At the Core of the Matter

J.M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace* from a psychoanalytical perspective

*Paul Yli-Tainio*
At Dalarna University it is possible to publish the student thesis in full text in DiVA. The publishing is open access, which means the work will be freely accessible to read and download on the internet. This will significantly increase the dissemination and visibility of the student thesis.

Open access is becoming the standard route for spreading scientific and academic information on the internet. Dalarna University recommends that both researchers as well as students publish their work open access.

I give my/we give our consent for full text publishing (freely accessible on the internet, open access):

Yes ✗ No ☐
**Table of Contents**

Introduction 1

Freudian Concepts Used for This Study 6

Memories that Still Speak 8

*Byron in Italy*, an Opera of Desire 13

A Wishful Dream 16

Conclusion 23

Works Cited 27
Introduction

Born in 1940 as a descendant of European immigrants, J.M. Coetzee grew up in postcolonial South Africa. He published his first book in 1974, which has been followed by a large number of publications, both in terms of fiction and non-fiction. Soon after the period of Apartheid finally ended in 1994, his award winning novel, Disgrace, was published in 1999. According to Jacqueline Elizabeth May Dent, it is “the turbulent dynamics of a postcolonial, socio-cultural landscape tainted with violence, racial hatred and inequality, [that is imprinted] into his fiction” (Dent 4), and it is in this type of political environment, where the characters that Coetzee creates are typically placed – white South African males who “represent the authors own struggles to find a place for himself in the past, present, and future South Africa” (Dent vii). This could also be said to be true for the main character in Disgrace, David Lurie, whose thoughts, concerns and desires are revealed to the reader as the story unfolds through the eyes of Lurie himself.

Set in post Apartheid South Africa, the story revolves around the fifty-two year old divorced professor David Lurie, who works at the University of Cape Town. He has a daughter, Lucy, who lives in the countryside where she runs a boarding kennel, and sells flowers and produce at the farmers market. In the first part of the novel Lurie’s somewhat disillusioned and lonely life in the city is depicted. Bored from frequently teaching the same courses on the Romantic poets (Coetzee 4), he is considering composing a chamber opera, Byron in Italy; which he dedicates to the poet Lord Byron and his last mistress, Teresa.

Lurie has a history of being a womanizer, and besides frequent flirtations, he visits a prostitute on Thursdays (1). However, when he seduces one of his students,
Melanie, “the dark one” (18), he shows up one evening and demands sex even when she resists (25). She ends up filing a complaint, to which Lurie pleads guilty. However, the school committee wants him to show true remorse through issuing a public statement (57). Lurie refuses with the consequence that he is being expelled from the University.

In the second part of the novel Lurie spends most of his time with Lucy in the countryside, where he is introduced to Petrus, ‘the dog-man’, who helps her with the garden and the kennel (64), and to Bev, who he end up helping at her volunteer based animal welfare clinic. However, Lurie has been raising concern about Lucy’s safety. One afternoon, Lurie and Lucy are suddenly attacked by three native black men. The dogs are shot, Lurie is beaten, and Lucy is raped. To Lurie’s dismay, Lucy refuses to report the rape to the authorities (108). Lurie suspects that Petrus knows something and confronts him. Later at a party in Petrus’s house, one of the attackers is present and he proves to be one of Petrus’s family. Despite that, Lucy still refuses to call the police.

Frustrated, he spends some time with Bev, and by trying to work on his opera. He concludes that many of Byron’s escapades must been considered rape as well (160). When Lucy later tells him that she is pregnant and intends to keep the child (198), and Petrus says that he will marry her, Lurie is devastated (202). At this point, Lucy indicates that she cannot live with both him and Petrus. As a consequence Lurie moves out, however, he decides to stay in the countryside and rents a room in the neighboring town so he can stay in contact with both Lucy and Bev (211). Feeling more tranquil, he makes a last attempt to work on his opera. Sitting in the dog-yard with his favorite dog at the clinic listening in, he strums on the banjo and “hums Teresa’s line” (215). By now he has learned to give the dogs “love” (219). Yet, as a final note, Lurie brings his favorite dog to
the operating table making Bev to ask; “I thought you would save him for another week? . . . [No], I’m giving him up” (220).

In previous research the dominant scholarly tradition typically explores *Disgrace* from a postcolonial perspective by looking at social conflicts and historical contexts. Well known scholars in the field, such as David Attwell and Elleke Boehmer, thus, explores themes such as the political climate, the issue of rape, race, and justice in the novel. Attwell looks into the discourse of race for instance, and says that “the novel’s title surrounds Lurie’s and the rapists’ sexuality with synecdochic implications which extend to an entire history of wrong being re-enacted in reprisal and vengeance” (Attwell 340). Elleke Boehmer describes the consequences of Lucy’s refusal to lay charges on the rapists and argues that “[Lucy] physically, if not verbally, accepts a burden of the accountability for the wrongdoing of the past” (Boehmer 349).

