communications due to the closing of the University's modern language and classics departments. David views his new role at the University as a demotion, and the change dispels any passions he once possessed as a professor:

Because he has no respect for the material he teaches, he makes no impression on his students. They look through him when he speaks, forget his name. Their indifference galls him more than he will admit.⁷⁹

David craves recognition from his students but fails to recognize that his lack of passion for the material he teaches encourages this behavior from his students. One can infer that when he taught English at the university, he was more respected as a professor. David's profession, like his character, is dispensable in the eyes of others. His inability to connect with the younger generation and becoming less appealing to women leaves David feeling isolated and helpless.⁸⁰

⁷⁹ Coetzee, John Maxwell, *Disgrace*, New York: Penguin Books, 2005, 2.

⁸⁰ Abootalebi, Hassan, "Collapse of White Authority," 76.

Unable to forget the past and adapt to the societal changes taking place in South Africa, David remedies these negative emotions throughout the novel by asserting his authority over vulnerable people within South Africa: people of color and women specifically.

Sex as a Means of Reinforcing Authority

David's sentiments regarding sex and women exemplify his arrogant need to constantly reinforce his false beliefs about himself. David once delighted in his sexual conquests, never struggling to satisfy his desires, but now an older David has lost his ability to attract women. He solely views women as an object of desire, demonstrated throughout the novel in his relations with them. David feels a sense of affection for the passive and submissive Soraya but is thoroughly disgusted by his secretary who is much more animated during intercourse. He believes that it is the new generation who has abandoned the concept of love, yet David's idea of love is solely based on control. When he is finally rejected by Soraya, he finds a new object of desire in his young student Melanie. His infatuation with her is disconcerting; David finds her address through her class enrollment and promptly travels to her apartment. Melanie enters his car to return to his residence, and throughout the car ride, David continually references the power he wields over her as her professor:

He takes her to Hout Bay, to the harbourside. During the drive he tries to put her at ease. He asks about her other courses. She is acting in a play, she says. It is one of her diploma requirements. Rehearsals are taking up a lot of her time.⁸¹

While the narrator claims that David discusses her university activities to calm Melanie, his discourse in this section underpins the power David has over Melanie. He is enthralled by

⁸¹ Coetzee, John Maxwell, *Disgrace*, 11.

Melanie's passivity during intercourse, finding, "...the act pleasurable, so pleasurable that from its climax he tumbles into blank oblivion."⁸² His exploitation of Melanie is so fulfilling in his eyes because it allows David to relive the privilege he once experienced during apartheid. He recognizes Melanie's disinterest in him, but does not recognize the interaction as assault:

She does not resist. All she does is avert herself: avert her lips, avert her eyes. She lets him lay her out on the bed and undress her: she even helps him, raising her arms and then her hips...Not rape, not quite that, but undesired nevertheless, undesired to the core.⁸³

Not only is he able to assert his authority on a woman, but also an individual of lower status in South Africa, since Melanie is a person of color.

Throughout the act, he questions his decisions based on Melanie's age, but he finds himself unable to control his desires. It is not David who possesses the ability to control his behavior, but instead he is a slave to his bodily desires,⁸⁴ a constant theme throughout the novel. While Oedipus fails to control his emotions leading to his hubris, his actions were kind-hearted in nature and beyond his own control. David's constant quest to fulfill his desires is self-satisfying and harmful to the women he exploits. In every sexual relation David participates in within the novel, he avoids meaningful connections with the women. He is attracted to Melanie's youthful figure but finds every other aspect of her childish and tasteless. His desire is not limited to physical attraction, when he meets Bev Shaw on Lucy's farm for the first time, he is detested by her appearance:

⁸² Coetzee, John Maxwell, *Disgrace*, 11.

⁸³ Coetzee, John Maxwell, *Disgrace*, 15.

⁸⁴ Kossew, Sue, "The Politics of Shame and Redemption in J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*," *Research in African Literatures* 34, no. 2 (2003): 158, <https://doi.org/10.1353/ral.2003.0036>.

