

# THE SINS OF DAVID:

Forgiveness and Surrender in J. M. Coetzee's  
*Disgrace* and the Story of King David and  
Bathsheba

BRITTANY KRAUS

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In "The Sins of David," Brittany Kraus wrestles with the problem of forgiveness in South African writer J. M. Coetzee's most controversial and closely studied novel, *Disgrace*. Many scholars have written about this book, but none have carefully examined the relationship between its title character, David Lurie, and King David of the Old Testament, who both commit sexual transgressions and must then find a way to atone for them. As Kraus argues with great inventiveness and subtlety, the resources of a sacred framework of forgiveness are continually evoked but also denied in Coetzee's novel, which tries to imagine what secular grace might look like in post-apartheid South Africa, and does not reach any comforting conclusions.

DR. ALICE BRITTAN

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In his Booker Prize-winning novel *Disgrace*, J. M. Coetzee explores the nature of forgiveness and its pragmatic - and problematic - manifestations both in the lives of individuals and in society. In his characterization of David Lurie, a man who suffers multiple professional and personal disgraces throughout

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the novel, Coetzee alludes to another David and his fall from grace: the Biblical David of the Old Testament. The parallels between David Lurie and King David may seem to exist only insofar as both men initiate their downfall by acting upon their sexual desires for women who do not reciprocate this desire, but the similarities run even deeper. Both of their stories operate within greater discourses of forgiveness and its relations – confession, atonement, reconciliation, and redemption – in which the individual’s ability to forgive and be forgiven is subject to outside forces and external players. While the story of King David’s disgrace exists within a theological framework (and thus adheres to a theological conception of forgiveness), the world in which David Lurie operates is decidedly secular, bereft of divine influence or control. Rather, David Lurie’s ability to elicit and enact forgiveness for his own disgraces (and others’) is intertwined with competing discourses of forgiveness and what it means to be in disgrace.

The story of King David’s fall from God’s grace is predicated on the assumption that he was once *in* God’s grace. Handpicked by God, David succeeds to the throne of Israel to become the nation’s second king. He is selected by God to rule the Israelites, God’s chosen people, because God sees in David a “man after His own

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heart” (1 Samuel 13:14). Yet King David’s sin against God is a sin of the heart. Upon seeing a beautiful woman bathing, David desires her so strongly that he demands that she be brought to him, whereupon he has intercourse with her and she becomes pregnant. The woman, Bathsheba, is already married, and David therefore orders her husband, Uriah, to “the front of the hottest battle . . . [so] that he may be struck down and die” (2 Samuel 11:14). King David sets the stage for Uriah’s death: he commands that the rest of the battalion retreat from the front lines once they have advanced, leaving Uriah to fend for himself. Uriah pleads for mercy, but David refuses him. Uriah is killed in battle, and David subsequently marries Bathsheba. When God discovers what David has done, He rebukes him:

Why have you despised the commandment of the Lord, to do evil in His sight? You have killed Uriah the Hittite with the sword; you have taken his wife to be your wife . . . Now therefore, the sword shall never depart from your house, because you have despised Me. (Samuel 2 12: 9-10)

In disobeying two of the Ten Commandments - “Thou shalt not kill” (Exodus 20:13) and “Thou shalt not commit adultery” (Exodus 20:14) - David is defying God’s law. There is a seemingly clear-cut relationship between David’s

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disobedience and his disgrace: by rebelling against God's law, David commits a mortal sin. Derrida argues in the published portion of his seminar entitled "On Forgiveness," "If there is something to forgive, it would be what in religious language is called mortal sin, the worst, the unforgivable crime or harm" (32). By that logic, David's sin is unforgivable.

