



Fathering Rescripted: The Shadow of the Son in Coetzee's Late Fiction

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Abstract

The issue of *late fatherhood* and the role children play in creative works of senior writers frame my discussion of representations of fathering in the late work of J.M. Coetzee. I focus on Coetzee's allegorical treatment of fractured father-son relationships in *The Childhood of Jesus* and *The Schooldays of Jesus*. Drawing on the literary nonfiction which I teach, and have employed to

narrate my own experience of “senior fathering,” I critique the dystopian outcomes of the father-figure's (Simón's) compulsive self-erasure. His “blind faith” in a mother's innate superiority represents not only the author's reflections on his own shortcomings as a father, but his interrogation of the absence of the father in literary traditions.





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A growing interest in father-son relationships has shaped my re-reading of authors such as Ernest Hemingway, Cormac McCarthy, and J.M. Coetzee. I have come to focus on literary representations of fathering done in the senior years, with its peculiar mixture of the prospect of second chances, coinciding with an “undercurrent of grief.” J.C. Kannemeyer used these words to describe Coetzee’s enduring devastation rooted in the tragic death of his son Nicolas in 1989 (509). This remained “a constant, corrosive pain from which there is no deliverance,” Kennemeyer tells us (457), even if the corrosive force had become an undercurrent twenty-four years later, when Coetzee published *The Childhood of Jesus*.

My theme of the “shadow of the son” in *The Childhood of Jesus* (2013) and *The Schooldays of Jesus* (U.K. 2016; U.S. 2017) is both an attempt to nudge critical engagement with these late fictions in a new direction, and as will become evident, also something of a personal discovery process. Most initial responses to *Childhood* passed over the importance of the father-son relationship, and in particular Coetzee’s unhealed trauma over the loss of his son, from whom he was estranged.

Befuddlement over the *Jesus* fictions is understandable. The critics are right that Coetzee seems to like to “frustrate” reader expectations (Bellin), or that he is “an inveterate frustrator” (Fargo). But if he repeats a pattern of “denying” reader desires (White), then this fits well with a definition of genres as a process in which authors arouse, and then fulfill or defeat, audience expectations.¹ Attentive readers know from experience that Coetzee as a writer and reader is not satisfied with formulaic resolutions of generic conventions. He habitually undercuts expectations in search of bigger payoffs. Writing in *The Telegraph*, Duncan White remarks that Coetzee “uses fiction like steel wool to scrub away at himself in the hope of revealing unadorned truths.”

Fair enough, but if the author is scrubbing at himself, then surely we must look at the biographical context. David Attwell’s *J.M. Coetzee and the Life of Writing* has broken new ground in revealing the biographical context of some of Coetzee’s fictions, including the relationship to his mother as backdrop to *Age of Iron* (1990), the death of his son Nicolas as

1. John Lennard and Mary Luckhurst, *The Drama Handbook: A Guide to Reading Plays*. Oxford UP, 2002, p. 336.





the genesis of *The Master of Petersburg* (1994), and how the relationship with his daughter Gisela informs *Disgrace* (1999). Attwell is the only critic to my knowledge who has understood *The Master of Petersburg*, an “autobiographical historical fiction” (174), as “a personal document seeking to become impersonal” (182). Those who knew Coetzee understood it as “an act of contrition & to a certain extent one of exorcism.”²

This exorcism, and the artistic “scrubbing” compelled by the “undercurrent of grief,” is an interpretive key to the *Jesus* fictions. Maybe one has to have been a father who lost his son to fully understand this—or at least to have reconsidered fatherhood in senior years. Dwight Garner, writing in the *New York Times*, provides an opening for me when he writes that *The Childhood of Jesus* “begins like a homage to *The Road* by Cormac McCarthy. Like McCarthy’s novel, *The Childhood of Jesus* is about a man and a boy in transit through a world that baffles and frightens them.”

