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Imagining our end: South african apocalyptic fiction

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CHAPTER 3: *Life and Times of Michael K*

"obscurest of the obscure, so obscure to be a prodigy" (*Life and Times of Michael K* 142).

Life and Times of Michael K [1](1983) is written at an explosive time of political crisis in South Africa. Set in an imagined future, it reflects a failed and damaged state whose disregard for its people results in fractured identity, feelings of dehumanisation and loss. There is no sense of reprieve for the characters that, at the close of the novel, find themselves still caught in an "illusory eschatology" (Titlestad 2016, 1). Coetzee is a master storyteller and an iconic literary figure. His emergence and notoriety globally, along with other writers such as, and not limited to, Paton, Gordimer and Brink, helped stage a greater awareness of apartheid and fuelled an urgency about its dire consequences and the pressing need for transformation. He "came to hold a central place in defining an international canon of respectable, morally robust and liberal oppositional literature" (Barmett 288). David Atwell articulates that "*Life and Times of Michael K* was written partly – with the emphasis on partly – in response to a particular political and constitutional debate in South Africa in the early 1980s" (Atwell 1993, 1). A heightened, growing dystopic cycle of political uprising in the State of Emergency (1985 – 1987) is echoed in the clautrophobic mood and militarism in *Life and Times*. While presenting scenes of devastation and despondency, "it is hard to resist the observation …that [the text] stands as perhaps the most accurate of several attempts in South African fiction of the period at giving concrete shape to an imagined future"(*Ibid.* 3). In *Life and Times*, Coetzee immerses his readers into a dystopic future time, sensitively playing with the reader's expectations for an apocalyptic narrative. Tapping into the reader's imagination, he invites a multimodal engagement with the crisis, with the purpose of dispelling profuse feelings of hopelessness.

The style of writing mirrors the pervasive, moribund mood of the "life" and "times" of South Africa in the 1980s. Its nuanced text explores the possibilities of what it means to exist in a world that deprives one of the likelihood to do so. Paradoxically, it suggests as Titlestad aptly comments, a "prudential possibility and qualified optimism"

with the intention to "mute the apocalyptic narrative" (Titlestad 2016, 2). The present chapter will suggest how apocalyptic rhetoric guides the message of the text, firstly by exploring the text itself and, thereafter, by directing an understanding of how the reader is drawn into a performative reading, thus creating an apocalyptic text to encourage the reader's possible active engagement for change.

Coetzee himself indicates that in the dark years of apartheid, it had become " 'too late for politics'…Politics, in this sense, is what comes *before* and *after* the revolution; what happens *during* the revolution is the violent release of forces that politics under 'normal' circumstances tries either to marshal or to oppose" (Coetzee as quoted in Atwell 1993, 1). It is in the shadow pertaining to this idea that Coetzee's fourth novel and first Booker Prize-winning work opens. South Africa is torn by civil war. Even though there is an understanding that *Life and Times* is set in South Africa, details about race and the civil war remain unnervingly indistinct, heightening the reader's disorientation regarding the events presented. The minimalistic, subtle text tells of the life and the difficult times of its protagonist, Michael K, whose hare lip "curled like a snail's foot" and suggests a metonym for his traumatic life [2](Coetzee 1983, 4). Both he and his his mother share a damaged life and live a compromised existence in the dystopic present. He is seen as an anomaly and an object of amusement. Anna K, in her maternal attempt to safeguard him, keeps him away from children, indirectly fostering his alienation and asocial introversion. At first, he observes "his mother polish other people's floors, learning to be quiet" and later, is "taken out of school… committed to the protection of Huis Norenius" in Faure, until the age of fifteen (*Ibid.*). His oppressive, damaged life is marginally counterbalanced by his passion for and solace found in gardening. Employed as a Grade 3(b) gardener for the Parks and Gardens division in Cape Town, he finds this a peaceful activity away from urban chaos, often even failing "to hear the boom of the noon gun" (Coetzee 1983, 4). He lives with his mother under grim and inhumane conditions in the basement room, originally "intended for air-conditioning equipment"(*Ibid.*). While his mother's employers live in a five-bedroomed apartment upstairs, Anna K and Michael's room has "no electric light, no ventilation; the air was always musty" (Coetzee 1983, 6). His fatally ill mother, suffering from dropsy, yearns to be taken back to die on the farm of her youth, which she recalls nostalgically. Deducing that he "had been brought into the world to look after his mother", K, in the throes of the crisis of a civil war, embarks on an implausible journey, a "Great Trek" of sorts, coaxing his mother in a make-shift wheelbarrow, to transport her to a hospital in

Stellenbosch (Coetzee 1983, 7). Reminiscent of the harrowing military presence in the State of Emergency, K traverses the "devastated areas where the demolition of burnt-out buildings had just begun", miraculously avoiding military convoys of "armoured car[s] with a gunner standing in the turret", looters, corrupt policemen and thieves (Coetzee 1983, 20-21).

K arrives at Stellenbosch hospital to discover, three days later, that his mother has died. Determined to fulfil his promise to her, he continues his journey, intending to return her ashes to a farm in Prince Albert (Karoo) where he believes his mother to have spent her youth. Alone and without food, he eventually arrives, scattering her ashes unsure whether he even has the right place. Echoes of former South African apartheid history haunt K's present. On the farm, he briefly meets Visagie , the son of the former white farmer. Refusing to assume a former role of subservience, K runs away from Visagie preferring the solace of the farm and his own thoughts. Physically exhausted and hungry, K is taken to a labour camp in Jakkalsdrift where he eventaully escapes to return to the farm. There he lives in abandoned isolation and, in cicumstances suggestive of magic-realism. K tends the pumpkins, an ascetic existence, learning to survive, depriving himself of food. Guerillas pass through the farm while K tries to keep himself concealed believing that this is his only possible existence and peace amid the growing chaos. Soon after, captured by the military and considered an enemy of the state, he is imprisoned and sent to a rehabilitation camp and prison hospital in Cape Town. The medical doctor on duty, a white liberal, attempts to help him but falls short in being able to understand K's true deep-rooted need. K eventually escapes yet again, and after a brief experience with a pimp and two prostitutes, returns to the basement of the building (ironically named Côte D'Azur) in Seapoint where he previously had lived with his mother. The circular plot structure endorses the idea that the cyclical nature of destruction and suffering continues with only "prudential possibility and qualified optimism" of deferring eschatology (Titlestad 2016, 3).

The text is divided into three sections. The first, which is the longest section, narrates in free indirect discourse the events from K's birth to his arrival at the rehabilitation camp in Cape Town. Part Two, written in first person from the perspective of the medical doctor, narrates the interaction between Michaels(as he is incorrectly referred to here)and the doctor who has fostered a curiosity about his "weakest pet duckling" (Coetzee 1983, 142). It ends with K's second escape. Part Three returns to free indirect discourse and traces K's return to Sea Point, his brief sexual encounter with two

prostitutes and his reclaiming of "his smelly corner"(Coetzee 1983, 183), asserting his withdrawal into and claim of his own, free consciously created space:

> At last, he thought, at least I have not been clever, and come back to Sea Point full of stories of how they beat me in the camps till I was thin as a rake and simple in the head. I was mute and stupid at the beginning. I will be mute and stupid at the end. (Coetzee 1983, 182)