However, in contrast to the views of the dominant scholarly tradition of the novel, two alternative studies in particular are geared towards a psychological approach in order to explain Lurie’s behavior. In *Midlife Crisis or Male Wound? A Psychoanalytical Study of the Protagonist’s Behavior as Midlife Crisis* Maliheh Hushidari argues for instance, that many of Lurie’s symptoms can be explained by his midlife crisis, and concludes that fear of loneliness, fear of aging, and the fear of death are the most important reasons for Lurie’s desperate and irrational behavior (Hushidari 8). As a way to externalize his midlife crisis, and a scandalous love life, Hushidari further states that Lurie “consoles himself with an escape” to the composition of a chamber opera (14). Hushidari also presents Freudian theories, and states that Lurie’s ‘ego’ fails to moderate “between his id (his instincts and impulses) and his superego (conventions of the society)” (7). Instead,
controlled by his instincts, he becomes selfish, begins to daydream and becomes “obsessed by women” (15). In addition she questions whether the lack of a ‘father-figure’ has had any impact on him (24).

In Pursuing Ghosts: the Traumatic Sublime in J.M. Coetzee’s Disgrace Kimberly Wedeven Segall questions how experiential memory is assessed after a history of violation; “how are the ‘ghosts of the past’ recognized so they ‘don’t return to haunt us’ (Segall 48)?” By using the concept ‘traumatic sublime’, which Segall defines as the “experience of violence [which] are changed into images of oppressed subjects and ghosts (Segall 42), she argues that Lurie is trying to erase the past but is interrupted by the images of the attack on him and Lucy that “leads to ghostly nightmares of his daughter and the rapists”, such as in the dream when “he wallows in a bed of blood, or, panting, shouting soundlessly, runs from the man with the face like a hawk, like a Benin mask, like a Thoth” (Coetzee 121). “As a tactic of interruption and ghostly presence, the ‘traumatic sublime’ refuses the initial oblivious attitude of Lurie” (Segall 50). And it is in this way that Lurie “comes to term with the past” . . . “The metamorphosis of Lurie’s sublimations – as in the creative writing of an opera – is part of Lurie’s emotional development and his sublimated desire to hear voices of the subjugated [women in the novel]” (Segall 51).

As this previous research shows, there are a number of possible ways to analyze Disgrace, from the dominant postcolonial approach to those that are based on a psychoanalytical approach. Similar to the two latter studies, this thesis will use a psychoanalytical approach in order to analyze Disgrace. However, previous research has not shown much concern for the suggestion of the ‘Oedipus complex’ in this novel, a
Freudian concept that refers to the effects of a young boy’s unresolved sexual desire for his mother. This is significant, because, according to Freud, an unresolved Oedipus complex may lead to psychological problems in adulthood. Thus, this thesis will attempt to explore this gap with the use of psychoanalytical literary theory, based on the ideas of Sigmund Freud, with the aim of showing how the Oedipus complex is hidden in the narrative, and how it may unconsciously be causing psychological problems for the protagonist, and affecting his behavior. In addition this thesis will analyze the novel from the perspective of the author, with the aim of showing how the novel as a dream, according to Freud, represents the fantasy of an unsatisfied childhood wish, further indicating the occurrence of the oedipal drama, which include the components of the ‘mother-figure’, the ‘father-figure’, and the ‘little boy’s loving feelings towards his mother and hostile feelings towards his father. By showing how the Oedipus complex not only affects the protagonist’s behavior, but also linking it to how it unconsciously may affect the author’s writing process, this thesis attempts to contribute to previous research by adding this alternative understanding of Disgrace.

In the first chapter, the psychoanalytical concepts, which will be used in this thesis in order to support the occurrence of the Oedipus complex, will be presented. With the use of the concepts, the ‘ego’, the ‘superego’, the ‘id’, and the ‘external world’, the second chapter will attempt to show how an unresolved Oedipus complex may be the cause for the protagonist’s behavior. The third chapter will analyze the protagonist’s composition of his chamber opera with the use of the concept ‘sublimation’ in order to strengthen the notion of an occurrence of the Oedipus complex in the narrative. Before the concluding fifth chapter, the fourth chapter, entitled ‘A Wishful Dream’ will, with the
use of Freud’s ‘topographical’ and ‘structural’ model of the mind, and the concept of
‘sublimation’, attempt to illustrate how the novel as a dream of the author, may be the
infantile wish of the author that seeks expression in *Disgrace*, further indicating oedipal
components.

**Freudian Concepts Used for This Study**

Sigmund Freud was the father of psychoanalysis, which was based on his discovery of
‘free association’. By letting his patients talk freely he would be able to reach into their
unconscious and finds symptom relief (Vejar 5). He was convinced that neurotic behavior
in adulthood was due to conflicts within the person, caused by unconscious desires and
fears, which could be linked back to repressed and unresolved issues in the psychosexual
development in early childhood, especially in the so-called libidinal phases, the oral, anal
and the phallic stage (Sandler et al. 22).