When I first read *The Road*, I was living in Las Cruces, New Mexico, with my new Caribbean wife, an infant daughter, and an eleven-year-old son who would leave my home at age twelve. I closely identified with the often philosophical discussions that a “senior father” has with his precocious son.

During promotion of *The Road* and the film adaptation in 2009, McCarthy commented on the role of his young son John in the novel’s composition. In an interview with Oprah Winfrey, McCarthy acknowledged that writing *The Road* would have been impossible if he had not had a son in his senior years. McCarthy was seventy-three at the time of the interview, so the experiences with his son John (born 1998) which fed his fiction, occurred around age seventy. Then in a “conversation” published by the *Wall Street Journal*, when McCarthy was seventy-six, he was more explicit. Many lines in the book “are verbatim conversations my son John and I had,” he confessed. And: “I mean just that when I say that he’s the co-author of the book.”³

2. Coetzee’s brother-in-law Cecil Jubber, quoted in Kannemeyer, 470.
3. Michael Conlon, “Writer Cormac McCarthy confides in Oprah Winfrey,” *Reuters* (June 5, 2007). The Oprah interview was filmed at the Santa Fe Institute. John Hillcoat, director of the film adaptation of *The Road*, participated in a conversation with McCarthy, which was held next to the ruins of The Alamo in San Antonio. See Jurgensen, 2009.





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This “late fatherhood” perspective, along with taking seriously the claim that a boy’s words can constitute co-authorship, are crucial to my own reading. Making use of recent biographical and critical work by David Attwell and the late J.C. Kannemeyer, I “scrub” beneath the surface of Coetzee’s quasi-allegorical treatment of fractured father-son relationships in *The Childhood of Jesus* and *The Schooldays of Jesus*, both written in Coetzee’s mid-seventies. But a word to my readers: I teach Creative Writing, and my writerly style is rooted in pre-academic careers as a songwriter and journalist. At times I write in a hybrid style, drawing on literary criticism but grounded in literary nonfiction, which I have long employed to narrate shards of my own experience of “senior fathering.”

Let us drop down now into a scene near the beginning of *The Childhood of Jesus*, in which the advanced-middle-age substitute father, Simón, tells his five-year-old quasi-son David: “You may think you are washed clean, but you aren’t” (21). On the surface, this is a reference to a core idea in this philosophical fiction—that memory of a prior life has been erased. But this line is double-voiced, and may also refer to the author’s efforts to ameliorate that “constant pain” caused by the loss of his son.

When Dwight Garner notes certain similarities to McCarthy’s *The Road* and writes that “there is an implication of a recent moral apocalypse,” I read this as both social and personal. The loss of a son can feel like one is living in the “post-apocalyptic world.”

After I read *The Road* in 2009, long before I taught it in Puerto Rico as part of the post-apocalyptic genre, I lost my own son. Samuel left my house at age twelve. Living far away, I saw him little. Then at age sixteen, he went into a silence that was not broken for thirty months. I still remember the inerasable pain following a court date in which custody was turned over to a mother who I knew would try to prevent communication between father and son. I described this in a memoir, *Further Fathering*, an effort to process this “undercurrent of grief,” much as Coetzee wrote *The Master of Petersburg*, or Hemingway wrote the first section of *Islands in the Stream*:

My last year with Samuel, he had a green Koran which he would not allow me to touch, a gift from his Moroccan step-father, the “brown daddy.” Samuel had already chosen another





father. By the next summer, he was gone. Following script, he went incommunicado. I only saw him in court, where he went into the judge's chambers to make his wishes clear. He wished not to live with his father.

I cried bitterly the whole flight back to Florida.

While writing the memoir, I was forced to recognize that this “undercurrent of grief” had still not been processed. In February 2016, as I was revising a study about “father-son dialogues” in *The Road*, a friend sent me an old photo, from my days as a single father in Oklahoma.