Part One encapsulates the trauma that surrounds K and his abjection. From an early age K's reaction to his dysfunctional world encourages him to cultivate a look of "a person of feeble mind… a poor simpleton" and to withdraw into his silence (Coetzee 1983, 131, 155). He "was easiest when he was by himself', enjoying gardening as "a measure of solitariness" (*Ibid.* 4). His aphasia becomes, on the one hand, a projection of his anxiety and alienation from society. Unable to negotiate his way in a world that is inflexible to change, K is left disempowered and fearful of losing his inner voice and freedom. As a young child, he recalls being "numb with terror" at Huis Norenuis as he stared at mathematical problems gazing "at the word *quotient"* noticing that it "did not change, it did not dissolve, it did not yield its mystery" (*Ibid.* 110). Later, on his exodus from the dystopic city, there are moments where he astutely and strategically uses his assumed stupidity. We read that when he encounters a road-block, thinking that if he looks "very stupid", the soldiers would let him pass (*Ibid.* 40). At another time, while trying to purchase gingersnaps from a shopkeeper, he manages to get her attention as he "looked stupid" (*Ibid.* 51). When the medical doctor and Noël interrogate him about his involvement in the war, he tells them that he is "not clever with words"(*Ibid.* 139). Power relations is a construct of language and by avoiding language and words, K removes himself from power relations that have caused his suffering. His choice has always been to evade, rather than to engage with and transform his emotions. The lack of engagement leaves a void in his social interactions. At one stage, his inability to articulate the questions asked him renders him incapable to communicate. Language, like politics, becomes a vacuum, a "gap", as it cannot move beyond the present crisis :

> Always when he tried to explain himself, there remained a gap, a hole, a darkness before which his understanding baulked, into which it was useless to pour words (Coetzee 1983, 110).

Both his look and silence are conscious reactions to an oppressive dystopic world. They are also a conscious strategy of strength to attempt to protect himself and his identity in his own world, unhindered by the forces that have imposed his suffering. The act reflects his forthright and brave response, albeit unconventional and absurdist in result. Threatened by effacement, he eludes every possibility for eschatology, but is tragically trapped in his abjection and loss. In selecting silence and withdrawal, he paradoxically fashions some notion of selfhood which he feels protects him from the intrusion of others. His action is not cowardly but a heroic resignation in the hope that his inner thoughts and freedom will not be destroyed, confirming that it "did not seem to him that he had been a coward" (*Ibid.* 39). It is not the success of his action that renders him heroic in our minds, but rather that he attempts to survive amidst the improbability of his surroundings. Thus, K's look and silence is not mere passive acceptance, but an assertion of his unwillingness to submit and relinquish his freedom.

Against all odds, K's apparent vulnerability does not make him a victim of the crisis. The apocalyptic rhetoric defers eschatology of erasure. His simplicity should not be assumed as a sign of his "stupidity", of his backwardness. On the contrary, his simplicity makes him stand apart from the violence, the war, the destruction and chaos that surrounds him, suggesting perhaps a mythologised character who contests eschatology. Timothy Wright's (2012) suggestion that his willed obscurity and asocialisation points to his depiction as the Noble Savage merits a brief discussion. Jean-Jacque Rousseau's famous dictum that "Man is born free and everywhere he is in chains" (*Social Contract*) proposes that man is tainted by society.[3] For Rousseau "natural man" is uncorrupted by society and exhibits particular traits such as solitariness as well as a shared empathy for those who suffer. He is existential as "the savage lives in himself" sharing a love of self, an "*amour de soi*" (Ross as quoted in Wright 65). The "civil man" however, is attracted to the aggrandisement and false assertion that society offers, such as (but not restricted to) power, wealth, status. As such he has no sense of self, as he sees himself only through the approval of others. He is narcissistic and unmoved by suffering of others, displaying an "*amour propre*"(*Ibid.*). The mythologised Noble Savage does not seek any power constructs and affirmations from society, and remains content, irrespective of the crisis that threatens to implode around him. His innocence and naïveté act as a "mirror" revealing the failings of man (Wright 65). Coetzee toys with ideas of the Noble Savage as a contested apocalyptic message. Even though Kermode warns us about the failures of myth as an effective means to make sense of the present

chaos and to move from *chronos* to *kairos,* we are led to believe that Coetzee's K does the opposite. In the chaos and the traumatic ruptures that dominate K's world, he is able to move through the crisis and survive even under the most improbable circumstance. He becomes a metonym in the apocalyptic, to reveal and "unveil" the injustice of society which is driven by myopic politics. He thus becomes the "mirror" of the crisis, not only for the reader, but also the medical doctor.

Marijke Van Vuuren (2005) presents an argument suggesting that if K's silence encapsulates his escape from his apocalyptic crisis, then noise for him becomes a reminder of that which threatens his inner consciousness: the sounds of "civil man" seen in war, political power and the resultant oppression. Van Vuuren suggests that "power, war and machinery … fill space" (Van Vuuren 96). The "screams and shouts" of the riot outside his home distress K as they are the reminder of destruction (Coetzee 1993, 22). While K and his mother flee "the burning city", he hears the rumblings of military convoy "in a roar of noise that seemed to turn the air solid"(*Ibid.* 150, 22). When he is captured he notices "the clatter of the helicopter" (*Ibid.* 112). Even the music at Huis Norenuis, which plays "all afternoon and all evening, 'till eight o'clock", makes him "feel restless" because he cannot "think [his] own thoughts" (*Ibid.* 132 & 133). The chaos and confusion that noise emanates for K represents the outer world of eschatology. Its antidote is the inner silence of his own thoughts, unmandated by others. Deprived of agency, K's withdrawal becomes, like the mythologised Natural Savage, "life-giving … associated with nurture and the cultivation of the earth: the garden" (Van Vuuren 96).

K's evasion of destruction and chaos by withdrawing into his own self points to the enigma and complexity in his character. While he may be considered, much like the Noble Savage, to be free from the impact of society, politics and history, the limitations of this is suggested by the text. K removes himself from the realistic time-frames of the current dystopic world as an attempt to enter his own existential self; yet we are reminded that the historical past cannot be either ignored or forgotten, as it continues to impact and haunt the present. To live out of time is a futile improbability. While in the Karoo, he surrenders to nature "and K's confidence came back" (*Ibid.* 106). At first, he is reassured that " every day would be the same as the day before, there would be nothing to say" (*Ibid.* 46). Linear time, an echo of the reality from which he is escaping, is abandoned and thus, in his view, it becomes meaningless as an assertion that "he was not a prisoner or a castaway, his life by the dam was not a sentence that he had to serve out" (*Ibid.* 115). Yielding himself up to abandoning linear time, what he refers to as "the

other time in which the war had its existence", K yields himself "to a time flowing slowly …washing over his body, circulating his armpits and his groin, stirring his eyelids" (*Ibid.* 115). Having moved away from the world that has caused suffering, his conscious attempt at protecting his current state of joy becomes a choice on his behalf to live "beyond the reach of calendar and clock in a blessedly neglected corner, half awake, half asleep"(*Ibid.* 116). Escaping from his crisis, K finds that the Karoo offers him a freedom that has been denied to him and continues to be denied to him under the present regime. It points to an illusory eschatology. While he is engaging with the crisis and posing questions about his own identity which he forges in nature, the time is, however, not permanent. Even though Visagie, a deserter, reassures K that he "makes peace with everyone" and that "there is no war…on the farm", his suggestion that he and K could "live quietly…[on the farm] until they make peace everywhere" is not a viable option for K (*Ibid.* 64). Visagie represents the voice of oppression and K assertively decides to escape:

> The story of his life had never been an interesting one; there had usually been someone to tell him what to do next; now there was no-one, and the best thing seemed to be to wait (*Ibid.* 67).

K questions his existence, his new way of life and strategies to keep himself protected from the apocalyptic crisis of the outside world, but he cannot engage in any type of permanent futurity. He becomes aware of this as he apprehensively monitors the movement of the guerrillas and searches for tracks around the dam and burrow, living day by day. He comes to fear that his newly found existence is always under threat, because no matter how efficiently he burrows himself in the ground and hides he cannot prevent reality from destroying his silence. His fear of eschatological erasure becomes visible in his plea for "the earth …[to] swallow …[him] up and protect…[him]" (*Ibid.* 107).

