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An Annotated Bibliography: J. M. Coetzee's *Age of Iron*

Introduction

This annotated bibliography provides a chronological list of book reviews and criticism of J. M. Coetzee's novel *Age of Iron* (1990). As seen in Derek Attridge's *J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading* (2004), critics have often regarded an engagement with complex ethical issues in South Africa as central to Coetzee's work, and *Age of Iron*, an epistolary novel at the end of the apartheid era in Cape Town, is no exception. The novel explores the representation of the other, love, and care, and such ethical concerns have attracted scholars. This project aims to provide discussions regarding the ethical reading of *Age of Iron*.

J. M. Coetzee was born in Cape Town, South Africa in 1940. He published his first work, *Dusklands*, in 1974, which is broadly recognized as a postmodernist novel of South Africa.¹ His fiction has depicted violence and oppression within the colonial and post-colonial world. He received the first of two Booker Prizes for *Life & Times of Michael K* (1983), which

¹ Dominic Head adds that Coetzee is widely known as a postmodernist but also recognized as a "late modernist" ([18], ix).

tells the story of Michael K, narrated by the third-person narrator and by a medical officer during a fictional civil war. In 1990, Coetzee published *Age of Iron*, in which the protagonist, Mrs. Curren, writes a letter to her daughter since the day she was diagnosed with terminal cancer. As Gabriele Annan points out, *Age of Iron* depicts “more overtly about apartheid than any others [Coetzee] has written” [3]. The novel has been seen as the first novel about contemporary South African society in Coetzee’s fiction, and *Disgrace* (1999), which was given the second Booker Prize, follows. The Nobel Prize in Literature for 2003 was awarded to Coetzee because he “in innumerable guises portrays the surprising involvement of the outsider.”² After he moved to Australia in 2002, many of his works, including *Elizabeth Costello* (2003), *Slow Man* (2005), and a trilogy of Jesus novels (2013, 2016, 2019), deal with the themes such as the ethics of animals, senescence, and immigration.

Throughout his writing career, Coetzee explores otherness, and *Age of Iron* portrays how one can trust/love the other. In her last days, Mrs. Curren confronts indigency and violence through encounters with Vercueil, a vagrant sleeping on her property, Bheki, her servant’s son who died during the civil commotion, and John, Bheki’s friend killed by police. The narrator, a retired Classics teacher, is a well-educated garrulous character; on the other hand, most people she interacts with are taciturn with her. In particular, the following five scholars’ analyses of the representation of the other in his fiction greatly influenced Coetzee’s study. For example,

² Nobel Prize Outreach AB 2022. “The Nobel Prize in Literature 2003.” *NobelPrize.org*. <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2003/summary/>.

Benita Parry examines a representation of silenced characters in *Life & Times of Michael K*, *Foe* (1986), and *Age of Iron*. In the post-colonial context, Parry considers that Coetzee's silenced characters describe the white writer's dilemma of instability and disorder in South Africa [11]. Following Parry's consideration, David Attwell focuses on the two terms "dialogue" and "fulfillment" to reveal Coetzee's ethics which is not a specific but a culturally rooted code of ethics. According to Attwell, *Age of Iron* is a polyphonic dialogue novel but not reciprocal enough, and the narrator recognizes it [12]. Derek Attridge discusses the relationship between Mrs. Curren as the subject and Vercueil as the other based on "trust" [17]; on the other hand, Gilbert Yeoh claims that the ethics of love is the key statement of the novel that responds to intense violence under apartheid [16]. In addition, Michael Marais examines Coetzee's authorial desire for the other through his relationship with South African history. Coetzee denotes his engagement with the other outside history while refusing history as an a priori system in his fiction [14]. In these ways, Coetzee's description of the other has been observed through characterization and post-colonial, historical, political, and ethical contexts.

His work's ethical concern invites literary scholars' attention, as well as philosophers'. In *J. M. Coetzee and Ethics: Philosophical Perspective on Literature* (2010), edited by philosophers Anton Leist and Peter Singer, Samantha Vice explores Coetzee's moral vision of love and trust against the debate about "whether morality, or the 'moral point of view,' is essentially *impartial*." She states that *Age of Iron* shows the difficulty, or sometimes

impossibility, of living ethically [23].

Motherhood and care are the other critical concerns of *Age of Iron*, both of which relate to ethics. Rachel Ann Walsh analyzes Mrs. Curren's motherhood and humanism, employing Emanuel Levinas's ethic of responsibility [24]. In the critical biography of Coetzee, David Attwell quotes Coetzee's speech at the banquet following the Nobel Prize award ceremony in 2003, in which he talked about his mother's absence. Attwell traces a relationship between his mother and the writing process of *Age of Iron* [29]. Moreover, Mahrukh Khan examines a connection between Mrs. Curren's motherhood and imperialism [28].