As I looked at the photo of me and my children, just returned from Mexico in August 2003, I started to choke up. A deep, unprocessed grief threatened to overwhelm me. I fought it off. I knew that I needed to find my way to a different level of the “wisdom” that experience supposedly teaches. Despite the passage of time, the loss of my two children at age 12 continues to haunt me.

The conventions of academic writing are such that a scholar is expected to keep a proper distance from the material. We are to *assume the position* of a disembodied style. Indeed, some readers who have internalized this practice of self-erasure will have already wondered why I—the “analyst”—am forcing a narrative about my own son onto my reading of a Nobel-Prize-winning author. As I hope to demonstrate, there is a very good reason indeed. This has to do in part with both Coetzee and myself trying to make sense of “special” sons who were both highly intelligent and disruptive. The probability that the John Coetzee-Nicolas relationship “sideshadows”⁴ the relationship between David and Simón in the *Jesus* novels, David Attwell wrote to me, is “a difficult thing to account for properly in literary-critical mode, but it’s painfully there.”

4. Sideshow: Gary Saul Morson, *Narrative and Freedom: The Shadow of Time*. Yale UP, 1994: 118. In a specifically literary nonfiction context: Wendy Bishop, “Suddenly Sexy: Creative Nonfiction Rear-Ends Composition.” *College English*, 65.3 (Jan. 2003): 272.





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Hence the need at moments to step outside the “stern discipline” of lit-crit mode. Alternative stances include positionality, and affect. I am trying to establish a certain “affective kinship” here, a claim perhaps all the more difficult to account for properly, given Coetzee’s reticence on personal matters. But I follow Coetzee’s lead here, in his claim that “all writing is autobiographical” (“Interview” 17) and Attwell’s précis of “how the self is written into the work, and then written out, leaving its imprint as a *shadowy presence*” (3, emphasis added). My claims about the “side-shadow” of the son draw both on literary criticism, and on my own variant of literary nonfiction in which both “critic” and “author” share a somewhat similar affective matrix.

I had read *Waiting for the Barbarians*, *In the Heart of the Country*, and *Disgrace* in 2011 while in Tampa. In late 2016, I made my way through the rest of his fiction, simultaneously reading Attwell’s 2015 study and Kannemeyer’s biography. Coetzee’s troubled experience as a one-time single father to Nicolas—like not being able to roust him from bed in the morning—found direct or mediated expression in *Petersburg*. But Attwell’s book ends with only a brief mention of *The Childhood of Jesus*. As I read this, and *The Schooldays of Jesus*, it became ever clearer that in Simón’s dialogues with the sometimes obdurate boy David, Coetzee is returning to some unfinished business—the residue of the short troubled life and premature death of his only son, Nicolas.

Philosopher Rai Gaita came to read *The Childhood of Jesus* with a sense of “trust” in Coetzee. After re-reading his other work, he came to a recognition of “how much I trusted him.” Asked just what this trust involved, Gaita responded that he trusted his “seriousness” (Koval). As I understand this, Coetzee had built up this trust through a body of work which challenged readers.

My own level of “trust in Coetzee” has been earned by his honesty, and his representation of the raw emotions often involved in the fathering process.



First Impressions

My first impressions of *The Childhood of Jesus* were not at all “befuddled,” as had been the response of some reviewers. Rather, I had the (widely shared) impression that this was a return to form, and that Coetzee had established an allegorical tone similar to *Waiting for the Barbarians*, which was my favorite of his novels. The first eight chapters captured my sympathies and my interest on three levels. First, the repeated assertions by Simón—“Not my grandson, not my son” (2, 28, 53, 74, 84, 124)—begin immediately, and are sustained throughout the novel, indicating a focus on non-traditional forms of family or kinship. When a female friend, Ana, describes Simón as a *padrino*, he explains that this is “someone who acts as your father when for some reason your father cannot be there.” But to David, he resists defining their relationship: “There isn’t a proper word for what I am to you” (33). Second, the related announcement that “We are here to find your mother” establishes the novel’s quest during and after their migration to Novilla (17, 21, 74, 95). This seems innocent at first, but soon the fixation on finding a mother-substitute signals dystopian results. Third, the theme of immigrants to this allegorical land having “washed themselves clean of old ties” (20, 26, 80, 97) is also introduced early, and through repetition and variation, serves as a narrative motor. One thing the residents seem to have been washed clean of is sexual desire, which for Simón remains something far more present than the “shadow of a memory.”

