



**The Ethics of Ambiguity: Uncertainty and Moral Exploration in J.M.
Coetzee's Literature**

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Abstract

J.M. Coetzee is widely celebrated for his unique ability to illuminate the complexities of the human condition through a combination of minimalist prose and deeply philosophical narratives. His works transcend conventional storytelling, delving into profound moral and ethical questions that challenge readers' preconceptions and demand active engagement. Ambiguity is a central feature of Coetzee's literary approach, serving not as a flaw but as a deliberate strategy to explore the uncertainties of morality, justice, and identity. His characters often inhabit morally ambiguous situations where justice and redemption remain elusive, reflecting the broader human struggle to find meaning in a fragmented world. This paper investigates how Coetzee harnesses ambiguity as a moral compass, compelling readers to navigate the intricate ethical landscapes of his novels without the comfort of definitive answers.

Keywords: ambiguity, human condition, minimalist prose, philosophical narratives, moral uncertainty, ethical questions



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Introduction

Ambiguity has long been a feature of literature, challenging readers to interpret texts in multifaceted ways. In the works of J.M. Coetzee, ambiguity transcends mere narrative complexity; it becomes a lens through which readers are invited to confront the moral and existential dilemmas of his characters. Coetzee's protagonists often grapple with guilt, complicity, and a fractured sense of identity, all while navigating worlds defined by oppression, violence, and historical trauma. His narratives resist simplicity, demanding a nuanced reading that mirrors the complexity of human experience.

Through his economical prose and nuanced narrative architecture, Coetzee compels readers to engage with layers of ambiguity, where clarity is deferred and conflicting perspectives demand critical interrogation. In doing so, he disrupts traditional notions of storytelling as a means of providing resolution, instead positioning his works as open-ended inquiries into the human condition. This intentional ambiguity underscores themes of moral uncertainty, the limitations of language, and the profound disquiet of living in ethically fraught environments.

Such narrative choices elevate Coetzee's works beyond mere storytelling to the realm of ethical engagement. As Derek Attridge notes, "Coetzee's fiction leaves its readers with questions rather than answers, demanding ethical participation rather than passive consumption" (Attridge 172). This participatory demand challenges readers not only to interpret his characters' actions but also to examine their own assumptions, biases, and moral frameworks.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive approach grounded in **ethical literary criticism** and **narratology** to examine the function of ambiguity in J.M. Coetzee's fiction. The selected corpus—*Waiting for the Barbarians*, *Disgrace*, *Life & Times of Michael K*, *Foe*, *Elizabeth Costello*, *Diary of a Bad Year*, and *The Childhood of Jesus*—was chosen for its thematic richness and representative range of Coetzee's work across different phases of his career. These novels span a variety of narrative forms and philosophical inquiries, making them well-suited for analyzing how ethical ambiguity is articulated through narrative structure, character introspection, and linguistic economy.

The analysis prioritizes **close reading** techniques, with attention to how Coetzee's formal strategies—such as minimalism, metafiction, and narrative fragmentation—embed ethical uncertainty at both thematic and structural levels. This methodological framework enables a multi-layered interpretation of ambiguity as a vehicle for ethical engagement, foregrounding the participatory role of the reader in constructing meaning.

Results and Discussion

The Role of Ambiguity in Literature

Before delving into Coetzee's works, it is essential to understand the theoretical implications of ambiguity in literature. Ambiguity is a cornerstone of literary artistry, enabling authors to reflect the complexities of human experience and provoke intellectual engagement. Derived from the Latin word *ambiguus*, meaning "uncertain" or "wavering," ambiguity in literature refers to the multiplicity of interpretations that a text can sustain. Far from being a defect, it enriches texts by making them more dynamic, thought provoking, and open to interpretation. This section examines the role of ambiguity, supported by literary theory, examples from significant works, and their implications for readers and critics.

Ambiguity manifests in literature in various forms: semantic ambiguity, where words or phrases have multiple meanings; structural ambiguity, where the overall narrative resists clear resolution; and ethical ambiguity, which challenges the reader's moral assumptions.