The theme of care underlies the novel; however, Mrs. Curren's struggle with caring has not been seen as an ethical issue in general. Marais barely mentions this failure of care, discussing instead an absence of "an ethic of generous hospitality" [19]. Gyllian Phillips, in one of the latest studies of Coetzee's work, explores the care relationship between workers and the vulnerable recipients of their care in Coetzee's novels [33]. An argument about the ethics of care has been gaining attention during the COVID-19 pandemic for the last few years; thus, as Phillips examines the care relationship in Coetzee's novel, care can become the other ethical theme of reading his fiction.

This list includes 33 materials written in English, which were published globally between 1990 and 2021, including book reviews, books, journal and magazine articles, and a Ph. D. dissertation. The items mainly discuss *Age of Iron*, or employ *Age of Iron* as a target of

an ethical reading, collected by the following keywords: “J. M. Coetzee,” “*Age of Iron*,” and “ethics.” By my careful examination, materials that only mention the name of the work or do not analyze it considerably are excluded from the list. The major journals in this list are *English in Africa* by Rhodes University in South Africa, *Matatu: Journal for African Culture and Society* by Brill, and *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* by SAGE Publications. Additionally, *MFS: Modern Fiction Studies*, *Studies in the Novel*, and *Twentieth Century Literature* are the journals that often accept articles about Coetzee’s work. This project was completed using online databases and offline services, such as *ProQuest*, *JSTOR*, *MLA International Bibliography*, *Academic Research Premier*, Hokkaido University Library, and Inter-Library Loan.

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- [1] Thornton, Lawrence. "Apartheid's Last Vicious Gasps." *The New York Times*, Sept. 23, 1990 issue, <https://www.nytimes.com/1990/09/23/books/apartheid-s-last-vicious-gasps.html>. Accessed Oct. 4, 2022.

Compares the narrative by the Magistrate in *Waiting for the Barbarians* and that by Mrs. Curren in *Age of Iron*. Both narrators awaken to complicity with the regime in the land where they live: the province of the Empire for the Magistrate and in 1980s South Africa for Mrs. Curren. Thornton considers *Age of Iron* as a splendid description of the "smoky, apocalyptic" truths of South Africa. Coetzee provides the suffering of the Magistrate's shame of injustice, as well as the witness to the inexorable coming of the age of iron.

- [2] Eder, Richard. "Book Review: A Mirror Held to the Ugly Face of Apartheid." *Los Angeles Times*, Sept. 27, 1990 issue, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1990-09-27-vw-1654-story.html>. Accessed Oct. 4, 2022.

Introduces *Age of Iron* as Coetzee's stabbing confession about the country: the white South Africans envisage "black anger, violence and revenge." Edgar says that Mrs. Curren is a white, privileged woman but also that "she has the gift of lucidity" that "tells her she is black." Additionally, Edgar describes Mrs. Curren's spiritual journey as "a Stations of the Cross in which the old woman painfully comes to learn. . . how disfigured she was before she was black." Edgar seems to be the only reviewer who explains Mrs. Curren's consciousness as black.

- [3] Annan, Gabriele. "Love and Death in South Africa." *The New York Review*, Nov. 8, 1990

issue, <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1990/11/08/love-and-death-in-south-africa/>.

Accessed Oct. 4, 2022.

Reviews Coetzee's *Age of Iron* and Nadine Gordimer's *My Son's Story*, both of which were published in 1990 and depict violence in South African society. Annan regards *Age of Iron* as a realism novel in the apartheid era. Quoting Coetzee's essay "Idleness in South Africa," Annan examines idleness in the description of the race of Vercueil, which is left unknown to readers. Coetzee, in the essay, alerts us to European arrogance of "the idleness of the native." Vercueil can be "its defense in fiction," but also as "an individual with eschatological implications: angel of death." Beyond the level of a political novel, *Age of Iron* resonates with a paradoxical message: political but not political, and nothing to be learned but disgust, grief, and shame to be learned.

- [4] Marais, Michael. "'Who Clipped the Hollyhocks?': J. M. Coetzee's *Age of Iron* and the Politics of Representation." *English in Africa*, vol. 20, no. 2, 1993, pp. 1–24. *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40238710>. Accessed Oct. 4, 2022.