Through K the "novel carries out … an interrogation into the foundations and origins of the state and its subjects" (Wright 62). We recall the meticulous detail of K's journey transporting his mother in the wheelbarrow, which is a reminder of the Voortrekker's journey to their "promised land". Further, K's garden, where he nurtures the pumpkin seeds and takes great pains to water them and strategize how to keep his

garden productive, is a haunting reminder of the Cape of Good Hope garden started by Jan van Riebeeck on his arrival in 1652. [4] K claiming his piece of the land may also be seen as a haunting reminder of the *plaasroman,* which Coetzee intentionally deconstructs in order to point to its limitations. We recall that K, at one stage, comments that :

> … he could understand that they should have wanted to bequeath the privilege of so much silence to their children and grandchildren in perpetuity(though by what right he was not sure) (Coetzee 1983, 47).

Wright further suggests that while K's garden has contrasting images to the ruptured chaos of the city and may allude to the pre-lapsarian idyll of the Garden of Eden, it is always threatened by invasion and destruction, much like the political space. While the land may at first be considered an abandoned space free from the political injustices that have caused suffering, it is full of threatening presence. K yearns to live "off the land" so that "when "food comes out of this earth…[he] will recover … [his] appetite; for it will have savour" (Coetzee1983, 46 & 101). The open space on the Visagie farm is a barren wasteland where the silence invites K to conclude: "I could live here forever" (*Ibid.* 46). We read that the "anxiety that belonged to the time on the road began to leave him…miles and miles of silence" (*Ibid.* 46-7). For him, the enveloping silence of the Karoo away from debilitating power becomes an emerging space free from the trauma of his former world:

> He climbed a hill and lay on his back listening to the silence, feeling the warmth of the sun soak into his bones (*Ibid.* 46).

The apparent idyllic space is, however, a threatened space. We read of K's growing anxiety as he strategizes how he can protect his land from goats and passers by, as he is "fearful of [their] looming shapes"(*Ibid.* 103). Coetzee's descriptions of K "[resting] by day and …[staying] up at night to protect his land and till" remind us that K's world "has collapsed"; that K is not in an idyllic, apolitical, mythologized space but is banished on a wasteland (Wright 64). There is no renewal after the decadence. The apocalyptic rhetoric has not resulted in eschatology of the old. Rather, there is a constant reminder that there is no way out of the abjection and loss. While K's existential journey

into his own consciousness becomes a desperate plea to safeguard his own identity, his inability to engage in his world renders his suffering unending. The repetitive cycle of trauma, chaos and suffering impacting on the present, is echoed through the numerous allusions to World War Two Nazi labour camps. K's imprisonment leaves K looking like "someone from Dachau" (*Ibid.* 146). The descriptions of labour trains and details of the famine and conditions in the camps link the recurring images to past horror and trauma in the present. Past historical trauma, like apartheid, will continue to impact the present in cyclical repetition unless there is full engagement with the past itself. This acts as a further reminder of Kermode's assertions that fictions that degenerate into myth prevent the decadence to be transformed into renewal.

To view K as a victim would be misreading the assertion of his actions. The action and experience of reading this sophisticated text requires an active participation on behalf of the reader. In the face of his crisis and his eschatological fear of becoming a victim of the war and of the dystopic crisis within his country, K relinquishes all material objects and contact with the world. His physical and emotional nakedness is an evasion of a world that has dealt out to him fear, marginalisation and pain. Power is not beyond contestation. While in his self-made hideout dug in the earth, K hears the soldiers overhead and justifies why he cannot come out of hiding and show himself to them:

> … K knew that he would not crawl out and stand up and cross from darkness into firelight to announce himself. He even knew the reason why: because enough men had gone off to war saying the time for gardening was when the war was over; whereas there must be men to stay behind and keep gardening alive, or at least the idea of gardening; because once that cord was broken, the earth would grow hard and forget her children. That was why. (*Ibid.* 109)

His desire for freedom can only be permanent if it becomes the event of transformation; however we understand that the war continues unabated, eschatology is illusory and has not resulted in renewal. No matter how desperately he alienates himself in his silence and in the earth, the crisis will continue. There is a pivotal moment of this realisation in his futile attempt at a time when his consciousness articulates his inner eschatological fear. In the Karoo, what is unveiled from his crisis is that being "cut off

from society, he was in danger of becoming more timorous than a mouse"(*Ibid.* 106). He regards these fears as "absurd" (*Ibid.* 105) as he fears the "runaway soldiers, off-duty policemen …who hold their hefty sides laughing at… [his] pathetic tricks, … [his] pumpkins hidden in the grass, … [his] burrow disguised with mud" (*Ibid.* 106). His old distress of humiliation is compounded at the anxiety of thinking that they would "kick…[his] backside… and turn … [him] into a servant" (*Ibid.* 106). The crisis of war renews his unconscious drive for hope and freedom at all costs in any form, even in the face of failure[5]. By the close of Part One, with K's capture and journey to the Rehabilitation Camp, the reader from his or her own life perspective begins to enter K's world even if he/she is unable to share K's debilitating apocalyptic crisis vicariously. The reader, however, is able to empathise with K's chaotic world and is sensitively drawn into his mystical consciousness and his hope of nurturing his concept of freedom at all costs. By the time Part One closes, our expectations do not prepare us for the switched narrative voice in Part Two. Part One invites us to enter K's world; Part Two destabilises the reader.

Kermode reminds us that irony in rhetoric (*peripeteia*) moves "to its obviously predestined end" and is deterministic and closer to myth than fiction (Kermode 18). This renders predictive expectations; "it is a disconfirmation followed by consonance; the interest of having our expectations falsified is obviously related to our wish to reach the discovery or recognition by an unexpected and instructive route" (*Ibid.* 18). However, the "more daring the *peripeteia*", Kermode attests, the more the text respects the sense of the "here and now", the reality of the moment, and "finding something out for us, something *real*" (*Ibid.* 18). The defamiliarisation in the change of narrative voice in Part Two (from free indirect discourse in Part One) suggests a different point of view in Part Two. Additionally, the metafictional letter and diary entry written by the doctor counteract our expectations of reading, shifting our focus to listen to the voice of the medical doctor and his positioning not only towards K, but also to the crisis in which he finds himself. Further, the metafiction subtly suggests the need to rewrite a new narrative different from the grand narrative of apartheid. It urges the apocalyptic to point the characters (and the readers) to move forward out of the crisis, and support K's determination to "mute the apocalyptic narrative" having taken cognisance of the past trauma (Titlestad 2016, 1).

Part Two reaffirms the extent of the apocalyptic crisis and K's determination to refrain from speaking and eating. His narrative remains "untold" to the doctor and, yet

the reader, through the free indirect discourse in Part One, has "heard" his narrative, his fear of eschatological effacement and his determination to live on, as best he can. K cannot be salvaged from the oppressive world other than through his imagination to "fly over the fences and between the houses" clutching his pumpkin seeds, trapped in the world that is so intent on destroying him (*Ibid.* 133).

The reader feels destabilised from the opening page of Part Two as he/she moves from the meditative, contemplative voice of K in Part One to the scientific, rational description of the new patient. K is "a little old man" with "evidence of prolonged malnutrition" (Coetzee 1983, 128). The medical doctor adds further that K "claims to be only thirty two" shedding questions in the reader's mind about his trustworthiness as a narrator (*Ibid.* 129 & 130). The medical doctor, whose narrative presents the voice of the white liberal, stifled by the apocalyptic crisis, is also trapped in the *middest,* unable to understand how to move from *chronos* to *kairos* yet desperately seeking it. As Tegla puts it, the medical doctor's story is as important as that of K, as it asserts Coetzee's purpose in defying the imposition of one authorial voice:

> Coetzee's general approach to fiction is to refrain from moral judgements or moral messages (Tegla 151).