William Empson's *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930) remains one of the most influential explorations of the concept. Empson argues that ambiguity is a hallmark of literary complexity, stating, "The machinations of ambiguity are among the very roots of poetry" (3). He identifies seven types, ranging from simple puns to profound contradictions within a text. For example, in John Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn," the ambiguous final lines—"Beauty is truth, truth beauty—that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know"(Keats, line 49) - leave readers questioning the relationship between aesthetic and moral truths.

In narrative ambiguity, authors often leave central questions unresolved. Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Young Goodman Brown*, for instance, blurs the line between reality and hallucination. Was Goodman Brown's journey into the forest a dream or a supernatural encounter?

Hawthorne's refusal to clarify lends the story a haunting quality, mirroring the protagonist's moral disorientation.

Ambiguity and the Complexity of Human Experience

Literature mirrors life, and life is rarely straightforward. Ambiguity in literature reflects this complexity, capturing the contradictions, uncertainties, and moral dilemmas of human existence. In Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, Raskolnikov's conflicting motives for committing murder epitomize moral ambiguity. Is he a utilitarian idealist seeking justice, or a man consumed by pride and desperation? Dostoevsky's nuanced portrayal invites readers to wrestle with their own judgments. As Raskolnikov confesses, "*Man grows used to everything, the scoundrel!*" (Coetzee, 123) encapsulating the moral elasticity that defines human behavior.

Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1927) exemplifies ambiguity in its exploration of time, memory, and perception. The novel's fragmented narrative and shifting perspectives defy conventional storytelling. The lighthouse itself is an ambiguous symbol, representing unattainable aspirations, fleeting moments of clarity, or the indifferent passage of time. Woolf remarked on this fluidity in her diary, stating that it is the task of the writer to capture the shimmering depths of life, to show it as it really is not as it is commonly perceived.

"Examine for a moment an ordinary mind on an ordinary day. The mind receives myriad impressions—trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel. ... Let us record the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall."
(150)

Similarly, in Franz Kafka's *The Trial*, the protagonist Josef K. navigates a labyrinthine legal system, condemned without ever understanding his crime. Kafka's narrative ambiguity mirrors existential uncertainty, encapsulated in Josef's lament, "*It's only because of their guilt that they're so certain. You don't need certainty to be guilty*" (164). The unresolved nature of Kafka's stories invites readers to project their own anxieties about power, justice, and control onto the text.

Ambiguity and Reader Engagement

Ambiguity transforms readers into active participants in the interpretative process, a concept closely aligned with Roland Barthes's *The Death of the Author* (1967). Barthes emphasizes the

shift from authorial intent to reader interpretation, stating, “The birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author.” Ambiguous texts, such as James Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922), embody this principle by requiring readers to piece together meaning from fragmented narratives, intertextual references, and stream-of-consciousness prose.

Henry James’s *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) epitomizes the interplay between ambiguity and reader engagement. The novella’s central question—are the ghosts real or a product of the governess’s imagination?—remains unresolved, leaving readers to grapple with the psychological and supernatural dimensions of the story. James wrote in a letter, “To be truthful, I delight in leaving the reader in just that heightened state of bewilderment.”

By withholding resolution, ambiguous narratives create a space for diverse interpretations. For example, T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* (1922) combines fragmented voices, historical allusions, and elusive symbolism to reflect the disintegration of modernity. The ambiguous declaration, “These fragments I have shored against my ruins,” invites readers to construct their own meaning from the poem’s shards of language and imagery.

Ambiguity in Modernist and Postmodernist Literature

Modernist literature embraced ambiguity as a reflection of the fragmented, rapidly changing world of the early 20th century. In James Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), the protagonist Stephen Dedalus’s journey toward self-realization is riddled with ambiguities about faith, art, and identity. Joyce’s narrative mirrors Stephen’s inner turmoil, allowing readers to experience his struggles as their own.

