

A suggested outline – J.M. Coetzee's *Age of Iron*.

In his 1990 novel entitled *Age of Iron*, South-African author J.M. Coetzee /ku'siə tells the story of a woman dying of cancer who is writing a letter to her daughter who has emigrated the United States to protest against the apartheid regime. In this epistolary novel, the autodiegetic narrator shares details about her everyday life with cancer, and she occasionally depicts the wider political background of apartheid South Africa. This is the case in this particular scene, where the depiction of the humdrum of her everyday life contains the ramblings of her confused mind as well as a rather straightforward denunciation of the political leaders.

The main interest of our analysis will be precisely to unveil the unity behind those apparently elements of different natures: in other terms, how do the striking similarities between the three levels – the narrator's body, her home and her country – serve the author's scathing denunciation of the endemic evil that plagues South Africa?

While attention will be first of all paid to the characteristics of the narrator's sick body and mind, we will then zoom out to focus successively on the ambivalent notion of home and on the sickness that affects apartheid South Africa.

I. IN SICKNESS AND IN...DEATH

No **pathos** here: a rather factual depiction of a decaying body and tormented mind.

(a) Symbolic death

sweet sleep (= sweet release of death?), *oblivion*, *lying*, etc...

The fly = a **foreboding** of her imminent decaying carcass?

(b) Frailty and temporary relief

Try to (l.1, l.9), *I want to...I want to* anaphoric emphasis

Numerous passive sentences: *steal over me / across my eye / across me*. : she seems to be just a body.

I cannot. Locked / locked up: paralysis

(c) Fear

dread. Italicized. Particular importance. *Quaking, with one eye open*.

So potent that the only motions are motions of fear.

→ The polysemic *occupy* (l.18) suggests that her body and mind are not only potentially entertained, but that they can easily be *invaded*. The same can be said about the protagonist's house which doesn't feel like a home.

II. HOME IS WHERE PRISON IS

= the portrait of this frail woman is given more emphasis through the contrast with the violent world outside.

(a) Her home is a cage: physical imprisonment

Strong similarities between her *ineffective* body and her ineffective home.

I shake myself free VS cage / bars / locks / locked up

= ironic situation of the victim whose protection is guaranteed by her internment.

(b) Cut off from the world...: mental seclusion

> similarities between the potential sources of relief in her home as well.

= **discrepancy** between the *wires* (4 instances between lines 36 and 38) positive images *music from the stars* or *the light of the world* and more negative ones *cry for help* (1.37) or the world that *flood[s] in* (1.21) suggesting an overwhelming number of information.

(c) ...the animal world

While her mind is occupied by fear, the outside world is occupied by animals.

Locusts and pigs: the eighth of the ten plagues of Egypt inflicted by Yahweh on the Pharaoh.

Pigs, gluttony and uncleanness. -ing forms suggesting activities that contrast with the narrator's motionlessness.

→ The protagonist seems fated to experience the outside world **vicariously** through the *pipe* (1.22) that is her television set. That doesn't prevent her - and behind her, Coetzee - to draw a vitriolic portrait of South African politics.

III. A COUNTRY OF IRON

= By choosing a privileged white woman as the witness of her country's decay - not the typical victim of the racial segregation of apartheid - Coetzee makes his own version of Hesiod's ages of man.

(a) A necessary distance

quaking in her nest. A subject depicting herself from the outside.

An eye that is and is not mine: troubled identity? Maybe it is not just about the narrator's individual case?

the weight off my hip: her suffering body mirrors the heavy political body of South Africa.

(b) Stagnation + paralysis

downward, pressing, sluggish

their power in their weight 1.52 : like cancer.

Even the multiple gerunds bear on words denoting **stasis** New Latin, from Greek, act or condition of standing, stopping, from *histasthai* to stand : standing > crisis.

(c) A deep-rooted heritage of violence

- the last of the dodos: **anachronistic metaphor** to suggest that she doesn't belong to contemporary SA +reinforce extinction due to human (inhumane?) activity.

- + references to Cesthwayo / Dingane: interracial inherited violence. While Cesthwayo

Dingane massacred the Boers with whom he had struck an agreement, he was finally killed by the Boers.

Cesthwayo: he went into exile in London before coming back to SA to be killed by the Boers.

Irony: those **antonomasias** (the use of a proper name to designate a member of a class OR the use of an epithet or title in place of a proper name) suggest the close link between the current rulers and the former losers.

By drawing from myth and religion and interweaving the physical, the material and the political, Coetzee's straightforward denunciation of his country's political crisis has universal echoes.

Myths of the ages of the world

By Hesiod

From a very early period, Greek myths seem to have been open to criticism and alteration on grounds of morality or of misrepresentation of known facts. In the *Works and Days*, Hesiod makes use of a scheme of Four Ages (or Races): Golden, Silver, Bronze, and Iron. "Race" is the more accurate translation, but "Golden Age" has become so established in English that both terms should be mentioned. These races or ages are separate creations of the gods, the Golden Age belonging to the reign of Cronus and the subsequent races being the creation of Zeus. Those of the Golden Age never grew old, were free from toil, and passed their time in jollity and feasting. When they died, they became guardian spirits on Earth.

Why the Golden Age came to an end Hesiod failed to explain, but it was succeeded by the Silver Age. After an inordinately prolonged childhood, the men of the Silver Age began to act presumptuously and neglected the gods. Consequently, Zeus hid them in the Earth, where they became spirits among the dead.

Zeus next created the men of the Bronze Age, men of violence who perished by mutual destruction. At this point the poet intercalates the Age (or Race) of Heroes. He thereby destroys the symmetry of the myth, in the interests of history: what is now known as the Minoan-Mycenaean period was generally believed in antiquity to have been a good time to live. (This subjection of myth to history is not universal in Greece, but it is found in writers such as Hesiod, Xenophanes, Pindar, Aeschylus, and Plato.) Of these heroes the more-favoured (who were related to the gods) reverted to a kind of restored Golden Age existence under the rule of Cronus (forced into honourable exile by his son Zeus) in the Isles of the Blessed.

Source: Britannica online.

Plagues of Egypt

The **Plagues of Egypt** (Hebrew: **מכות מצרים**, *Makot Mitzrayim*), in the story of the Exodus, are ten disasters inflicted on Egypt by Yahweh, the God of Israel, in order to force the Pharaoh to allow the Israelites to depart from slavery;^[1] they serve as "signs and marvels" given by God to answer Pharaoh's taunt that he does not know Yahweh: "The Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD."^[2]

8. Locusts: Ex. 10:1–20

This is what the LORD, the God of the Hebrews, says: 'How long will you refuse to humble yourself before me? Let my people go, so that they may worship me. If you refuse to let them go, I will bring locusts into your country tomorrow. They will cover the face of the ground so that it cannot be seen. They will devour what little you have left after the hail, including every tree that is growing in your fields. They will fill your houses and those of all your officials and all the Egyptians—something neither your fathers nor your forefathers have ever seen from the day they settled in this land till now.

—*Exodus 10:3–6*