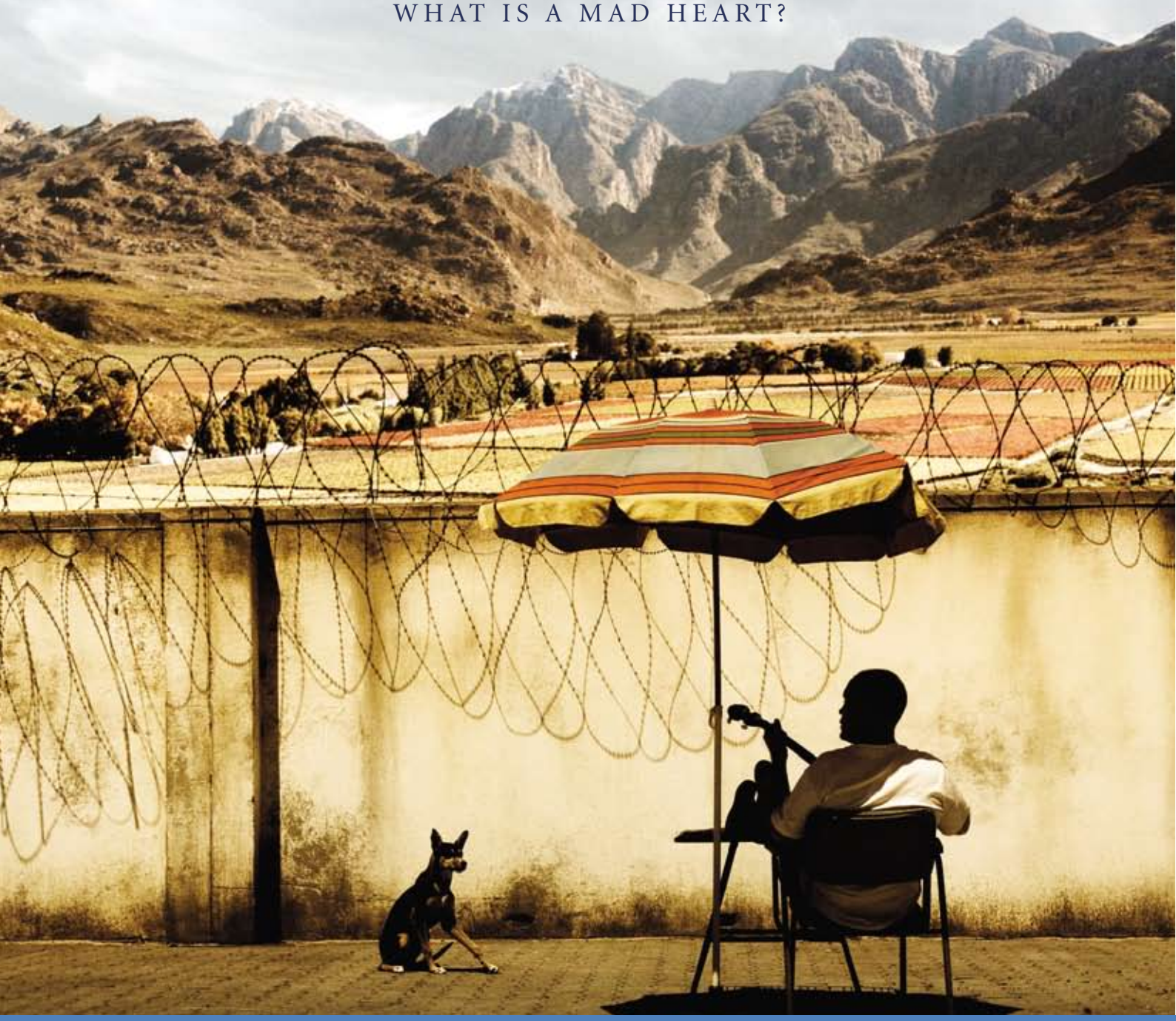
JOHN MALKOVICH

A STEVE JACOBS FILM

DISGRACE

WHAT IS A MAD HEART?



A **STUDY GUIDE** BY MARGUERITE O'HARA

Introduction

Disgrace is based on J.M. Coetzee's 1999 Booker prize-winning novel of the same name. The novel, set in post-apartheid South Africa, struck a chord around the world as a powerful work dealing with complex characters, emotions and sexual encounters. The film is a faithful adaptation of the novel, portraying the beauty and power of the natural world as it reveals the moral complexities of people's lives in a country where the balance of power is shifting in both the private and public sphere. *Disgrace* tells the story of one man's downfall to reflect wider issues in a society. The production team, including the screenwriter, Anna-Maria Monticelli, director Steve Jacobs, cinematographer Steve Arnold and a uniformly strong cast led by John Malkovich as David Lurie have created a film that is exceptional in its fidelity to the text and refusal to offer simple moral perspectives.

Synopsis

David Lurie, twice-divorced and dissatisfied with his job as an English professor in post-apartheid South Africa, finds his life falling apart. When he seduces one of his students, and does nothing to protect himself from the consequences, he is dismissed from his teaching position and takes refuge on his daughter's farm in the Eastern Cape. For a time, his daughter's influence and the natural rhythms of the farm promise to harmonise his discordant life. But the balance of power in the country is shifting. In the aftermath of a vicious attack on the farm, he is forced to come to terms with more than his disgrace alone.

