

The Neo-Pagan God of Modern Humanism in *Disgrace*

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Abstract: *Disgrace*, published in 1999, is set in the post-apartheid South Africa. After its publication, many critics read the novel as a response to the current political affairs of South Africa: the whites seeking a way to reconcile with the blacks in the new South African land. Besides, the novel is also read as an existential novel. Many critics are concerned with Lurie's personal growth in which animals play an important transformative role: dogs make Lurie aware of the suffering of beings. Lurie is thus entitled as a "dogman," a "scapegoat," or a "scapegrace." However, all of these critics neglect one trait of Lurie, that is, he is actively inventing his own perverse life rather than life transforms him. He willfully woos one of his students thirty years younger than him. Afterwards, he asserts his right of desire and refuses to repent for his sexual harassment on his student. Finally he determinedly chooses to become a dogman in the rural land of South Africa. In the fifth chapter of his 2003 novel *Elizabeth Costello* titled "The Humanity in Africa," Coetzee expresses his view of Humanism which, I found, can shed a light on interpreting the protagonist Lurie's character in *Disgrace*. In "The Humanity in Africa," Coetzee suggests that Greek-Renaissance Humanism and Judean-Christianity have been rivaling, yet at the same time miming each other. Modern Humanism is usually regarded to be originated from Greek civilization as opposed to Christianity, yet, Coetzee suggests, it incorporates the two European civilizations: it follows the Greeks to pursue human beauty and also learns caritas from Christianity. Human pride is the backbone of Modern Humanism, which makes men their own gods: Human beings assert their human subjectivity and pursue human beauty and at the same time assume the role of Christ to suffer as a human flesh and suffer for others. In this thesis, I

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argue that one of the protagonist Lurie's remarkable traits is that he, inspired by his human pride, willfully self-invents his perverse life. Lurie's pride is actually a pride of a Modern Humanist, which drives him to completely pursue human beauty and endows him with the strength to willingly suffer human disgrace. Lurie's human pride is so strong that it grants Lurie's absolute sovereign self and elevates him to a Neo-Pagan God of Modern Humanism.

Keywords: Human Pride; Greek Humanism; Judean-Christianity; Beauty and Ugliness

INTRODUCTION

Disgrace is a 1999 novel by South Africa-born author J. M. Coetzee, winner of the 2003 Nobel Prize in Literature; the book itself won the Booker Prize in 1999, the year in which it was published. A 2006 poll of "literary luminaries" by *The Observer* newspaper named it as "the greatest novel of the last twenty-five years" written in English outside the United States.

According to *The Guardians*, "[a]ny novel set in post-apartheid South Africa is fated to be read as a political portrait, but the fascination of *Disgrace* is the way it both encourages and contests such a reading by holding extreme alternatives in tension, salvation, ruin."³ This comment actually points out the two levels of reading the novel.

In the first place, the novel certainly shows its political concern about the post-apartheid South Africa. Many critics argue that the novel is a political response to the new South Africa in which the whites have lost their previous privileges and seek their unresolved destiny in the black land. Some readers consider the novel to be a disseminated and misleading portrait of post-apartheid South Africa (such as the outrageous gang-rape scene) and some consider it a sincere expression of the whites' willingness to atone for their ancestors (such as Lucy's final decision to give birth to the bastard baby conceived in the gang-rape to atone for her white ancestors).

In the second place, there is no doubt that the novel is a timeless piece of art that deals with more than the historical and regional elements. The novel shows its deep reflections on the existential condition of human beings and their salvation. Many critics have explored an outstanding element of the novel, that is, the animals which share the same existential condition with human beings and play a transformative role in Lurie's personal growth.

It is acknowledged by most critics that animals in the novel suffer the pains as human beings do. Louise Tremaine does a thorough investigation on the animals in Coetzee's work. She finds that Coetzee incorporates animals as a narrative element that associates with the suffering of death or the questions of foreknowledge of impending death. The animals in Coetzee's works are creatures that suffer humanly inflicted captivity, pain or death miserably. Tremaine also coins such terms as "embodiedness" and "body-souls"⁴ to describe the existential condition of both human beings and animal beings.

Some other critics have invented different terms to describe Lurie's personal growth correlated with animals. Tom Herron points out that the protagonist Lurie is actually "becoming animal."⁵ He perceives that though in European philosophical tradition that views the animal as a thing possessing neither language nor ethics, it is exactly the animals' lack of power that makes them assume an exemplary and transformative status in *Disgrace*. Encounters with the animals in the rural land help Lurie to sow his

³ See <http://books.guardian.co.uk/departments/generalfiction/story/>.

⁴ See Tremaine, Louis. "The Embodied Soul: Animal Being in the Work of J. M. Coetzee." *Contemporary Literature*. Wisconsin: Winter 2003. 587-612.

⁵ See Herron, Tom. "The Dog Man: Becoming Animal in Coetzee's *Disgrace*." *Twentieth Century Literature*. Hemstead: Winter 2005. 467-92.

sympathetic seeds and become animal. Thus, Herron offers readers a very perceptive point: "Lurie's becoming animals happens when the notion of disgrace crosses various boundaries and expands to include all beings, nonhuman as well as human" (Herron 483). Becoming animal is to cross the borderline between animals and mankind to fully embrace the disgrace of beings. Chris Danta presents another term to describe Lurie's growth: Lurie is "becoming a sacrificial animal like a dog, like a lamb."⁶ He argues that Lurie is becoming a scapegoat or a sacrificial animal for secular ends: an experience of sacrifice without redemption. Danta emphasizes that disgrace is not the opposite of the theological notion of grace. Grace refers to God's grace, and Lurie finally ends up a "scapegrace" who escapes God's grace because of his "over-identification with the suffering body – the prospective corpse of the animal victim" (Danta 735).

It is interesting to note that before Chris Danta, Derek Attridge proves that Lurie finally enters "a state of grace"⁷ incorporating animals and music as the substance in his new existence. I believe that the seemingly two opposite terms "scapegrace" and "a state of grace" offered by the two critics actually do not contradict: the "scapegrace" Danta proposes here is the divine grace that Lurie escapes from, while the Attridge's "a state of grace" is human grace that Lurie enters.

All these criticisms on *Disgrace* revolve around the human existential condition and its salvation and emphasize the animals' transformative role in Lurie's personal growth. Louise Tremaine powerfully argues that Lurie, in the end, actually gives up the effort to seek civilization and salvation and accedes fully to the simple truth that "his salvation can reside in no one and nothing beyond his own animal being ... there is no salvation from suffering and death for human beings, there is only a way to salvation from the shame and disgrace that the existential suffering and death threaten to instill in us" (Tremaine 607). The salvation that the novel leads us to is a secular one that humans can only save themselves from the shame and disgrace as embodied beings.

We can see from the above that the terms "embodiedness," "body-souls," "becoming animal," "like a dog, like a lamb," and "scapegrace" provided by critics all prefer to investigate Lurie's personal growth as a way to explore the novel's ultimate concern about the human existential condition and its salvation which is a secular one done by human themselves.

However, these critics obviously neglect one essential trait in Lurie's character: Lurie is determinedly inventing his own life from the very beginning of the novel and his transformative process is not a passive one influenced by animals. What I have been most impressed by the novel is that in every decision-making point when Lurie can certainly anticipate the consequences his decisions will lead to, Lurie chooses a dangerous path and puts his life at risk. Life does not force Lurie to transform; he himself is determined to invent his new state of being. Lurie, at the age of fifty-two when the novel begins, clearly enjoys launching an attack on his own life and keeps self-inventing a new and perverse life. Firstly he willfully pursues one of his students, a colored beauty thirty years younger than him; afterwards he defiantly refuses to repent for his harassment on the girl and abandons his better off life to fully join the worse off life in the countryside. Michiel Heyns believes this is Coetzee's narrative strategy – "perversity,"⁸ which means that in every crucial point the protagonist Lurie makes a decision that leads further to his downfall like Sophocles' *Antigone*⁹. I argue that Lurie's perversity might be seen as a narrative strategy, but Coetzee clearly endows his protagonist a remarkable characteristic – that is the "secret pride." It is rather this secret pride in Lurie that determines him to make every perverse choice of life and gives him the audacity to "become animal," "become a dog" or enter "a state of grace" or "scapegrace": the various kinds of descriptions of Lurie's new states of being by other critics. And this trait of Lurie is consistent throughout the novel. I further argue that the secret pride of Lurie is humanist pride.