Freud considered the Oedipus complex to be “the kernel complex, at the troubled
core of the personality” (Ellmann 11), which typically develops in the phallic stage,
roughly between the ages of two and six years. During this time, the boy’s sexual desire
for his mother grows and he begins to see his father as an obstacle, and he wants to kill
him. In order to avoid this, his desire for his mother needs to be repressed. This happens
when the young boy feels the father’s ‘threat of castration’, accepts him as superior, and
lets go of his desire for his mother. Freud defined this process as the ‘primal repression’,
and it dissolves the potentially dangerous Oedipus complex, because, if it is not resolved,
it will cause “relentless pressure and eventually create psychological trouble – a
‘pathogenic’ effect”’ on the mind (Lynn 170).
One of the main aspects of Freud’s theory was his two models of the mind; the ‘topographical model’, which divides the mind into three parts; the Conscious, the Preconscious, and the Unconscious (Sandler et al. 64), and the ‘structural model’, which consists of the four agencies the ‘id’, the ‘ego’, the ‘superego’ and the ‘external world’. The ‘id’, which represents the primal instincts of the newborn child, such as self-preservation instincts, sexual instincts or the libido, and aggressive wishes (169), is located in the Unconscious, and is governed by the ‘pleasure principle’, which seek immediate gratification at all times. In opposition to this, the ‘ego’ and the ‘superego’ follow the ‘reality principle’, as they comply with prevailing ethic standards and morals of the ‘external world’ (21). The ‘ego’, which represents the consciousness, develops in order to handle the conflicting demands of the ‘id’, the ‘external reality’, and the ‘superego’ (170). The ‘superego’ in turn, which represents the conscience of the mind, has a punitive and prohibiting function as it is looking for moral perfection. It develops as a result of the ‘primal repression’ in the phallic stage, when the child inherits morals and social ideals through the parents (Freud New Introductory 78).

Freud believed that repressed wishes and desires would not only reveal themselves as neurotic behavior, they could also be expressed unconsciously in a more socially accepted manner through the process of ‘sublimation’ (Sandler et al. 59). The production of a literary piece is an example of this, and according to Freud, it represents a daydream that “contain[s] in its fantasy the fulfillment of an unsatisfied wish” (Mollinger 2). It is the Unconscious and the Preconscious that distort the meaning of the wish so it can bypass the censorship of the ‘ego’ and the ‘superego’, in order to reach a hallucinatory expression in the Conscious. This modification process is primarily done by
the processes of ‘condensation’, where several meanings are condensed into one dream symbol, and by ‘displacement’, which replaces ‘forbidden’ objects with acceptable ones (Sandler et al. 123).

Memories that Still Speak

In order to understand confused emotions and pathological behavior in adulthood, Freud states that one must go back to early childhood memories to find the real reasons for their existence. With the use of Freud’s ‘structural model’ of the mind, which consists of the concepts, the ‘ego’, the ‘superego’, the ‘id’, and the ‘external world’, this chapter will attempt to connect Lurie’s behavior with an unresolved issue in his psychosexual development, one which occurs in the phallic stage, the time when the child tends to fall in love with one of the parents and become the enemy of the other, because this drama of the Oedipus complex will return again and again in a disguised form in adulthood if not resolved (Sandler et al. 24).

Lurie’s only statement in the novel regarding his childhood; “mother, aunts, sisters fell away, they were replaced in due course by mistresses, wives, a daughter” (Coetzee 7), indicates that he grew up without a ‘father-figure’. The relevant question, one which Hushidari also asks in her research, is whether the fact that “his childhood was spent in a family of women” has any effect on him (Hushidari 24). Because, from a psychoanalytical perceptive this is an important indication that Lurie’s ‘superego’ may have been hampered because of this, despite influences by other ‘parental’ representations such as teachers or others. The importance of the superego cannot be underestimated as it is supposed to represents the conscience of the mind, and as such it
is “indispensable” in social relations (Freud New 110). Hence, if the ‘little boy’ does not experience the ‘primal process’, it is likely that it will hamper the ‘superego’s development, and the individual may face troubled social relations later in life.

In Lurie’s case, there are indications of a troubled social life. He is depicted as lone wolf, with no apparent friends, who has turned into a “moral dinosaur” (Coetzee 89). He has a history of being a womanizer, he has regularly been seeing a prostitute, and according to his own testimony, he is not “made for marriage” (69). He also tends to belittle other people. For instance, when Lucy introduces him to Bev and Bill, he wants to leave, because “the last thing he wants to do is trade small talk with these people”, because, apparently he judges them by their appearance: he sees Bev as a “dumpy, bustling, little woman” (72), and Bill as “equally squat” and concludes that “he has no respect for women who make no effort to be attractive”. In addition he tells Lucy that in his opinion, “animal-welfare people are a bit like Christians . . . Everyone is so cheerful and so well-intentioned that after a while you itch to go off and do some raping and pillaging. Or to kick a cat” (73). When Bill at a later point picks up Lurie at the hospital after the attack, Lurie tells him that he appreciates Bill’s help. However, Lurie does not like Bill’s response; “What else are friends are for? You would have done the same”. Instead of simply agreeing, he becomes annoyed and begins to contemplate why Bill calls him his friend. He ends up associating the origin of the meaning of ‘friend’ to ‘love’, but cannot see the connection between him and Bill (102). In this way Lurie tends to distance himself from other people because he seems to judge others based on his own ‘higher standards’.
The ‘id’ according to Freud is “the dark, inaccessible part of our personality [where] the logical laws of thought do not apply . . . [and] contrary impulses exist side by side” (Sandler et al. 177), and he compared the ‘id’ to a horse with “superior strength” that the ‘ego’, as the rider, needs to control, and in certain cases repress disturbing desires to stay in the Unconscious (Freud *The Ego* 15). However, without the ‘superego’ as an observing ‘parent’, who can judge the ‘ego’, guide it, and even punish it, it may lead to the fact that the libidinal instincts, wishes and desires of the ‘id’, do not experience the same resistance on their way towards gratification (Sandler et al. 180). An indication of the ‘id’s’ working in Lurie’s mind is exemplified in his hearing with the school committee when he only wants to plead guilty to the sexual harassment charges against him made by Melanie and her father Mr. Isaac, and not make any confession (Coetzee 51). Still, even when he later change his mind, he simply says; “‘very well’ . . . ‘let me confess’ . . . ‘I was not myself’ . . . ‘I became a servant of Eros’” (Coetzee52). For Dr Rasool, one of the school committee members, this is not a sufficient excuse, because Lurie only refers his action to a sexual impulse he could not resist, (Coetzee 53). She demands a public statement from Lurie in order for him to show true remorse. However, Lurie believes this additional demand is preposterous, “I have had enough,” [he says] . . . “I plead guilty. That is as far as I am prepared to go” (Coetzee 55). In this way Lurie not only refuses to show remorse, he also defends his sexual instincts that are rooted in his ‘id’.