Curriculum relevance

While *Disgrace* can stand alone and provide a rich and complex experience for an audience, it also offers a fascinating example of the process of adaptation from book to screen. For students studying either post-colonial literature and/or the process of adaptation, this film has a great deal to offer.

It would be suitable for senior secondary students and tertiary students of literature; contemporary history and politics; post-colonial studies; and film studies. The film, like the novel on which it is based, makes demands on an audience and refuses to offer simple or satisfying solutions to the issues it deals with.

Familiarity with the novel would enrich the way students read this film but it is by no means essential. Like all good films, *Disgrace* has its own strengths and approach to portraying both people and place; gestures, attitudes and body language are as eloquent as the dialogue.

This guide provides some brief background information about apartheid and recent South African history to offer some context for what takes place in the film. For some students, this may not be necessary as they may already have studied and understood some of the complex political, racial, economic and social history underpinning the story.

Ideas about collective guilt and responsibility as they are explored in this film do not just relate to South Africa. In Australia, for generations, there was resistance from both governments and white Australians to the idea of apologising to indigenous Australians for what had happened to them since white settlement. It was only in 2008 that the newly elected Labor Government made a formal apology to Aboriginal Australians on behalf of white Australians. This has not however made the past go away and, as in South Africa, there remains a legacy of bitterness, anger and mistrust between people. Past practices have resulted in poverty and inequality which will take generations to ameliorate.

J.M. Coetzee

Coetzee was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2003. He has won the Booker Prize twice, in 1983 for *The Life and Times of Michael K* and in 1999 for *Disgrace*, the novel on which this film is based. A native of South Africa, Coetzee moved to Australia in 2002 and lives in South Australia. His prose is spare and his novels sometimes seem to present a rather bleak view of the human condition. Several of his novels deal with the political and social conditions in South Africa, particularly the suffering caused by imperialism, apartheid and post-apartheid violence. *Disgrace* explores some of the unresolved tensions of the post-apartheid era in South Africa. Critic James Wood describes the novel as 'a masterpiece with its loose wail of pain and its vigorous honesty'. (*The New Republic*)

KEY CREW AND CAST
CREW
Director/producer – Steve Jacobs
Writer/producer – Anna-Maria Monticelli
Cinematographer – Steve Arnold
Producer – Emile Sherman
Composers – Antony Partos and Graeme Koehne
Editor – Alexandre De Franceschi
Production designers – Mike Berg (South Africa) and Annie Beauchamp (Australia)
CAST
Professor David Lurie – John Malkovich
Lucy – Jessica Haines
Petrus – Eriq Ebouaney
Bev Shaw – Fiona Press
Melanie – Antoinette Engel
Disgrace was shot in South Africa and Australia by a mainly Australian film crew. The film runs for just under two hours.

Background information about South Africa and the legacy of Apartheid

What follows is a much-abbreviated history of apartheid in South Africa. As with any society and country with a long history of colonial rule and oppression, the consequences of this subjugation and dispossession are ongoing and complex for all races. While the details of the historical circumstances may be different, the continuing chaos in Zimbabwe and other African countries is a direct consequence of their colonial history. Racial harmony and trust does not emerge within a generation; economic and educational equality cannot be achieved in a generation; the wounds are deep. When *Disgrace* was published, the system of apartheid had only been officially dismantled for five years.

'Apartheid' – meaning separateness in Afrikaans – was a system of legal racial segregation enforced by the National Party government in South Africa between 1948 and 1994.

Racial segregation in South Africa began in colonial times, but apartheid as an official policy was introduced following the general election of 1948. New legislation classified inhabitants into racial groups (black, white, coloured, and Indian), and residential areas were segregated by means of forced removals. Blacks were stripped of their citizenship, legally becoming citizens of one of ten tribally based self-governing homelands or Bantustans, four of which became nominally independent states. The government segregated education, medical care, transport and most public services, providing black people with services vastly inferior to those of whites. Apartheid in South Africa was a system of institutionalized racism and white domination. Mixed-race marriages were illegal and highly restrictive 'pass laws' limited the movement of black people, many of whom eked out a meagre existence as servants to the dominant minority of whites.

Apartheid and its oppressive policies of disenfranchisement and oppression sparked significant internal resistance amongst the black population and some white South Africans. A series of popular uprisings and protests were met with the banning of opposition and imprisoning of anti-apartheid leaders, including Nelson Mandela who spent twenty-seven years in prison. As unrest spread and became more violent, state organs responded with increasing repression and state-sponsored violence.

Reforms to apartheid in the 1980s failed to quell the mounting opposition both in South Africa and the world, and in 1990 President de Klerk began negotiations to end the system of apartheid. He released Mandela and other political prisoners from jails; these negotiations culminated in multi-racial democratic elections in 1994, which were won by the African National Congress under Nelson Mandela. The vestiges of apartheid still shape South African politics and society.

South Africa has an uncommon demographic profile, marked by a heterogeneous population base, social issues directly related to the legacy of apartheid, divisions within ethnic groups, HIV/AIDS and emigration. Consequently, within the Rainbow Nation, demography plays a prominent role in public policy.