Her hair is a mass of little curls. Does she make the curls herself, with tongs? Unlikely: it would take hours every day. They must grow that way. He has never seen such a tessitura⁸⁵ from close by. The veins on her ears are visible as a filigree of red and purple. The veins of her nose too. And then a chin that comes straight out of her chest, like a pouter pigeon's. As an ensemble, remarkably unattractive.⁸⁶

It is impossible to ignore the description of Bev Shaw's curly hair, often possessed by individuals with African heritage. It is a combination of her African heritage and her elevated age that disgusts David, demonstrating both his failure to adapt to his own increasing age and his racist attitudes that linger from apartheid. Though Bev Shaw's appearance does not initially spark the flame of desire within David's heart, he still participates in an affair with her. The narrator describes the act as, "Without passion but without distaste either. So that in the end Bev Shaw can feel pleased with herself. All she intended has been accomplished."⁸⁷ It is David's arrogance that causes him to assume Bev Shaw's appreciation of the intercourse. The act is framed as selfless—a favor given to a friend—but David fails to consider the effect the affair could have on others' relationships. Following Lucy's rape and David's incineration, Bev Shaw's husband counsels David offering his assistance. Bill Shaw considers David a friend, but David mocks his perspective believing that Shaw's rural life has withheld him from seeing the world and deepening his understanding of friendship:

(Bill Shaw believes) David Lurie is his friend, and the two of them have obligations towards each other... (He has) seen so little of the world that he does not know there are men who do not readily make friends, whose attitude toward friendships between men is corroded with scepticism?⁸⁸

⁸⁵ "The general range of melody of a voice part" (merriam-webster.com), most likely used here to describe the varying lengths of curls in Bev Shaw's hair.

⁸⁶ Coetzee, John Maxwell, *Disgrace*, 48.

⁸⁷ Coetzee, John Maxwell, *Disgrace*, 90.

⁸⁸ Coetzee, John Maxwell, *Disgrace*, 60.

David believes that his concept of friendship is superior to Bill Shaw's, not only demonstrating his arrogance but also his hypocrisy since it is unclear whether David has any real friends within the novel. The narrator further hints at David's racist attitudes. His own arrogance and the attitudes from apartheid that permeate his being creates a disconnect between David and others; his stubborn fear of black South Africans leaves him unable to adjust to the new power systems within post-apartheid South Africa. David, like Oedipus, is alienated from others due to his failure to adapt to the new South Africa, and because of his arrogance. David's failure to alter his mindset forces him to succumb to his fall from grace.

The Chance for Redemption

When the story of Melanie's sexual assault at the hands of David reaches the administration of the university, David is presented with a chance to admit his fault and maintain not only his dignity, but his position at the university. While the end of apartheid may have weakened white South Africans' abilities to oppress others, white privilege remains within their society. Responding to the committee, David admits his guilt half-heartedly, but refuses to release a statement to appease the administration:

“Frankly, what you want from me is not a response but a confession. Well, I make no confession. I put forward a plea, as is my right. Guilty as charged. That is my plea. That is as far as I am prepared to go.”⁸⁹

David's unconscious racism causes him to perceive his interactions with Melanie as perfectly consensual and not problematic. He fails to recognize his misuse of authority stating, “My case

⁸⁹ Coetzee, John Maxwell, *Disgrace*, 30.

rests on the rights of desire...On the god who makes even the small birds quiver.”⁹⁰ Similar to Oedipus who was alienated from his true self due to the enigma behind his origins, David cannot recognize his own crave for redemption and absolution.⁹¹ His first rendezvous with Melanie presents the tension within his mind in regards to their relations, “*A child! he thinks: No more than a child! What am I doing?*”⁹² When he finally is asked if he feels regret for his actions, David can only respond, ““No...I was enriched by the experience.””⁹³ Where Oedipus refuses the chance to maintain his dignity by heeding the words of Tiresias, David refuses to admit his fault. Without authority or the power to quench his desires, David is nothing.