Discusses Coetzee's allusions to Plato's cave and theory of forms in *Age of Iron*. According to Marais, the novel's description of colonial history is an inferior imitation of Plato's simile of the cave: "a distorted, debased representation of an ideal reality or ethical community" (2). Coetzee dramatically illustrates the corruption of social context on the individual South African. When she saw an old family photograph taken in a garden, Mrs. Curren writes: "Who clipped the hollyhocks?" In the picture, there were no people who made the garden, so she guesses the workers are standing outside of this picture so as not to interrupt her family. Marais sees this media representation as an omission of all

indications of the violent world of townships in South Africa.

- [5] Attridge, Derek. "Literary Form and the Demand of Politics: Otherness in J.M. Coetzee's *Age of Iron*." *Aesthetics and Ideology*, edited by George Levine, Rutgers UP, 1994, pp. 243–63.

Considers the relationship between the act of reading and writing through Coetzee's fiction to indicate political demands in South African literature. In Coetzee's work, the effectiveness as literature is not separate from the importance of these works in the ethical-political sphere, but is however constituted by their importance. Attridge claims that there is a difference between "a text that exists as an object to be interpreted" and "one which exists only in an act that unites a reading and a writing, between the presentation of truth and the performance or production. . . of truth" (247). *Otherness*, in his discussion, does not simply locate outside language or discourse but is brought into being by language. Attridge points out that a figure of otherness in *Age of Iron* has high affinities with Herman Melville's *Bartleby*. In conclusion, the text resists the readers' familiar way of reading, especially reading to find "moral support and justification in literature" and presents the difficulty and necessity "of a just response to alterity, of trust in the other" (258). The text achieves this by using language to subject us to the possible but irregular demands of otherness.

- [6] Jolly, Rosemary. "Voyages in J. M. Coetzee's Novels: Narrative Conquests in *Foe*, Narrative Exploration in *Age of Iron*." *Matatu: Journal for African Culture and Society*, vol. 11, no. 1, 1994, pp. 61–70.

Analyzes narrative modes in postcolonial contexts in *Foe* and *Age of Iron* and sees these novels as texts that constitute “a public recognition of the limitations of the use of the figurative narrative form in aborting the colonial enterprise” (68). *Age of Iron* describes the severe violence in South African society and the critical need for and difficulty of a different future; therefore, it can be seen as the first “contemporary realism” novel by Coetzee. Jolly suggests that Coetzee uses the narrator, Mrs. Curren, to approach the issue of narrating South African history without any violent assumptions that narrative can overcome all iniquity while itself staying innocent, but it is impossible.

- [7] Roberts, Sheila. “‘City of Man’: The Appropriation of Dante’s *Inferno* in J M Coetzee’s *Age of Iron*.” *Current Writing: Text and Reception in Southern Africa*, vol. 8, no. 1, 1996, pp. 33–44, doi: 10.1080/1013929X.1996.9677971.

Explores the echo of Dante’s *Inferno* in *Age of Iron*. The role of Vercueil as a messenger works as a wordless Virgil. Roberts considers that Coetzee deploys Dante’s *Inferno* in his novel because of “Dante’s use of Hades as a parody of the city” (35). Dante saw the city of Florence in Italy as Coetzee sees Cape Town, as “an embodiment of Augustine’s ‘City of Man,’” where the brutality keeps the city from being the “City of God” (35). Mentioning Harold Bloom’s examination of “the way successive phases of literature acknowledge borrowings from great forebears” (43–4), Roberts concludes that *Age of Iron* exposes the chaos and pain of South Africa through Dante’s vision and design.

- [8] Marais, Mike. “Places of Pigs: The Tension between Implication and Transcendence in J. M. Coetzee’s *Age of Iron* and *The Master of Petersburg*.” *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, vol. 31, no. 1, 1996, pp. 83–95, doi: 10.1177/002198949603100107.

In a comparison of *Age of Iron* and *The Master of Petersburg*, Marais examines a paradoxical dimension that is the desire to “become a more human literature by transcending the stultifying politics of their social context” (83–4). Coetzee writes of the need to change the society in South Africa; simultaneously, he is aware of the flexible nature of the inescapable “worldliness” of the literary text.

- [9] Huggan, Graham. “Evolution and Entropy in J. M. Coetzee’s *Age of Iron*.” *Critical Perspectives on J. M. Coetzee*, edited by Graham Huggan and Stephen Watson, Palgrave Macmillan London, 1996, pp. 191–212, doi: 10.1007/978-1-349-24311-2.