This sense of neglecting norms and moral values is reflected on other occasions as well, such as when his lawyer recommends counseling; “To fix me? To cure me? To cure me of inappropriate desires” (Coetzee 43)? When Lucy later brings up the matter of
Melanie, she believes he should stand up for himself, to end potential gossip, and try to find a teaching job at another university. However, he remains relentless in his position; “You miss the point my dear” . . . “My case rests on the rights of desire” (89), and compares himself with a story of a male dog that became excited each time it smelled a female dog and was beaten until it did not know what to do. Lurie tells her; “a dog would accept the justice of chewing a slipper, but no animal will accept the justice of being punished for following its instincts.” The moral according to Lurie is that “the poor dog had begun to hate its own nature. It no longer needed to be beaten. It punished itself” (Coetzee 90). With this metaphor, Lurie is not only comparing himself with the punished dog, he is also emphasizing the importance of following one’s instincts, as anything else would be to go against nature and lead to insanity. Consequently, he is also rejecting the norms of the society, which he believes are repressing his libido.

Despite the lack of sufficient support of the ‘superego’, the ‘ego’ still operates under the ‘reality principle’, and tries to comply with prevailing ethic standards and morals of the ‘external world’. In other words, a conflict between the ‘id’ and the ‘ego’ can take place, which can create a sense of guilt. This is noticeable when Lurie visits the Isaac family in order to show remorse for what he did to Melanie; “it is not a punishment I have refused. I do not murmur against it. On the contrary, I am living it out day by day, trying to accept disgrace as my state of my being. Is it enough for God, do you think, that I live in disgrace without term” (Coetzee 172)? By saying this to Mr. Isaac, Lurie implies a moral growth, and an understanding of values and morals of conventional society. However, his ‘id’ is there to remind him of his sexual instincts: when Melanie’s younger sister opens the door for him when he arrives, “the memory of [Melanie] comes over him
in a hot wave. *God save me*, he thinks. *What am I doing here?*” Moments later Lurie is taken by his passion when he imagines “the two of them in the same bed: an experience fit for a king“ (164). Does his remorse to the Isaac family mean anything? he does not know, because, to use his own words; “he does want to speak of his heart. The question is; what is on his heart” (165)? This shows how Lurie is conscious of his actions, at the same time as he is driven by his unconscious desires, which creates confusion in his mind.

In short, according to Freud, the role of the ‘superego’ cannot be diminished. Psychological problems are likely to follow the individual into adulthood if the ‘ego’ is not able to successfully repress the ‘little boy’s sexual desire for his mother in the phallic stage. In Lurie’s case, as it can be assumed that he grew up without a ‘father-figure’, thus he did not experience the ‘primal process’, which is essential for the development of the ‘superego’. In Lurie’s case this is being reflected by his troubled social life and in the way he defends his sexual instincts, which is seen in the fact that he is ready to have quit his respected job as a teacher at the University in favor of it, and consequently allowing himself to face an uncertain future however unreasonable it may sound. Considering these aspects, they may add to the notion that Lurie suffers from an unresolved Oedipus complex that can be traced back to his early childhood, which is still unconsciously affecting his behavior.

*Byron in Italy, an Opera of Desire*

To further understand the influence of the Oedipus complex on Lurie, his chamber opera will be analyzed by using the concept of ‘sublimation’. On and off in the novel, Lurie
works on his composition of his chamber opera which is supposed to begin as a lustful love affair between Lord Byron and his mistress Teresa Guiccioli. As a scholar on romantic poets, the opera is something that energizes him, even though his goal for it is somewhat diffuse: does he intend to be famous for it, or is it merely a ‘closet drama’ that Lucy will be the only one to hear about (Coetzee 63)? From a psychoanalytical perspective, an artistic work is much more than ‘just a creation’, it is something that equals a dream, and as such it “contain[s] in its fantasy the fulfillment of an unsatisfied wish” (Mollinger 2), which first “appeared in childhood” (61), because, to Freud, “the dream is always a wish-fulfillment, because it is a creation of the Unconscious system, whose only aim is wish-fulfillment” (Freud Interpretation 371). Yeats once wrote; “the passion, when . . . they do not find fulfillment, become vision; the visions of the poet, like the visions of the dream, represent the ‘sublimation’ - the sublime transfiguration - of the shackled cravings of the flesh” (Ellmann 12).