It stands to reason, however, that if David is "a man after [God's] own heart", then God's heart is culpable, or at least He bears some responsibility for the desire that spurs David's heinous actions (1 Samuel 13:14). In other words, if God is omnipotent and omnipresent, then David is but a human agent of the divine. Though David "may have the freedom to initiate a course of action," he cannot be held wholly responsible for what is in his heart; after all, his heart resembles God's own (Kissack and Titlestad 135). This complication, of course, is one of the perplexities that pervades the Old Testament (and early Judeo-Christian theology in general), and can be traced back to the concept of Original Sin, which finds its genesis in the story of Adam and Eve and their forced exile from Eden. In the story of David and Bathsheba, however, God curses David for sinning in secret:

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Behold, I will raise up adversity from your own house; and I will take your wives before your eyes and give them to your neighbour, and he shall lie with your wives in the sight of this sun. For you did it secretly, but I will do this thing before all Israel, before the sun. (2 Samuel 12:11)

It is almost as if God is, in theatrical terms, “off-stage” while David seduces or rapes Bathsheba and premeditates her husband’s death. Yet it is neither Bathsheba nor Uriah to whom David must appeal for forgiveness; it is God alone that David must ask, for it is God alone who can grant it. Although the theological tradition of forgiveness is “complex and differentiated, even conflictual,” it nonetheless posits a singular vision in which sovereignty and forgiveness are inextricably intertwined (Derrida 28). That is, as God has ultimate sovereignty over all humankind, only God is capable of forgiving human faults. In contrast to Derrida’s dream of forgiveness, in which “the ‘purity’ of a forgiveness worthy of its name would be a forgiveness without power: unconditional but without sovereignty,” the theological understanding of forgiveness is quite the opposite (59). As Kissack and Titlestad argue, the “finitude of human mortality is obliged to acknowledge humbly its inferiority to the omniscience and omnipotence of the Divinity” (136). Therefore, in the Old Testament,

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forgiveness is conditional because it exists, always, within the realm of divine power and judgment.

The question remains: does God forgive David? The answer is yes, but the price of God's forgiveness is the blood of an innocent, David and Bathsheba's first-born son. Before God kills David's son, however, David visits the prophet Nathan:

So David said to Nathan, "I have sinned against the Lord." And Nathan said to David, "The Lord also has put away your sin; you shall not die." However, because by this deed you have given great occasion to the enemies of the Lord to blaspheme, the child also who is born to you shall surely die. (2 Samuel 12:13-14)

According to Nathan, God has already forgiven David, but He will kill David's son regardless. God spares David's life, but at the cost of his son's. Forgiveness is thus represented as operating on a contractual, even economical, basis. David pleads with God to let his son live, as Uriah pleaded with David for his own life, but, in the Old Testament framework, violence begets violence, blood begets blood, and forgiveness must be bought and paid for. Human beings are the primary currency.

Theological discourses of forgiveness echo throughout Coetzee's *Disgrace*, but they are uneasily enmeshed within

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a secular context. David Lurie, the novel's protagonist, suffers his first disgrace when he is caught having an affair with a young student, Melanie Isaacs. He is subsequently dismissed from his teaching post, under the pretext of having disobeyed academic regulations. Unlike King David, however, whose fall from grace is predicated on his first being *in* grace, our initial impression of Lurie is one of a man who is already fallen or, at the very least, is in decline. He is fifty-two, divorced, and has, "to his mind, solved the problem of sex rather well" (Coetzee 1). His solution begins and ends with weekly visits to a prostitute. Once a professor of modern languages at Cape Town University College, Lurie now teaches "Communication Skills" and "Advanced Communication Skills" at Cape Technical University (3). Although it is not stated explicitly, Lurie's professional demotion is precipitated by the changing social and political climate of South Africa. No longer under the apartheid system, South Africa is in the beginning stages of a national transformation, what David terms the "great rationalization" (3). The renaming and reconfiguration of Cape Town University College to Cape Technical University is a product of that transformative and transitional process. Education is just one component of a national reconstitution. In David's view, the aim of the

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“new” educational system, with its focus on students acquiring technical and “communicative competence,” is to churn out worker bees for the great hive of South Africa, rather than to encourage moral or intellectual edification (Kissack and Titlestad 138). David might be right, but he is also out of touch.