The combination of these themes—the quest for a mother, denying fatherhood, and the need for sexual companionship—sets up the dynamics of Chapter 8. After the father-son dyad is assigned an apartment in the East Village, Simón befriends Elena, whose son Fidel has become David’s closest playmate. Elena is an intelligent, no-nonsense young woman whose feeling of “goodwill” rather than desire causes Simón to self-reflect: “how much longer before he will emerge as a new, perfected man?” (57).

In Chapter 8 Elena agrees to “do the business of sex” (60). Some humor is introduced: Simón is rather disappointed by her lack of “sexual feeling for him,” but “he likes to think of his lovemaking as a patient and prolonged act of resuscitation” (61). He uses the Spanish verb *descongelar* when she says matter-of-factly “we can do it now.” Thereafter she sometimes teases him: “If you like, you can have another go at thawing me” (61).



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The foursome is comfortable together, and soon Simón proposes marriage. A practical woman, Elena readily accepts. There grows a certain mutual respect between them. Elena counsels him when he expresses frustration that things “do not have their due weight here” (64)—the music, their lovemaking, etc. One peaceful afternoon, as they lie in bed talking, as ordinary couples do, Simón puts into words the difference that separates him from Elena and others he has met in Novilla. The core idea here is the persistence of *shadows*:

I suffer from [...] the shadows of memories. I know we are all supposed to be washed clean by the passage here [...] But the shadows linger nevertheless. That is what I suffer from. Except that I don't use the word *suffer*. I hold onto them, those shadows. (65)

One can hear in these words—a painful embrace of shadows—both character and author. We know that Coetzee left South Africa, which twisted him, but also forged his greatness as a writer. As an Australian citizen, he found a measure of happiness. The word “anodyne” which Simón uses to describe Novilla may convey something of what Coetzee feels about life in Adelaide, compared with the turbulence in South Africa. Then there is the shadow of his son Nicolas, still demanding that the father revisit the meaning of the son's rebellions, failures, and tragic end. The character Simón, however, also voices something of the disjunctions of the age of transmigration. “We modern readers also live ‘exiled’ from the old world,” as Robert Pippin remarks. “We have no living, vital memory of what it must have been like to live in such a world, and so we have also, in a sense, been washed clean” (Pippin 151).

One can also apply this perspective to the digital age. As an educator I see students fixated on their cell phones, and to some degree “washed clean” of traditional notions of community, and rootedness in history. I too cling to the shadows of a former existence of a lived community, the feel, as Simón puts it, “of residence in a body with a past, a body soaked in its past” (143).





The moment at the end of Chapter 8, when the boys rush in (the sons of new lovers Elena and Simón), sweaty, hungry, and happy, reminds me a bit of moments of contentment between the lovers in Orwell's *1984*. As a reader, I want this relationship to grow, the marriage to be effected. I want to see a continuation of the tender father-son dialogues "between a curious child and a conscientious father figure who never wants to lose his patience" (Charles). And I wish to see the boys to grow as friends. David clearly needs this. There have been hints of his manias, his sense of having a secret name or identity, his fear that he may "fall into a crack" (35). But one can see that in this non-traditional family structure, the boy would probably grow up more or less normally, free of shadows.