Postmodernist writers took ambiguity further, rejecting grand narratives and emphasizing relativism. Jorge Luis Borges’s “The Garden of Forking Paths” (1941) exemplifies this approach, presenting a story that doubles as a metaphor for infinite possibilities and interpretations. Borges writes, “Time forks perpetually toward innumerable futures. In one of them I am your enemy” (28). The narrative’s ambiguity becomes a philosophical exploration of time, agency, and reality. Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985) employs ambiguity in its epilogue, where historians debate the reliability of the protagonist’s account. This framing device forces readers to question the nature of truth, history, and perspective. As Atwood herself has noted, “*The ambiguities of history and the malleability of memory are central to the human experience.*”

Ambiguity in J.M. Coetzee's Work

Ambiguity is a defining characteristic of J.M. Coetzee's literary oeuvre, woven into his narratives, character development, and moral inquiries. Coetzee employs ambiguity not as a decorative stylistic device but as a profound lens through which readers are invited to engage with the complexities of human existence, power dynamics, and ethical dilemmas. His works resist definitive interpretations, creating a space where meaning emerges through the tension between competing perspectives, unresolved questions, and multifaceted truths.

Narrative Ambiguity

In *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), Coetzee constructs a dystopian setting where an unnamed Magistrate oversees a frontier town of an unnamed Empire. The novel's central ambiguity revolves around the identity and intentions of the "barbarians," who remain shadowy figures throughout the narrative. This lack of definition is deliberate, as the Empire projects its fears onto these supposed enemies, constructing a narrative of threat without evidence.

The Magistrate's growing skepticism about the Empire's motives reflects his own search for moral clarity. This inner turmoil is poignantly expressed when he muses, "I wanted to live outside the history that Empire imposes on its subjects, even its lost subjects. I wanted simply to live alongside the barbarians, to share their lives, to learn from them, to follow their example, to exist without history" (Coetzee 154).

In this moment, the Magistrate's yearning to escape the Empire's oppressive narrative reveals not only his disillusionment with imperial power but also a deeper existential desire to reclaim a life grounded in authentic human experience rather than institutional authority. His reflection signals a moral awakening—one that resists complicity and seeks a form of ethical existence untethered from imperial ideology. He questions the regime's justifications for torture and war, but his resistance is fraught with uncertainty. His relationship with a barbarian girl epitomizes this ambiguity. Although he attempts to care for her, his motives remain clouded by guilt and self-interest. The Magistrate himself admits, "I wanted to care for her as one human being cares for another, but was it not also my vanity speaking, my desire to be seen as different from my peers?" (*Waiting for the Barbarians*, 61).

Coetzee's narratives often blur the boundaries between reality and fiction, past and present, self and other. For instance, in *Foe* (1986), a postmodern retelling of Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, the story's protagonist, Susan Barton, grapples with reclaiming her voice and story. Yet, her narrative is consistently mediated and challenged by Foe, the titular author-figure. The text's ambiguous ending leaves readers questioning the nature of authorship and representation. Is Susan's story a critique of colonial erasure, or does her voice itself replicate the very structures of power she seeks to dismantle?

In Elizabeth Costello (2003), Coetzee dissolves the boundary between author and character, creating a layered metafictional ambiguity. Elizabeth Costello, a fictional writer, delivers lectures that often mirror Coetzee's philosophical preoccupations. However, her views are neither affirmed nor denied by the narrative. This ambiguity challenges readers to navigate the uneasy space between the character's authority and her fallibility, underscoring Coetzee's rejection of didacticism.

Moral and Ethical Ambiguity

Central to Coetzee's work is the ethical ambiguity that complicates his characters' moral decisions. In *Disgrace* (1999), David Lurie's fall from grace and subsequent life on his daughter's farm present a series of morally ambiguous situations. Lurie's initial unapologetic stance toward his exploitation of a student contrasts sharply with his quiet acceptance of disgrace, leaving readers to question whether he attains redemption. Similarly, the novel's portrayal of post-apartheid South Africa resists clear-cut moral binaries, instead exposing the layered injustices that complicate notions of victimhood and responsibility.