On a second occasion, David seeks forgiveness from the Issacs family. Upon his arrival at their household, David expresses desire for Melanie’s younger sister Desiree:

She has Melanie’s eyes, Melanie’s wide cheekbones, Melanie’s dark hair; she is, if anything, more beautiful. The younger sister Melanie spoke of, whose name he cannot for the moment recollect.⁹⁴

Even though David recognizes his fault and asks for absolution from Mr. Issacs, David still is unable to control his internal desire for youthful, vulnerable women. Desiree’s presence causes David to recall his first sexual encounter with Melanie. His memory of the encounter is still influenced by his need to maintain his ego. Though the original scene describes Melanie as uninterested and submissive to the older David, his biased perceptions recall, “...her eyes gleaming with excitement. Stepping out in the forest where the wild wolf prowls.”⁹⁵ The framing of these lines fails to portray the true nature of the encounter, demonstrating David’s disconnect

⁹⁰ Coetzee, John Maxwell, *Disgrace*, 53.

⁹¹ Kossew, Sue, “Shame and Redemption in *Disgrace*,” 160.

⁹² Coetzee, John Maxwell, *Disgrace*, 12.

⁹³ Coetzee, John Maxwell, *Disgrace*, 32.

⁹⁴ Coetzee, John Maxwell, *Disgrace*, 99.

⁹⁵ Coetzee, John Maxwell, *Disgrace*, 102.

with reality. The culmination of this scene leads to David humbling himself by bowing before Desiree and Mrs. Isaacs. David questions if this act is enough to purge him of his shame, but this act is not sufficient as when his eyes meet with Desiree's, he still senses his desire for her. Later that night, David receives a call from Mr. Isaacs who asks if his apology was delivered with the hopes of receiving assistance from the family to be reinstated at the university. There is a significant connection to fate here as Mr. Isaacs states, "...the path you are on is one that God has ordained for you. It is not for us to interfere." Both Oedipus and David Lurie succumb to the fate of the gods, but it is only Oedipus who was helpless to control his fate. David was presented with a multitude of opportunities to avoid his fall from grace, but it is his inability to control his sexual desires and his need to maintain his sense of superiority that ultimately leads to his disgrace.⁹⁶

⁹⁶ Acharya, Badri P, "THE POLITICS OF COUNTER-FOCALIZATION IN COETZEE'S DISGRACE," *Impact* 8, no. 12 (December 11, 2020): 22.

The Ignorance of David Lurie

David possesses a similar ignorance to Oedipus when it comes to knowledge, but his ignorance relates to the people of South Africa. As previously stated, David fails to adapt to the new attitudes that emerge in post-apartheid South Africa, influencing his perception of women and Africans within South African society. His beliefs are antiquated, needing alterations to exist amidst the societal changes that are ongoing in South Africa. Like Oedipus, it is a combination of David's arrogance and ignorance that influences the actions he takes throughout the novel. His ignorance only further alienated him from his daughter and the other people he comes across once he moves onto Lucy's farm in rural South Africa. David's ignorance causes him to rationalize his actions throughout the novel. When describing his assault of Melanie to Lucy, David initially blames his dismissal from the university because of his age before referencing Melanie's assumed boyfriend as the one at fault. David is blinded by his perceptions of their relations, unable to consider other motives Melanie and her family may have had to accuse him of assault. It is not solely Melanie's perspective that David is unable to comprehend; he constantly struggles to understand any viewpoints beyond his own perceptions. He is unable to understand Lucy's perspective on apartheid and her choice to keep the child she bears following her rape. There are two mechanisms through which David's ignorance makes it difficult to understand the perspectives of others: his misogynistic and racist attitudes which remain from apartheid.