While in Part One, the reader explores the consciousness of K, Part Two shifts by visibly commenting on his physical degradation. We notice, in particular how K's physical degradation has increased, suggesting K's erosion from the apocalyptic crisis and his on-going effacement from society, as he is " too absorbed to listen to the wheels of history" (*Ibid.* 159)[6]. In Kermodian terms, the apocalyptic crisis, the *tic,* is the long history of oppression denying freedom to most. The rupture of the crisis, the civil war, is vaguely presented in the text. The reader is left to draw inferences from the morsels of descriptions given. The intertextual references to Nazi prisoner of war camps certainly suggests that it is eschatological in purpose, intent on quelling any rebellion and maintaining control and dominance of the oppressors rather than decreeing freedom. Thus, eschatological trepidation keeps K trapped in the *middest,* fearful of the *toc* of extinction and erasure. He resolves to move "wholly inward, wrapped up by the process of his own slow extinction", but intent on living (*Ibid.* 158).

The intensity of the crisis shifts, in Parts Two and Three back into the labour camp and the city with the focus on the visible dehumanisation of the apocalyptic crisis.

The impact of the war on all its people reminds us of the suffering described in T S Eliot's "The Waste Land" with suggestions of traumatised people who have no escape from their suffering.[7] We read in Coetzee's text of the suffering of "living in suspension", over-crowded hospitals with only "eight beds in the infirmary" to house sixteen patients, with disease and decay rampant (*Ibid.* 158). The disturbing graphic images reminiscent of Nazi labour camps describe prisoners herded into trains waiting to be treated back to physical health in order to start working in the labour camps. The forced collusion of the medical staff perturbs the reader, their purpose, "the end of the process", is to "certify them cleansed and pack them off to the labour battalions to carry water and dig latrines"(*Ibid.* 159). The horror of the war is a state of suspension: "a state of life in death or death in life" (*Ibid.* 159). Rarely some, like Felicity seem to cope, albeit superficially:

> Unless I mistake her, Felicity does not think of herself as a castaway marooned in a pocket of time, the time of waiting, camp time, war-time. To her, time is full as it has ever been , even the time of washing sheets, even the time of sweeping the floor; whereas to me , listening with one ear to the banal exchanges of camp life with the other to the suprasensual spinning of the gyroscopes of the Grand Design, time has grown empty. … Even the concussion case (*Ibid.* 158)

But mostly the war creates the confusion of a "time grown empty": pain and a moral compromise, with only sporadic gestures at humanism "to effect a change in men's souls" (*Ibid.* 135 & 158). Trapped in the *middest*, they can neither face the present nor engage in the future.

The medical doctor admits that his life is an unexamined life, which lacks scope and meaning. He explains at one moment that prior to K's arrival he "was happy, as happy as one can be in a place like this" (*Ibid.* 149). He naively temporises these feelings of ethical inertia to the war, which is for both him and Noël a "time of waiting" (*Ibid.* 158):

> only a period of time after which things will return to the previous state, with its personal conscience or consciousness dormant. He… lives in a time 'grown empty', devoid of any meaning or personal significance. (Tegla 145).

However, his narrow understanding of his own life and its broader context do not allow him to use the interaction with K for greater ethical self-growth. He comes to recognise the senselessness of his own existence: K opens up a possibility for change in the doctor, but it is never fully actualised or effected. The medical doctor believes that K is able to recognise that he, the doctor, is " more than …[he] seemed to be" (*Ibid.* 164). He hopes that K will be the catalyst to initiate change as he "means something, and the meaning he has is not private to me" (*Ibid.* 165). In the *middest,* the doctor yearns to move beyond his crisis, to a meaningful future where the camp would not "just be the old Kenilworth racetrack… but a privileged site where meaning erupted into the world" (*Ibid.* 165). As "persecutor, madman, bloodhound, policeman", he recognises the emotion of needing change yet never translates that into action other than signing K's fraudulent death certificate. His experience with K is simplistically translated in his eyes as an allegory "of how scandalously, how outrageously a meaning can take up residence in a system without becoming a term in it" (*Ibid.* 166). By submitting to the war, the medical doctor surrenders to its history, while K consciously detaches himself from it and thus does not submit to either the war and or "to the wheels of history" (*Ibid.* 159). Referred to as an "escape artist, one of the great escapees", K is admired by the medical doctor for his inner strength , resilience and determination to be out of history, in a world of his own, and thus he "takes off his hat" to him (*Ibid.* 166-167). Being both part of and separate to the action in the novel, K exercises free will to distance himself from a society that is oppressive to both in its assertion of tyrannical power. Even though he is "a poor simpleton", K is a man of conscience who maintains the hope of being able to find a place in society unhindered by the forces that oppress him. K shows the doctor that self-reflection is a necessary path for meaningful existence, however meagre and difficult the life will be. He moves the doctor's consciousness so as to be open to interrogation of self. But sadly, the process remains incomplete. The doctor recognises this, but does not know how to change, remaining trapped in the *middest.* Hence K's selflessness moves the doctor to see him as an albatross around his neck. The doctor admits : "I walk bowed under the weight of you" (*Ibid.* 146).

The personal voice in the doctor's letter as white oppressor is an attempt at dialogue with K, the oppressed. However, even this action emphasises the difference between the two characters. The doctor's plea is logical and based on scientific reasoning, while K's actions denote an affective inward response of passive rebellion not to conform[8]. In the letter, the medical doctor offers a teleological vision to K: if "he

…does not compromise…[he is] going to die"(*Ibid.* 150). His piqued curiosity about K's unwillingness to eat defies logic, and leads him to assert that K is "not sure he is wholly of our world"(*Ibid.* 130). K's choice to refrain from eating is illogical to the doctor: to choose a death with pain and suffering over a possibility of living can only be interpreted on an academic, scientific level. As time passes, his obsession about wanting K to eat and to listen to his story fails, but in turn he comes to recognise that the unwillingness to talk is part of K's mysticism and rebellion. K's determination is to continue on his journey for social and political alienation and freedom unhindered by those who regard themselves as superior. When interrogating K with Noël, K refuses to give in to them by offering them answers they want to hear and holds on stoically by asserting his own personhood. The medical doctor's plea to "yield" is an truism that K is prepared to forego (*Ibid.* 152). The doctor, however, "yields" to the system of the political regime (*Ibid.*). What is unveiled through K is a recognition of the medical doctor's automated life where decisions are made for him, where he is doing something in which he does not believe. At one time, the doctor's interiority is merely gestured at, as he comments on the "concussion case, turned wholly inward… lives in dying more intensely than I in living" (*Ibid.* 158). But this self- knowledge is sporadic and limited as opposed to K's emerging identity, echoed loudly in his statement "I am what I am" (*Ibid.* 130).