Claims that the enormous sense of suspense in *Age of Iron* lies in “a tension between evolutionary and entropic principles” (192). Darwinism provides a framework for Huggan’s reading of *Age of Iron*. Mrs. Curren’s narrative represents the process of her dying and the country’s collapse. In a parody of Darwinian logic, Mrs. Curren’s painful death as punishment for the “white liberal” expects its extinction but remains coerced paradoxically. Coetzee illustrates its irony “by playing off the evolutionary metaphor of arrested development against the entropic metaphor of progressive disintegration” (200).

- [10] Head, Dominic. “A True Confession: *Age of Iron*.” *J. M. Coetzee*, Cambridge UP, 1998, pp. 129–43.

This book introduces Coetzee’s fiction from *Dusklands* to *The Master’s Peterburg* as postcolonial literature. By closely reading his novels, Head discovers Coetzee’s position

between Europe and Africa. In the chapter about *Age of Iron*, Head points out a paradoxical dimension of the novel that personal development needs “the self’s acceptance of its own unimportance” (129). At the end of *Foe*, Foe uses the metaphor of “a maze of doubting” to tentatively describe himself as a writer who is in the similar position as postcolonial writers such as Coetzee. Further, Head examines Mrs. Curren’s letter writing as “a secular maze” that is a “Godless maze” (143). Her truth depends on the political ethics, the sense of time and place.

[11] Parry, Benita. “Speech and Silence in the Fictions of J. M. Coetzee.” *Writing South Africa Literature, Apartheid, and Democracy, 1970–1995*, edited by Derek Attridge and Rosemary Jolly, Cambridge UP, 1998, pp. 149–65.

Considers that Coetzee describes white writers’ dilemma of unstable identities in South Africa by writing novels with European literary and philosophical traditions. Parry examines Coetzee’s paradoxical writing mode, which disrupts the colonialist mode and “is grounded in the cognitive systems of the West” (150). In the discussion of colonialism and post-colonialism discourse, silence has been interpreted as “a many-accented signifier of disempowerment and resistance, of the denial of a subject position and its appropriation” (152). However, Parry suggests that silence implies outside of the oppressor/oppressed structure, which is estranged from the world, and criticizes Coetzee’s usage of silence for being restricted as a non-verbal signifying system. In *Age of Iron*, Parry discusses the taciturn Vercueil’s “location on the fringes of the phallogocentric social order, whose dominance through their speechlessness and asexuality [he] evade[s]” and the female

narrator Mrs. Curren's intimacy with death caused by cancer.

- [12]Attwell, David. "'Dialogue' and 'Fulfillment' in J. M. Coetzee's *Age of Iron*." *Writing South Africa: Literature, Apartheid, and Democracy, 1970–1995*, edited by Derek Attridge and Rosemary Jolly, Cambridge UP, 1998, pp. 166–79.

Taking up the terms "dialogue" and "fulfillment" from Benita Parry's argument, Attwell examines *Age of Iron* to reveal Coetzee's achievement in his novel during the Emergency period of South Africa. Coetzee is a writer who repeatedly writes about homelessness of settlers as "symptomatic of the failure to imagine Africa as a place of community" (166). *Age of Iron* is a polyphonic dialogue novel "but not enough reciprocity" (168; italics original), and Mrs. Curren, the narrator herself, recognizes this. The self-consciousness about alterity in *Age of Iron* surfaces differently from Coetzee's previous works, according to Attwell. Attwell considers that "fulfillment" in the novel is "a certain consciousness which the society would ordinarily choose to ignore or to deride" (175). With respect to the subject of ethics in the novel, this chapter argues for not a specific code of ethics but a culturally rooted code of ethics.

- [13]Hoegberg, David E. "'Where is Hope?:' Coetzee's Rewriting of Dante in *Age of Iron*." *English in Africa*, vol. 25, no. 1, 1998, pp. 27–42.

Post-colonial authors often engage to rewrite and critique European literature to denounce a privileged European educational system in the colonial world. By examination of the

intertextuality between Dante's *Inferno*, as European high culture, and Coetzee's *Age of Iron*, Hoegberg reveals the repetition and difference in both works. Coetzee reflects Dante's idea of "the importance of direct experience in the process of self-examination and confession" but is suspicious of Dante's imperial view (28).

[14]Marais, Michael. "“Little Enough, Less Than Little: Nothing’: Ethics, Engagement, and Change in the Fiction of J. M. Coetzee.” *MFS: Modern Fiction Studies*, vol. 46, no. 1, Johns Hopkins UP, 2000, pp. 159–82, doi:10.1353/mfs.2000.0009.