Blacks compose about 79.7 per cent (2007 estimated) of the population and represent different ethnic groups, including Zulu, Xhosa, Ndebele, Pedi, Sotho and Swazi, as well as recent immigrants from other parts of Africa (particularly Zimbabwe and Nigeria). Whites compose 9.1 per cent (2007 estimate), comprising of the descendants of Dutch, French, British, and

German settlers who began arriving at the Cape from the late seventeenth century, immigrants from Europe who arrived in South Africa in the twentieth century, and Portuguese who left the former Portuguese colonies of southern Africa (Angola and Mozambique) after their independence in the mid-1970s. Coloureds (8.8 per cent, 2007 estimate) are mixed-race people primarily descended from the earliest settlers, their slaves, and the indigenous peoples. The remaining 2.4 per cent are categorised as 'Indian/Asian', including the descendants of Indian indentured sugar estate workers and traders who came to South Africa in the mid-nineteenth century (particularly around Natal), as well as a small Chinese population of approximately 100,000 people.

South Africa has relatively high rates of emigration (the majority are white). According to OECD data, countries with a large number of South African immigrants (irrespective of naturalisation) include the United Kingdom (141,405; 2001 estimated), Australia (79,425; 2001 est.), United States (68,290 est.; 2000 est.), Canada (37,680; 2001 est.) and New Zealand (26,061; 2001 est.). Smaller South African communities are in Portugal, Netherlands, Greece and Ireland.[1]

Truth and Reconciliation Commission

At the end of the apartheid era, President Mandela set up 'Truth and Reconciliation Hearings' which ran from 1995 to 1998. These commissions invited people to tell their stories of life and injustices suffered under the apartheid regime. The mandate of the commission was to bear witness to, record and in some cases grant amnesty to the perpetrators of crimes relating to human rights violations, reparation and rehabilitation. One of the key questions arising from these hearings was – Can remorse and admissions of guilt lead the way to atonement and forgiveness, making a new co-existence between black and white, oppressed and victims, possible?

While Coetzee's novel, published in 1999, does not deal directly with the commission hearings, some of these questions resonate in *Disgrace*.

Pre-viewing activity

The art of adaptation

Disgrace was adapted from Coetzee's novel of the same name by Anna-Maria Monticelli.

Read the following introductory material about adaptation of books to film and respond to the questions that follow before you watch *Disgrace*. After watching the film you might like to return to these questions and discuss how this adaptation works.

Adapting a novel to a film is always difficult. The process by which one thing develops into another, with one form changing into something else, needs to be done with care and sensitivity, but above all with an affectionate respect for the original source material. The differences in the method available to filmmaker and writer to tell a story are enormous. Often, readers of a novel will come to the film with strong pre-conceptions about how characters should look and behave, what is essential for inclusion in the film and a general scepticism about whether a great novel can be made into a film that is both faithful and illuminating about the source material from which it originated. Fidelity does not simply mean inclusion of all the details of the story; it should mean being true to the tone and intention of the original text, what Salman Rushdie calls 'the question of essences'.[2] Watching films tends to be a more popular pastime than reading novels in the twenty-first

century, and the release of a filmed adaptation of a novel can greatly accelerate the sales of a title. In recent years, sales of Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy soared with the release of Peter Jackson's adaptations of the books into three award-winning films. It is worth thinking about what is lost and gained in film adaptations of novels apart from increased sales of the original text. Anna-Maria Monticelli, who adapted Coetzee's novel to the screen, won the prize for best feature film adaptation at the 2008 Australian Writers' Guild Awards for *Disgrace*.

- Make a list of films you have watched in the past few years that have been adapted from a book you have read.
- What are your criteria for a good adaptation of a book to a film?
- How often is the process successful when it is reversed, where a film is turned into a novel?
- Why might a filmmaker choose to select or omit scenes and sometimes even include some scenes that are either not in the novel, or only incidental to the story?
- Is it reasonable for an adaptation to change emphases and even endings for dramatic cinematic purposes, e.g. 'a happy ending'?
- How crucial is the choice of actors in playing key roles to the success of a filmed adaptation of a novel? Give some examples where you think this does or does not work in films you have watched, particularly where the novel is both contemporary and popular.

A viewing log

The film runs for approximately 110 minutes. While there are many different scenes, the narrative can be divided into a number of sections or 'Acts', as in a drama. Being clear about when events happen and how individuals respond to them is important in a film like *Disgrace* where the things that happen and their consequences and meanings are seen differently by key figures in the story. The table on pages 7 and 8 breaks the film down into ten 'Acts', outlining the key scenes in each of these 'Acts'. However, such a bald summary of 'what happens' cannot render how we are shown the ways in which things happen. It cannot suggest tone, mood, pace or style, just as a summary of a novel tells us little about the real nature and strength of the story. What matters most may be conveyed through something other than words or actions.