Ignorance due to Misogyny

Beyond his sexual relations with women, David's misogyny is constantly demonstrated through his interactions with Lucy. He recognizes Lucy's love for her farm and her partner Helen

but cannot understand her love since his ideals do not align with his daughters. David describes Lucy as a “*boervrou*,”⁹⁷ finding it outlandish for his daughter to willingly relinquish her status to work on a farm. He does not approve of Lucy’s new life, fearing that she will be harmed by the villagers who inhabit the surrounding area since Lucy has no means of protection (i.e., a man), outside of a rifle. Lucy recognizes his scrutiny towards her lifestyle:

“You think I ought to involve myself in more important things... You think, because I am your daughter, I ought to be doing something better with my life... You think I ought to be painting still lives or teaching myself Russian. You don’t approve of friends like Bev and Bill Shaw because they are not going to lead me to a higher life.”⁹⁸

Lucy’s way of life is not something David can be proud of because it does not allow him to feel a sense of superiority. Her choice to live a life in rural South Africa within an impoverished black community is tasteless in the eyes of David when compared to the superior boer⁹⁹ lifestyle that he embodies. His inability to recognize Lucy’s appreciation for a rural lifestyle on a farm makes it impossible for David to comprehend why Lucy refuses to report the rape to the authorities. Though David’s sexual assault of Melanie was not violent, his actions parallel that of the gang that raped his daughter. He urges Lucy to report the incident to the police, but when engaging in similar abuses of power with his student, he expects no consequences for his actions. The rape of Lucy, like Melanie’s sexual assault, is an instance where power is being utilized against those who are powerless.¹⁰⁰ Lucy views her rape at the hands of African villagers to be a form of reparation for the white oppression of blacks throughout apartheid:

⁹⁷ Coetzee, John Maxwell, *Disgrace*, 36.

⁹⁸ Coetzee, John Maxwell, *Disgrace*, 44.

⁹⁹ “A South African of Dutch or Huguenot descent,” (merriam-webster.com).

¹⁰⁰ Kossew, Sue, “Shame and Redemption in *Disgrace*,” 156.

“But isn’t there another way of looking at it, David? What if . . . what if that is the price one has to pay for staying on? Perhaps that is how they look at it; perhaps that is how I should look at it too. They see me as owing something. They see themselves as debt collectors, tax collectors. Why should I be allowed to live here without paying? Perhaps that is what they tell themselves.”¹⁰¹

To David, this notion is childish. Lucy could easily move in with her mother in Holland or escape to some other refuge with David to avoid the dangers of living in rural South Africa, but that is not ideal in the eyes of Lucy. She recognizes the price of living on her farm in South Africa, and her love for this way of life dissuades her from reporting the rape as it would signal the end of her farm. Seeing no other options to maintain her current lifestyle, Lucy decides to give birth to the child she bares from the rape and will marry Petrus to ensure her protection. David laments Lucy’s decision with a misogynistic tone, “A father without the sense to have a son: is this how it is all going to end, is this how his line is going to run out...”¹⁰² Unable to understand a woman’s perspective and his own daughter's wishes, David fails to recognize how his misogynistic views alter his perceptions of reality.

Ignorance due to Racism

The co-proprietor of Lucy’s farm is a man named Petrus. Petrus is a black South African who owns some land and assists Lucy and Bev Shaw with the care of the dogs on the farm. When David first meets Petrus, all impressions point toward Petrus being a good man. When Petrus fails to protect David and Lucy from the assault via the group of black South African farmers and David discovers that Petrus knows the individuals responsible, David’s perception

¹⁰¹ Coetzee, John Maxwell, *Disgrace*, 95.

¹⁰² Coetzee, John Maxwell, *Disgrace*, 119.

of him changes. He cannot trust Petrus after this discovery, but in rural South Africa, it is people like Petrus who possess the authority over others:

In the old days one could have had it out with Petrus. In the old days one could have had it out to the extent of losing one's temper and sending him packing and hiring someone in his place. But though Petrus is paid a wage, Petrus is no longer, strictly speaking, hired help...He sells his labour under contract, unwritten contract, and that contract makes no provision for dismissal on grounds of suspicion. It is a new world they live in, he and Lucy and Petrus. Petrus knows it, and he knows it, and Petrus knows that he knows it.¹⁰³

