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Animals
in
J. M. Coetzee's
Disgrace

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1. Introduction

They [the animals] are part of the furniture, part of the alarm system. They do us the honour of treating us like gods, and we respond by treating them like things.

(Coetzee 2000: 78)

I chose to read Coetzee's *Disgrace* in a "Gymnasium," because animals are a central ethical issue. I will discuss ethics after the students have worked on the novel for at least two weeks; therefore, I expect them to know the novel well. Knowing that the novel is very complex, I will teach it to a class in the "Oberstufe". In order to give the students a general overview of ethics and animal rights, I will read a philosophical passage with them. Then I will work closely on the book, analysing how animals are depicted in metaphors. Before moving away from the text itself and trying to connect the ethical issue to the whole novel, I will ask the students to examine the protagonist's attitude towards animals. Finally, we will discuss our findings and exchange personal opinions.

2. Peter Singer and Animal Rights

To introduce the topic I will start with an excerpt from a public dialogue between Peter Singer and Judge Richard Posner in *Slate Magazine* about ethical obligations to animals. Since the discussion topic should be well prepared for by the students, I will ask them to read the text by Singer and answer some questions about it for their homework. Before handing out the text, however, I will ask them if they know who Peter Singer is and explain that he is a contemporary Utilitarian philosopher who specialises in bioethics.

The students should answer the following questions at home:

- 1) What does Peter Singer mean by "equal consideration of interests"?
- 2) Is, according to Peter Singer, every human being more valuable than any animal of any other species? Explain why or why not this is the case.
- 3) What do you think of his argumentation? Discuss.

These questions should help the students to understand Singer's viewpoint on animal rights. In his opinion, human and non-human animals are equal, and an animal's pain should be considered as bad as a person's pain. His argumentation goes so far to claim that not all human beings are more valuable than animals. He implies that a chimpanzee, for example, is more valuable than a mentally

disabled person who is in his opinion not rational, self-aware or autonomous.

This, of course, should lead to considerable discussion. Do the students think that Singer goes too far with this statement? If yes, how would they argue to prove that he is wrong? Afterwards, we could simulate a TV show. I would ask the students to form two groups, one of which would argue for Singer's view and the other against his argumentation. Each group will be assigned to collect arguments and must choose three people who will present them so that we have a total of six people debating animal rights. This may seem to be a rather long introduction. Yet if one takes into account that the students have already worked on *Disgrace* in depth, they deserve to have classes in which they can be more 'active.' The students who do not take part in the debate will be the audience and are allowed to ask questions or voice their opinions. Furthermore, a host, who will be leading the debate, will be chosen. Thus, everybody is included. The students will therefore learn how to present good arguments. Moreover, they will hopefully have fun because Singer is discussed in a simulated TV show rather than with the teacher.

3. Metaphors

After the students have expressed their opinions on animal rights, we will return to Coetzee's novel. It is obvious that many animals are mentioned in *Disgrace*. However, I would like the students to recognise that there are not only animals on Lucy's farm. Indeed, the novel contains many metaphors containing animal images right from the start. I would ask the students to work in pairs and look for animals and animal images on pages 2-3, 10, 25 and 56.

At the beginning of the novel, David Lurie compares having sex with the prostitute Soraya to snakes engaged in intercourse: "lengthy, absorbed, but rather abstract, rather dry, even at its hottest" (Coetzee 2000: 3). This comparison seems unusual, as snakes evoke negative feelings because they are dangerous animals.

The second animal metaphor can be found at the end of chapter one, when David acquires Soraya's private phone number, calls her and wonders why Soraya is furious. "But then, what should a predator expect when he intrudes into the vixen's nest, into the home of her cubs?" (Coetzee 2000: 10). Soraya is described as a mother who wants to protect her children so that David cannot do them any harm. Since David is the predator, this metaphor puts him in a very negative light.

We can find even more animal imagery if we have a look at the scene of intercourse between Melanie and David. When he more or less forces her to sleep with him, she seems "like a

rabbit when the jaws of the fox close on its neck" (Coetzee 2000: 25). Melanie has been chased; she could not rescue herself and is now waiting until "the rape" is over.

The last metaphor I want the students to examine is on page 56, when David is being questioned by university students after the hearing. They are referred to as "hunters who have cornered a strange beast and do not know how to finish it off" (Coetzee 2000: 56). This time it is Lurie who is in the position of being the hunted animal. However, he is a "strange beast" (Coetzee 2000: 56) and therefore not at all helpless prey. Whereas the reader sympathises with Soraya, s/he does not necessarily do so with Lurie.