Quoting from Maurice Blanchot's analysis regarding the Orpheus and Eurydice myth and Emmanuel Levinas's theory of the Other, Marais examines Coetzee's authorial desire for the Other through his relationship with South African history. Coetzee refuses "history" on a priori system in his fiction to denote his engagement with the Other outside history. To discuss Coetzee's ethical concern about the history and the Other, Marais uses two of his works: *Age of Iron*, which is set in the 1980s when apartheid was collapsing, and *Disgrace*, which is set in the post-apartheid era. Marais claims that "for Coetzee, the work may work by becoming the writer's responsible response to the Other." According to Marais, although Coetzee constructs the Other in his fiction inspired by Blanchot's understanding of Orpheus's gaze on Euridice, which leads to her ruin by the desire of possession, he illustrates "the Other's possession of the writer." He negotiates with the desire for the possession of Others to highlight "the ability of the Other to affect the subject" (170).

- [15]Yeoh, Gilbert. "J. M. Coetzee and Samuel Beckett: Ethics, Truth-Telling, and Self-Deception." *Critique - Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, vol. 44, no. 4, 2003, pp. 331–48, doi:10.1080/00111610309598888.

To describe Coetzee's development of ethics of the self, Yeoh analyzes Beckettian ethical themes in his trilogy of *Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, and *The Unnamable* in Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *Age of Iron*. Although it is well-known that Beckett had a great influence on Coetzee's fictional work, Yeoh further illustrates the ethical relationship between the two writers. Yeoh interprets the figure of indifference in both writers' works as "the suspension of interpersonal difference in aporia" and "a lack of love toward the otherness of the other" (345). Regarding the argument of indifference and love, Yeoh's "Love and Indifference in J. M. Coetzee's *Age of Iron*" provides a deeper consideration.

- [16]Yeoh, Gilbert. "Love and Indifference in J. M. Coetzee's *Age of Iron*." *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, vol. 38, no. 3, 2003, pp. 107–34, doi:10.1177/00219894030383007.

Set during the apartheid era, *Age of Iron* illustrates the ethics of love in responding to severe violence. According to Yeoh, Coetzee approaches love through the "implicit chiasmic form" (107). Yeoh emphasizes that the form appears as a reversal in Vercueil, who loves Mrs. Curren, and not Mrs. Curren, who loves Vercueil. Love in *Age of Iron* references "Paul's hymn to love in 1 Corinthians 13" and Leo Tolstoy's short story "What Men Live By" but ironically rewrites the ethics of love from these stories. Mrs. Curren represents Paul's "sounding brass," and Vercueil associates a "derelict" in Tolstoy's story,

who symbolizes “agape” as “the novel’s puzzle of love” (130). Moreover, Yeoh suggests that Mrs. Curren’s “rhetoric of love emerges as a rhetoric of indifference” (125). Samuel Beckett’s idea of “a writing of nothing” affects Mrs. Curren’s love discourse with the figure of indifference. Besides, Yeoh articulates the difference between his key statement, ethics of love, and Derek Attridge’s argument of “trust” as the key ethics in the novel.

[17]Attridge, Derek. “Trusting the Other: *Age of Iron*.” *J. M. Coetzee and The Ethics of Reading*, U of Chicago P, 2004, pp. 91–112.

One of the often-cited studies of *Age of iron*. Discusses the trusting relationship between Mrs. Curren and Mr. Vercueil via her letter to her daughter, indicating Jacques Derrida’s and Emanuel Levinas’s theories. According to Attridge, transcending otherness never exists except in some religious contexts, and the self produces the other in a particular place and time. In *Age of Iron*, Mr. Vercueil appears as the other “who challenges Mrs. Curren’s daily habits,” and “his otherness arises from everything that she. . . has rejected” in her habits (99). Attridge considers the trusting issue of leaving her letter to Mr. Vercueil “as a kind of heightened staging of the very issue of otherness” (103). Attridge comprehends Mr. Vercueil not allegorically but literally, not a metaphorical sign but a historical sign of corruption of social order in apartheid. In addition, Attridge interprets the ending of the novel, when Mrs. Curren lies in a bed while Mr. Vercueil embraces her, as her death scene.

In the “ethico-political trauma of the post-colonial world” of the novel, the general rule is no more applied, but the endemic value does, and the moral code is tested and justified in a specific context (110). According to Attridge, “[i]n a sense, the ‘literary’ is

the ethical;” however, literary criticism rarely makes the same statement (111). Attridge concludes that the sketch of trust and love indicated in *Age of Iron* is placed “not in any hagiographic object-lesson. . . but in [the novel’s] enactment. . . in which the reader is invited to participate with sympathy but also with critical judgment” (111).