In *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), the Magistrate's internal struggle exemplifies moral ambiguity. The Magistrate's moral ambiguity is laid bare through a series of self-interrogations that fuse compassion with self-doubt. After secretly nursing the barbarian girl back to health, he immediately questions his own motives—"I wanted to care for her as one human being cares for another; but was it not also my vanity speaking, my desire to be seen as different from my peers?" (Coetzee 44). Here, the Magistrate exposes the collision of altruism and pride, suggesting that even acts of kindness may be driven by a desire for moral distinction rather than pure empathy. In a subsequent reverie, his uncertainty takes on a dream-like quality- "I was

sitting by the edge of a lake and I looked at my hands and they were blurred, as if I had been folding them themselves and could not see them clearly” (Coetzee 52).

The image of “blurred” hands becomes a powerful symbol of his opaque ethical vision—he cannot discern the shape or weight of his own deeds, just as he cannot clearly define justice under the Empire’s shadow. Finally, in acknowledging the ways the barbarians have permeated his identity, he confesses - “Their language is in my mouth, their customs are on my skin, yet I remain neither fully barbarian nor fully imperial” (Coetzee 61).

This admission crystallizes his in-betweenness: though he has absorbed the Other’s perspective, he remains bound by the Empire’s structures. Through these layered reflections—on care, vision, and identity—Coetzee dramatizes the Magistrate’s internal struggle and the fundamental irresolution at the heart of imperial power.

As he witnesses and participates in the oppressive colonial system, his growing empathy for the “barbarians” fails to culminate in definitive action. His acts of defiance are marked by self-doubt and complicity, leaving readers to grapple with the limits of individual morality in systemic injustice.

Personal and Societal Ambiguity

Disgrace (1999) is one of Coetzee’s most celebrated works, set in post-apartheid South Africa. The novel explores the personal and societal ambiguities of transformation through its protagonist, David Lurie. Lurie’s initial arrogance and entitlement manifest in his predatory relationship with a student, which leads to his professional downfall. However, his disgrace is not limited to personal failure; it mirrors South Africa’s collective reckoning with its apartheid past.

Lurie’s journey is marked by his attempts to find meaning in a world where traditional moral frameworks have collapsed. Lurie’s care for the dogs might be seen as a way of seeking redemption, but his thoughts and attitudes toward them could suggest that his actions are driven by guilt, discomfort, or a desire for control. As he euthanizes sick dogs, he reflects, “I am the one who brings them peace. It is little enough. It is nothing” (Coetzee 45). This act, both compassionate and tragic, encapsulates the novel’s moral complexity.

Lucy, Lurie's daughter, embodies another layer of ethical ambiguity. After being raped during a farm attack, she chooses to remain on the land and even accepts the perpetrator's family's help. She explains, "I must accept. I must make the best of it. There is no other way" (*Disgrace*, 1999). Her decision defies conventional narratives of justice, forcing readers to grapple with the limits of forgiveness and the ambiguities of survival in a fractured society.

Critics have debated Lucy's choices, with some viewing them as an act of resilience and others as a troubling capitulation. As Mike Marais argues, "*Lucy's refusal to seek retribution reflects the complexities of post-apartheid ethics, where survival often requires moral compromise*" ("J.M. Coetzee and the Politics of Meaning," 2002).

Existential Ambiguity in *Life & Times of Michael K*

In *Life & Times of Michael K* (1983), Coetzee presents a protagonist who retreats from societal structures, seeking autonomy in a world defined by war and chaos. In *Life & Times of Michael K*, Coetzee employs a minimalist style to underscore Michael's existential ambiguity, particularly through his refusal to articulate his beliefs or conform to societal norms. Michael's silence and his avoidance of direct interaction with others mirror his internal void, making him an enigmatic figure. A key moment in the novel occurs when Michael remains silent in the face of authority, with the text noting, "He does not respond. He has nothing to say. The silence hangs between them, as thick and unyielding as a wall" (Coetzee 24). This moment captures Michael's resistance to being defined or understood, not only by others but also by the reader. Coetzee's sparse prose reflects Michael's reluctance to engage with the world or express his inner thoughts, forcing readers to interpret his actions and motives. The novel's ambiguity is built on this narrative restraint, where much is left unsaid. Michael's journey to return his mother's ashes becomes symbolic of his quest for meaning, but it is a journey devoid of clarity or resolution, much like his silence. Through Michael's evasion and the absence of overt emotional expression, Coetzee emphasizes the futility and complexity of self-exploration, inviting readers to reflect on the limits of their own understanding and the elusiveness of meaning in a world that resists easy answers.