Life and Times is a novel of prolonged and extended crisis and lingering catastrophe which continues remorselessly even at its close. It demonstrates an intentional conflict between *chronos* and *kairos*. Both K (the oppressed) and the medical doctor(the oppressor who is a white liberal), while in the *middest*, are confronted by a complex and painful existence. For K, an existence in the camps where he will be absorbed into a system, will jeopardise his free-will. In his mind, the only possible hope for solace is his silence and his gardening, two actions that remove him from an oppressive environment. By developing a greater consciousness self; a level where, however limited in his reach, he is able to detach himself from those who will manipulate his free will for their own benefit. Stripped of all connection to the world that has caused him humiliation and suffering, K is able to forge a semblance of an identity, never being reliant on anyone other than himself. Where, in Part One, his assumed simplicity draws him to feeling marginalised, in Part Three, he asserts confidently that there "is nothing to be ashamed of being a simpleton" (*Ibid.* 182). Within his limited scope he is able to move from *chronos* to *kairos* only within his consciousness as a "qualified optimism" (Titlestad 2016, 1). He will be able to move into

a limited, compromised future, while, paradoxically, still being trapped in his abjection and loss:

> Because if there was one thing I discovered out in the country, it was that there is time enough for everything.
> (Is that the moral of it all, he thought, the moral of the whole story: that there is time enough for everything?) (*Ibid.* 183)

Timelessness prevents eschatology of the end, the *toc*. It defers effacement while K lives on, as best he can. Only then "and in that way…one can live" (*Ibid.* 184). The war "affords him a renewal of his instinctive drive, as he finds solace and refuge in hard work, his own labour" (Kehinde 68).

The continued suffering of the white liberal doctor, creates unease for the reader. The doctor's interaction with K is, in practical terms, apocalyptic as he becomes more aware of his integrity and the ethical sense of his existence and that of others. Conscious of injustice, he begins questioning and doubting his own life and its value. However, he is overwhelmed and is unable to delve further not only into his own self, but also into the long history of suffering that has resulted in the present apocalyptic crisis. The medical doctor yearns for freedom, but rather than tapping into his own self and forging a new way forward, he looks to K to show him the way. As such he remains trapped in the society that he despises, remaining in the *middest* unable to initiate any feasible change. There is a prudential sense of hope that perhaps with time he will find a means to move fully from *chronos* to *kairos*. Tegla suggests that the doctor's diary and the limitation of his willingness to act, positions him as a white liberal intellectual who ultimately remains complicit in white patriarchal rule:

> This interpretation may be regarded as valid, if one recalls Coetzee's answer to the question of whether, in this novel, he aims at dialogue with his South African readers. Coetzee replies that "If I was conducting a dialogue in *Life and Times*, it was with Michael K." It might be argued, therefore, that the second part, with its introduction of the narrator in the person of the white liberal man … is a narratological choice with an ethical dimension, inviting the reader to perform a similar "dialogue" with K as the medical officer … attempts to have (Tegla 149)

The nascent humanism apparent in the medical doctor's reaction to K in both his letter and diary entry, lead us to consider the importance of empathy, love, reciprocity and hospitality for any feasible future. His growing empathy for K moves him to begin to introspect about himself and his role in both the war and what it represents. We read that he "slowly began to see the originality of the resistance" that K has offered (*Ibid.* 163). A few paragraphs later this is further corroborated when he expresses what he has come to understand about K:

> I slowly began to understand the truth: that you were crying secretly, unknown to your conscious self…for a different kind of food, food that no camp could supply (*Ibid.* 163).

The text suggests that cultivating empathy, love and hospitality may develop from listening to different viewpoints without the prejudice of white dominance. The doctor acknowledges that his life is not his own. He yearns however for the freedom that K has, but the doctor's actions are linked to and compromised by the war. He does not understand how to break free and his hope rests in illusory eschatology, in the anticipation that the end of the war will necessarily bring in a new time. Thus he admits that he is " not ready" to follow K, even acknowledging that the " truth is that the only chance …[he] had is gone, and gone before …[he] knew" (*Ibid.* 161). He regrets not being as brave as K as when "Michaels had made the break, I should have followed" (*Ibid.* 161). His abjection leaves him trapped between the *tic* and the *toc.*

K manages in the face of crisis to keep the abstraction of freedom alive through his actions and thoughts, by his "consciousness of time" (Van Vuuren 98). He believes that he can cut himself off from the chronological time of history, the historical time that has rendered such suffering and injustice to him. For a short while, he manages to transcend and escape it but the impact of history, seen in the historical intertextual references discussed earlier in this chapter, remind him that past history will always threaten and impact on the present. As time is conceptual and transitory, Van Vuuren suggests, so too is freedom. History keeps the medical doctor trapped in the *middest.* Healing the prisoners to be strong enough for the labour camps becomes an action that perpetuates the historical present.

The shortest of the sections of the novel, Part Three, opens with illusory eschatology that the past crisis has ended. We are lured to believe in the apocalyptic cycle of "empire, decadence and renovation" (Kermode 29). The city seems to have transformed and renewed to one of beauty and serenity. The opening passage negates

the eschatological anxiety evident at the close of Part Two. We read of K's return "against the brilliant morning light", with the air "being still" (Coetzee 1983, 171). K is at "peace, on familiar ground, grateful for the warmth of day" (*Ibid.*). Noise that previously was jarring for him and associated with position of autocratic power seems to have been replaced by gentler sounds of "the slaps of the waves... the hiss of the retreating water…the tinkle of the ice-cream vendor's bell" (*Ibid.*). The peace and freedom in this section, is conceptual, and thus limited only to the consciousness of K. But, Kermode reminds us that "we think in terms of crisis" (Kermode 30). It is in this part of the novel, that K expresses his subconscious aversion to "people waiting to exercise their forms of charity" on him (Coetzee 1983, 181). In such circumstances, his ethical stance of being used as "an object of charity" appals him as he becomes aware that he does not want to submit to the humiliation of others who treat him with disregard. We turn to Kermode yet again who confirms, "the instrument of change is the human imagination. It changes not only the consoling plot, but the structure of time and the world" (Kermode 31). In the face of being trampled upon by prejudice, K allows his imagination to transport him beyond reality. He confirms an identity of selecting to be a gardener "that does not tell stories because it lives in silence" (Coetzee 1983, 182). He faces eschatological anxiety about the way in which he can secure ways that will show how "one can live" in the present (*Ibid.* 184). In order to conceptualise this, he calls on his past actions and recognises that his total withdrawal from an unjust world has been his survival and awareness of not submitting to power and humiliation. The resignation that there "is nothing to be ashamed of in being simple" becomes a call for survival and an assertive action of his identity. Aware that society has not changed, he forges a way in which he can continue to adopt a consciousness of freedom where the end is "immanent rather than imminent" (Kermode 101):

> I was mute and stupid at the beginning, I will be mute and stupid in the end (Coetzee 182).

The circular plot structure suggests that the apocalyptic crisis of K's "times" continue and will continue to be debilitating and degrading. As a novel of abjection, it portrays a socio-political space where meaning for many has been thwarted. Inertia and hopelessness abound. In K's mystical regression from society and his self-assertion in rediscovering his own worth, K becomes the rediscovery of the ordinary defying a role

of victimhood. In the final moments of the novel K is back where he started, accepting a false reality of consciousness in a desperate attempt to keep alive. The country continues to be inhospitable to him. Denied a place in society, K's identity is threatened. He fashions a notion of selfhood accepting boldly in his statement "I am what I am" (*Ibid.* 131). His successes are potentially visible, but "[perhaps] that is enough of an achievement for the time being" (*Ibid.* 182).

Discussing the novels of Alain Robbe-Grillet as an example, Kermode shows how the "departure from a basic paradigm", the *peripeteia* discourages "schematic expectations" in the conclusion to a novel (Kermode 19). The reader, in such novels, is required to shift focus because he/she "will find none of the gratification" inherent in a "clear story" with neatly defined beginning, middle and end (*Ibid.*). The challenge for the reader is to engage imaginatively with a text that "makes its own unexpected, unrespectable designs" in formulating a possible solution to the end (*Ibid.* 20). Such novels, suggests Kermode are a "shrewd blow at paradigmatic expectations" and, "*not* doing things which we unreasonably assume novels ought to do" (*Ibid.* 21). For Kermode, these novels offer a "falsification of simple expectations" to the shape of the future (*Ibid.* 23). Because we yearn to create ends, it is only "the most trivial work" which conforms "to pre-existent types" (*Ibid.* 24). In engaging with interpretations of the end, we will make sense of them. It is what is revealed in the text, as "an age of perpetual crisis in morals and politics", the "paradigms of apocalypse", that continue for the reader as our way "of making sense of the world" (*Ibid.* 28).