[18]Head, Dominic. *The Cambridge Introduction to J. M. Coetzee*, Cambridge UP, 2009.

This book briefly introduces Coetzee’s biography and his works’ themes. Head locates *Age of Iron*, which was published in 1990, at the end of the first part of Coetzee’s career. The analysis of the novel is based on Head’s previously published “A True Confession: *Age of Iron*” [10].

[19]Marais, Michael. “From the Standpoint of Redemption: *Age of Iron*.” *Secretary of the Invisible: The Idea of Hospitality in the Fiction of J. M. Coetzee*, Brill, 2009, pp. 95–128, doi:10.1080/00031305.1958.10481753.

To show Coetzee’s negotiation with intense violence in apartheid history, Marais examines an absence of “an ethic of generous hospitality” in *Age of Iron*, mentioning Yeoh’s discussion about the ethic of love. One of Theodor Adorno’s concepts in *Minima Moralia* is a key to understanding Mrs. Curren’s privileged view toward the violent events: “from the standpoint of redemption.” Marais regards a description of Mrs. Curren’s house that symbolizes her status and a failure of care as important. Moreover, Marais connects his discussion with the house in Tolstoy’s short story “What Men Live By.” The story’s

allusions highlight different forms of charity between the shoemaker's self-sacrificing humanity and Mrs. Curren's unwilling tolerance. Marais points out that Mrs. Curren's encounter with Vercueil implies the impossibility of unconditional love and care, and such inability is what Coetzee believes.

[20] Poyner, Jane. "Writing in the Face of Death: 'False Etymologies' and 'Home Truth' in the *Age of Iron*." *J. M. Coetzee and the Paradox of Postcolonial Authorship*, Ashgate, 2009, pp. 111–27.

Throughout her book, Poyner highlights the "paradox of postcolonial authorship" in Coetzee's fiction. She points out that his marginal and oppressed stories paradoxically expose the risk of authorship. In parallel with political contexts in South Africa, she divides Coetzee's career into four phases: the "madness of civilization," the resisting other, the end of apartheid, and beyond a post-colonialist paradigm. *Age of Iron* is placed in the third phase. In reference to Attridge's argument about ethics and politics in the novel, Poyner concludes that Mrs. Curren's ethical arrogance inhabits her discernment of charity and trust and weakens her intellectual authority.

[21] Grayson, Erik. "*The Ones Who Cry*": *Aging and the Anxiety of Finitude in J. M. Coetzee's Novels of Senescence*. 2010, State University of New York, Ph. D. dissertation.

Traces Coetzee's engagement in the representation of old age from *Age of Iron* to *Disgrace*. In particular, Grayson argues that the anxiety of each protagonist in his three novels in the

1990s leads to “a series of attempts to transcend death” (27). According to Grayson, describing aging as a difficult process of degradation, Coetzee creates an elaborated sense of senescence with apprehension for the marginalization of the elderly.

[22] Hayes, Patrick. “Genre and Countergenre: *Age of Iron*, *Pamela*, and *Don Quixote*.” *J. M. Coetzee and the Novel: Writing and Politics After Beckett*, Oxford UP, 2010, pp.130-164.

Describes two main points about *Age of Iron*: Mrs. Curren should not be regarded as “an allegorical figure for an ethical position” but a character who is given voice in South African politics (132–3); and the text is “jocoserious,” by which Coetzee attempts to illustrate “the seemingly impossible idea of a ‘nonposition’” (133). Hayes discusses those two points intertextually with Samuel Richardson’s epistolary novel *Pamela* and Miguel de Cervantes’s *Don Quixote*.

[23] Vice, Samantha. “Truth and Love Together at Last: Style, Form, and Moral Vision in *Age of Iron*.” *J. M. Coetzee and Ethics: Philosophical Perspective on Literature*, edited by Anton Leist and Peter Singer, Columbia UP, 2010, pp. 293–315.

This book explores a philosophical relation to literature by reading Coetzee’s work, which motivates philosophers’ interests. In “Introduction,” the editors, Anton Leist and Peter Singer, explain three “philosophical” features in Coetzee’s work: “an usual degree of reflectivity,” “paradoxical truth seeking,” and “an ethics of social immediacy.” According to the editors, *Age of Iron* is the beginning of Coetzee’s deeper development of the third

characteristic. Regarding essential impartiality in morals, Vice examines “the content and quality of [Coetzee’s] moral vision” in *Age of Iron* (293). She claims that the novel shows the difficulty, or sometimes impossibility, of living ethically. In the era of iron, even love, such as in kinship, Mrs. Curren and her daughter, must be put aside, but it is not blamable.