David’s reluctance, even refusal, to change with the times, could be read as an act of ideological and intellectual defiance against the watering down of education, but David is no academic luminary either. Throughout his entire career, he publishes only three books, none of which cause “a stir or even a ripple” (Coetzee 4). Although an expert on Romantic poets and, by some standards, a cultured man (he quotes Wordsworth and listens to Mozart and Scarlatti), David uses his proficiency in Western culture for decidedly non-scholastic purposes: mainly, to seduce Melanie Isaacs. Melanie and David, however, are not on even playing fields:

Wine, music: a ritual that men and women play out with each other. Nothing wrong with rituals, they were invented to ease the awkward passages. But the girl he has brought home is not just thirty years his junior: she is a student, his student, under his tutelage. No matter what passes between them now, they will have to meet again as teacher and pupil. (12)



David's initial attempts at seducing Melanie fall flat for multiple reasons, but what remains uneasily reconciled is the vast disparity in their ages and stations. Even if their relationship is not illegal, which it *technically* is not, David nonetheless occupies a position of authority and power. However, David persists in thinking of himself as powerless, as an unwitting slave of his sexual desire, a "servant of Eros" (52). He attempts to justify his actions by appealing to a non-rational mode of discourse: he claims to be possessed, and attempts to blame the gods of Classical mythology for his "ungovernable impulses" (52). His invocation of the gods, however, evokes little sympathy for him from his colleagues at the university.

Whether by coercion or of her own free will (an ambiguity that remains unresolved), Melanie Isaacs files charges of sexual harassment against David. He is therefore called before a tribunal at the university, not only to account for his actions, but also to "express contrition" for what he has done (Coetzee 54). The formal charges against David are twofold: he is accused of sexually harassing Melanie Isaacs, and he is accused of forging her grades. David instantly pleads guilty to both charges. The committee, however, does not accept David's admission of guilt; what they want is a confession. Yet the council

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presumes no authority: “The body here gathered, Professor Lurie,’ says Mathabane, opening proceedings, ‘has no powers. All it can do is make recommendations” (47). Although the committee claims to have no power, a false sentiment reiterated throughout the hearing, they nonetheless dismiss David’s “reservations of a philosophical kind” regarding the proceedings (47). In the committee’s eyes, philosophy has no place within secular discourses; it belongs in the classroom, but not in the real world. Furthermore, the committee insists that the hearing “is not a trial but an inquiry,” abnegating their own legal and judicial authority (48). The committee thus presents itself as a neutral entity, adhering to “rules of procedure” rather than moral or ethical codes of conduct (48). They are but a conglomeration of rational, objective mediators without the power of judgment.

But David *is* on trial, and the committee rules against him. After refusing to seek legal representation or undergo counselling, David eventually offers the committee a hollow confession, which he frames as a story:

The story begins one evening, I forget the date, but not long past. I was walking through the college gardens and so, it happened, was the young woman in question, Ms. Isaacs. Our paths crossed. Words passed between us, and at that moment something

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happened which, not being a poet, I will not attempt to describe. Suffice it to say that Eros entered. After that I was not the same. (Coetzee 52)

In the committee's view, David's refusal to express any signs of remorse or shame for his actions amounts to nothing more than a shirking of personal responsibility. In effect, that is precisely what it is. Although Julie McGonegal argues that "Lurie presents himself as a scapegoat" (157), it is in fact the mythical Eros that David scapegoats. David presents himself as a mere puppet for Eros, and thus attempts to imbue desire with its own agential capacity, completely outside of human control. As David later admits, however, it is his own vanity that causes him to make such an arrogant claim: "*It was a god who acted through me. What vanity!*" (Coetzee 89). Yet the vanity of the committee cannot go unnoticed either, as they too play with the power of gods. To satisfy the committee, David must offer himself up as a sacrifice: he must bare his soul with a heartfelt confession, and the committee must judge whether this confession reflects his "sincere feelings" (54). The committee contends that "the wider community is entitled to know" the details of David's case and confession, positioning David, the committee, and the general public in a communal dialogue of forgiveness and

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retribution (50). That dialogue, however, is uncomfortably framed by competing modes of discourse on the topic of forgiveness and its function in society. If David feels that his relationship is a private affair between himself and Melanie (and Eros), the committee feels the opposite: David's trial has, for all intents and purposes, gone public.