⁶ See Danta, Chris. "Like a Dog ... Like a Lamb: Becoming Sacrificial Animal in Kafka and Coetzee." *New Literary History*. University of New South Wales: 2007. 721-37.

⁷ See Attridge, Derek. "Age of Bronze, State of Grace: Music and Dogs in Coetzee's *Disgrace*." *Novel*. Brownm University, 2000: 98-121.

⁸ See Michiel, Heyns. "'Call no man happy': Perversity as narrative principle in *Disgrace*." *English Studies in Africa*. Johannesburg: 2002: 57-64.

⁹ *Antigone* is a tragedy by Sophocles written before or in 442 BC.

After the publication of *Disgrace*, Coetzee completed another novel *Elizabeth Costello* in which Coetzee explains many of his philosophical ideas. I find that the fifth chapter of the novel titled “The Humanity in Africa” can shed a light on our reading of Lurie’s secret pride. In the fifth chapter, Coetzee arranges a debate between the Judean-Christianity and the Greek-Renaissance Humanism: the novelist Elizabeth speaks for Humanism and her twin sister Blanche for Christianity. Elizabeth contends that what Greeks contribute to human beings is the assertion of human beauty after the long dark Christianity dominated age. However, Elizabeth, as a Modern Humanist first standing up for the Greek Humanism, later finds that Modern Humanists actually also learns from the Christianity. Christ abandons his higher status and suffers human disgrace as a human flesh and He suffers not for Himself but for lower human beings. Thus Christianity teaches people caritas, that is, to suffer as a being and suffer for others in a Christ-like way. Christianity keeps human beings alert to their earth-bound suffering body and instills in mankind with God’s love or caritas.

Speaking of Humanism, we can easily find that human pride is its backbone. Human pride was first generated from the Greeks who inspire mankind to uncover their human bodies and show their human beauty, while human pride is also refined by miming and contending Christianity: human pride must guide human beings to transcend the human condition of the suffering body that Christianity warns of and also mime Christ to acquire caritas.

My argument is that Lurie is marked by the trait of human pride which, first originated from the Greek Humanism and at the later refined by Christianity, is the backbone of Modern Humanism. The human pride in Lurie determines him to fully pursue human beauty after the Greeks, and willingly suffer the human disgrace as Christ. With this absolute pride, Lurie elevates himself to the status of complete human sovereign, human independence and human perfection and becomes a Neo-Pagan God of Modern Humanism.

This approach to the interpretation of the novel also offers a new way of reading sexualities, another outstanding element in the novel. Lurie’s audacity to woo the beauty Melanie and his assertion of the rights of desire for human beauty and the opposite sex are inspired by the Greeks. And Lurie’s final sexuality with the ugly Bev symbolizes his embracing human disgrace.

The essay will first examine the fifth chapter of *Elizabeth Costello* titled “The Humanity in Africa”, exploring Coetzee’s view of the rivalry between Greek-Renaissance Humanism and Judean-Christianity which Modern Humanism incorporated the two civilizations. Then I will give a detailed analysis of the protagonist Lurie in *Disgrace* whose pride encourages him to seek beauty after the Greeks and embrace human disgrace after Christ. Finally, I prove that Modern Humanism is also regarded as a religion, asserting human’s God-like sovereign and Lurie’s supreme human pride makes him a Neo-Pagan God of Modern Humanism. In the end, I leave the readers an open question on the power of salvation offered by the Modern Humanism.

1. COETZEE’S VIEW OF MODERN HUMANISM IN *ELIZABETH COSTELLO*

Modern Humanism has its origin of Greek-Renaissance Humanism which promotes human subjectivity and is often seen as an opponent to Judean-Christianity which confines the mankind to seek the unbounded possibility of life. However, in the fifth chapter of his 2003 novel *Elizabeth Costello*, Coetzee expresses his view that Modern Humanism actually incorporates both Greek-Renaissance Humanism and Judean-Christianity.

In the novel, rather than speak to the topic at hand in an expository prose and in his own voice, in each chapter Coetzee reads a fictional narrative about an aging, Australian novelist Elizabeth Costello, who is invited either to present a lecture or to be a guest at one. In the fifth lesson titled “The Humanity in Africa”, Coetzee arranges a debate between the two civilizations in a clever way: he arranges Elizabeth Costello who speaks for the Greek-Italian humanists and her twin sister Blanche for Judean-Christianity

together.

Sister Blanche first airs her view that the vision Greeks offer to mankind is only a dream or a delusion. The mechanic reason that the Greeks promote has brought its own death. Later when Elizabeth visits Blanche's missionary's hospital where she meets Joseph who devotes his lifetime to carve the same suffering face of Jesus on the cross over and over again, she finally begins her argument that after the long dark Christianity dominated Middle Ages, it is the Greeks that give humans back their beauty. The great and brilliant Greek people, far from attempting to make a divorce with man's nature, had found pleasure and beauty some of the most essential constructive forces. However, in the end of this chapter, Elizabeth has an epiphany: she realizes that Greeks teach human beauty, but it's from the Christianity that humans learn *caritas*. Christianity teaches humans their ugliness, worshiping the ugliness of Jesus dying on the cross, but at the same time it also transmits the *caritas* that God offers to the mankind. Jesus gave up his God's privileges, incarnated to suffer what the human flesh has to suffer, alerting humans to the suffering of the body and preaching the sympathy and *caritas* humans can give to other fellow beings.

It is also interesting to note that the humanist Elizabeth Costello and Sister Blanche are actually twin sisters, indicating their deep-connected bounds. Modern Humanism is actually an offspring of the Greek-Renaissance Humanism and Judean-Christianity. It boosts humans' confidence to seek beauty and joy from the human existence, its challenges and tragedies, even in the inevitability and finality of death. It encourages individuals to benefit the society and find meaning in relationships and *caritas*.

1.1 The Greek-Renaissance Humanism Versus Judean-Christianity

The word "humanity" can conjure up such terms as "human nature" and "human condition." As mortal entities, there are a series of biologically determined events that are common to most human lives and some that are inevitable for all. The human condition encompasses all of the experience of being human.¹⁰ In the world, different civilizations contribute different ways of viewing humanity and coping with the human condition.

Coetzee, as a contemporary English literature writer, is deeply influenced by the two European civilizations: Greek-Renaissance Humanism and Judean-Christianity. The two civilizations offer humans different guidelines to react and cope with the commonality of human condition and human nature. In *Elizabeth Costello*, Coetzee arranges a debate between the two civilizations in a clever way.

In the fifth lesson titled "The Humanity in Africa", Elizabeth Costello, the fictional novelist speaks for the Greek-Renaissance Humanists and her twin sister Blanche for Judean-Christianity. Blanche, who has founded a charity hospital in South Africa, is given an honorary degree by a university for her contribution to the charity hospital. To be specific, she is given a bachelor's degree on humanities. Blanche uses this chance, giving a speech against *studia humanitatis* (Latin word for studies of humanities) at the ceremony. The multilayered rivalry between the two civilizations or between the two sisters is clearly laid out. Blanche argues that universities did not give birth to humanity studies which are distinct from the divinity studies. Textual scholars first tried to study the classical texts with the purpose of translating the "True Word" in *Bible* accurately. Yet gradually those scholars shifted their interest to the seductive pre-Christian texts themselves. In addition, Blanche argues that the ideal life the Greeks create is just a dream. The Greek civilization is the only one alternative to the Christian vision that Humanism was able to offer. "To Greek society – an utterly idealized picture of Greek society...half-naked men, their breasts gleaming with olive oil, sitting on the temple steps discoursing about the good and the true, while in the background lithe-limbed boys wrestle and a herd of goats contentedly graze. Free bodies in free souls.... A dream, a delusion" (*Costello* 132).¹¹

Blanche argues that while the classics of antiquity were once thought to "offer a teaching of way of life, the study of the classics now might offer a way of life or ... at least a way of earning a living;" thereby, she says, "they have brought about their own death by the hand of the new god, the monster

¹⁰ The passage is indebted to the entry "Humanity" at www.wikipedia.com.