[24] Walsh, Rachel Ann. “‘Not Grace, Then, but at Least the Body’: Accounting for the Self in Coetzee’s *Age of Iron*.” *Twentieth Century Literature*, vol. 56, no. 2, 2010, pp. 168–95, doi:10.1215/0041462x-2010-3008.

Analyzes how Mrs. Curren’s motherhood and humanism appeared in her letter as a constant ethic based on Emanuel Levinas’s ethic of responsibility, applying *Age of Iron* interpretations by Derek Attridge and Michael Marais and Judith Butler’s argument of responsibility. Coetzee reveals “the historical complicities that shadow our abstractions” and writes meanings of responsibility to the other “when our response is understood as originating in a concrete time and place” (170).

[25] Worthington, Kim L. “*Age of Iron* (1990).” *A Companion to the Works of J. M. Coetzee*. 2011, edited by Timothy J. Mehigan, Camden House, 2014, pp.113-131.

Considering the historical background of *Age of Iron*, Worthington discusses Coetzee’s writing of (non-mythical) truth while facing historic events in the 1980s and 1990s that later became mythical. In the novel, Mrs. Curren finally discovers an ethic of “thoughtless” and the need to “become someone other than yourself.” According to Worthington, it

implies not only a necessity of recognition of another “I,” but also of “other.” Worthington states that a contest in the novel is not between politics and history, nor between fact and fiction. The contest is “one in which the political, the ethical, and the aesthetic ‘are heard’” (126).

[26]Attridge, Derek. “‘To Speak of This You Would Need the Tongue of a God’ —On Representing the Trauma of Township Violence.” *Trauma, Memory, and Narrative in the Contemporary South African Novel*, Brill, 2012, pp. 177–94, doi: 10.1163/9789401208451_009.

Claims that the fictional novel *Age of Iron* becomes historically accurate reportage, considering the commotion in Guguletu, Cape Town, in 1986. Mrs. Curren’s narrative is no more than a literary representation as her diary; thus, it is different from insiders’ narrative in the townships. Attridge mentions the same commotion in Guguletu from other works by Afrikaans writers such as André Brink and Elsa Joubert and quotes classics such as Virgil and Dante, to reveal the process that Mrs. Curren involves readers in the trauma of violence as a reading experience.

[27]Tegla, Emanuela. “Facile Goodness and Shame: *Age of Iron*.” *J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Power: Unsettling Complicity, Complacency, and Confession*, Brill, 2015, pp. 61–122.

Examines the narration as morality in *Age of Iron*, along with *Waiting for Barbarians*, *Life & Times of Michael K*, and *Disgrace*. Contemporary fiction in an epistolary style is “an

instrument of political or ethical communication” (75); and in *Age of Iron*, Mrs. Curren uses “her letter as being a confession” (81). She confesses the difficulty of loving Vercueil: “I love him because I do not love him” (*Age of Iron*, 131). She considers love, charity, and care for her surroundings, such as Vercueil, Bheki, and John; however, she realizes her love and charity are not fulfilled, if she maintains an abstract “moral sense of care or goodness” (94). Telga points out that Mrs. Curren engages the readers to be witnesses to the narrated events, which are “the ethical demands the novel imposes on the reader” (122).

[28]Khan, Mahrukh. “Motherhood and the Measure of Truth in J. M. Coetzee’s *Age of Iron*.” *Matatu: Journal for African Culture and Society*, vol. 47, no. 1, 2015, pp. 247–74, doi: 10.1163/18757421-90000404.

Deploying Julia Kristeva’s terminology, Kahn examines Mrs. Curren’s return to a “maternal territory” that is a stage of the intuitive semiotic stage. A colonizer, Elizabeth Curren makes myths “about the immanent benignity of the human spirit; her regenerative myth is inspired by the ‘instinctual’ and the ‘maternal’” (249). Kahn suggests that the central motif in *Age of Iron* is sterility; the motif emerges as miscommunication “between the black revolutionary voices and a leftist white minority” (250). Moreover, Khan considers Curren’s use of the word “care” as false but argues that her word choices, “which consistently let her down,” can convey her “passionate engagement with the ‘growing’ of a charitable ‘soul’” (266). The inconsistent mother figure in *Age of Iron* subverts the fixed allegation of semiotics and meanings.