What do these metaphors have in common with one another? It is striking that they are all used in a negative context and that two of them are related to sex. They underline the fact that David does not love Soraya or Melanie; his only aim is the satisfaction of sexual desire. In three of the images, the animals are presented as suffering. If we have a look at the animals on the farm, we learn that they suffer as well: the dogs are killed by the three intruders, the sheep are slaughtered for Petrus's party, the animals in the clinic are killed, etc. One could say that these metaphors foreshadow the suffering of the animals on the farm. At this point, I would ask the students if they see a connection between Singer's text and Coetzee's use of metaphors. By comparing animals to human beings does he put human and nonhuman animals on the same moral footing? By comparing the suffering of human beings to the suffering of animals does the novel imply that one ought to give equal consideration to their interests? After a short discussion I would draw the students' attention to page 205 where Lucy and David use the simile "like a dog." Giving up the land and becoming Petrus's third wife is represented as humiliating and equal to a life of a dog. Again, the suffering of human and nonhuman animals are compared. This important metaphor should close the work on animal imagery.

4. David's attitude towards animals

Third, I would like to have a closer look at the relationship between the protagonist and actual animals in the novel. There is a radical change in David's behaviour with regard to animals, and I would like the students to look for possible situations where this change might be indicated. At the beginning of the novel, animals do not seem to be important to David at all. When he talks about the Animal Welfare League with Lucy, he says: "[...] I'm sorry, my child, I just find it hard to whip up an interest in the subject. [...] after a while you itch to go off and [...] kick a cat" (Coetzee 2000: 73). With this statement, David not only says that he is not interested in animals but also that he does not approve of welfare organisations and does not like the people who work for them (cf.

Coetzee 2000: 73). Shortly after this scene, however, David falls asleep in Katy's cage. This is a clear sign that he feels comfortable being with the dog. Additionally, he decides to help Bev Shaw in the clinic (Coetzee 2000: 79). From then on, the reader recognises that the longer David works in the clinic, the more he cares for the animals, especially the dogs. In a conversation with Bev (cf. Coetzee 2000: 85), he seems to sympathise with them when he asks if they are all going to die. I would read pages 142-146 carefully with the students, because it is obvious here that David is moved by his work at the clinic. He realises that he cannot get used to assisting in the killing of the dogs and even cries on his way home from the clinic. Without being able to understand his behaviour and his feelings, he even does the incinerating himself in order to save the honour of their corpses.

Another important fact one should take into account is that David shares his Byron project with the dogs. He even sings to himself, being surrounded by the dogs (cf. Coetzee 2000: 212). Furthermore, he thinks of adding the lamenting voice of a dog to the duet: "Would he dare to do that: bring a dog into the piece, allow it to loose its own lament to the heavens between the strophes of lovelorn Teresa's? Why not? Surely, in a work that will never be performed, all things are permitted?" (Coetzee 2000: 215). In David's imagination, the dog suffers. The animal's suffering could underline Teresa's pain. We could again ask ourselves if he wants to claim that one should give equal consideration to the interests of animals. By all means, this passage shows that animals have become a major part of Lurie's life.

Moreover, the students will probably bring up the subject of *Driepoot*, the young dog David "has come to feel a particular fondness for" (Coetzee 2000: 214-215). In seeming contrast to his growing affection for this dog, however, he does not save it but rather assists Bev in killing it at the end of the novel. It is striking that the novel ends with the image of the dog, because this puts animals in the centre of the narrative. This also reflects David's change in attitude towards animals: whereas actual animals are not mentioned at the beginning of the novel, they play an important role at the end. In a lesson, I would use a discussion of this closing scene as a transition to the next task.

5. Connection to the Content

How can we now connect what we have found out about animals to the knowledge we have gained since beginning to work on *Disgrace*? How can we interpret the ending of the book, for instance? I would be interested in how the students read this scene. Some might think that David accepts that he cannot rescue the dogs, though he can relieve their pain and suffering. Perhaps they will see this as a sign that he also accepts that he cannot help Lucy or intrude on her life. During the course of

the narrative, he has tried over and over again to persuade his daughter to leave South Africa and start a new life where it is safer. One could suggest that by giving up the dog, David acknowledges that he cannot force Lucy to change her life. On the other hand, one could interpret the ending in terms of David himself. He wants to start from ground zero, and the last scene could be read as a hint of his having made the decision to do so.

I will work with students on the question of whether David Lurie changes during the course of the novel. Could this scene function as evidence for the change in the protagonist? We have discussed that David did not like animals before, but that he learned to care for them. Additionally, he gives in to Lucy at the end, knowing that she has to lead her life as she chooses. Because of David's development, the reader can identify with him. At the beginning, this is hardly possible: spying on a prostitute and persuading a young girl to sleep with him are behaviours which the reader will probably disapprove of. The animals, however, help David in some way to reconsider his way of life.