This simple, yet ethically robust narrative "unveils" to the reader a number of multi-layered possibilities for a deferred eschatology of feared erasure. The apocalyptic rhetoric fuels urgency about apartheid's dire consequences and the necessity for transformation. What renders this text particularly powerful, and in my view an essential read as an example of oppositional literature, is the original manner in which Coetzee frames apocalyptic rhetoric. For Coetzee, the foremost experience of reading and living is to provide "a means for interrogation of our existence … a good life – good in the sense of being ethically responsible" (Coetzee as quoted in Atwell 1993, 1). The "morbid symptoms" of apartheid and the growing cynicism of white liberals are common tangential threads in many of Coetzee's texts (Gramsci as quoted in Gordimer 1983). Writing from "within[the] apartheid condition", and being a writer who is "conscious-stricken" by injustices of oppression, Coetzee allows his writing to work both against the historical space of the present while "laying bare the madness of

civilisation" (Poyner 2003, 3). Referring to *Elizabeth Costello* as example, Coetzee suggests an essential triangulation between the reader, the text and the limits and power of language. He manipulates the reading experience by purposefully drawing on apocalyptic rhetoric, yet at pivotal moments in the text, he subverts the apocalyptic by feeding and enticing his readers with fresh, malleable possibilities to defer what has been feared. He intentionally disorients his readers by contravening the expected and predicted, tapping into the reader's imagination to awaken a process of reshaping a historical space as a reaction to the catastrophism presented in the text. Patrick Hayes explains:

> Coetzee tries to conceive writing instead as a type of serious, or to use the term he borrows from Joyce, 'jocoserious' play with the rules and boundaries that govern political discourse. (Hayes 4)

Life and Times displays Coetzee's playfulness with apocalyptic rhetoric in his subversion of conventional expectations of speculative imaginary. The apocalyptic "unveiling" of the human condition in *Life and Times* moves to manipulate the reader to open a possibility for an ethical experience of reading. He develops an interplay between the author, the various characters(in particular K and the medical doctor) and the reader to share in an active, performative reading experience which points to self reflection as a first, necessary step towards a conceivable transformation. Reading thus becomes transformed into a Bahktian performance of the possibilities of what is "unveiled" through the narrative. In his writable text, Coetzee draws the reader to reflect on and understand that futurity rather than an escahatological anxiety, can transcend to become a different, transformed future reality, with potential for hospitality, reciprocity and understanding. We are left to consider while reading, whose voice is being heard in the novel? Is it always constant, or does it change and, if so, why? How does this transform what is being revealed through apocalyptic rhetoric to the reader? How does the transgression, or manipulation of an apocalyptic rhetoric, help readers not only to make sense of the "here and now", but to engage in a different, qualified cautionary possibility?

Apocalyptic rhetoric in *Life and Times* is manipulated to become an ethical tool in writing and a multimodal possibility of engaging in a future. Coetzee refrains from overt, authorial "moral judgements and moral messages", but rather entices us to think differently about what is being experienced and presented in the text (Tegla 151).

Coetzee's probing text unveils the consequences of living in a state that denies human consciousness. Alexandra Effe (2017) refers to this form of manipulation as a "transgression" and suggests that its purpose is to encourage interiority that can result in renewal. The reader moves from seeing the fictive experience in the text and balances those experiences within a realistic context, thus allowing the text to be didactic with transformative potential. In a Kermodian sense, the reader is in *the middest*, between the *tic* and the *toc*. The text, through its performative potential is able to allow the reader to move from *chronos* to *kairos* and thus prevent the dystopic as presented in the text from happening in reality.

Both the reader and the characters in *Life and Times* feel overwhelmed in *the middest*, confronted by the apocalyptic crisis and the consequent dystopia that dominates the text. Coetzee's K is enmeshed in a politically damaged world fractured by the civil war that does not bring hope for any reprieve or eschatology. The war itself does not bring an end to the suffering but rather endorses a compromised exitence. K feels isolated, marginalised and debilitated. Both his "life" and his "times" are abject and desolate. In order for the reader to allow the apocalyptic rhetoric in the text to unveil the horror of the consequences of a South Africa that is invested in military action (as in the State of Emergecy) as an obtuseness preventing change, the reader needs to be fully immersed in the characters, especially that of K. Rather than describing events first person as a biography of K, as perhaps alluded to in the novel's title, Coetzee uses mostly free indirect discourse (for all except the medical doctor's narrative). Judgement and commentary are withheld in the three-part narrative.

Understanding the differing narrative modes of the text becomes an essential part of the performative reading experience. The text becomes apocalyptic in its potential to unveil to the reader the horror of a possible future should different choices of not embracing a life of hospitality and love be made. The free indirect discourse entices the reader into the text, which will then allow an interplay between the author, reader and the characters. The reader experiences vicariously, almost at first hand, the events and the characters as they are unveiled to him/her. The displacement which intentionally destabilises expectation, avoids one authorial voice and encourages an empathy with K. As K lacks political agency, the free indirect discourse allows the space for his voice to be heard. Coetzee subtly and astutely exposes the discordant, difficult relationship between K and an oppressive, unchanging socio-political environment. The reader is gently drawn into the interior monologue of the self-reflective novel. K's "radical refusal

of imposition" is delivered through the different narrative voices which reflect aspects of his inner consciousness (Tegla 122).

We are reminded of Stephen O'Leary's observation that apocalyptic rhetoric is "social practice… a discipline located at the intersection of aesthetics, politics and ethics" (O'Leary 4). For O'Leary, the apocalyptic is a "method of inquiry whose object is to discover how audiences are moved or persuaded through the interplay of style, form, content and context" (*Ibid.*). The presentation of catastrophe and the resulting apprehensions about the future, for O'Leary "may be inspired and limited by the ancient logic of apocalypticism" (*Ibid.*). What is common to both religious and secular apocalypse is the Manichean struggle: as threat of punishment to those who are evil and salvation and redemption for those who are morally good. Coetzee's text challenges this; such a binary is simplistic and defies the subtlety of the novel. The "times" leaves its people at the close, remaining trapped in a stagnant and oppressive political system. If the apocalyptic, then, persuades in the possibility of a different future rather than dwelling on the past, the reader needs to be drawn into the interplay between the author and the characters. *Life and Times* offers a teleological framework for identifying and understanding the consequences of recalcitrant politics, unveiling the debilitation of its characters to its readers "to situate …[them] at the end of a particular historical time" (O'Leary 13).

The message of the novel rests ultimately in the reader feeling empowered to make different choices to those made in the novel. Thus the role of the reader in his/her response to the text cannot be ignored. Certainly, in reading *Life and Times*, and seen in the backdrop of Coetzee's *oeuvre* in texts such as *Foe, Barbarians* and *Disgrace* to mention but three, we appreciate that we are dealing with a text that purposefully defies categorisation. Rather as a performative, porous text it presents a country in crisis and a country that is threatened eschatologically not by outside forces, but from a political system within it that prevents accountability in the treatment of K. It is a text that expresses humanity's dilemma about the challenge of futurity while being simultaneously trapped in the *middest*. A conventional narrative, Kermode reminds us, would be "nearer myth than novel" (Kermode 18). Indeed, this is a novel that contests conventions or shows the linitations of a fixed, predictive form where the active reader "is not offered easy satisfactions, but a challenge to creative co-operation" and allows engagement in something new (Kermode 19). Since the writer has set his novel in an indeterminate time in the future in the midst of a civil war, he opens up a series of

possibilities enabling him to use apcalyptic rhetoric to toy with the attentive reader. Even though we feel rooted in politics while reading it, the novel - like its protagonist - stands outside politics. K's silence becomes a reminder of what he cannot voice and thus, we slowly enter into his consciousness and learn to empathise with him. In Coetzee's own words "The word of the author echoes in the ear of the reading public…the writer occupies a position that simultaneously stands outside politics, rivals politics, and dominates politics" (Coetzee 1996b, 41, 47). Drawing on the anlogy of writing as a "transaction with some figure of the beloved", Coetzee shows how he both "tries to please" the reader but simultaneously "tries continually though surreptiously to revise and recreate" the reader's thinking (*Ibid.* 38).