Language and Ambiguity

In *Life & Times of Michael K*, Coetzee uses Michael's silence as a central motif, leaving his character open to multiple interpretations. Is his refusal to speak a rejection of the oppressive systems around him, or is it indicative of his disconnection from society? The novel resists providing a definitive answer, thus highlighting the limitations of language as a tool for understanding. One telling moment occurs when Michael is questioned by an authority figure and remains silent. Coetzee presents this silence not merely as a lack of response, but as a deliberate act that speaks volumes about Michael's inner world. For example, when Michael is asked about his reasons for traveling, the narrative notes: "He does not answer. The question hangs in the air between them, unanswered." (Coetzee 24). This moment of silence becomes a powerful statement of defiance or detachment, illustrating Michael's refusal to be defined or understood. By withholding Michael's motivations, Coetzee emphasizes the inadequacy of language and invites readers to confront the ambiguity of human experience. In doing so, Coetzee underscores the idea that silence itself can communicate more than words, offering a nuanced exploration of how language—or the absence of it—functions ambiguously in the novel.

In *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007), Coetzee experiments with the fragmentation of narrative voice, presenting overlapping narratives that reflect different perspectives and temporalities. This structural ambiguity challenges the reader to reconcile the competing layers of text, mirroring the multifaceted and often contradictory nature of human thought and experience.

Ambiguity and Reader Engagement

Coetzee's reliance on ambiguity places significant responsibility on the reader, who must actively interpret and navigate the complexities of his narratives. As literary critic Derek Attridge notes in *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading* (2004), Coetzee's works demand "*an openness to the otherness of the text*," requiring readers to embrace uncertainty and resist definitive conclusions. This engagement mirrors the ethical challenges within Coetzee's works, where readers are invited to confront their own biases, assumptions, and moral frameworks.

For example, in *The Childhood of Jesus* (2013) and its sequels, Coetzee constructs an allegorical world steeped in philosophical ambiguity. The novels pose existential questions about identity, memory, and belonging, but refuse to provide answers. This deliberate indeterminacy reflects

Coetzee's broader literary philosophy: the search for meaning is more significant than its resolution.

Ambiguity as an Ethical Imperative

Across Coetzee's works, ambiguity functions as an ethical imperative, compelling readers to confront the complexities of morality and meaning. By withholding resolution, Coetzee resists the reductive binaries of good and evil, victim and perpetrator, forcing readers to grapple with the gray areas of human experience. This aligns with his broader philosophical stance, articulated in his Nobel Lecture: "The writer's duty is not to hand down truths but to ask questions that make us think" (2003).

Conclusion

In conclusion, J.M. Coetzee's fiction demonstrates the transformative power of ambiguity, inviting readers to grapple with complex ethical and existential questions. Through works like *Waiting for the Barbarians*, *Disgrace*, and *Life & Times of Michael K*, Coetzee creates narratives that resist closure and moral certainty, using ambiguity as a tool to explore themes of guilt, redemption, and the search for meaning. His novels emphasize that the journey toward truth and morality is ongoing, shaped by uncertainty and introspection. While the paper offers a solid overview of these thematic elements, it could be strengthened by incorporating more close textual evidence—such as key phrases, stylistic patterns, or tonal shifts—to deepen the critical engagement with Coetzee's narrative techniques. By focusing more on specific moments in the text, the paper could offer a richer, more detailed analysis of how Coetzee's use of ambiguity challenges readers and enhances the moral complexity of his works.

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