¹¹ In the following text of Chapter I, all the quotations from *Elizabeth Costello* are from this edition: Coetzee, J. M. *Elizabeth Costello*. New York: Viking, 2003.

reason, mechanical reason” (123). It is important to note that Blanche does not condemn the classics themselves but the study that, rather than seek to learn and practice the ideals they contain, instead studies their author’s belief in these ideals, thus worshipping their beauty and divorcing it from the pursuit of the good, a move which becomes a pursuit of beauty for its own sake. In dinner table conversation following Blanche’s antagonistic speech, Elizabeth tries good-naturedly both to align herself with her sister and to conciliate the humanist scholars by describing reading as a quest for salvation and a search for guidance for the young and pointing that “writers can at least teach us about ourselves” (128). Blanche contends that “humans do not need to consult novels to know what pettiness, what baseness, what cruelty human beings are capable of. That is where they start. Humans are fallen creatures. The study of mankind amounts to no more than picturing to us our darker potential. So the study of mankind is to be study in what reborn men can be” (128). As Plato drives the poets out of his ideal country, Blanche determinedly divorces her sister’s secular Humanism, which is seen as picturing to us our darker potential, from the pursuit of truth – a study in what reborn men can be, thereby making a gap between the supposedly friendly twins.

The rivalry between the Greeks and Christianity becomes clearer, when Elizabeth later spends time at sister Bridget’s missionary hospital, where she meets a local craftsman who has spent his life and rough talents carving an “identical emaciated Christ with a mask-like face” (134) for thousands and thousands of crucifixes of all sizes: “the face of the tortured man is a formalized, simplified mask in a single plane, the eyes slits, the mouth heavy and drooping...the knees are raised, as if the man were trying to relieve the pain in his arms by putting his weight on the nail piercing his feet” (135). Joseph devotes his lifetime to carve the same suffering face of Jesus on the cross over and over again. Elizabeth accuses that why Blanche didn’t introduce Joseph to those great Greek and Italian paintings, which might help him to be a real artist, not a craftsman. It is this crucifix finally objectifies the latent conflict between the sisters. ““Why a Christ dying in contortions rather than a living Christ? Why a Gothic, medieval, backward tradition? Why reject beauty?” Elizabeth asks” (138). In answer, Blanche argues that the beauty which her sister craves is an appeal to the Greeks whom Africans reject in favor of God who will help them bear their cross. Africans need “someone who suffers like them. Like them and for them” (141). Elizabeth rejects the Christ mask and instead has celebrated the religious function of writing that can save us by teaching us about ourselves. For her the mask, acknowledged by both sisters as not art at all, is not a mirror or a lamp, but just itself – a rough, ugly, earthbound memento of an outdated tradition that she cannot connect with ultimate realities or with her self. The humanist writer needs art to mediate the actual; Blanche, by contrast, says it is enough for the poor faithful – especially the women – to see Christ as sharing their ugly lives here and now.

While Coetzee represents this conflict between the idealist humanist and the harshly realist Christian in terms of their response to the question of beauty in relation to truth – a conflict which Elizabeth sees as a contest between Jesus and the Greeks, the more fundamental point of contention is the question of love. In saying goodbye, Blanche coolly throws Elizabeth’s choice of the Greeks in her face, saying, “you backed a loser”, and telling her that she even chose the wrong Greeks, “the rational Apollo instead of the ecstatic Orpheus” (145). Elizabeth is rather shocked at Blanche’s manner, as is the reader at Coetzee’s representation of such a sharp binary. Elizabeth goes home disappointed not to have made contact with her sister at a deeper level. And it is interesting that, instead of modeling the love of Christ with her sister, Blanche seems compelled to insist that her sister look to the model of Christ; the effect, for Elizabeth, is a refusal of love.

The surprising conclusion of the story finds Elizabeth, a month later, using art in the form of writing to seek a resolution of all the feelings stirred up in her by this visit with her sister in Africa. She finds she can only begin to tell it as a letter to Blanche, just as Blanche has used her speech and then the Christ mask to make her point. Elizabeth’s story has two parts, however, and only the first, in which she continues their debate on the nature and the purpose of beauty, can she tell her sister. Elizabeth writes of having posed a few years before for Mr. Phillips, an aging male painter friend of their mother’s, when, out of compassion for his longing for his youthful days of painting young nudes, she bares her breasts for him to paint.

Elizabeth enjoys her audacity to bare her breasts for the old dying man, and she wonders where she got the idea, where she learned this pose – the presentation of her divine body – she realizes that she

learned it from the Greeks and what generations of Renaissance painters made of the Greeks. Because of them, she sees, “through me a goddess was manifesting herself” (149). After the long period of the Dark Middle Ages ruled by the Judean-Christianity civilization, it is the Greeks that give humans back their beauty. The Greeks, far from attempting to make a divorce within man’s nature, had aimed to see life steadily and see it whole, who, giving free play to all their powers, had found in pleasure and beauty some of the most essential constructive forces.

In the letter to Blanche, Elizabeth says what the Greek Humanism teaches is what she has shown to Mr. Philips – humanity. After the centuries-long Christian night, “the Greeks give us back our beauty, our human beauty” (151), she writes Blanche. Against the obsessively repeated carving of the ugly mask of Christ, then Elizabeth holds up the “human beauty of a woman’s breast, painted and caressed over and over again” (151). Elizabeth or Coetzee uses the beautiful woman breasts to represent the Greek civilization, which is set along the Crucified Christ as a symbol of Judean-Christian civilization.

1.2 Modern Humanism Incorporating the Greek-Renaissance Humanism and Judean-Christianity

When Elizabeth poses herself for Mr. Phillips to paint, asserting that there is a goddess manifesting through her, she first thinks the goddess is the Greek Hera or Aphrodite, but she quickly moves on from the Greeks, conscious that her pose is not imitating Aphrodite or Hera, but Mary of Nazareth. She sees that there is a quality lacking in the Greeks – “what she calls the ability to exude, which provokes that heady mixture of the ecstatic and the aesthetic which is worship – and that this quality emerges only once in the history of mankind, in Renaissance Italy, when immemorial Christian images and observances are invaded by the humanistic dream of antique Greece” (150). Elizabeth realizes that women’s body becomes the site of both human beauty and human sublime, and men’s longing for women’s body may not only be seen as an erotic response, but also an act of worshipping.

In the Italian Renaissance, the rediscovered Greek legacies inspired the Christian artists to mime the Greeks who paint the beautiful human nudes, and thus they created the half-naked Virgin Mary as a new symbol of Christianity as opposed to the suffering Jesus on the cross. The Christianity and the Greeks have been mediated by Virgin Mary.

It would have been satisfying had Coetzee ended his lesson here, with the quiet triumph of Humanism and beauty, which is at the same time a reconciliation between Jesus and the Greeks, mediated by Virgin Mary. But Coetzee is never interested in comforting endings. Elizabeth herself is so uncomfortable with the ideal ending because what happens later is so ungraceful that Elizabeth hesitates to tell Blanche about it. The first stage of this private story tells of Mr. Philips’s further decline that he can no longer hold a brush or to speak, and Elizabeth sits half-nude for him one last time. Up to this point the story is decent enough to send to Blanche and will still have supported her argument on beauty and art, but at the point not only decency, in terms of Elizabeth’s sense of how Blanche will see things, but the power of art fails. For the last stage of her relations with the dying Mr. Philips sees her performing oral sex on his nearly extinct organ of generation. Elizabeth sees herself as the middle-aged woman crouched over the bag of bones worrying about the entrance of a stern Nurse Naidoo as much as she worries his penis. She reflects sardonically that “the situation is less than ideal, as everything is ... once you are past a certain age” (154). Ironically perhaps, because she is repelled by the ugly mask of Christ, she turns to the Greeks for a word to name the spectacle, first rejecting Eros, for which it is too grotesque, then “agape¹²,” until she recognizes the aptness of the word provided by the Christians: caritas. She knows it from “the swelling of her heart and the sense of self-abandonment that is like falling into a hole on the heart” (154).