In her research, Hushidari suggests that Lurie’s ‘closet opera’ is a way for him to externalize his midlife crisis, while Segall states that the reason for composing the opera becomes a way for Lurie to transform himself from being a coldhearted womanizer to be able to feel real love. However, based on Freud’s concept of ‘sublimation’, through which repressed wishes and desires can be expressed unconsciously in a more socially accepted manner, this thesis suggests that Lurie is energized to compose his chamber opera due to repressed incestuous desires.

Lurie loves his daughter, Lucy (Coetzee 67), and he is caring and protective of her qualities which he shows especially after the attack on them. Lucy is also very caring initially in her approach, and wants him to stay with her. However, Lurie’s love is not
limited to a fatherly love as it is infused with an emotional desire, reflected through ‘subliminal’ messages in the novel, such as when he first arrives at Lucy’s and is impressed by her appearance; “she has put on weight. Her hips and breasts are now (he searches for the word) ample . . . embracing him, kissing him on the cheek. What a nice girl, he thinks, hugging her” (59). When Lucy later comments on the wild geese that are returning for the new season, Lurie’s instinctual desire in his ‘id’ swiftly awakens when she says; “Aren’t they lovely, they come back every year. The same three.” . . .”Three, [he imagines]. That would be a solution of sorts. He and Lucy and Melanie” (88). When Bev after the attack implies that David does not understand Lucy, because he was not in the room when the rape took place, he silently disagrees, because “he can, if he concentrates, if he loses himself, be there, be the men, inhabit them, fill them with the ghost of himself” (160. As a womanizer Lurie is used to get what he wants, however, this time the object for his sexual desire is loaded with a dangerous taboo that needs to be repressed into the Unconscious to avoid any scandal.

Interestingly enough, the main character in his chamber opera, Lord Byron, was involved in scandals during his lifetime, which led to his wife, Annabella, accusing him of “incest, homosexuality and heterosexual sodomy” (Hodgkinson). However, in Lurie’s view, Byron’s behavior should not be considered a scandal; he rather believes it is a pity that it is seen as such by the society. Still, he admits that his own theme in Byron in Italy must be a scandal as well (Coetzee 31). In this way, by excusing Lord Byron’s scandalous behavior, he also seems to defend his own ‘Eros’ and potential scandal. Considering this, it is probable to say that Lurie’s composition is a ‘sublimation’ in progress, energized by his own incestuous desire, which is indirectly seeking gratification
through the fantasy in his creation of the chamber opera. And considering Lurie’s history of being a womanizer and his intellectual involvement with Lord Byron, it is fitting to say that Lurie is projecting himself as Byron. In addition, in view of Lurie’s desire for Lucy and the aspect of a scandal, it is striking how well Lucy fits into the role of the young Teresa. In other words, his desire for his daughter seems to be the wish that seeks fulfillment through the composition of his opera.

At first, his opera revolves around the lustful love affair between the older Lord Byron and his young mistress, Teresa, in a villa in Ravenna (Coetzee 180). However, after the attack on Lurie and Lucy by the three men, the character of the opera changes as a result of the fragility, the despair, and the dark mood that Lurie finds himself in from that moment (107). More importantly, as a consequence of the attack, it also affects his relationship with Lucy, as he is drifting “bitterly apart” from her at the same time (112).

Interestingly enough, this is also reflected in the opera as it changes from being a love affair between Byron and the young Teresa, to focusing on Teresa as a middle aged woman, and a Byron who is long dead. All of a sudden Byron’s role becomes a distant figure, who only whispers to her from his grave while Teresa’s tormented voice calls for his love in vain (183). As a consequence, while the separation between Byron and Teresa reflects Lurie’s own separation from Lucy, it gives Lurie the opportunity to keep his own love for Teresa alive. As a way to do so, he ‘gives her his toy banjo’, which he “plink-plunks” on. And as a last attempt, through a subtle inclusion, he lets himself appear as a ghostly presence in the opera, as he is “held in the music itself” (184). In this way he clings to the love of Teresa, to be there with her, when she cradles the banjo.
The transition from the young to the older Teresa, and the death of Lord Byron, constitute a significant change in his opera, because now an older Teresa suddenly becomes the central character. This in turn symbolizes the transition from Lurie’s initial frivolous desire for a young woman, to the love of an older woman with more tenderness. In combination with the fact that Teresa calls Byron “her child, her boy” (183), it also turns her appearance into a motherly figure. It is through this complex distortion process in his Unconscious that Lurie is unconsciously trying to express his desire for his mother, which at first, seems to be a desire for his daughter. However, even if the unconscious wish is being ‘thwarted’ in the ‘sublimation’ process through the sudden attack on Lucy and Lurie, the ‘appearance’ of his mother through the older Teresa, and the symbols of his love for her, reflects “a strong experience in the present [which] awakens in the writer a memory of an earlier experience, usually a childhood wish, which finds its fulfillment in the creative work” (Mollinger 14). This “pressure towards the satisfaction of [his] infantile wish, however unreasonable in the present” (Sandler et al. 80), would then be the result of his lurking Oedipus complex, because he sees his own mother reflected in Lucy, which his opera, Byron in Italy, is a ‘sublimation’ of.