[29] Attwell, David. "Mother —*Age of Iron*." *J. M. Coetzee and the Life of Writing: Face to Face with Time*. 2015, Penguin Books, 2016, pp. 137–152.

Traces a relationship between Coetzee and his mother and the writing process of *Age of Iron* through his speech at the banquet after the Nobel Prize ceremony in 2003, *Boyhood*, *Youth*, and *Age of Iron*. In the draft of *Age of Iron*, the novel was composed as a letter from a son to his mother, and during the process of writing, the point of view was changed from the son to the mother. Attwell states that Mrs. Curren's relationship with Bheki, John, and Vercueil with "strong imaginative sympathy" implies that "the root of [the novel's] investment lies in the familial bonds beneath the surface of the final text" (150).

This book is the second biography of J. M. Coetzee, following John Kannemeyer's *J. M. Coetzee: 'n Geskryfde Lewe* ("A Written Life") published in 2012. Throughout the book, Attwell writes his critical views about Coetzee's fiction as his biography.

[30] Dooley, Gillian. "'Hades This Place, and I a Fugitive Shade': Classical Cultures and Languages in J. M. Coetzee's *Age of Iron*." *English in Africa*, vol. 43, no. 1, 2016, pp. 101–08, doi:10.4314/eia.v43i1.5.

Regards Mrs. Curren's knowledge of Greek and Roman mythology and Latin and Ancient Greek as a Classics lecturer as important to the construction of her characterization. Her classical, biblical expressions symbolize "the marginalization of western liberal culture in Africa" (102), in particular when Mrs. Curren rearranges Hesiod's five ages by adding "the softer ages" to envision "a cycle, rather than Hesiod's linear progression" (103). The

characters in the novel are described as iron by Mrs. Curren, but not Vercueil, even while she was compared to iron by Vercueil. In 1980s South Africa, only Vercueil withdraws from western intellectual consciousness and remains as the “entirely other.”

[31] Pretorius, Antoinette. “‘I Become Shameless as a Child’: Childhood, Femininity and Older Age in J. M. Coetzee’s *Age of Iron*.” *Ageing Women in Literature and Visual Culture: Reflections, Refractions, Reimaginings*, 2017, pp. 255–73, doi:10.1007/978-3-319-63609-2_15.

Sees the childhood and older age in Coetzee’s novel as resistance against the stereotypical idea of these ages from age studies’ point of view. In the process towards democracy in South Africa, the aging female Mrs. Curren’s body ironically describes a complex transition into “ideologies centered on newness and youthfulness” (256). Pretorius suggests that Mrs. Curren’s biggest resistance is not against the decline of aging but is represented in her attitude toward police officers when they come to catch John. However, they mistreat her and paradoxically infantilize her because of her older age. According to Pretorius, Coetzee extends older age “beyond a fixed temporal significance, with Curren both breaching the confines of her present physically and subverting the conventionally inevitable decline into moral obsolescence” (271).

[32] Freeman, John. “On J. M. Coetzee’s *Age of Iron*: Perennially, Lamentably, Current.” *Literary Hub*, Oct. 18, 2019, <https://lithub.com/on-j-m-coetzees-age-of-iron-perennially-lamentably-current/>.

Appraises *Age of Iron* as a contemporary classic but confesses that the novel makes readers feel strange and find unfading concerns. Freeman suggests the possible historical background while writing the novel during the State of Emergency in 1980s South Africa. A young single mother named Maki Skosana was burned to death by a group of anti-apartheid activists who suspected her of betrayal. The incident was broadcast throughout the country; it had a huge impact on the activism. According to Freeman, *Age of Iron* has no simple words to describe it, and it is “too specific to be a political allegory.” The novel demands readers not to understand the details of the situations at that time but to seek the meaning of words like “charity.”

[33]Phillips, Gyllian. “Precarious Life and Labor in J. M. Coetzee’s *Age of Iron*, *Slow Man*, and *Diary of a Bad Year*.” *Studies in the Novel*, vol. 53, no. 4, 2021, pp. 368–84, doi:10.1353/sdn.2021.0044.

Explores the relationship between care workers and the vulnerable recipients of their care in Coetzee’s three novels. Employing Judith Butler’s idea of “precarious life,” Phillips claims that the narrative in these novels is shifted from a singular subjectivity to a shared one to resist economic precarity. In *Age of Iron*, Vercueil refuses to be a temporal laborer employed by Curren; thus, Phillips focuses on a servant Florence who represents precarious labor and “offers an ethical-political connection in the critique of apartheid specifically” (372).

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