If Elizabeth holds back from telling Blanche about this, it is to save her pride, both because of the questionable decency or the comic nature of the scene and because with this act she seems to concede to the humanity and power of her sister’s faith. For, while she has rejected the grotesque mask of Christ, she in a sense follows its model by loving Mr. Philips despite the grotesque appearance of the act. She must

¹² “Agape” is one of the several Greek words translated in to English as love.

in this overcome her pride not only in facing of Blanche, her mimetic rival, but in facing of anyone who might happen to see her, notably the formidable Nurse Naidoo.

This brings us back to a point that Plato dwells on in *The Republic*, the problem of perception. For teaching young people to follow the good is made most difficult by the fact that an unjust person can be seen just and the just as unjust. And what Elizabeth, defender of beauty, has to surrender is her own appearance of being beautiful, or at least dignified, in the eyes of a decent spectator. With Blanche too this is an issue, since in her apparent triumph over Elizabeth she appears anything but a loving Christian sister. And we are left with the uncomfortable sense that her desire to point Elizabeth to Christ becomes a stumbling block that leads to a denial of love. In contrast, Elizabeth surrenders her own ideals of beauty – appears unjust, in fact – and in doing so not only demonstrates true Christian love – *caritas* – for an unlovely object but also exposes, in the final words of the story, an even more tender and humbling love for her sister who, in love, has rejected her. In a disturbing way, then, Coetzee presents in Elizabeth the secular humanist who imitates the scapegoat and in Blanche the Christians who embrace the scapegoat and turn it into a stumbling block that prevents love by using it as a mask of ugliness to hide not only beauty but truth. Perhaps Coetzee would agree, after all, with Girard's (A Christian Anthropologist) idea that our concern for victims is the secular mask of Christian love.

In the letter Elizabeth also shows that human beings can also acquire divinity when they show their *caritas*. When one embraces the ugliness, the disgraced, and the degraded with love, one will have the sparks of the divinity. In this way, human beings can acquire the qualities of the divine.

We can discern Coetzee's view of humanity from this chapter. He firmly believes in the Greeks' celebration of human beauty, and Coetzee also seems to believe that African people also need someone from the higher to suffer like them and with them, but Coetzee doesn't grant Christ as the only one who can accomplish this task; Elizabeth Costello, as a scholar of Humanism, a human being, can also show this great love for the degraded and join them.

As a humanist, Coetzee's view of Modern Humanism offers us a key to unlock the mystery of the novel *Disgrace*.

2. HUMAN PRIDE OF LURIE IN *DISGRACE*

Through the protagonist Lurie in *Disgrace*, Coetzee embodies his view of Humanism which is shaped by the mimetic rivals: the Greek Humanism and the Judean-Christianity. Lurie, a modern humanist holding the profession of teaching literature, has a notable trait in his character: his pride. In one of his literature classes, he reads a poem on Lucifer written by Byron, alluding to his own secret pride.

He could
At times resign his own for others' good,
But not for pity, not because he ought,
But in some strange perversity of thought,
That swayed him onward with a *secret pride*¹³
To do what few or none would do beside;
And this same impulse would in tempting time
Mislead his spirit equally to crime. (qtd. in *Disgrace* 33)¹⁴

With this pride, Lucifer does not depend on others to give him an identity and makes himself his own sovereign. This secret pride sometimes guides him to do good things; sometimes misleads him to do crime. Likewise, Lurie's pride first stimulates him to chase a colored beauty thirty years younger than

¹³ The italics by me.

¹⁴ In the rest of the text, all the quotations from *Disgrace* are from this edition: Coetzee, J. M. *Disgrace*. London: Vintage, 1999.

him; later his human pride justifies himself from charge of the harassment on his student; finally his pride motivates him to live among the dogs and suffer with the disgraced beings without the least hope of salvation from God.

Because of this secret pride in the Humanist Byron, Byron's Lucifer, or Byron's disciple Lurie, they will take a different and dangerous path and live a perverse life in common people's eyes as believers in other religions do.

2.1 Lurie's Audacity to Pursue Human Beauty after the Greek-Renaissance Humanists

In *Disgrace*, Coetzee carefully selects a protagonist who shares the same profession with his and is self-identified as a faithful disciple of literary masters or great humanists. The protagonist Lurie is a Modern Humanism scholar, working as a literary scholar and professor in Cape Town Technology University, though he is a rather petty scholar compared to Coetzee. Lurie's academic achievements in the past twenty-five years only comprises three books: the first on "opera *Boito and Faust Legend: The Genesis of Mefistofele*, the second on vision as Eros *The Vision of Richard of St Victor*, the third on Wordsworth and history *Wordsworth and the Burden of the Past*" (*Disgrace* 3). He earns a living by reading, teaching and doing research on the great literature. Professing literature offers him a steady job and a good salary to ensure his pursuit of modern and secular happiness. He never becomes a famous writer, but he still has a lot of passion for Humanism literature. Throughout the novel, Lurie is contemplating on writing an opera on Byron entitled "Byron in Italy". In the novel, Byron is his new favor and the works on Byron are everywhere on his shelves.

In university, he becomes an adjunct professor in the Communication Department after a reform. The university, only for the morale's sake, allows Lurie to offer a course on Romanticism Literature. The novel, as a highly literary novel, devotes many pages to give a detailed description of Lurie's teaching Wordsworth's *Prelude* and Byron's *Don Juan*.

Lurie, to some degree, represents the modern humanist intellectuals at universities. What is special about Lurie is that he is more sincere. He does not read literature for fun; he reads literature to believe. He is a faithful disciple of Humanism masters among whom Byron is clearly his recent favorite.

In love life, Lurie's life resembles Byron's who he worships. Byron is a leading figure in Romanticism, yet his fame rests not only on his writings but also on his life, which featured extravagant living, numerous love affairs, debts, separation, and marital exploits. Byron fell in a desperate love for his cousin when he was not yet eight, and was still unforgettable after more than ten years. Byron's mother wrote, "He has no indisposition that I know of but love, desperate love, the worst of all maladies in my opinion."¹⁵ And Byron himself even predicted in this boyhood years that his desperate love would in the end make England untenable to him. He wrote,

Ah! Sure some stronger impulse vibrates here,
Which whispers friendship will be doubly
To one, who thus for kindred hearts must roam,
And seek abroad, the love denied at home.¹⁶

Byron's strong impulse and desperate love is what Lurie can truly feel. Like Byron, Lurie has a special fondness of women. He was born in a family full of women: mother, sisters, and aunts. Later, they were replaced in due course by mistresses, wives and a daughter. He has no son. "The company of women made him a lover of women, and to an extent, a womanizer" (7). The company of beautiful women is his backbone of his life. Though he has been divorced twice, his life is never without a woman's company. In the opening, we know that he is having a weekly session with a prostitute Soraya whose company he enjoys very much. Soraya seems to be a graceful lady with a honey brown body

¹⁵ The source of the quotation is from the entry "Byron" at www.wikipedia.com.

¹⁶ Ibid.

despite her ungraceful profession. After the unfortunate incident that Lurie happens to meet Soraya with her two sons in public life, Lurie's life becomes dry until Melanie's appearance.