Once again, David expresses nostalgia for the apartheid system in which white South Africans had complete authority over the black South Africans. In this new system, Petrus is no longer fallible for the crimes committed against Lucy and David. Without any proof or a police case, Petrus is free to continue to live his life, much to the dismay of David. Within post-apartheid South Africa, racist attitudes can no longer be openly expressed by white South Africans. David maintains his racism unconsciously and internally throughout the novel. There are some instances in the novel where David's subconscious, racial biases come to the surface. When David discovers Pollux, one of the men involved in the rape of his daughter, spying on Lucy in the shower, his racist sentiments are unleashed:

Never has he felt such elemental rage. He would like to give the boy what he deserves: a sound thrashing. Phrases that all his life he has avoided seem suddenly just and right: Teach him a lesson, Show him his place. So this is what it is like, he thinks! This is what it is like to be a savage!¹⁰⁴

The narrator claims that David has avoided these terms throughout his life, but his use of authority over vulnerable people of color blended with his nostalgia from the old days of

¹⁰³ Coetzee, John Maxwell, *Disgrace*, 69.

¹⁰⁴ Coetzee, John Maxwell, *Disgrace*, 124.

apartheid makes this scene unsurprising to the reader. David finally recognizes his racist attitudes, but he rationalizes them since the boy participated in the violent gang rape of his daughter. Here David further demonstrates his hypocrisy in regard to his exploitation of women. To an extent, David's actions with Melanie mirror Pollux's actions with Lucy. David stalked Melanie and showed up to her house to coerce her into sex. His actions are just as indefensible as Pollux's actions.

At the novel's end, David takes over the role of caring for the dogs who are to be put down, while Petrus gains more power and land in rural South Africa. The role reversal signals the change in power dynamics following the end of apartheid. David fails to overcome his biases towards women and Africans, further cementing his fall from grace. Though David has abused his power and refused to admit fault for his actions throughout the novel, he still deems himself to be a man on par with Aristotle's notion of a tragic hero, "Not a bad man but not good either."¹⁰⁵ Directly comparing the self-concept and other's perceptions of Oedipus and David will demonstrate that although David possesses similar qualities to the tragic hero, he embodies the antithesis of an Aristotelian tragic hero.

¹⁰⁵ Coetzee, John Maxwell, *Disgrace*, 117.

The Self-Concepts of David Lurie and Oedipus

Even if one were to side with David's perspective of his sexual relations with Melanie, his character is by no means noble. One of the clear distinctions between the tragic hero, Oedipus and David is their own self-concepts. It is clear throughout the play that Oedipus believes his decisions are just and the actions he takes are altruistic in nature. There is no ulterior motive behind Oedipus' decision to save the city of Thebes; he does not seek to save the city for any reason besides the fact that he has been welcomed by the Thebians as king and has seen the suffering the plague has brought to the people of the city. It is because of his love for Thebes—among other reasons—that Oedipus, overcome with guilt, willingly blinds himself and accepts his exile from the city upon discovering the truth behind the plague. While misguided by his hamartia, Oedipus never questions the decisions he makes throughout the play, unlike David. His hubris is not a sin of his character. He prides himself on his knowledge because every experience he has had has reasserted the veracity of his wisdom. Oedipus possessed the wisdom to solve the Sphinx's riddle. As a result of this event, there was no reason for Oedipus to question his own knowledge. Oedipus demonstrates confidence in his actions but is not arrogant like David. His actions do not reinforce false beliefs about himself, besides the beliefs of his origins which are beyond his own control. Arrogance and pride may be traits that displease the gods in Greek tragedies, but it is Oedipus' choice to embark on a journey with the hopes of altering fate that is his hubris rather than these qualities.

The impetus behind Oedipus' hubris was attempting to avoid his destiny of killing his father and marrying his mother. The very act of striving to alter this fate demonstrates that it is not within Oedipus' self-concept to commit these acts. Unlike Oedipus, David does not

demonstrate that his choice to sexually assault Melanie is beyond the bounds of his self-concept.