A Wishful Dream

In a similar fashion as in the previous chapter, this chapter will analyze a work of art as a result of a ‘sublimation’ process. However, in this chapter the focus will change from that of the character to the author, because it will attempt to show how Disgrace is a ‘sublimation’ of the author’s infantile wish, namely the Oedipus complex, because according to Freud, “literature is like a dream [which] contains the fulfillment of an
unsatisfied wish” (Mollinger 3). The significance of this is that it implies how the Oedipus complex not only unconsciously affects the behavior of the character but also how it is influencing the author’s mind during the creative process of this novel.

According to Freud’s interpretation of Hamlet, his inaction to revenge his father in the play proves to be a result of his Oedipus complex. However, Freud also links Hamlet to Shakespeare by saying; “it can of course only be the poet’s own mind that confronts us in Hamlet” (Barry 75). This was later attempted by his English colleague Ernest Jones as well (Mollinger 135). In Wallace Stevens’s poetry, a poet who is committed to “a natural, and earthly world”, Robert N. Mollinger argues for how intellectual and emotional meanings are integrated in Stevens’s poetry and attempts to show how they are connected to oedipal fantasies, such as “the natural earth [being] imaged as the mother, and the poet’s commitment to the earth [being] a sexual approach to the mother” (123).

Coetzee himself once wrote that “’all autobiography is storytelling, all writing is autobiography’, a statement that blurs the boundaries between autobiography and fiction” (Dent 5). In one of Coetzee’s earlier novels, Boyhood, Coetzee writes about himself as a young boy where he declares his “major feeling towards his weak father . . . [who] gradually descending into alcoholism and debt is that of contempt: ‘[Coetzee] has never worked out the position of his father in the household. In fact, it is not obvious to him by what right his father is there at all’” (Kusek 105). Considering this, it is fair to say that he grew up with an ‘absent’ father, which would indicate a possible unresolved Oedipus complex on behalf of the author.
The following allusion in the novel functions “as a route to [his] childhood fantasy that makes its entrance into the dream-thoughts as an intermediary junction point” (Freud *The Interpretation* 333): “Is he happy? By most measurements, yes, he believes he is. However, he has not forgotten the last chorus of *Oedipus*: call no man happy until he is dead” (Coetzee 2). Why does Lurie give this ambiguous answer to his own question with a quote from Sophocles play *Oedipus the King*? It has to be assumed that Lurie did not kill his father, nor sleep with his mother. The analysis will however suggest that he may have a wish to do just that.

In order to look for connecting thoughts and to show how the Oedipus complex symbolically represents the infantile wish that is being expressed in *Disgrace*, Freud’s ‘topographical’ and ‘structural model’ of the mind will be used as a way to organize the novel into a mental landscape. As the wish remains hidden in the novel, symbols in the novel needs to be understood through psychoanalytical means (Mollinger 3). On the basis of this assumption, the author’s ‘ego’ is being represented by Lurie. And as the ‘ego’, according to Freud, resides in the Conscious, it is represented by the city environment which he is familiar with. The countryside on the other hand, with its unknown factors to the author, such the wilderness, and other potential dangers, symbolizes the author’s Unconscious. In accordance, this is also where his ‘id’ would be located, with its sexual drives, aggressiveness and unfulfilled wishes. Just as Freud would reach into his patients Unconscious in order to find symptom relief, the author begins a journey to explore his own fictional Unconscious through the writing process of his novel, with the difference that the author is not aware of doing so. This becomes significant, because, by symbolically entering his own Unconscious in the writing process, the author re-
experiences his own childhood memory, as the ‘little boy’ he once was. In this way the author unconsciously tries to connect with the unsatisfied infantile wish through the writing process, in an attempt to be able express his love for his ‘mother’ again, which is in accordance with Freud, who states that “the dream is always a wish-fulfillment, because it is a creation of the Unconscious system” (Freud Interpretation 371).

Several aspects in the fictional Unconscious point towards the fact that Lurie, Lucy, and Petrus, are key figures in the interpretation of the infantile wish that seeks gratification in Disgrace. Firstly, the main action in the novel revolves around these three characters. Secondly, they belong to the part that takes place in the fictional Unconscious, the countryside. Thirdly, they represent the most emotional importance, in this way they become the most significant symbols in the interpretation of the repressed wish of the novel (Sandler et al. 128). And lastly, and most importantly, according to Freud, it means that they, in this way, also constitute the disguise of the instinctual wish (126).

These characters are also ‘condensations’, and as such, they can have many meanings according to Freud (Sandler et al. 123). Lucy has a strong connection to the countryside. She feels closely related to it and refuses to leave. She makes a living from the arable land by selling produce and flowers. She belongs there, on the soil, which is traditionally seen as feminine. In this way she strongly associates with a mother symbol in reference to Mother Earth (Mollinger 128). In addition, Lucy shows a motherly care for Lurie and wants him to stay as long as he likes (Coetzee 65). She tries to help him to find a job, and teases him like her mother used to do to him (78). Considering this, and Lurie’s relationship to Lucy in the previous chapter, it supports the notion that Lucy now is a ‘displacement’ for the ‘author’s ‘mother-figure’, and Lurie would represent the
author as her ‘little boy’, and consequently, Lurie’s desire for Lucy, would imply the author’s love for his own mother.