The committee, however, is not a united entity; rather, its members are divided by gender. The male members of the committee are far more sympathetic to David's plight than the female members, although their sympathy is suspect. The males, who are far too eager to sweep the whole scandal under the rug and go about business as usual, are met with fervent opposition. Farodia Rassool, in effect the spokeswoman for the female voice of the committee, invokes the "long history of [patriarchal] exploitation" as inextricable from the charge of sexual harassment against David (Coetzee 53). In Rassool's mind, David's offense is not a singular event, but part of a long history of male violence against women. In a rare moment of self-reflection, David tries to imagine how Rassool must see him:

What does she see, when she looks at him, that keeps her at such a pitch of anger? A shark among the helpless little fishies? Or does she have another vision: of a great thick-boned male bearing down

on a girl-child, a huge hand stifling her cries? How absurd! Then he remembers . . . Melanie, who barely comes to his shoulder. Unequal: how can he deny that? (53)

Rassool comes to represent a feminist discourse concerned with the ongoing victimization of women by men, but Melanie, the actual victim in this scenario, is noticeably absent from the hearing. Although the committee takes the position that Melanie need not undergo further trauma by attending the hearing – that she need not face her abuser yet again – the question remains: what right does the committee have to intervene on her behalf? On whose authority does the committee presume to speak for her?

Like Bathsheba, the muted victim of King David, Melanie remains eerily silent regarding the charges leveled against Lurie. Derrida argues:

It is also necessary to think about an absolute victimization which deprives the victim of life, or the right to speak, or that freedom, that force and that power which *authorizes*, which permits the accession to the position of ‘I forgive.’ (58)

Melanie is spoken for on multiple occasions throughout the novel, often by male figures: David, her boyfriend, the committee, her father. She is consistently denied a voice; time and again, patriarchal figures presume the right to “intervene” on her behalf, to tell her story for her. Even

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David's rape of Melanie is told from his perspective, leaving the reader undecided as to whether or not it can even be called rape: "She does not resist. All she does is avert herself: avert her lips, avert her eyes" (Coetzee 25). Melanie's physical unresponsiveness, her lack of resistance, comes to muddle the nature of David's crime in his own mind: "Not rape, not quite that, but undesired nonetheless, undesired to the core" (25). Whether or not David's crime is rape, however, remains ambiguous throughout because the reader is reliant on his account. While David states his case multiple times throughout the text, Melanie never once states hers. Her statement is alluded to at the university tribunal, but its details remain hidden from the reader. In spite of all the "principled objections" David offers in his defense, he never once reads what Melanie has written (McGonegal 157).

When David later seeks pardon for his offenses against Melanie, it is not from Melanie herself, but instead from her father. Melanie is, again, absent throughout this scene. Her welfare seems, at best, a tertiary concern. Rather, Mr. Isaacs, a self-professed man of God, sees the state of David's soul as being a far more urgent matter. Despite his wife's opposition, Mr. Isaacs invites David to have dinner with his family: to come and "break bread" with the Isaacs,

an expression that immediately reveals his Christian orientation (Coetzee 167). When David appears, for the second time, at the home of the Isaacs, the scene that ensues is almost comical. David, in a rather awkward (and inappropriate) attempt at social etiquette, brings a bottle of wine to share. Mr. and Mrs. Isaacs, however, do not drink. Nonetheless, Mr. Isaacs encourages David to pour himself a glass, and they begin to break bread, all the while making small talk. The comedy of the scene is undermined, however, by the presence of Melanie's mother and younger sister, the provocatively named Desiree ("Desiree, the desired one" [164]). David has met Desiree once before, although she had not known then who he was nor what he had done. Once she becomes aware of his identity, Desiree regards David with equal parts curiosity and revulsion (or, at least, David imagines she does): "*So this is the man my sister has been naked with! So this is the man she has done it with! This old man!*" (169). David, in reverse, tries to suppress his lust for the young girl. Mrs. Isaacs, tellingly, refuses to meet David's gaze at all. The awkwardness of the situation becomes too much for David to bear, and he tries to excuse himself. Mr. Isaacs, in an act of seeming moral fortitude and emotional generosity, urges him to stay: "Sit down, sit down! We'll be all right! We will

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do it! You have to be strong!” (169). As Martin Swales argues, Mr. Isaacs’s exclamations indicate “his expectation of a confession and a request for forgiveness from David” (144). Mr. Isaacs is also attempting to lead by example. In other words, he puts his wife and daughter through this ordeal in order to illustrate to David the tenets of his Christian faith: “Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened to you” (Matthew 7:7). According to Mr. Isaacs, all David has to do is ask for forgiveness, and he will be given it. But David must first give a testimony to which Mr. Isaacs – and his God – will bear witness. David’s disgrace is once again thrust into the public view, although within the privacy of the home of the Isaacs.

