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The treatment of the body in the fiction of JM Coetzee

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Abstract

My overarching argument, that Coetzee's treatment of the body is a defamiliarisation of it, is supported by more focussed textual commentary and substantiated argument, divided into nine chapters.

Chapter 1, by means of an introduction, first explains the thesis' argument and then discusses the treatment of the body in past and current Coetzee criticism with emphasis on findings that help to elucidate my own position. From here on, each chapter shows how the body is central as a source of meaning and agency, but in different ways and through different forms.

Chapter 2 focusses on how Coetzee distorts the reader's perspective of the body and plunges him/her into what I call a kinetic poetics. The central argument in this chapter is that Coetzee uses a viewpoint in such a way that the body is reinvented poetically.

Chapter 3 looks at the historical embeddedness of the body and the body as a response to the discourse of history. Coetzee's philosophical positioning on the relationship between literature and history dramatises itself, I will argue, in his depiction of the body.

Chapter 4 argues for the centrality of the body as generator of plot in the fiction – hence creating storylines that are unusual - whilst chapter 5 shows how Coetzee's treatment of the body in its relationship to space has a significant effect on the atmosphere in the fiction.

These first five chapters, therefore, have as purpose the study of the body in Coetzee in relation to pertinent body criticism and to then show how Coetzee's stylistic attributes and philosophical positioning (chapters 2 and 3) create a writing that has a unique morphology of plot (chapter 4) and creates an entirely new atmosphere (chapter 5).

A recurrent finding throughout these chapters is that Coetzee challenges conventions whilst creating a type of strangeness or defamiliarisation through the description of the body: this is my overarching thesis statement to which subsidiary points will lead.

Once these bases have been established, the remaining four chapters will continue to focus on the body in four different modes: the sexual (chapter 6), in relation to animals (chapter 7), through eating (chapter 8) and through death (chapter 9).