If the relation between Lurie and Lucy symbolizes the ‘mother’ and her ‘little boy’, then the relation between Lurie and Petrus symbolizes the rivalry between the ‘little boy’ and the ‘father’, because, besides Lurie’s subliminal messages of his longing for Lucy, he also worries for her safety, and tries his best to relocate her away from his ‘rival’, Petrus. In addition, glimpses of jealousy comes through; “the truth is, he does not like to think of his daughter in the throes of passion with another woman . . . Yet would he be happier if the lover were a man” (Coetzee 86)? However, his longing for his ‘mother’ is halted by Petrus. In a symbolic act by the “fatherly Petrus” (162), he forcefully claims Lucy as his through the rape attack, which is suggesting the dominant role of the ‘father’. Lurie’s nightmare that he has soon after the attack, where “he wallows in a bed of blood, or, panting, shouting soundlessly, runs from the man with the face like a hawk, like a Benin mask, like a Thoth” (121), is a strong indication of the ‘little boy’s’ ‘fear of castration’. In her research, Segall refers this dream to be a part of Lurie’s emotional development. However, according to Freud, anxiety dreams can have a sexual content. He “maintain[s] that neurotic anxiety has its origin in the sexual life and corresponds to a libido which has been deflected from its object and has found no employment” (Freud The Interpretation 125). This would further support the idea of the repressed wish from the childhood is being realized in the novel and that it might refer to the ‘little boy’s’ ‘fear of castration’.

In summary, from first liking Petrus, Lurie’s hostility towards him grows which leads to the point when Lurie is ready to kill him (Coetzee 119), which would represent
the ‘little boy’s’ desire to kill his ‘father’, so he can have his ‘mother’ by himself. However, Lurie is being humiliated. Not only does Lurie feel abandoned and senses the overwhelming power of Petrus, both physically and mentally, the announced marriage between Petrus and Lucy, and Lucy’s intention to keep the child, who was a result of the rape, symbolically also strengthen the bond between the two of them as the ‘little boy’s ‘parents’. This symbolically puts an end to the rivalry between the ‘little boy’ and the ‘father’. Subsequently, the ‘little boy’s’ ‘fear of castration’, in combination with a sense of guilt for the incestuous wish of his mother, and a guilt for his feeling of hostility towards his father, finally results in the little boy’s surrender of his desire for his mother. Because, from this point, Lurie’s visions seem to dissolve; “I don’t know what the question is anymore,” he tells Bev. “Between me and Lucy a curtain seems to have fallen. I didn’t even notice when it fell” (210). As the ‘little boy’ accepts his new inferior position, it also implies a state of equilibrium between the three of them.

If Freud’s theory is correct, this may imply an Oedipus complex on behalf of the author. However, the author’s unresolved Oedipus complex may indirectly have been processed unconsciously through the literary fantasy with ‘the little boy’s’ symbolic surrender of his sexual desire for his ‘mother’ and his acceptance of the fictional ‘father-figure’. In this way Petrus also may represent the absent ‘father-figure’ in the author’s real childhood. Nevertheless, this would symbolize the ‘primal repression’, a possibility of a strengthened ‘superego’ that may have retained additional moral values, which could be depicted through Lurie’s assimilation process into the community and the acceptance of the new circumstances in his life at the end of the novel, which is something that Segall also concludes, by saying that he is able to feel love again. Thus, in this way this
analysis has attempted to show how the infantile wish has expressed itself symbolically in the novel.

There are a few instances in the novel where the ‘Oedipus complex’ is being hinted at. However, it is not being literally expressed. Nonetheless, there may be a good reason for omitting it. According to Freud, “the dream often reveals the operation of defense mechanisms such as negation.” However, this “represents an important ingredient of the [hidden meaning of the] dream” (Sandler et al. 129). In one of these instances in the novel, when Lurie reflects on Lucy’s sexuality, he refers to Freud’s Electra complex, and follows this with a statement about ‘sons’ that refers to the Oedipus complex. However he indicates that he does not know much about the Oedipus complex:

As he grows older, he turns more and more – it cannot be helped – towards his daughter. She becomes his second salvation, the bride of his youth reborn. No wonder, in fairy-stories, queens try to hound their daughters to their death! He sighs. Poor Lucy! Poor daughters! What a destiny, what a burden to bear! And sons: they too must have their tribulations, though he knows less about that. (Coetzee 87)

It could be assumed that a scholar on romantic poets is well familiar with the drama of Oedipus complex. However, because just like Lurie’s desire for Lucy is expressed through the ‘sublimation’ process in creating the chamber opera; it is plausible to say that Disgrace could be seen as a ‘sublimation’ process for the author’s own repressed childhood wish, which seeks gratification in the writing process of the novel. If this is true, then the Unconscious and the Preconscious have distorted this repressed wish so it can bypass the censorship of the ‘ego’, so it can reach the ‘surface’ of the Conscious for
indirect gratification through the fantasy in the creative work. For the same reason it is likely that the mentioning of the “Oedipus complex” is omitted as it relates too strongly to the repressed wish. This is significant, because if this is correct, and the distortion process did not occur in Unconscious, this novel would not have been created, because, in accordance with the ‘pleasure principle, “the pressure towards the satisfaction of infantile wishes, however unreasonable in the present, still persist” (Sandler et al. 80), and these overwhelming wishes must stay repressed.