Near the end of the novel, David recalls picking up a young German traveler on the road:

Without warning a memory comes back from years ago: of someone he picked up on the N1 outside Trompsburg and gave a ride to, a woman in her twenties travelling alone, a tourist from Germany, sunburnt and dusty. They drove as far as Touws River, checked into a hotel; he fed her, slept with her. He remembers her long, wiry legs; he remembers the softness of her hair, its feather-lightness between his fingers.¹⁰⁶

Thoroughly disgraced because of his actions, David still reminisces on his past sexual escapades, unable to recognize his past behavior as exploitative in nature. David may have believed that his sexual assault of Melanie was, “Not rape, but undesired...,”¹⁰⁷ he later demonstrates that he has no real comprehension of the concept of rape:

The streetwalkers are out in numbers; at a traffic light one of them catches his eye, a tall girl in a minute black leather skirt. *Why not*, he thinks, *on this night of revelations...*The girl is drunk or perhaps on drugs: he can get nothing coherent out of her. Nonetheless, she does her work on him as well as he could expect. Afterwards she lies with her face in his lap, resting. She is younger than she had seemed under the streetlights, younger even than Melanie. He lays a hand on her head. The trembling has ceased. He feels drowsy, contented; also strangely protective. *So this is all it takes!*, he thinks. *How could I ever have forgotten it?*¹⁰⁸

David takes pride in raping a vulnerable, young woman, who may be a minor. His ignorance did not embolden him to act in a manner that goes against his morality, committing a sin in the process and leading to his downfall. David has no morals regarding his behavior; he lacks empathy and continually takes advantage of others. He possesses a self-concept of disgust because he is a disgusting individual. David’s subconscious seems to be cognizant of this fact,

¹⁰⁶ Coetzee, John Maxwell, *Disgrace*, 115.

¹⁰⁷ Coetzee, John Maxwell, *Disgrace*, 15.

¹⁰⁸ Coetzee, John Maxwell, *Disgrace*, 116-117.

but he refuses to recognize it consciously, due to his arrogance. He is unable to adjust to the new South Africa because he cannot fulfill his personal needs—his sexual desires—without using the authority he once wielded during apartheid. David is by no means a man neither good nor evil, with noble intentions that suffers misfortune. He is an evil man who benefitted from the privilege he once received through apartheid and suffers a fall from grace due to the end of this oppressive system, and his stubborn inability to relinquish his self-indulgent nature.

Carl Rogers—who posited the notion of self-concept—believed that all humans were innately good, but committed evil acts due to the inability to come to terms with traits they deem to be negative.¹⁰⁹ According to Rogers, it is through therapy and self-acceptance that individuals can build the trust within themselves to act in a manner that satisfies their needs without harming others (a congruent self-concept). David possesses an incongruent self-concept because he is unable to accept his desire for non-white South Africans, while Oedipus possesses an incongruent self-concept because he is unable to recognize the truth behind his origins. Oedipus has no reason to doubt the knowledge he possesses about his origins, but this faulty knowledge causes him to commit evil. Where Oedipus attempted to verify his knowledge to no avail, David refuses to consider his desires as problematic and willingly harms others. His unconscious mind clearly recognizes that his actions are damaging to others as well as himself, but David's conscious mind refuses to acknowledge this due to his racist attitudes. It is a combination of his misogynistic attitudes from apartheid and his unwillingness to recognize these emotions that leads to his exploitation of women of color in the novel. While Oedipus' downfall was avoidable given his fate from birth, David's downfall could have been avoided if he would have come to terms with his desires for women of color.

¹⁰⁹ Rogers, Carl R, "A Note on the 'Nature of Man.," *Journal of Counseling Psychology* 4, no. 3 (1957): 202, <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0048308>.