David, however, is a “non-believer,” and Mr. Isaacs’s assumption of the role of spiritual intercessor leaves both parties dissatisfied with the outcome of the meeting. As a Christian, Mr. Isaacs “sees himself as bound to forgive, but this is in accordance with the injunctions of God . . . related to the fear of retribution that defiance would incur” (Swales 145). While Mr. Isaacs views himself as having direct communication with God through prayer, David, as a non-Christian, is excluded from this divine party line.



David does not pray, nor does he believe that forgiveness occurs on a transcendent level:

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 . . . I am living it out from day to day, trying to accept disgrace as my state of being. (Coetzee 172)

The tone of this passage differs dramatically from David's self-righteous speeches to the university tribunal. Although he is not necessarily remorseful, he is most certainly resigned. What is most compelling about David's rebuttal to Mr. Isaacs is that, while David professes not to believe in a higher power, he nonetheless feels that he is being punished. But who or what is punishing him? In spite of David's self-proclaimed agnosticism, there remains a metaphysical element that pervades his speech to Mr. Isaacs. It is not, however, the same metaphysical realm to which David appeals for an explanation and justification of his sexual desire; it is not the realm of Eros, but rather something far more human or, at least, something less divine. As Michael Heyns suggests, "Recurrent frustrations, disappointments and defeats can only diminish the individual's sense of effective agency" (Heyns qtd. in

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Kissack and Titlestad 135). By rejecting a Christian perspective of forgiveness, David begins to recognize his own feelings of individual impotence and social paralysis. David, whose sense of agency is diminished at the onset of the novel and continues to weaken throughout, comes to realize his own disbelief in a subjective free will. David does not believe in God, but neither does he fully believe in his own agency within a secular context. His state of disgrace is a state of moral and ideological limbo and, although he is unable to articulate it, his resignation to live out his disgrace “from day to day” is a first step toward self-reconciliation (Coetzee 172).

In a gesture that is part pantomime, part personal sacrifice, David falls to his knees in front of Mrs. Isaacs and Desiree and bows his head to the floor. At once a ritualistic and bizarre performance, David’s gesture displays more remorse, more empathy, and more understanding of the suffering he has caused than any confession would provide. Although not an act of repentance, it is an act of simple gratitude. David offers the best apology he can: by thanking Mrs. Isaacs and her daughter for their hospitality. Hospitality is defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as “the act or practice of being hospitable; the reception and entertainment of guests, visitors, or strangers, with liberality

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and goodwill” (“Hospitality,” def. n. 1a). On the surface, hospitality seems to have little to do with notions of forgiveness, but hospitality does not have to be reciprocated, or even appreciated, to live up to its name. It is an act of generosity, and generosity is an act of the heart. For Derrida, pure forgiveness, unmediated by external factors, occurs only in the heart. Forgiveness “must remain intact, inaccessible to law, to politics, even to morals: absolute” (Derrida 55). It is a private matter, even a secret experience. Yet asking for forgiveness is also an act of faith, not in the divine, but in the human heart’s ability to forgive. Although David does not ask for the forgiveness of the Isaacs family (because, in many ways, it is not theirs to offer), his non-verbal display of deference toward Mrs. Isaacs and Desiree acknowledges their attempt to show him goodwill - to forgive him - genuine or not. David knows he is an unwelcome guest, yet he tries to be a gracious guest nonetheless.