	SECTION	SCENES	TIME LOG
1.	David Lurie in Cape Town – establishing the seeds of Lurie's 'disgrace'	Lurie with Soraya, the prostitute he visits regularly. Lecturing to his students about Wordsworth. His first direct meeting with Melanie, one of his students. Entertaining Melanie at his house. Checking her personal contact details in Student Records. Lunch with Melanie followed by sex. Offering Melanie a ride home in the rain. Asks to see her again. At Melanie's play rehearsal. Goes to her house and has sex with her. In class. She does not appear for the test but he marks her as present. Melanie's boyfriend confronts Lurie in his office. His car is vandalized. In class. Melanie's boyfriend is there with her. In his office with Melanie, insisting she sit the missed test. Motorbike scene. In class. Very few students attending. Blackboard says CASANOVA. Lurie confronted in corridor by Mr. Isaacs, Melanie's father. Dining with his ex-wife who tells him people know what he's done and that 'Melanie took sleeping pills'.	00:00–00:20 Many of these scenes are quite brief. (20 minutes)
2.	The Inquiry	Inquiry of peers into Lurie's behaviour with Melanie. He admits guilt but refuses to defend himself. Press pressure Lurie for a statement. Lurie at home packing things to go away.	00:20–00:25 (5 minutes)
3.	Going to his daughter Lucy's farm in the Eastern Cape	Driving away from Cape Town through the rolling countryside of vast spaces and emptiness. Finds Lucy alone on her farm, her partner Helen having left for the city. Meets Petrus who works for Lucy but is also becoming a part-owner of the farm. Shown around farm, which includes boarding kennels for dogs. Hears barking of dogs at night. David helps Lucy and Petrus pick flowers and vegetables to sell at local market. Meets Bev and Bill, Lucy's friends, who have an animal shelter and clinic. David querying Lucy about Petrus' right to come and go in the house. Lucy suggests David help Petrus with farm work and assist Bev at her animal clinic. David assisting at the clinic – feeding dogs and helping with the animals.	00:24–00:38 (14 minutes)
4.	The violent assault at Lucy's farm	Lucy and David are walking three dogs. As they approach her farm, three black men ask to use the phone. Lucy takes one of them inside and the others attack David who is locked out of the house. David is knocked out and locked in the toilet while the men ransack the house, sexually assault Lucy and load up the car with their spoils. They pour spirits on David and set him on fire. He hears the dogs being shot. Lucy unlocks the door. She walks to a neighbour's farm for help, telling David that each will give their own account of what happened to them.	00:37–00:48 (11 minutes)
5.	The immediate aftermath	Ettinger, the neighbour, takes them to the local hospital, advising them to be fully armed. At the clinic, David's burns are treated. Lucy goes to police station with Ettinger. Bill takes them to his place where Bev cares for them. At Lucy's insistence they return to the farm. David digs graves to bury the dogs. Petrus returns in a truck. Lucy seems passive and distressed and is unwilling to talk about the assault. David's relationship with Petrus is increasingly strained.	00:47–01:00 (13 minutes)

6.	Changing relationships	David and Lucy attend Petrus' party to celebrate the land transfer. Lucy sees one of the men (the young boy) who was one of the attackers. Lucy stops David calling the police, insisting the peace must be kept. Petrus will not reveal the boy's name to David.	01:00–01:08 (8 minutes)
7.	David, Bev and the dogs	Bev tells David that Lucy owes Petrus a lot. She tells him that he cannot know what really happened because he was not there. He assists with the euthanising of the dogs and takes the corpses away for burning. David weeps alone in the truck. He and Bev work and talk together David and Bev begin a sexual relationship. He strongly urges Lucy to go away where she will be safe but she refuses. Bev suggests David go back to Cape Town for a while.	01:07–01:19 (12 minutes)
8.	Returning to the city and seeking forgiveness	David visits Melanie's family and speaks with Mr. Isaacs to give his side of what happened. David asks for forgiveness but Isaacs suspects his sincerity and motive. David kisses the floor in a doorway in front of Melanie's mother and sister in a gesture of contrition. He drives to his home in Cape Town which has been broken into and vandalized. He attends a performance of Melanie's play and encounters her boy-friend. He picks up a prostitute during the night.	01:19–01:31 (12 minutes)
9.	Returning to the Eastern Cape and Lucy	David returns to the farm where Lucy tells him she is pregnant and intending to have the child of one of the rapists. He weeps alone outside her house. Lucy tells him that the young boy is Petrus' wife's brother Pollux, and that he is a disturbed child. David tries to discuss the situation with Petrus. Lucy explains that for the good of everyone she is entering into a legal alliance with Petrus – accepting his protection in return for handing over the land to him.	01:31–01:40 (9 minutes)
10.	Endings	David returns to farm with dog and sees Pollux watching Lucy through a window. He attacks him as does the dog. Lucy breaks up the struggle and the boy sees her breasts as her gown slips off her shoulders. David goes to see Bev looking for a place to stay. He helps with the euthanising of the dogs including a young dog that has responded to him. He stops at Lucy's and watches her as she works in the garden. They go inside together for tea.	01:40–01:48 (8 minutes) Total time: Approx. 111 minutes

Student Activities

After watching the film

A. Figures in a landscape and the power of the land

The landscape of South Africa, and particularly the Eastern Cape region of Lucy's farm, is an important element in this film, something more than background or setting. At times breathtakingly beautiful in its vastness, at other times redolent with a dry and desolate hostility, both isolated and alienating. Land use and ownership is at the heart of the political and social history of many countries, and this is particularly the situation in Africa.

- What kind of comfort and natural rhythm does the farm offer to Lucy?
- How does she cope with the isolation and what is dangerous about living in the country as Lucy has chosen to do?
- What contrasts are suggested between the rhythms of city and rural life in this film?