What is evident then, is that *Life and Times* cannot be read conventionally as an apocalyptic narrative that imbues authorial intention and moral values to its readers. Images of catastrophism, crisis and dystopia cannot be reduced to simple, predictable symbols of eschatology and prophecy of a failing political system. "[M]odern eschatology…has substituted conscience, or something subtler, for historical prophecy", Kermode reminds us (Kermode 26). Rather, reading Coetzee becomes an enabling, singular event that encourages active participation in both the "life" and the apocalyptic "times" of K, the "obscurest of the obscure, so obscure to be a prodigy" (Coetzee 1983 142). The text and in particular K's "life" needs to speak to its "times" and to the reader with conscience. Derek Attridge's substantial contribution on the ethics of reading (2004, 2005) offers further insight into the unconventionality of the text and how I believe it encourages readers to view the text as apocalyptic in its "unveiling" potential to the readers themselves.

In *The Singularity of Literature* (2004), Attridge argues against an overriding instrumentalist reading of a text, which is fixed, in authorial intention "as a predetermined end" (Attridge 2004, 7). Adopting such an approach ignores "the uniqueness of each literary object" (*Ibid.* 10). He suggests that an instrumentalist reading be harmonized by an additional and refined attention to the "work" of fiction and its language, that results in acknowledging literature as "a singular phenomenon"[9] (*Ibid.* 14). In this, the reading experience becomes an act of engaging with alterity. Discussing both the role of the "author" and the "work", Attridge suggests that writing becomes an "event" where the writer's imagination and creative skill come into play (*Ibid.*). In this process the writer "is acted upon" as it "becomes a refashioning of familiar patterns of thought" resulting in transformative writing (Marais 2005, 89). The author finds himself

with the possibility of "active destabilisation of the same" (Marais 2005, 89.). Reading thus, in turn, becomes an event or an ethical experience that occurs both actively with attentiveness and purpose to detail, but may also happen "without warning to a passive, though alert consciousness" (Attridge, 2004, 26). It is then that the work opens up new, different "possibilities of meaning" (Marais 2005, 89). Because reading becomes a singular experience in a given context and time, each reading may result in an altered reading experience. Further, singularity of the work suggests for Attridge that it defies that which is predictable and expected, and that it becomes an event that will entice the reader to see the given situation differently by identifying strongly with the protagonist. As such, literature resists instrumentalist interpretation and focuses on an experience that will prompt the reader to question, whether similarly or differently, depending on the time and context of reading. Sue Kossew (1996) asserts this when she states that "Coetzee's consistent in his refusal of closure, both novelistic and political, and insistent on raising questions rather than providing answers" (Kossew 27).

In his chapter "Against Allegory" in *J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading* (2005), Attridge additionally suggests that the plethora of allegorical readings to specific characters like K (or the Magistrate in *Waiting for the Barbarians*) is a temptation for a reader to reduce these finely nuanced works to simple literary readings and limit the potential richness of the reading experience itself. Both works of fiction reveal a profound, finer reading that draws the reader to focus with close attention to nuanced detail. This opens up the possibility of the events in the novel being "unveiled", which assumes an ethical reading with the potential for a new discourse to encompass futurity. This takes into account:

> an openness to alterity, an acknowledgement of the historical and cultural situatedness of both writing and reading, a responsiveness to the work as invention, a sensitivity to the mediations through which we experience the world, and a registering of the event of the text in a performance of its own stagings of language's multiple powers (Attridge 2005, 62).

It is in this vein that Coetzee's text engages innovatively in the apocalyptic. The defamiliarisation of this experience translates an ethical standpoint into "something…[that] happens to the reader, [which] is a more significant testimony to the power and distinctiveness of literature, and to the brilliance of Coetzee" (Attridge 2005,

45). In his monograph, Attridge argues that an ethical experience of reading Coetzee is made possible by an engagement with "sensitivity and workings of a text" which I suggest reveals the apocalyptic rhetoric to be didactic (Attridge 2005, 11). In particular, "the text that is experimental and estranging is more demanding of its reader and hence more ethically charged" (*Ibid.*). Writing during the darkest of apartheid's dark years, Coetzee explores hopelessness but prudentially offers a possibility of a qualified, subtle optimism for a future different to the events in the novel.

Alexandra Effe (2017) suggests something similar in her assessment of the power of Coetzee's narrative and its transformative potential. She attests that Coetzee's texts "do not state the truth but perform issues in dialogue" that empower the reader to dismiss overwhelming anxiety of being in the *middest* (Effe 20). The apocalyptic rhetoric in the narrative is a metacode, which Effe suggests offers the potential of opening a discourse regarding politics and possibility for hospitality and reciprocity, which as yet may not be attained in the text. One thinks of the doctor whose actions point to a sensitivity for understanding yet he feels unable to actualise these. Effe continues:

> Meaning in narrative is always uncertain in the sense of unpredictable since the reader is an unknowable factor (Effe 22).

If the reader is drawn into an interplay with the writer and the characters, one needs to consider how the apocalyptic entices the reader to respond to the crisis, to K and to the medical doctor so that what is unveiled, may result in a charged future. As the interplay is dynamic, the reading experience becomes equally dynamic and perhaps a different, open-ended exerience. Marijke Van Vuuren (2005) suggests that *Life and Times* is a "mythopoeic novel… dialectically structured…[which] elude[s] definitive interpretations… [resisting] closure" (Van Vuuren 94). Atwell states the "scenario is not strictly apocalyptic" as a conventional genre (Atwell 2). Rosemary Jolly (1996), however, comments that *Life and Times* is "set in apocalyptic times" (Jolly 149). Dominic Head (1997) comments that even though Coetzee intentionally excludes any racial reference to K, resisting classification imposed by apartheid legislation, it cannot be "merely future projection" (Head 48). The painful existence in *Life and Times* is intensified by the obdurate tyranny of its bureaucracy. The apocalyptic crisis drives an incapacity in many of the characters to understand how to move beyond the present. The relentless irrationality and inflexibility of bureaucracy are visible when K returns time and again to the permit office in a futile attempt to obtain a

permit to leave the city. Characters are neither drawn to nostalgic recollections of the past nor to a hopeful outcome in a future. War, as perpetual crisis, fails to be redemptive but continues in catastrophic intensity, leaving both oppressors and oppressed in a state of terror and inertia. Obscure in purpose, the civil war intensifies the already visible socio-political crisis and personal devastation even further. The futility of purpose remains foremost in the text, startingly eveident when, in Part Three, the doctor asks Noël:

> …For what reason were we waging the war, after all, but to augment the sum of happiness in this universe? Or was I remembering, was that another war I was thinking of?
> …
> 'Also,' I said, 'can you remind me why we are fighting this war?' (Coetzee 1983,157)