Conclusion

The ANC's claim of *Disgrace* reinforcing negative racial stereotypes from apartheid is unsupported by the actual text of the novel. Coetzee employs a technique called counter-focalization in the novel, in which the narrator presents the events from the perspective of the focalizer (being David).¹¹⁰ David's portrayal in the novel is ironic; his perspectives demonstrate the antiquated ideas of power and race from the apartheid era in South Africa. The stories of the oppressed—people of color, Melanie, Lucy, etc.—are not represented through this literary technique.¹¹¹ Coetzee's framing of David demonstrates his condemnation for not only the system of apartheid, but also the individuals who benefit and continue to benefit from the privilege the system granted them. Coetzee includes the rape of Lucy at the hands of a group of Africans to mirror the actions David takes towards women in the novel. By including the rape of a white colonial woman by African natives, Coetzee demonstrates that both the whites and blacks are capable of the same oppressive acts. Lucy's rape illustrates the end of the established racial and social hierarchies in South Africa.¹¹² The problematic nature of David's attitudes towards women and blacks is constantly reinforced in the novel and serves to frame David's character as malevolent. David's ideology undergoes the same collapse as the racial and social hierarchies present from apartheid, further exemplifying that David's attitudes cannot coexist with the new attitudes emerging in post-apartheid South Africa.

David is by no means a tragic hero like Oedipus. His downfall into disgrace is brought about by his own stubborn and arrogant personality, so the audience feels no sympathy towards his suffering. David will remain unable to achieve happiness unless he continues to satisfy his

¹¹⁰ Acharya, Badri P, "COUNTER-FOCALIZATION IN COETZEE'S DISGRACE," 15.

¹¹¹ Acharya, Badri P, "COUNTER-FOCALIZATION IN COETZEE'S DISGRACE," 23.

¹¹² Meyers, Jeffrey, "In a Dark Time: Coetzee's *Disgrace*," *Style* 47, no. 3 (2013): 341, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5325/style.47.3.334>.

desire through exploiting women. If any character in *Disgrace* evokes sympathy from the audience in a similar manner to a tragic hero, it is Lucy. Lucy's love for her farming lifestyle complicates her decision to report the crime and leave rural South Africa. She refuses to abandon her way of life, and is forced to marry Petrus out of desperation and gives birth to the child from the rape in order to maintain her position in rural South Africa.¹¹³ Lucy views her situation as a consequence of the evils committed by white Europeans through the colonization of South Africa, and she hopes her decisions "pay the price" to continue living amongst the black South Africans in the rural portion of the country.¹¹⁴ While white South Africans from the old generation (like David) should be condemned for their actions and views towards black South Africans, Lucy displays the hope for a reformed South Africa following the end of apartheid, earning readers' sympathy.

Coetzee may have drawn inspiration for the character of David Lurie through his analysis of texts by Geoffrey Cronjé, a white South African nationalist who voiced support for establishing apartheid in the 1940s.¹¹⁵ Cronjé believed that the segregation of black and white communities in South Africa was necessary to prevent "blood-mixing" between white and black South Africans.¹¹⁶ He believed that separating these communities would allow both black and white South Africans to maintain their culture without the desire to practice aspects of the other's culture.¹¹⁷ Coetzee was very critical of this notion because he believed that it was irrational to restrict the desires of individuals. With this context, Coetzee's portrayal of David takes on a new meaning. Because of the separation of white and black South Africans during apartheid and the

¹¹³ Abootalebi, Hassan, "Collapse of White Authority," 82.

¹¹⁴ Coetzee, John Maxwell, *Disgrace*, 95.

¹¹⁵ Sanders, Mark, "Undesirable Publications," *Law & Literature* 18, no. 1 (2006): 101, <https://doi.org/10.1525/lal.2006.18.1.101>.

¹¹⁶ Sanders, Mark, "Undesirable Publications," 102-103.

¹¹⁷ Sanders, Mark, "Undesirable Publications," 103.

racist attitudes that emerged as a result, David resents his sexual desire for women of color and constantly exploits them to fulfill it. His attitudes and actions must be erased from South African culture by both white and black South Africans, or the damages from apartheid may lead to a new system of oppression that targets white South Africans. *Disgrace* can be interpreted as Coetzee's plea to South Africans to progress past the evils of apartheid and begin to repair race-relations within their society.

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