Additionally, I would like to talk about the title of the book. On the one hand, it might refer to the protagonist, who lives in a state of disgrace because of his relationship with a university student. On the other hand, it draws one's attention to Lucy, who is dishonoured, because she is raped and is impregnated by three black men. However, the word "disgrace" is also often used with regard to animals: "They flatten their ears, they droop their tails, as if they too feel the disgrace of dying" (Coetzee 2000: 143). Here, death is seen as a state of disgrace, and it is obvious that in the novel there are many animals that die. Furthermore, David does the incinerating in order not to dispose of the dogs in a disgraceful manner. These considerations make it clear that the title can refer to animals and not just to the protagonist.

In my opinion it is important that the students do not discuss the topic in isolation but also relate it to the whole novel. This task should make them aware of the fact that the question of ethics is embedded in Coetzee's work. Therefore, it should not be taught separately.

6. Final Discussion

In the final discussion I would like the students to remember what we have talked about during our work on the role of animals in *Disgrace* and to think about the novel's possible intentions. What does the novel intend to tell us? Is there any clear suggestion that we ought to treat animals in a more humane way? Every student has to answer this question on his or her own. I would like them then to articulate their thoughts in class. It would perhaps be going too far to claim that Coetzee intends to advocate animal rights on the basis of his novel. However, I would ask the students to do

research about other works by Coetzee before the final discussion. Knowing that he has produced non-fictional works such as *The Lives of Animals* (1999), for example, could help them to understand Coetzee's position on animal rights. At the very least, we should take into account the fact that the descriptions of animals and their treatment are narrated in a realistic way in *Disgrace*, and that this evokes negative feelings. The reader is shocked and sympathises with the animals.

There are several people in the novel who care about animals a great deal. Yet the reader learns that animals have little or no rights in South Africa. We could compare the situation of animals in South Africa and Germany, for instance. While dogs in South Africa have the function of guarding property and people, they have a completely different status in Germany. In what ways are they treated as pets or substitute children. What about the treatment of animals on German farms? These are possible questions I would ask the students in order to provoke a serious discussion.

7. Appendix

Peter Singer: First of a series of letters in an Email Debate with Judge Richard Posner on Animal Rights in *Slate Magazine* (June 12, 2001):

Before the rise of the modern animal movement there were societies for the prevention of cruelty to animals, but these organizations largely accepted that the welfare of nonhuman animals deserves protection only when human interests are not at stake. Human beings were seen as quite distinct from, and infinitely superior to, all forms of animal life. If our interests conflict with theirs, it is always their interests which have to give way. In contrast with this approach, the view that I want to defend puts human and nonhuman animals, *as such*, on the same moral footing. That is the sense in which I argued, in *Animal Liberation*, that "all animals are equal." But to avoid common misunderstandings, I need to be careful to spell out exactly what I mean by this. Obviously nonhuman animals cannot have equal rights to vote and nor should they be held criminally responsible for what they do. That is not the kind of equality I want to extend to nonhuman animals. The fundamental form of equality is *equal consideration of interests*, and it is this that we should extend beyond the boundaries of our own species. Essentially this means that if an animal feels pain, the pain matters as much as it does when a human feels pain—if the pains hurt just as much. How bad pain and suffering are does not depend on the species of being that experiences it.

People often say, without much thought, that *all* human beings are infinitely more valuable than any animals of any other species. This view owes more to our own selfish interests and to ancient religious teachings that reflect these interests than to reason or

impartial moral reflection. What ethically significant feature can there be that *all* human beings but *no* nonhuman animals possess? We like to distinguish ourselves from animals by saying that only humans are rational, can use language, are self-aware, or are autonomous. But these abilities, significant as they are, do not enable us to draw the requisite line between *all* humans and nonhuman animals. For there are many humans who are not rational, self-aware, or autonomous, and who have no language—all humans under 3 months of age, for a start. And even if they are excluded, on the grounds that they have the potential to develop these capacities, there are other human beings who do not have this potential. Sadly, some humans are born with brain damage so severe that they will never be able to reason, see themselves as an independent being, existing over time, make their own decisions, or learn any form of language.

If it would be absurd to give animals the right to vote, it would be no less absurd to give that right to infants or to severely retarded human beings. Yet we still give equal consideration to their interests. We don't raise them for food in overcrowded sheds or test household cleaners on them. Nor should we. But we do these things to nonhuman animals who show greater abilities in reasoning than these humans. This is because we have a prejudice in favor of the view that all humans are somehow infinitely more valuable than any animal. Sadly, such prejudices are not unusual. Like racists and sexists, speciesists say that the boundary of their own group is also a boundary that marks off the most valuable beings from all the rest. Never mind what you are like, if you are a member of my group, you are superior to all those who are not members of my group. The speciesist favors a larger group than the racist and so has a large circle of concern; but all these prejudices use an arbitrary and morally irrelevant fact—membership of a race, sex, or species—as if it were morally crucial. The only acceptable limit to our moral concern is the point at which there is no awareness of pain or pleasure, and no preferences of any kind. That is why pigs count, but lettuces don't. Pigs can feel pain and pleasure. Lettuces can't.

8. Works Cited

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