For Byron and Lurie or those Greek-Italian Humanists, women's body is the site which human beauty resides in. Desire for women is never despicable, but respectable. Women's bodies are a site for men's worshipping. As Elizabeth Costello says, the painters worship the mystery that is manifested to them from the body of women which reveals life and beauty, life flowing in a stream. According to Humanists, women's beauty does not belong to their own but belongs to the world. Women have the responsibility to share their beauty or body. Lurie's sexual crisis is realized through familiar literary and aesthetic conventions for expressing amorous impulse. Trying to seduce Melanie, Lurie first uses classic music and meerlust wine as a cliché way of wooing. Afterwards, he invites Melanie to watch an aesthetic video of dance. Melanie shows little interest in the dance, nor does she express any interest in Lurie's professional and passionate talk on Byron. At last, Lurie resorts to his last straw: he bluntly asks Melanie to spend a night with him for good reason: Lurie quotes Shakespeare's sonnet: "From fairest creatures we desire increase ... that thereby beauty's rose might never die." (qtd. in *Disgrace* 16). Yet Lurie's Shakespearean sonnet does not work for this South African girl. Melanie does not buy his Greek aesthetic values and finally files a charge against him.

Lurie is a royal disciple of those Humanism masters as Shakespeare, Wordsworth and Byron. And we can see he conducts his life under the guidance of these masters. He worships the human beauty. He does not view women as women. He, following the Greeks, views women as goddesses. Also, he sees his lust for women as a sincere worshipping of the goddesses.

We can clearly see from the novel that Lurie's fascination with sexuality is deeply shaped by English language and Humanism they give to instinct and desire. Lurie's reading for his sexuality is interwoven with European literary and aesthetic legacy. Lurie's rebellious head and perversity take root in the European Humanism literature and philosophy. The Greek Humanism also teaches him about the rights of desire.

In his Romanticism class, confronting with Melanie's boyfriend, Lurie quotes Byron to convey his plea for his uncontrollable impulse of his desire for Melanie. He reads from Byron's *Lara* in the class, in which Byron depicts Lucifer as the dark angle and a thing of dark imaginings. Through Lucifer, Byron and Lurie reveal human's secret pride which is the number one sin in Christianity. They follow their instinct, be it good or bad, pursuing full freedom. As Melanie's boyfriend comments: "Lucifer does what he feels like. ... he just does it" (33). Lucifer does not act on principle but on impulse. Lucifer's madness is not of the head, but the heart which comes from one's instinct and is a part of constitution of human. In that it is a part of human nature, and it should not be condemned, on the contrary, it should be understood and sympathized. Like animals' instinct, human beings' instinct should be acknowledged and sympathized. Even an old man has the right of desire for the beautiful young bodies. It's not men's fault to get old. They still long to enjoy the banquet of senses and the intimations across generations are sincere feelings.

Lurie illustrates this point with a story of a dog, a golden retriever. Every time there is a bitch dog in the vicinity, the dog will get excited and the owner of the dog will beat it under the Pavlovian regularity. As a result, the dog began to hate its own nature, which, Lurie believes, is a despair for the dog. Humanism acknowledges human or animal nature.

In the inquiry in which Lurie is charged by Melanie, Lurie's plea is that it is the Greek Goddess Eros that acts on him. The Greek Eros or Aphrodite signifies human beauty that the Greeks have discovered firstly. He refuses to repent because he holds on to the human rights of desire and impulse. He cannot deny his desire and impulse which he is born with, or we can say he cannot deny his humanity. He refuses to be a hypocrite. He stands true to himself.

Lurie compares the inquiry on him to public confessions in Puritan period and Mao's China when in order to perfect human nature the government punished every inappropriate and ignoble human behavior: Everyone must have a noble mind and moral. Everyone sings high notes in public, but might do vulgar deeds in the secret. Hypocrisy is everywhere. People have to make hollow confessions in public to avoid being sentenced. He clearly mocks some Christians' insincerity to their human nature: "Everyone is so cheerful and well-intentioned that after a while you itch to go off and do some raping and pillaging. Or to

kick a cat" (73).

Lurie refuses to fake and make an insincere confession, because being true to human nature and himself is his principle. He can not make fake repentance, as he says "Repentance is neither here nor there. Repentance belongs to another world, to another universe of discourse" (58). He himself is not to blame for getting old. He himself is not to blame for desire for beauty. He even respects human's prurience, because prurience shows one's sincere desire to pursue human beauty.

To defend his pride and faith, Lurie willingly asks for his severest penalty. Following his will, he has received the severest penalty: he is "dismissed with immediate effect and forfeit all benefits and privileges" (51). Lurie becomes a martyr to Greek and Renaissance Humanism, and like Byron, Cape Town is untenable to him.

It is interesting that Lurie's ex-wife Rosaline comments that Lurie is a great self-deceiver and Lurie's plea for the rights of desire is just a ridiculous excuse and self-deceiving. Rosaline comments on Lurie's harassment on Melanie: "Are you sure it wasn't just a case of being caught with your pants down?" (188) Yet Lurie, as a disciple of Humanism, care more about humanity than the mediocrities.

The fact is Lurie's pursuit of beauty or the Greek truth, unfortunately, is not appreciated by Melanie and thus violates another individual's will. Lurie finally quits the game, fully embracing the human disgrace.

2.2 Lurie's Audacity to Embrace Human Disgrace after the Judean-Christianity

While Lurie's pride granted by the Greeks enables him to pursue beauty, his pride also leads him to embrace the human ugliness and disgrace as ultimate realities following the Judean-Christianity. Both Lurie and Lucy are fully aware of human disgrace, and they choose to suffer like Christ.

As the Chinese saying goes, at fifty one knows the mandate of heaven. Lurie, in *Disgrace*, at fifty-two, has to face the fact of his ageing body. Several times, he laments his ageing body. He first finds that his beautiful youth has disappeared, and he has lost his magnetism: "Young girls don't care about him. He has to pursue girls and buy them. Getting old is not a graceful business" (7). All human beings once had their limbs straight, eyes clear. Everyone does not want to quit from the banquet of senses. Lurie realizes he will not enjoy the banquet any longer. He is so unhappy with his ageing body that he is always contemplating on castrating himself to extinguish his inappropriate desire for the young girls, which indicates that Lurie to some extent is a purist who does things thoroughly and completely. After his affair with Melanie, described as his last leap before the light of impulse goes out, Lurie not only quits his game with young girls, but he also abandons every comfort that modern life provides. As Lucy says: "No weapon. Nothing. Like a dog" (205). Lurie expels himself to the rural land in South Africa. He fully joins the human disgrace.

First, he fully embraces the unpleasantness of the rural land. South Africa is a country of many poverties. Physically, it is a starkly beautiful, but barren, arid land; socially, it is a nation wracked by poverty, privation and disease. As Lurie observes: "a cool winter's day, the sun already dipping over red hills dotted sparse, bleached grass. Poor land, poor soil, he thinks. Exhausted. Good only for goats" (64). He also visits Bev's animal refuge, where he is repelled by the odors of cat urine and dog mangle and Jeyes Fluid. The refuge is also an unpleasant place as Lurie imagined: "rubbishy furniture, a clutter of ornaments porcelain shepherdesses, cowbells, and ostrich-feather flywhisk, the yammer of a radio, the cheeping of birds in cages, cats everywhere underfoot" (73). On cold winter mornings, he has to go to the market with Lucy and Petrus to sell their flowers. The market is also a scene full of unpleasantness. "The smell of burning meat...people rub their hands, stamp their feet, curse" (71). Coetzee's early life was formed by the Karoo, South Africa's arid and dusty heartland. Mike Nicol, another South African author, once wrote, "The Karoo is the heart of the country and the landscape within us."¹⁷ This austere and minimal landscape has left an indelible mark on Coetzee's work as his early novels show. Coetzee

¹⁷ The source of quotation is from "J. M. Coetzee, voicing the heart of the country" by Dr. Shaun Irlam Chair, Department of Comparative Literature at University at Buffalo.

himself has remarked, "I do believe in spareness.... Spare prose, and a spare, thrifty world."¹⁸