- How does David Lurie respond to the land and the life he finds in the Eastern Cape region?
- What kind of 'interior life' and physical and emotional qualities are needed to live in country like this?
- Do the black people have stronger claims to land use and ownership than the white people who have been the traditional landowners and farmers in South Africa?
- The number of car thefts in South Africa is very high. Why are vehicles such important possessions in rural areas?

B. Looking at characters

David Lurie and his adult daughter Lucy are the central characters in this film.

The film raises important questions about whose perspectives about what happens are endorsed, if any. The following questions are certainly worth thinking about and discussing, but establishing simple and clear-cut answers to any of them is not something either the novel *Disgrace* or the film invites us to do.

- What perspective of a white South African living in a post-apartheid world does Lucy represent?
- What are we to make of Petrus and his view that 'everything will be all right'?
- Is David Lurie's behaviour in Cape Town understandable, if not acceptable to most people?
- How is his being part of an earlier generation, with different experiences to his daughter, shown in the film?
- How are we to understand Lucy's determination not to pursue the rapists, or even to condemn their actions and seek some revenge?
- Does her choosing to stay on the farm seem wilful or even perverse in the circumstances?

- Do we accept and feel uneasy that David 'did nothing, wasn't there' (as Bev says), when Lucy was raped?
- Is his subsequent behaviour understandable given Lucy's insistence on managing the situation her own way?
- Has what he has experienced changed him in any important ways, and how do we know?
- Here are some definitions of the word disgrace:
    - Loss of honour, respect, or reputation;
    - shame;
    - the condition of being strongly and generally disapproved of;
    - something that brings disfavour or discredit.

How do these definitions apply to what happens in the story? Who is disgraced and how? Is 'disgrace' as a term of disapproval only applied to human behaviour?

One way of understanding the multiple perspectives embodied in the film is by listening to what people say. Here are some quotes that are worth exploring. They are grouped sequentially in line with the viewing log sections from 1 to 10.

1. 'A woman's beauty does not belong to her alone.'

   – David Lurie to Melanie

'We are not asked to condemn him but invited to sympathise. He is a thing, a monster, not possible to love, condemned to solitude.'

– Lurie explaining how Byron writes about Lucifer

'The whole thing is disgusting and vulgar.'

– Lurie's ex-wife expressing her view to him of the affair with Melanie

2. 'I plead guilty to both charges. Pass sentence and let's get on with our lives.'

– Lurie to the Board of Inquiry

'I took advantage of my position. It was wrong and I regret it.'

– Lurie to the Board of Inquiry

'Does this statement come from the heart? Does it reflect your sincere feelings?'

– Member of the Board of Inquiry to Lurie

'I've become a servant of Eros.'

– Lurie to the Board of Inquiry

3. 'I have a boarding kennel and a rifle. I'm not afraid.'

– Lucy to David

'I'm anxious about my daughter living here.'

– David to Petrus

'Here it is alright I think.'

– Petrus to David

'He helps me out and is also co-proprietor.'

– Lucy to David, explaining Petrus' position on the farm

'Sooner murder an infant in the cradle than nurse unacted desires.'

– David quoting from Blake to Lucy to explain his own behaviour

David: 'Can Petrus come in here just as he pleases?'

Lucy: 'We have an understanding. We share the use of the land.'

These animal welfare people are a bit like Christians; everyone is so well-intentioned, good and cheerful, that after a while you itch to go off and do some raping and pillaging, or kick the cat.

– David telling Lucy why he thinks he's unlikely to get on with Bev

'I do mind, I mind deeply.'

– Bev replying to David's question about how she feels about euthanising the animals

4. 'Desire cannot be punished. The dog came to hate its own nature.'

– David explaining to Lucy about the cruelty to a dog he observed during her childhood

'You say what happened to you and I'll say what happened to me.'

– Lucy to David after the violent robbery and assault at the farm

5. 'I never go anywhere without my beretta [pistol]. At least you can save yourself because the police won't … not anymore.'

– Ettinger, Lucy's white neighbour, to Lucy and David

'How can a doctor take care of all eventualities, David? Have some sense.'

– Lucy to David

'Things are changing. Ettinger is wrong. Guns and gates don't save you.'

– David to Lucy

'There's no shame in being the object of a crime.'

– David to Lucy

'What happened to me is purely a private matter, this place being what it is … South Africa.'

– Lucy to David

6. 'Why are you protecting Petrus?'

– David

'Don't shout at me. This is my life. I'm the one who has to live here.'

– Lucy

'It is hard for me. I must keep the peace.'

– Petrus to David

7. 'But you weren't there David.'

– Bev to David

'Do you regret what happened in Cape Town?'

– Bev to David

'At least here I'm out of the way of temptation.'

– David to Bev

'Can't we talk about it rationally?'

– David

'I can't talk about it anymore.'

– Lucy

'You were raped by three men and I did nothing.'

– David

*They **do** rape; stealing is just a sideline. I think they marked me. Maybe they see me as owing something. Maybe hating a woman or a man can make sex more exciting. It must be a bit like killing … you're a man … you should know.*

– Lucy to David

8. *I would like to give you my side of the story. Melanie struck up a fire in me. I am truly sorry for what I have put your daughter and your family through.*

– David to Mr. Isaacs, Melanie's father

'I say to myself, we are all sorry when we are found out, but the question is, what are you going to do now you are sorry?'