In the next chapter, Simón throws this domestic balance away, against the boy's wishes (76), because of Simón's fixation on the idea that fathers *do not matter*. This is a central puzzle of the narrative: a sonless father dedicates his whole self to the welfare and betterment of a fatherless son, and yet from the beginning seems fixated on the idea that "fathers are rather dispensable in a family," and that only mothers matter in the psychological well-being of a son (Pippin 145). This may be partially due to Simón being older than most fathers of boys David's age, but on a deeper level, he seems to be ventriloquizing more profound socio-cultural complexes about the inadequacies of fathers.

After Elena learns that Simón has handed David over Inés—a complete stranger who Simón irrationally decides is David's mother—she is dismayed: "I think you have made a mistake," (86) Elena warns Simón. Soon David is perpetually sucking his thumb, being dressed up in frilly clothes, and carted around in a stroller. Simón senses the truth: "But what if the mother is not a good mother? What if Elena is right?" (91). As the situation deteriorates, Simón admits: "Inés is not a particularly good mother" (105). Elena bluntly tells him that he has "projected some private obsession" onto a pampered thirty-year-old virgin who is unsuited for motherhood. Simón has a complex, she tells him: his supposed "sacred intuition [...] comes from inside you. It has its origin in a past that you have forgotten" (106). One of Simón's shadows has returned, unrecognized, and the return of this repressed shadow will have tragic results.





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Dispensable Fathers

Coetzee's exploration of fatherhood through personal narratives "seeking to become impersonal" in his post-*Barbarians* fiction resonated with me. The *Jesus* books continued, in senior years, a struggle to understand fatherhood explored not only in *The Master of Petersburg* but also in *Disgrace*. In the latter, David Lurie says to his daughter Lucy: "Being a father [...] I can't help feeling that, by comparison with being a mother, being a father is a rather abstract business" (Tajiri 63). That seemingly skewed take on fatherhood was one of several dynamics in both *Jesus* novels that troubled me.

On a first reading of *The Childhood of Jesus*, the three principal characters often irritated me. Simón is wise and patient, but his blind faith in an abstract mother became maddening. As Elena quickly surmises, Inés is "like a little girl with a doll—an unusually jealous and selfish little girl who won't let anyone else touch her toy" (104). As for David, he "constantly disputes obvious facts" and becomes "noncompliant, disruptive, disrespectful, and often simply bizarre" (Pippin 148, 147). But on a second reading, my sympathies with Simón grew. I saw that David's worst behavior was a result of the unhealthy relationship with Inés. Still, the narrative's move in an increasingly bizarre and finally tragic direction was rooted in the father's "issues" about his own unimportance, and the sacred rights of a "projected," rather than actual, mother.

What may Coetzee be suggesting about Simón's "fixation"? We know that unconscious complexes, as well as cultures, are revealed through repeating patterns (Geertz 10, 37, 46). There must be both psychological and cultural dimensions to the dogma that Simón repeats, with manic insistence, about the dispensable nature of fathers, and the unquestionable priority of mothers. Let us trace some of those patterns in *The Childhood of Jesus*. Then I will pull back to a broader focus, and look at the results of this matrix in the sequel, *The Schooldays of Jesus*.

From the beginning Simón tries to define his role in the narrowest way possible. He resists Ana's description of him as a godfather: "I am simply helping him to be reunited with his mother" (28). The repeated denials of kinship take on the character of a script. Upon first meeting Elena, he corrects her: "Actually, David is not my son. I don't have a son" (53). When he first talks to Inés, he begins: "You don't know me, I am of no





importance. I come on behalf of someone else, bearing a proposal” (73). When Inés refers to “your son,” he declares: “In fact I am not his father [...] I am a guardian of sorts. Temporarily” (74). The qualifier *temporarily* seems out of character with the love he feels for David, which is clear to all observers. When Inés visits Simón the next day with her brother Diego, Simón’s self-abasement goes up a notch: “Who I am doesn’t matter. I am not important. I am a kind of manservant” (80).