In Salem, on the contrary to Cape Town where there are a lot of beauties, Lurie is surrounded by those unattractive people like Bev and Bill Shaw. Lurie recounts he has never seen a texture like Bev Shaw: "her hair is a mass of little curls. The veins on her ears are visible as a filigree of red and purple. The veins of her nose, too. And then a chin that comes straight out of her chest like a pouter pigeon's" (81-2). Bill Shaw is also an unattractive person: "equally squat...with a beet-red face and silver hair and a sweater with a floppy collar" (73). Before Lurie never had friends like Bev and Bill kind. Bev is certainly not Lurie's type, but later we know that Lurie finally sleeps with Bev who he has never thought to sleep with. "To sleep with a Bev" (150), he is surprised by himself. Their secret appointment looks funny, pathetic but also heroic in Lurie's part. The choice for their love bed is "between the operating table and the floor. He spreads the blankets on the floor... Bev is lying under the blanket with only her head sticking out. Even in the dimness there is nothing charming in the sight. Slipping off his underpants, he gets in beside her, runs his hands down her body, she has no breasts to speak of. Sturdy, almost waistless. like a squat little tub" (149). However, Lurie still does his duty. "He does not show much passion, nor much detest." Bev becomes the first welcome "banquet" this disgraced life offers him. Lurie's sexuality with Bev is a visible turning point in Lurie's Life. After he sleeps with Bev, he heroically laments, "Let me not forget this day...After the sweet young flesh of Melanie Isaacs, this is what I have come to. This is what I will have to get used to, this and even less than this" (150). In this announcement, Lurie officially accepts and joins this disgraced life.

Not only people like Bev Shaw welcome Lurie to this spare poor land, but also the dirty and pathetic animals. Those disgraced animals are everywhere in Lurie's life in Salem. At night, Lurie hears the dogs crying on and on through the whole night. Lurie's daughter Lucy also keeps many animals which Lurie carefully observes and ponders on. The most stunning and unpleasant reading is the reading of those diseased animals taken to Bev to be cured. On the first day Lurie goes to help Bev with "a dog with an impacted tooth" (80), and "a goat with its swollen scrotum which has been savaged by dogs" (81). The Greeks will never depict these ugly realities that Coetzee ruthlessly does. This is where the harsh realism comes in. Coetzee depicts the true picture of mankind. In the refuge, Lurie has to assist Bev to kill those animals, which pushes him to encounter the death of beings every day. He can not hold back his thoughts to connect those animals' death with his own death. Death is disgrace. He has thought he will get used to the killings and death. But that is not what happens. The more killings he assists in, the more jittery he gets. "One Sunday evening, driving home in Lucy's kombi, he actually has to stop at the roadside to recover himself. Tears flow down his face that he can not stop; his hands shake" (143). This is the first time and the only time that Lurie has cried. This strong outlet of feelings shows us Lurie's great woe towards the overwhelming suffering and disgrace of life beings.

To save the honor of the disgraced life, Lurie even disposes of the dog corpses in a maniac way. Since Bev Shaw is the one who inflicts the needle, it is he who takes charge of disposing the remains. The morning after each killing session he drives the loaded kombi to the ground of Settlers Hospital, to the incinerator. "It would be simpler to cart the bags to the incinerator immediately after the session and leave them there for the incinerator crew to dispose of. But that would mean leaving them on the dump with the rest of the weekend's scouring: with waste from the hospital wards, carrion scooped up at the roadside, malodorous refuse from the tannery – a mixture both casual and terrible. He is not prepared to inflict such dishonor upon them" (143). So on Sunday mornings he brings the bags to the farm in the back of Lucy's kombi, parks them overnight, and on Monday mornings drive them to the hospital grounds. "There he himself loads them, one at a time, on to the feeder trolley, cranks the mechanism that hauls the trolley through the steel gate into the flames, pulls the lever to empty it of its contents, and cranks it back, while the workman whose job this normally is stand by and watch" (144). Lurie cannot stand the workman to beat the dogs' dead bodies in a shape for the convenience to be burned. This shows his great sympathetic power toward humanity. It is a respect to life or any life beings, no matter how petty the life being is. In this maniac way, Lurie defends the pride of every life being.

This specific description of Lurie's disposal of dog bodies is very powerful, concerning that the Lurie's seemingly stupid and mad action comes from the weakest part of human beings, that is, the fear

¹⁸ Ibid.

and the shame of death. Lurie cannot accept the fact that the life beings which once existed and lived well on the earth will be thrown away with waste. Life beings which were once so real and true on the earth become waste and rubbish. Lurie ponders on why he has to do such stupid things: "For himself, then. For his idea of the world, a world in which men do not use shovels to beat corpses into a more convenient shape for processing. He saves the honor of corpses because there is no one else stupid enough to do it. That is what he is becoming: stupid, daft, wrongheaded" (146). This is a very powerful writing which echoes the plots in another humanistic work *Hamlet*: Hamlet finds Yorick's skull which is being beaten by the gravediggers with the shovel. Hamlet bitterly gibes at Yorick's skull: "Did these bones cost no more the breeding but to play at loggarts with'em?" (*Hamlet* 35) Both Hamlet and Lurie mourn for the death and disgrace of life beings.

Lurie also shows his compassion for the two Persian goats picked out by Petrus for a dinner party. Lurie feels a bond between himself and the two Persians; he does not know how. "The bond is not one of affection. It is not even a bond with these two in particular, whom he could not pick out from a mob in a field. Nevertheless, suddenly and without reason, their lot has become important to him" (126). This bond comes from his power of sympathy, and his sympathetic imagination of the pain the two goats are suffering. This sympathy and his strong concern for the victims show Lurie's strong sympathetic power.

In the end of the novel, Lurie lives harmoniously in the dirty clinic, feeding dogs and playing a comic toy banjo. The clinic, more than his boarding house, becomes his home. He makes him a nest of sorts in the bare compound behind the building: "a table and an old armchair from the Shaws and a beach umbrella to keep off the worst of the sun. He brings in the gas stove to make tea or warm up canned food: spaghetti and meatballs, snoek and onions. Twice a day he feeds animals; he cleans out their pens and occasionally talks to them; otherwise he reads or dozes or when he has the premises to himself, picks out on Lucy's banjo the music he will give to Teresa Guicciolli"(211). His graceful opera comprising young beautiful Teresa and her lover aristo-brat Byron finally becomes a comic musical featuring middle-aged plump Teresa and Byron's abandoned daughter Allegra. This is the life that Lurie finally adapts to and embraces. It's not a respectable scholar's life surrounded by admiring students in a beautiful college environment. Coetzee chooses to celebrate a college professor who became "a mad old man who sits among the dogs singing to himself" (212).

Despite Lurie, Lucy is another character who embraces the human disgrace even more bravely. She abandons the higher life Lurie offers her in Holland and willingly lives in the suffering part of the world. She authoritatively announces that there is no higher or lower life. There is only one life that is the life humans share with animals. And this life is full of disgrace.

Even after the outrageous attack by three black men, Lucy still decided to give birth to the child conceived through the gang rape. Lucy also approves to be a Christ-like figure who determinedly decides to bear the disgrace and willingly atones for her white ancestors who committed the same crime to the African people.

Lurie and Lucy, armed with their humanistic pride, accept as their own, a guilt that is at the very least not only their own, and sacrifice themselves, like Oedipus and Hamlet, to lift a curse from his society and to transcend futile mediocrity in the sure glory of self-immolation.

2.3 Variations of the Term "Human Disgrace": Animal beings, Ugliness, the Suffering Body, Scapegoat

In the great amount of critical papers on *Disgrace*, we have no difficulties finding such terms as animal beings, ugliness, the suffering body, scapegoat, and disgrace. All of these terms actually enrich people's understanding of human conditions. And Lurie's human pride is a humanistic response to the human conditions.

These terms are replaceable with one another. If we start from thinking about the animal beings in the novel, Coetzee does not select powerful tigers or hawks, but he chooses the squalid dogs in the rural land. The rural land with many dogs is full of ugliness and unpleasantness. Besides, people living among animal beings also look unattractive. In Coetzee's works, if a human looks unattractive, he or she

resembles nonhuman animals such as Bev and Bill Shaw whose appearances repel Lurie when they first meet. We can clearly see that Coetzee's animal beings are lined to the ugliness as opposed to beauty.