– Mr. Isaacs to David

'Stick with your own kind. Keep away from her. Find yourself another life.'

– Melanie's boyfriend to David when he goes to see her play

9. *I am pregnant from that day. I'm not having an abortion. The child came from one of those men. Must I choose against a child because of who the father is?*

– Lucy to David

'He is a child, my relative.'

– Petrus to David

'It is not finished. He is a dangerous child.'

– David

'Petrus is offering an alliance. In return for his protection I will be his wife. I'll hand over the land to him and keep the house. I'm not leaving.'

– Lucy to David

10. 'This can't go on David. He's a disturbed child.'

– Lucy to David after the incident with the boy Pollux spying on her

'That's not an excuse for what he did to you. He should be in an institution.'

– David

'Well, he's here and that's a fact of life. Everything had settled down before you came back here.'

– Lucy

C. Literary References

David Lurie is a Professor of Literature at the University of Cape Town. His particular interest and area of study is Romantic English Literature – the poetry of Keats, Wordsworth, Byron and Blake. He is working on an opera about Byron's final years in Italy before his death at thirty-six. Lurie quotes lines from poetry to his students, but often these are to explain and sometimes justify his own behaviour to them. He also quotes lines from William Blake to his daughter to try and get her to understand his view of the world and his own behaviour and attitudes.

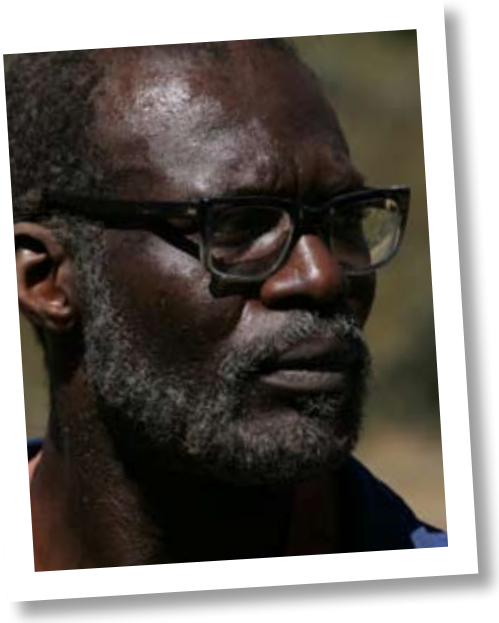
- How do these incursions into literature, as some kind of model for his own life, serve to help our understanding of some of his views, especially about sexuality and male desire?

- Given his apparently cool, ascetic nature and solitary life, what kind of solace and comfort might Lurie find in romantic poets like Wordsworth and Byron?

- Does his use of literature seem to be in some ways a rationalisation for his behaviour and attitudes towards women and sex? Does it allow him to live in a world removed from the reality of the new South Africa?

D. Dogs

Animals and their treatment by humans is a recurrent theme and motif in this film – what does their ownership, use and treatment convey about both people and the society in which they live? Lucy boards dogs and has a companion dog; her friend and neighbour Bev



runs an animal shelter where animals are given some veterinary care and often euthanised; David Lurie both works with Bev and is involved in the business of disposing of the dogs after they are killed; the dogs on Lucy's farm are also victims of the violent assault on Lucy and David.

In South Africa during the apartheid era, police dogs were commonly used to break up protests and disturbances. White settlers often owned well-trained guard dogs, such as Rhodesian Ridgebacks, Rottweilers, Mastiffs and German Shepherds to protect themselves and their properties. Abandoned cross-breeds are still a common sight in many rural areas. While different cultures have different attitudes to animals, and rural working dogs in many societies are treated differently to companion animals in Australian cities, our treatment of animals is often seen as a barometer of our humanity and capacity to respond compassionately to other creatures. In many societies animals are much more (and less) than pets.

- What is David Lurie's initial response to the dogs on Lucy's farm and at Bev's veterinary practice?
- How does this change as he spends more time at the farm and at Bev's clinic?
- What does he learn through Bev's treatment of the animals she both cares for and has to kill?
- At what points in the film do the dogs act as guards of their owners?
- How does the story David tells Lucy, about cruelty to a dog that he observed when she was a child, relate to his own behaviour when it comes to what is essential and fundamental to the nature of living creatures?
- Why do you think David Lurie decides not to save the young dog and then takes part in its being put down towards the end of the film?
- Is it possible to infer anything about Coetzee's views about animal welfare from what we see in the film in Lurie's attitudes?
- Is the worth of a dog's life any more or less to be valued than that of the people in this story or is human treatment of animals more the focus of the author's concerns?
- Cruelty to animals is abhorrent to many people, while indifference to their fate is less likely to be judged as morally reprehensible. Where do you stand on this issue?

Coetzee published a book in 2001 called *The Lives of Animals*, a collection of stories and essays which deals with the ethical issues of man's relationship with other animals. He has also been a patron of *Voiceless*, an Animal Rights organisation which 'envisions a world in which animals are treated with respect and compassion'.

E. Ethical questions – the personal and the political

Coetzee's work deals with difficult issues, particularly about what it is to be human and how we should treat other people and animals. In this film, there may be many aspects of how individuals behave that we find hard to understand, but as Bev says, 'we were not there'.

People's decisions and responses to what happens are always determined by their own situation and their values. The personal is intricately bound up with the political situation. History often lies heavily on people's actions.

