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J.M. COETZEE AND ANIMAL RIGHTS: ELIZABETH
COSTELLO'S CHALLENGE TO PHILOSOPHY

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Abstract

The thesis relates Coetzee's focus on animals to his more familiar themes of the possibility of fiction as a vehicle for serious ethical issues, the interrogation of power and authority, a concern for the voiceless and the marginalised, a keen sense of justice and the question of secular salvation. The concepts developed in substantial analyses of *The Lives of Animals* and *Disgrace* are thereafter applied to several other works of Coetzee.

The thesis attempts to position J.M. Coetzee within the animal rights debate and to assess his use of his problematic persona, Elizabeth Costello, who controversially uses reason to attack the rationalism of the Western philosophical tradition and who espouses the sympathetic imagination as a means of developing respect for animals. Costello's challenge to the philosophers is problematised by being traced back to Plato's original formulation of the opposition between philosophers and poets. It is argued that Costello represents a fallible Socratic figure who critiques not reason *per se* but an unqualified rationalism. This characterisation of Costello explains her preoccupation with raising the ethical awareness of her audience, as midwife to the birth of ideas, and perceptions of her as a wise fool, a characterisation that is confirmed by the use of Bakhtin's notion of the Socratic dialogue as one of the precursors of the modern novel. Along with the Platonic/Socratic binary, Bakhtin's concepts of polyphony, dialogism and monologism are applied to analyses of Coetzee's fiction, which, in keeping with his anti-authoritarianism, is shown to be polyphonic.

Costello's apparently insensitive and repeated comparison of industrialised animal farms to Nazi concentration camps is likewise scrutinised. It is argued that the point of the comparison is to question the normality and humanity of societies that

choose to ignore the suffering of animals in the animal exploitation industries. Her raising the question of this willed ignorance is related to Socrates' maxim that evil is a result of ignorance, and Coetzee's concern with the psychic cost to their humanity of those complicit in these industries is considered. David Lurie's evocation of Holocaust imagery in *Disgrace* is also examined, as is the role of art and the sympathetic imagination in attaining a degree of grace.

Platonic ideas on eros, beauty, art and immortality are found to be central to Coetzee's fiction, not only to that relating to Costello but also to *Disgrace* and much of his other work. While acknowledging the importance of Plato, Coetzee continuously extends, tests and subverts his ideas, frequently subjecting them to carnivalistic play. Unexpected connections are made between Coetzee's conception of the parent-child relationship, both biological and intellectual, and his notions of creativity, power and justice. Ideas of eating and fasting are explored in his fiction and related to the hunger-artistry of Franz Kafka. Coetzee's ideas on animals, writing and diet are found to be essential to his notions of secular salvation and an ethical way of life.

Keywords

J.M. Coetzee, Elizabeth Costello, Mikhail Bakhtin, Franz Kafka, Platonic, Socratic, eros, midwife, ethics, animal rights, liberalism, humanism, humanity, rationalism, sympathetic imagination, Holocaust, disgrace, grace, secular salvation, polyphony, dialogism, monologism, hunger-artistry

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