O'Leary reminds us that while dystopia is "inspired by the ancient logic of apocalypse", it is a rhetoric that exposes the problem of "evil' and anticipates a possibility for its imminent resolution (O'Leary 4). Dystopia is the dark and debilitating gorge, for O'Leary, that triggers the secular apocalyptic by presenting a world that expresses the terror and anxiety within a present time. While commenting on the proliferation of dystopian texts in the 1980s and 1990s, Thoman Moylan (2000) suggests that dystopia lingers "in the terrors of the present even as they exemplify what is needed to transform it" (Moylan 198-199). Thomas Moylan articulates the power of dystopian literature to invite active engagement in reading:

> Dystopian narrative is largely the product of the terrors of the twentieth century...[It] invites creations of alternative worlds…Crucial to dystopian vision in all its manifestations is the ability to register the impact of the unseen and unexamined social system on every day lives of every day people…As the mise-en-scéne is established in an exponential presentation of the society's structure and operations, the narrative zooms in on one of the subjects of the terrible place. (Moylan xi, xiii)

Attwell aptly observes that *Life and Times* shows consistently and in nuanced minutiae, time and again, the consequences of a failure to address the political crisis presented. For K, however, eschatological anxiety drives the creation as a withdrawal from and effacement of the physical present. He moves into his ethereal consciousness as a

subjective projection of his dehumanisation and resignation about his world, an absurdist hope of asserting his being. The city paralysed by civil war offers no reprieve to either K or its citizens. For K and his mother, terror and confusion envelop them:

> They could not guess that the tumult, the screams, the shots and the sound of breaking glass were confined to a few adjoining blocks: as they sat side by side on the bed, barely daring to whisper, the conviction grew on them that the real war had come to Sea Point and had found them out. (Coetzee 1983, 12-13)

Even as he moves out of the city into the rural landscape, the arid wasteland "from horizon to horizon… was empty" where "everywhere …[there was] evidence of neglect" (*Ibid.* 39, 46). The dysfunctional chaos of his environment marked by deprivation, curfews and fear is further compounded by the fact that he is born at a time of political oppression; he is poor, fatherless, ostracised because of his harelip, "a simpleton…,a poor helpless soul", desperately assisting his dying mother (*Ibid.* 141). The bureaucratic totalitarian state negates individual existence, as evidenced in K's interaction with "the policewoman with wary eyes" at the Permit Office who "slapped the counter to still him" as well as the nurse "who shook herself free…her voice…rising" (*Ibid.* 19, 27 & 28). Even his name, a source of identity, is vague and refutes definition. Known only as "Michael K", he has no "papers, no money, no family, no friends, no sense of who …[he is]" (*Ibid.* 142). Confusion rests around his identity as at first he is incorrectly registered at Jakkalsdrift as "Michael Visagie – CM – 40 – NFA" and later at the Rehabilitation Centre as Michaels (*Ibid.* 70). His identity is erased when the medical doctor issues a false death certificate and confirms "[t]he truth is that you are going to perish in obscurity and be buried in a nameless hole in a corner" (*Ibid.* 153) . The future seems untenable for K who is "the visual stereotype which a culture creates for the 'other' out of arbitrary complex features" where his harelip is equated to colour stereotyping or homelessness (Gillman as quoted in Tegla 128).

Life and Times in its stark simplicity and understatement engenders an affective response of making sense of the world. Amidst the emotional entrapment portrayed by its characters, the reading event is ethically charged and offers a prudential possibility of the apocalyptic. Piecing together an understanding of the crisis that K confronts results in an affective reading where the reader's empathy for K, moves the reader to become more involved in the broader concerns of the "times" of the novel. By the close, the

circular plot and the dark scene of the medical doctor hoping for eschatology to bring about an end of the *saeculum* marked, in his mind, by the end of the war, is a reminder that the political circumstances continue to be stifling and inflexible to any change. In K's assertion, retaining freedom in his consciousness through his erasure "in a social human context" is an attempt to fuel his limited hope and a resigned acknowledgement of unchanging times (Chesney 314).

Nadine Gordimer in her 1984 review regards *Life and Times* as an inadequate political message particularly in the presentation of its protagonist:

> And so J. M. Coetzee has written a marvelous work that leaves nothing unsaid – and could not be better said – about what human beings do to fellow human beings in South Africa; but he does not recognize what the victims, seeing themselves as victims no longer, have done, are doing, and believe they must do for themselves…Under the noise of the cicadas, with delicacy and sureness Coetzee has been drawing upon the strength of the earth to keep his deceptively passive protagonist and the passionate vitality of his book alive (Gordimer 1984b.)

However, Coetzee's consistency in refuting closure both politically and in his literary form, suggests that rather than answering questions posed in his books he draws on the reading to be apocalyptic and invites the reader to answer them for himself/herself ways to move beyond the crisis from *chronos* to *kairos*. We are reminded of Jameson who suggests that endings should be defied because they are dynamic spaces that beg interrogation and then engage in futurity beyond the pages. They negate a passive acceptance of the grand narratives of history (such as apartheid), but rather encourage the recreation or rewriting of new narratives.[10] The apocalyptic rhetoric in *Life and Times* does not thus fit into the traditional model of concordance. The unveiling does not rest with its characters finding a transformed, renewal of the crisis. Rather, the apocalyptic forms part of the ethical reading event as articulated by Attridge. The text is not naïvely predictive in its strict concordance with the beginning and the end. The future becomes a fluid potential possibility of a qualified transformation. The end is the beginning at the close of the novel and even though some may feel a sense of disappointment with the on-going crisis it is the apocalyptic imaginary that opens an opportunity for the reader to shape a different historical space. "Apocalypse", Kermode

reminds us, is that "which ends, transforms, and is concordant" (Kermode 5). Kermode continues:

> And we concern ourselves with the conflict between the deterministic pattern any plot suggests, and the freedom of persons within that plot to choose and so to alter the structure, the relations of beginning, middle, and end (Kermode 30).

END NOTES TO CHAPTER THREE:

[1] *Life and Times of Michael K* is hereafter referred to as *Life and Times.*

[2] Michael K hereafter will be referred to as K.

[3] 1712 – 1778. In *The Social Contract* (1762) Rousseau's famous dictum suggests that legitimate political rights and agency may only be achieved from an agreed contract with all its citizens so that each citizen is benefitted equally. See Rousseau[translated by H.J. Tozer], *The Social Contract* (1998).

[4] Jan van Riebeeck's garden began as a refuelling station for the sailors who rounded the Cape of Good Hope. The colonisers came into conflict with the nomadic tribes of the area "whose land has been taken" in order to develop the gardens.

[5] The power of Coetzee's text, amongst other attributes, lies in the fact that while placing K in the midst of what we believe is a political war, K's fight for freedom remains out of politics and history. Gordimer attests that "Coetzee's heroes are those who ignore history, not make it" (Gordimer in Kehinda 64).

[6] Details pertaining to his diminishing physical levels and emaciation are evident when early on while still in Sea Point we read that "instead of waiting for a bus that might never come, he jogged from Sea Point to the city" (Coetzee 1983, 19). Now at the Rehabilitation Hospital he had "collapsed during physical training, and was brought in with very low respiration and heartbeat" (*Ibid.* 129).

[7] "I could not
Speak, and my eyes failed, I was neither
Living nor dead, and I knew nothing,
Looking into the heart of light, the silence" ("The Burial of the Dead" lines 35 – 42).

[8] K's ascetic life style deprived of all possessions as well as his deprivation of food may draw parallels with Mahatma Gandhi (1869 – 1948). As a a civil rights activist in South Africa (1893 – 1914), Gandhi's non-violent civil disobedience and fasting became powerful non-violent rebellion in the fight for human rights (see South African History online).

[9] Attridge resolves to use specific terms to explain the subjective role of the reading experience. He prefers to use "author" rather than "writer" and the text as "work". "According to Attridge…the work is a work

precisely because the task of writing that the *author* is inspired to perform is completed" (See Attridge, 2005, 93-94).

[10] See Jameson (2007).