**Conclusion**

This thesis has used a psychoanalytical approach in an attempt to explore the occurrence of the Oedipus complex in J.M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace*. This has significance, because according to Freud, an unresolved Oedipus complex may lead to psychological problems in adulthood. Thus, the aim for this thesis has been to show how the Oedipus complex is there, in the narrative, and how it can be linked back to unresolved issues in the psychosexual development in early childhood. In addition it has shown how it unconsciously may have affected the protagonist’s behavior, as well as the author in the writing process of this novel.

Freud’s ‘structural model of the mind’, which consists of the concepts of the ‘ego’, the ‘superego’, the ‘id’, and the ‘external reality’, has been used in order to show how Lurie’s troubled social life could be linked back to an unresolved Oedipus complex in the phallic stage, when the ‘little boy’, roughly between the ages of two and six years, develops a sexual desire for his own mother. The reason for this was Lurie’s own statement indicating that he grew up without a ‘father-figure’, which in turn indicates that
he did not experience the ‘primal process’, which is very important for the development of the ‘superego’. In accordance, Lurie’s troubled social life could be detected. In addition he seems to defend his ‘Eros’ at all costs, because he is ready to quit his respected job as a teacher at the University in favor of it, and consequently allowing himself to face an uncertain future, which further indicates that Lurie suffers from an unresolved Oedipus complex that can be traced back to his early childhood.

In accordance with Freud, who states that an artistic work represents a dream, and as such it includes a fulfillment of a childhood wish, this thesis suggested that Lurie’s dangerous incestuous desires of taboo for his daughter, Lucy, awakens the memory of his childhood wish, namely, his love for his own mother, to express itself in the composition of his chamber opera in a socially accepted manner through ‘sublimation’. It was suggested that Lurie is projecting himself onto Byron, due to Lurie’s history of being a womanizer, and due to his intellectual involvement with Lord Byron. And considering Byron’s history of incestuous scandals and that Lurie admits that his own theme in his opera must involve a scandal, it was fitting that Lucy is a ‘displacement’ for Teresa. However, as Teresa turns into an older, motherly figure, Lurie is able to directly express his love for her when he appears as a ghostly presence in the opera by clinging to the love of Teresa as the ‘mother-figure’, to be there with her, when she cradles the banjo.

Considering that Coetzee grew up with an ‘absent’ father according to his text *Boyhood*, this thesis also implied an Oedipus complex on behalf of the author, thus, suggesting that *Disgrace* is a ‘sublimation’ of his repressed infantile wish, the love for his mother. In order to understand how this infantile wish is being expressed, symbolism in the novel was analyzed with the use of Freud’s ‘structural’ and ‘topographical’ model of
the mind. Based on this, Lurie is the ‘displacement’ of the author, Lucy the ‘displacement’ of his ‘mother-figure’, and Petrus the ‘displacement’ of his ‘father-figure’. By visiting the countryside, symbolically the Unconscious of the author, the author symbolically re-experiences his own childhood memory, as he turns it into the ‘little boy’, as a way to express his love for his ‘mother’. However, this time there is a ‘father-figure’, who is preventing this, instead it leads to the ‘little boy’s ‘fear of castration’, which is symbolically represented by Petrus forceful claim on Lucy as his through the rape attack. From this point on, the announced marriage between Petrus and Lucy’s decision to keep the child, symbolically strengthen their position as ‘parents’ towards the ‘little boy’. In this way the ‘little boy’ has no choice than to accept his ‘father’ as superior, and to give up his sexual desire for his mother. However, as a consequence, the ‘little boy’ also symbolically, experiences the ‘primal process’. Thus, it would mean that the ‘little boy’ inherits the moral and social values of the parents, and thus, he is able to develop his ‘superego’. In this way, through the distortion process of the Unconscious, a potential dissolution of his Oedipus complex may have occurred in the fantasy of the novel as the author re-experiences his own infantile wish through the creation of this novel.

By analyzing both the protagonist and the author, this thesis has shown how the character and the author are interconnected and it suggests how the powerful workings of this instinctual infantile wish of the Oedipus complex is there, but hidden in the narrative. In this way this thesis has shown how it is possible that the Oedipus complex unconsciously may have affected the protagonist’s mind and his behavior, as well as the author in his creation of this novel. This is further implied by the fact that “Oedipus
"complex" is not being expressed literally anywhere in the novel, but only hinted on a few occasions, which indicates that it might be omitted because it relates too strongly to the repressed infantile wish that seeks gratification. If it was revealed, the wish would stay repressed with the consequence that this novel may not have been written. In this way this psychoanalytical reading may contribute to previous research by adding this alternative understanding of Coetzee’s *Disgrace.*
Works Cited