Also animals remind people of the suffering body that humans share with animals. In *Disgrace*, humans treat animals badly with no respect for their body and soul. The book teems with the detritus of "Africa's suffering beasts" (84): "grilled meat," "burning meat," "meatballs," "soup-bones," "dog-meat," "blood," "brains," "bones," "butcher's meat," "stench of chicken feathers," "mutton chops," "boiling offal," "singled fur," "fried chicken," "carcasses of pigs," "mess of bones and feathers," "carrion." Some of the most moving passages in the book are those that attend to animals', especially dogs' deaths. Some of the most powerful writing is concerned with what happens to animals after their death, "once they are unable, utterly unable, to take care of themselves" (146). Indeed, our "instincts" tell us that human suffering somehow means more, that it should register more profoundly than that of animals. This should not, however, blind us to the real sufferings inflicted on and experienced by countless animals as a result of what Derrida describes as the industrial, mechanical, chemical, hormonal, and genetic violence to which man has been submitting animal life for the past two centuries. "For Coetzee, a dog's life holds little joy. We are devoured by boredom and pulls off the wings of the flies" (*In the heart of the country* 6, 9). Coetzee generally represents animals as creatures that suffer humanly inflicted captivity, pain or death, sometimes resentfully but more often abjectly. Coetzee's protagonists always make efforts to imagine animal consciousness at the moment of death. Coetzee seems to believe that the lives of animals are a long ecstasy interrupted only at the moment when they know with the full knowledge the knife has found their secret and they will never see the goodly sun which even at this instant goes black before them. In this way, Coetzee incorporates animals as narrative elements associated with suffering and death, and especially with the question of the foreknowledge of death.

This suffering body of both human's and animals' is disgrace. For the human beings in Coetzee's fiction, as for his (other) animals, to live in a body is to live with suffering, either actual or potential. In an interview, Coetzee affirms the centrality of the body and of suffering, and of their connection, in his work: "If I look back over my own fiction, I see a simple ... standard erected. That standard is the body. Whatever else, the body is not 'that which is not,' and the proof that it is is the pain it feels..."¹⁹ Coetzee, as a humanist, is deeply concerned with the human condition of embodiedness. The body makes humans suffer from ageing, sickness, and eventually death. The suffering body, as the suffering Christ on the cross, holds no beauty, it is a site human's ugliness and disgrace.

Another related term is scapegoat. The scapegoat is an embodiment of ugliness, a suffering body, and human disgrace. In *Disgrace*, Lucy compares Lurie to a scapegoat for those professors who have impulses and desires for the young beauty. And later, Lucy clearly becomes a scapegoat for her white ancestors. Scapegoating, in the origin of the theory, is an elimination rite in which an animal is the vehicle of evils that are chased from the community. One passage from the *Bible* makes the unfairness of the scapegoating system clear:

The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery and making her stand before all of them, they said to him, 'Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. In the law, Moses commanded us to stone such women. What do you have to say?' ... Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and he said to them, 'Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.' And once again, he bent down and wrote on the ground. When they heard it they went away, one by one, beginning with the elders, and Jesus was alone with the woman standing before him. Jesus straightened up and said to her, 'Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?' She said, 'No one, sir.' And Jesus said, 'Neither do I condemn you. Go your way and from now on avoid this sin.' (*Bible* John 8:13)

Christianity sees all humans bear human sins and evils inherited from Satan. There is no human good

¹⁹ Quoted from Tremaine, Louis. "The Embodied Soul: Animal Being in the Work of J. M. Coetzee." *Contemporary Literature*. Wisconsin: Winter 2003. 587-612.

enough to atone for the rest of human beings. The Christ is the only one path to save people from their sins. Yet Coetzee, as a humanistic writer, firmly believes in the greatness of human power and in his story creates a human scapegoat such as Lurie and Lucy to fulfill the role of Christ in Christianity. The two characters willingly atone for the whole human beings without any hope of reward. Coetzee chooses the scapegoats that have been cast out to come back to the society and tell their story. The human scapegoats capture a divine spark by showing their love and *caritas* to other fellow beings. Coetzee shows his great humanist love by appealing to the readers to sympathize or at least to understand the human scapegoat victims.

These terms mentioned above are complementary to one another. The novel's title *Disgrace* could not be fully interpreted without an exploration of the terms: animals, ugliness, suffering body and scapegoat. All these terms are opposite to human beauty that Greeks aspire to. But the modern humanists have the audacity to give a rightful picture of the human disgrace and proudly embrace it. Human pride grants the humanists to transcend the shame of being a human.

3. LURIE AS A NEO-PAGAN GOD OF MODERN HUMANISM

Modern Humanism can be seen as a branch of Neo-paganism. Coetzee has proved that it incorporates both Greek-Renaissance Humanism and Judean-Christianity. The key concept of Modern Humanism is human pride or the sovereign human will, which elevates man's role to be God and thus makes Modern Humanism a new religion.

In *Disgrace*, What Lurie says to Mr. Isaacs can be regarded as a declaration of his faith in secular Humanism as opposed to other religions:

As for God, I am not a believer, so I will have to translate what you call God and God's wishes into my own terms. In my own terms, I am being punished for what happened between myself and your daughter. I am sunk into a state of disgrace from which it will not be easy to lift myself. It is not a punishment I have refused. I do not murmur against it. On the contrary, I am living it out from day to day; trying to accept disgrace as my state of being. Is it enough for God, do you think, that I live in disgrace without term?" (172)

In this announcement, we see that Lurie denies the salvation from the religious God and creates his own secular path to salvation, that is, to accept the punishment and live in disgrace as a state of being. In this way, Coetzee creates a protagonist Lurie who sticks to his sovereign self and is determined to claim his complete human subjectivity, human independence, and human perfection. With this absolute human pride, Lurie elevates himself to the status of a Neo-Pagan God of Modern Humanism.

3.1 Modern Humanism as a Neo-Pagan Religion

Neo-paganism, although it holds some beliefs in common with the old paganism, is very different from the classical paganism of Greece and Rome and the cultic paganism of the more bloodthirsty ancient religions. It is a slide back into the age of pre-Christianity, and it is a much graver spiritual problem because the modern neo-pagan has know Christian God, yet they choose to explore the darkness again.

Modern Humanism, as a branch of Neo-Paganism, started from the Christian Humanism, The word human, indeed, became the chosen motto of the Renaissance scholars, "humanist" was the title which they applied to themselves as to men for whom "nothing human was without appeal."²⁰ It began as a reflection on the nature of man and his place in the cosmos, gradually mutated over the centuries, influenced by many social, political, philosophical, and religious factors. The Protestant Reformation, for example, promoted the individual right to interpret the Scripture as he saw fit, thus placing man

²⁰ The source of this quotation is from the entry "Humanism" at www.wikipedia.com.

above the Word.

During the “Enlightenment” of the eighteenth century, the rise of science and the elevation of reason all encourage men to seek to build the City of Man – man’s dream of a secular salvation.

The strain of Modern Humanism which comes down through Feuerbach, Marx, and Nietzsche can be called Promethean Humanism, after the figure in Greek mythology who stole fire from the gods and gave it to man. It is a Humanism that bases itself on rebellion and a denial of God. “The new Humanism of the nineteenth century embodied a demonic urge to negate and destroy. As Nietzsche saw clearly it was not only a matter of not believing in God. Once God had been denied, man could achieve true freedom only by denying all moral constraints on himself and inventing his own morality. The human will alone became sovereign” (Hitchcock 48).