- Do you think it is possible for black and white South Africans to live in harmony, given the legacy of apartheid with its deliberate racism, dispossession and contempt?
- Are we invited to judge David Lurie for any of the things he does and does not do? What could he have done to protect his daughter?
- Is it possible to understand Lucy's response to the gang rape and violation of herself and her property? Does her compromise to ally herself with Petrus for their mutual benefit make any sense to you? Is she attempting to make reparations for the evils of apartheid?
- What does Petrus see as his business in 'keeping the peace'? What are his priorities in this society where for so long he has been 'a dogman', without land, hope or prospects?
- When *Disgrace* was first published in 1999, some critics in South Africa were critical of the way black South Africans were represented in the novel, arguing that they were 'not fleshed out' and presented as 'evildoers'.[3] Could this criticism also be made of the black characters in the film?
- At the end of the film, what has changed for these people – for David Lurie, for Lucy, for Petrus and Bev?
- Has David Lurie achieved a kind of redemption, and if so, what might that be?

Student Activity

The filmmakers and cast and their perceptions of *Disgrace*

Steve Jacobs directed *Disgrace*. He is also one of the producers of the film. An actor and director, Jacobs won an AFI award in 1987 for best actor in *A Single Life.* His first feature film as director was the award-winning *La*

Spagnola (2001), made with Anna-Maria Monticelli. Here is his director's statement:

We wanted our film to be faithful to Mr Coetzee's great novel, portraying South Africa as a complex society wrestling with the aftermath of Apartheid. These arguments are played out throughout the narrative but are particularly focused in the intense relationship between David and his daughter, Lucy. The intimacies of their personal drama reflect the often-conflicting reactions to the horrific event that is central to the film. Set amidst a dramatic backdrop of mountains and valleys, our characters struggle with the turmoil of continuing. The spectacular landscape becomes integral to their personal journey, a journey that is both modern and old South Africa.

The moral arguments in the film are shades of grey and the actors were asked to reflect these nuances in the many dilemmas they face, leading the audience into the unexpected via layers and subtexts.

Yet despite this, this is still Africa and the physicalness of Africa dominates the film, particularly the epic location of Lucy's farm. Portraying the power and beauty of this natural world is, I believe, essential if we are to understand why, despite everything, Lucy decides to stay. South Africans every day have to make similar choices; we wanted to show in Disgrace *why they sometimes remain, not just why they go.*

Jacobs says that he found the novel realistic rather than bleak, 'but realist cinema is not so popular at the moment; it's basically escapist'. This response explains his approach to the style of the film, 'not what I would call a modern interactive style. I want the audience to make judgements themselves so the camera stands back'. He thinks the themes of the film include grace, revenge, retribution, sex, authority and power. Jacobs believes the film, like the book, will create a degree of controversy 'in a productive way, not sensationalist. It will press some buttons that are deep in all of us'.[4]

- How far do you think Jacob's film shows not only why South Africans leave but why they sometimes choose to stay?

- Which of the themes he names do you think are most important in the film?

Anna-Maria Monticelli adapted *Disgrace* from J.M. Coetzee's 1999 Booker prize-winning novel of the same name. She is also a co-producer of the film.

Monticelli, Moroccan-born, has a background in acting and wrote the script for *La Spagnola*. She describes the novel *Disgrace* as 'extraordinary, brave and real' and her response to it as 'organic and immediate'. Coetzee liked her adaptation. She felt that getting the casting right was crucial. Anna-Maria feels the film shows 'a brutality and a truth very much South African, yet it can translate to other countries. Lucy has hope, but it's horrific what has happened there.'[5]

Her adaptation of *Disgrace* won the 2008 prize for best feature film adaptation at the Australian Writers' Guild Awards.

- The film is quite spare in terms of dialogue. How does this reflect the essential nature of each of the central characters?

- What else is required of an adaptation of a novel to film apart from the dialogue?

- Why do you think Monticelli chose a linear narrative structure for this filmed adaptation rather than the often-used cutting back and forth in time to reflect on the genesis of what happens?

The look of the film

From the wide dry hills of the Eastern Cape to the Cape Town scenes set around the university and the long roads linking these very different areas, the film contrasts the countryside with the city, poverty with wealth, sophistication with simplicity, the lives and values of whites with blacks and male and female responses. These different spaces and worlds are all both connected but separate. Through the editing we move between these places in a series of seamless transitions. There are long shots, particularly of the farm, which reflect the isolation and the majestic beauty of this world; there are close ups of interiors that render the tensions between people in a way that is often claustrophobic. Apart from the work of the cinematographer, (Steve Arnold) and the editor (Alexandre De Franceschi), the Production Designers and lighting crew have an enormous influence on the look of a film. Mike Berg was the production designer in South Africa and Annie Beauchamp in Australia.

- What emotional states are suggested through these different landscapes?

- David Lurie is often seen looking through windows and doorways, sometimes behind blinds or curtains, as in the opening scene. What do these images suggest about his place in the different worlds in which he moves?

- What do the objects and furnishings in Lurie's house suggest about him?

- Is it possible to imagine Lucy in the city? When and where does she seem most comfortable and at one with the world?

- How does the Isaacs' house reflect the style and values of the family?