Neither David Lurie nor King David inhabit private worlds: their actions are subject to the reactions and responses of others, as well as to external consequences. Although King David must ultimately appeal to the God of the Old Testament for forgiveness, his disgrace is also broadcast to his country; as God tells him, “For you did it

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secretly, but I will do this thing before all Israel, before the sun” (2 Samuel 12:11). David Lurie, even in one of the most remote regions of South Africa, the site of his daughter Lucy’s farm, cannot escape the rumors of his disgrace; the “whiff of scandal” follows him wherever he goes (Coetzee 148). David carries his shame with him and is never fully free of it. King David, on the other hand, is absolved of his sins at the moment of his son’s death. Interestingly, King David’s son does not die immediately; rather, God causes the child to fall ill. While his son is dying, King David mourns his death. After his son is pronounced dead, however, David washes and anoints himself, changes his clothes, and goes to the temple to worship God. Then David returns to his house to eat, an act that confounds his servants: “What is this that you have done? You fasted and wept for the child while he was alive, but when the child died, you arose and ate food” (2 Samuel 12:20-21). King David replies, “Who can tell whether the Lord will be gracious to me, that the child may live? But now he is dead, why should I fast? Can I bring him back again?” (2 Samuel 12:22-23). While his infant son is dying, David retains hope that God will spare him, that God will be merciful: he maintains faith in the grace of God. Once his son dies, however, David acknowledges the

finality of death and the futility of continuing to mourn the dead. But his belief in God's grace remains unwavering.

Absolution is a theological concept, and David Lurie, a secular man in a secular world, cannot hope for such a divine bestowal. Yet, at the end of *Disgrace*, David participates in an act that seems to gesture toward personal redemption, even as it is unfulfilled. After leaving Cape Town to live with his daughter, Lucy, in the hinterlands of South Africa, David begrudgingly assists Bev Shaw, a friend of Lucy's, in euthanizing abandoned cats and dogs at the animal welfare clinic Bev operates. Over the course of the novel, David comes to regard this work with less contempt and begins, instead, to feel compassion for the unwanted animals. Every Sunday, he "offers himself to the service of dead dogs," carting their corpses off to an incinerator and loading them into the fire, one by one (Coetzee 146). He claims to do this "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," but David is fully aware of the futility of his actions (146). In spite of any ideological reservations he might have regarding the treatment of animal corpses, he knows that his actions must appear insane to any onlookers. After all, the dogs are already dead, and it is not his job to cremate them. David,

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however, is unable to administer the “lethal” – the drug that eases the animal’s passage from life to death – himself; he leaves the actual killing of the animals to Bev and assumes responsibility for them only in death. But, in the closing scene of the novel, David “gives up” a crippled dog he has developed genuine affection for:

He opens the cage door. “Come,” he says, bends, opens his arms. The dog wags its crippled rear, sniffs his face, licks his cheeks, his lips, his ears. He does nothing to stop it. “Come.” Bearing him in his arms like a lamb, he re-enters the surgery. “I thought you would save him for another week,” says Bev Shaw. “Are you giving him up?” “Yes, I am giving him up.” (219)

The comparison of the dog to a lamb has Christian overtones, but David’s act is not one of Christian charity or mercy. In fact, it is quite the opposite: he is ushering the dog to its death. The novel ends on a bittersweet note. David seems to have undergone a personal transformation, but that transformation is marked by surrender. He finally surrenders himself to the facts of a secular world: life ends at death, and everything must die. Although David seems to have, for lack of a better phrase, become a better person, killing a dog – an act that is literally life-denying – is an unlikely marker of personal transformation. David

remains in disgrace at the end of the novel, but he has come to terms with this state of being.

The Story of King David and Bathsheba is inextricable from its theological framework: King David is restored to God's grace only because God deems it so. Grace, and its opposite, disgrace, are both functions of the Divine, and David, though a king, must surrender himself to the ultimate sovereignty of God. Forgiveness is thus represented in the story as belonging wholly to the divine realm; human beings are capable of sinning, but they are not capable of atoning for their sins without divine intervention. In Coetzee's *Disgrace*, both the secular and theological conceptions of forgiveness are represented as being equally - and simultaneously - problematic when tried in human contexts. The question of forgiveness remains unresolved in the novel. What does true forgiveness look like? Perhaps it looks like a dead dog.

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