Several strains of Humanism in modern era even allow it to fulfill, supplement or supplant the role of religions, to be embraced as life stance. In 1929, Charles Francis Potter founded the First Humanist Society of New York whose advisory board include Julian Huxley, John Dewey, Albert Einstein and Thomas Mann. In 1930, Potter and his wife published *Humanism: A New Religion*. In 1933, *Humanist Manifesto* came out. The Manifesto and Potter’s Book became the cornerstones of Modern Humanism. Both of these sources envision Humanism as a religion. Here we quote one article from the *Humanist Manifesto III*:

Life’s fulfillment emerges from individual participation in the service of humane ideals. We aim for our fullest possible development and animate our lives with a deep sense of purpose, finding wonder and awe in the joys and beauties of human existence, its challenges and tragedies, and even in the inevitability and finality of death. Humanists rely on the rich heritage of human culture and the life stance of Humanism to provide in times of want and encouragement in times of plenty.²¹

This is the message that Modern Humanism conveys to us. Plato only wants people to know the good to improve humanity; the Christianity keeps people alert to their sins which sometimes hinder the humans to find their own beauty to present human selves. However, as Coetzee perceives, the Humanism in modern era incorporates the elements of Greek civilization and Judean-Christianity, developing as a secular religion: it encourages humans to seek wonders and beauties of human existence, even in the inevitability and finality of death.

As we can see, despite the various strains of Humanism, the key concept of Modern Humanism is the absolute sovereign human will, because man is more than a social animal. Man is an immortal soul and cannot live long without a spirituality of some kind. In the spiritual vacuum created by secular Humanism, humans have begun searching for a set of concepts that might reconnect them to a much larger universe, might reassure them that they are more than just clever talking beasts. Humans are especially drawn to those concepts that do not demand of them any moral constraints, for outside restrictions on their desires would be a threat to their sovereign self. No spirituality is more attractive to the sovereign self than Neo-Paganism.

Modern Humanism can be seen as a Neo-pagan religion when the human beings become arrogant and perceive themselves as God; thus, they also perceive themselves as the master. “A haughty heart is an abomination to the Compassionate One” (*Bible Proverbs: 16:5*). The haughty heart of humans enables man to supplant the Compassionate God’s role.

3.2 Lurie as a Neo-Pagan God in Modern Humanist Literature

Disgrace, as a humanistic novel in modern era, is a representative work of Modern Humanism. It invents a Neo-Pagan God Lurie, who is shaped by both the Greek-Renaissance Humanism and Judean-Christianity, and thus offers the readers a secular humanistic path to salvation as opposed to the

²¹ The source of this quotation is from *Humanist Manifesto III*.

other religious ways.

It is interesting to note that in the novel, there is also a slight comparison between two families: the Isaacs' and the Lurie's. We can see these two families take the opposite roads. Mr. Isaacs believes in God, and his family seems to be filled with blessings. They live happily: a beautiful mother and two angelic daughters; Mr. Isaacs has an esteemed position. Their household is neat and clean; everything in their family seems to be blessed, going upward to heaven: "A tight little petit-bourgeois household, frugal, prudent. The car washed, the lawn mowed, savings in the bank" (168). They are forgiven, and finally forgive Lurie and invite him to dinner. The Isaacs choose the God's way to salvation.

Clearly Coetzee favors the Lurie's family which is a chaotic and seemingly downfall family. Lurie, as a college professor of literature, totally has another world view, rebellious and undisciplined. He has divorced twice, lives alone, sleeps with prostitutes, and has an affair with one of his students. In the last part of the novel, he lives a disgraced life. The God-blessed life is not what Lurie is interested in, but this disgraced human life, the true picture of life. Coetzee does not favor the Isaacs' family enough to make the blessed and graceful family members his protagonists. He chooses Lurie's family to bear and transcend the heaviness of being.

Mr. Isaacs is exemplary in Christianity. Lurie is just the opposite of him. *Disgrace* creates a Neo-Pagan God, who asserts his absolute sovereign self: Lurie declares his rights of desire, accepts God's punishment and defiantly lives his self-invented life. As a humanistic novel, *Disgrace* presents to us a secular vision of salvation: "Rebirth without the intervention of Christ. By the workings of man alone" (*Costello* 133). Human beings should be brave enough to accept the punishment and disgrace, making it a way of daily life. Giving full play of human power and living in disgrace bravely: this is what Lurie preaches to the readers. Lurie, as Sophocles' Antigone, goes to his death without the least hope of reward. It is their duty and not the fulfillment of their hopes that demands self-sacrifice.

When Lurie finally goes to the Isaacs to apologize for his harassment on their daughter, many critics argue that Lurie has learned a lesson from Lucy's gang-rape incident, and gives a sincere apology to the Isaacs. At this moment Lurie certainly becomes aware of the pains he has caused to Melanie, yet I argue that he still sticks to his rights of human desire and never truly regrets what he has done for Melanie. Lurie seems to believe that what he has done for Melanie is wrong on Melanie's standing point, but it's never wrong in terms of his human instinct. He defiantly argues against God: if he is being punished for his human nature, it is not a punishment he has refused; he is living the punishment out from day to day and tries to accept disgrace as his state of being. Living in disgrace without terms is his declaration of his human independence.

We see that Lurie denies the salvation from religious God and human pride is the backbone of his faith in Humanism. With this pride, Lurie abandons God's grace and accumulate their own power of salvation. In this disgraced life, Lurie even finds beauty, "The wind drops. There is a moment of utter stillness which he would wish prolonged forever: the gentle sun, the stillness of mid-afternoon, bees busy in a field of flowers; and at the center of the picture a young woman, lightly pregnant, in straw sunhat. A scene ready-made for a Sargent or Bonnard. City boys like him; but even city boys can recognize beauty when they see it, can have their breath taken away" (218).

Lurie also finds his source of life in the rural land in South Africa. He finally gives up his favorite dog, indicating that he finally crosses the boundary of life and death. He accumulates his sovereign strength from writing on the middle-aged Terassa in his opera "Byron in Italy." He realizes "he must listen to Teresa. Teresa may be the last one left who can save him. Teresa is past honor. She pushes out her breast to the sun; she plays banjo in front of the servants and does not care if they smirk. She has immortal longings. She will not be dead" (209). Humanistic literature gives form to this immortal longing, which is a version of survival as strong as other religions.

CONCLUSION

As a reader from a country far from South Africa, we barely know the social environment of this strange

African Country, but we can still be stirred emotionally by the novel *Disgrace* which is set in South Africa. We may not feel as keenly about the race issue in the novel as the South African readers do, because in China we don't have such intensified race problems. As a Chinese we can only imagine it by our sympathetic power. However, why the novel is so appealing to us is the powerful message it conveys not particular for South Africans but for every human being: it shows its deepest care for the whole humanity.

Like other religions, Humanism arts and literature also show their ultimate concern about all human beings by creating a vision, a possibility, or a secular sublime, which certainly has a similar function as religions that deal with the ultimate concern about humanity. *Disgrace* is such a philosophical and religious novel. It invents a Neo-Pagan God of Modern Humanism who offers mankind a secular path to salvation. The novel supplies the readers with a secular sublime: the protagonist Lurie asserts his complete human subjectivity to pursue beauty and his absolute duty to bear human suffering.

But what we want to ask is how strong the power of salvation that Modern Humanism provides can be. Did Humanists make the wrong choice five centuries ago since the Italian Renaissance? Do Humanists back a loser who offers the mechanic reason? Will Humanism finally supplant other religions?

Coetzee himself raises doubts about the power of salvation provided by his fictional constructions. He says, "If I look back over my own fiction, I see a simple ... standard erected. That standard is the body. Whatever else, the body is not 'that which is not,' and the proof that it is is the pain it feels.... (Let me add ... that I, as a person, as a personality, am overwhelmed, that my thinking is thrown into confusion and helplessness, by the fact of suffering in the world, and not only human suffering. These fictional constructions of mine are paltry, ludicrous defenses against that being-overwhelmed, and, to me, transparently so.)"²²

In facing with the overwhelming human suffering, all these human endeavors to salvation seem tenuous or paltry, but they are firmly persistent. Coetzee certainly captures the divine sparks in humanity.

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²² Quoted from Tremaine, Louis. "The Embodied Soul: Animal Being in the Work of J. M. Coetzee." *Contemporary Literature*. Wisconsin: Winter 2003. 587-612.

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