- What impression does David (and the viewer) have of Bev's house the first time he goes there?

- Describe the atmosphere at Petros' party before things start to go wrong.

The sounds of the film

The soundtrack of this film incorporates classical music with traditional African music.

Antony Partos composed the score with renowned composer Graeme Koehne.

Partos' work includes the scores for several feature films including *Crush* (Alison Maclean, 1992), *Walking on Water* (Tony Ayres, 2002), *Soft Fruit* (Christina Andreef, 1999), *The Monkey's Mask* (Samantha Lang, 2000), *Garage Days* (Alex Proyas, 2002) and *The Home Song Stories* (Tony Ayres, 2007). His most recent scores were for *Unfinished Sky* (Peter Duncan, 2007) and the ABC telemovie *Valentine's Day*. His television work includes writing the music for the series *White Collar Blue*, *All Saints* and the telemovie *The Silence*, as well as the theme for the ABC review show *At The Movies*.

Graeme Koehne is currently head of composition at the Elder Conservatorium in Adelaide. He composed 'She Walks in Beauty', one of three songs he composed based on the poems of Byron. The song is heard at the end of the film and is part of the opera David Lurie writes during the film.

- At what points in the film were you particularly conscious of the soundtrack?
- How are different styles of music used to reflect different characters and their emotions? E.g. David plays classical music for Melanie when she first comes to his place, but when he is at her place, we hear more contemporary music.
- Is there much music heard on Lucy's farm? Who plays it and in which scenes?

The cast's perceptions

John Malkovich as Professor David Lurie:

'Coetzee is a terrific writer with challenging characters and this is an adaptation of a complex story. If Lurie finds redemption, this film ends before it happens.'

South African actor **Jessica Haines** has said of her role as Lucy:

It's about conflict between her own struggle in her head and her heart. When David invades her space, she's attacked and her perfect world has been tarnished. She takes on a lot of responsibility and starts to change. She makes forward-thinking choices that are so radical.

Eriq Ebouaney as Petrus sees *Disgrace* as a metaphor for Africa, the land:

The fact that Lucy decides to keep the baby and to live with Petrus is a metaphor for people living together. People should be humble and open-minded. You should look forward and stop looking backward because it is finished now.

Fiona Press as Bev Shaw

Antoinette Engel as Melanie

- Comment on the five main performances in this film. What does each actor bring to their role? If you have read the novel on which the film is based, were these roles played as you would have expected in relation to how you pictured the characters in the novel?
- Was there a performance that you thought was exceptionally strong in the way the actor presented the character's emotional states and vulnerability?

Awards and Reviews

Anna-Maria Monticelli's adaptation of *Disgrace* won the 2008 prize for Best Feature Film Adaptation at the Australian Writers' Guild Awards.

Disgrace won the International Critic's Award at the Toronto International Film Festival in 2008.

As the film has not been widely screened, there are few reviews available at this time. Those that have appeared are mostly very positive about the film. Alan Hunter writing in *Screen Daily* says:

Malkovich's Lurie is a product of his time and his male instincts but despite his actions he remains a sympathetic figure … we identify with his desire for order and the rule of law as well as the contradictions he voices about love, desire and the workings of the human heart. He is a flawed and fallible character.

Jessica Haines matches him in the other main role, showing the resentments within her Lucy and her desire to do whatever it takes to build a new understanding that might be the basis for a better future.[6]

- Which aspects of *Disgrace* did you most admire – characterisation and performances, the script, cinematography, editing, production design, soundtrack or direction?

  Write a review of the film that looks

closely at no more than two of these areas of the film as a means of highlighting its qualities.

- Some readers found Coetzee's novel a bleak view of post-apartheid South Africa. Does the film present a bleak view or are there positive elements in how different people choose to deal with a very difficult new world order and their own part in that world?
-

References and further reading

J.M. Coetzee, *Disgrace*, Vintage, 1999.

Other books by Coetzee. *Boyhood* and *Youth*, memoirs about growing up, *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *The Life and Times of Michael K*.

http://www.complete-review.com/reviews/coetzeej/disgrace.htm

Read a number of reviews of the novel *Disgrace*.

http://www.nytimes.com/2007/12/16/books/review/Donadio-t.html?_r=2&sq=disgrace

An essay from the *New York Times* about Coetzee's move to Australia and the response to *Disgrace* in South Africa.

http://www.theaustralian.news.com.au/story/0,25197,25235702-16947,00.html

Award-winning novelist Salman Rushdie's recent essay on Adaptations.

http://www.jasa.net.au/study/sense.htm

An essay about the adaptation of Jane Austen's novel *Emma* to the screen in *Clueless*.

Endnotes

1 Adapted from the Wikipedia site on South Africa, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Demographics_of_South_Africa>.

2 Salman Rushdie, 'Lost in Translation – The art of adaptation', *The Weekend Australian*, <http://www.theaustralian.news.com.au/story/0,25197,25235702-16947,00.html>, 28–29 March 2009.

3 Rachel Donadio, *The New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/12/16/books/review/Donadio-t.html?_r=2&sq=disgrace>, 16 December 2007.

4 From the Production Notes for *Disgrace*, p.6.

5 ibid, p.8

6 Allan Hunter, '*Disgrace*', screendaily.com, <http://www.screendaily.com/disgrace/4040681.article>, 6 September 2008.

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