When Simón narrates to Elena his *conviction* that Inés is the boy’s mother, Elena notes that “your son” has been missing his music lessons. Like Peter denying that he knows his Master, Simón recites his lines: “And once again, he is not my son, I am not his father” (84). He repeats the same denial to Álvaro, the foreman at the ship where Simón works as a stevedore: “But in any case I am not David’s father. His mother is the mother but I am not the father” (124). Neither Álvaro nor Elena buy this line for a minute: both observe that he is a wonderful, caring father.

Simón never offers a satisfactory answer, because he is speaking out of an unconscious complex. As he blurts out to Inés: “The boy is without mother. What that means I cannot explain to you because I cannot explain it to myself.” He pleads: “please take it on faith” (75). This faith which cannot be explained continues to surface. When Inés visits him, Simón argues that it “stands to reason” (!) that “to lead a normal life he needs a mother, needs to be born to a mother.” He again expresses a *conviction* without reason: “Some hand must have been guiding us [...] Some unseen hand” (79).

In contrast to the incommunicable nature of his self-abnegation, Simón can be articulate when explaining his theory of the rights of mothers. To Álvaro, he argues for “[t]he rights of the child as bearer of the future,” and makes the case that these rights are entirely invested in the mother. “Blood is thicker than water. A child belongs with his mother [...] By comparison, my claims are [...] artificial” (95). Despite all the evidence he hears to the contrary, Simón’s self-erasure is final: “I don’t have the right to choose. I have no rights in this matter” (125).

Elena, Álvaro, and in the beginning, his quasi-son David, all express esteem for Simón’s fathering skills. It is his fatherly love that sparks Elena’s harsh judgment: “in my opinion you are out of your mind, handing over your child to a stranger who for all you know has a dubious past” (97).





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She has no doubts about who is best for David: “You were a better father to him than she is a mother” (104). Álvaro, who has seen the man and boy together many times, points to a higher truth: “You love him. He loves you. That isn’t artificial. It’s the law that is artificial. He should be with you. He needs you” (95). Later Álvaro observes: “he trusts you utterly. He loves you. And you love him. So why give him away? Why cut yourself off from him?” (125).

The answer is rooted in the gendered dogma which Simón adopts as a blind faith. It shadows the whole of his relationship with his son. He adopts the self-marginalizing faith, instead of the child. He needs the child perhaps even more than the child needs him, he admits to Álvaro (95), but he needs the dogmatic faith of dispensable fathers even more. He is willing to sacrifice the child’s well-being, and his own emotional health, to that faith.

To be sure, Simón is wracked by self-doubt: when David makes it clear that he wants to “live here, with you,” Simón strokes his hair until he sleeps, and asks himself: “Does he have it in him to be both father and mother to the child, to bring him up in the ways of goodness while all the time holding down a job at the docks?” (76). The next day, when Simón pronounces to Inés that “I give up all claim to him,” he acknowledges that the boy “has a claim on me, but that is a different matter” (82). It is apparently an inferior matter, entirely subjugated to his sense of a duty to cede to the superior rights of an imagined, projected mother. When his own son tells Simón “I don’t want you to go” and “I want you to stay here,” the not-father can only recite a legalistic, self-fulfilling prophecy: “I can’t be part of that family” (82).

Simón is not blind to the truth of “the new dispensation.” After seeing David at the apartment he has abandoned to Inés, he asks himself: “Has it been a calamitous mistake to hand him over to this woman?” (89). Watching the boy suck his thumb and cling to his mother, the answer is clear: “More and more he is convinced that something is wrong” (90). He foresees a dystopian outcome: “The child will learn to look on him as an enemy, the enemy of their mother-child bliss” (90). But although he recognizes that Elena and Álvaro are right, he cannot abandon his faith. His faith calls on him to proclaim the superiority of “the mother,” beyond





the shadow of a doubt. Evidence to the contrary has to be swallowed, deflected, defeated by faith. The dogma that Simón recites turns out to be the same sort of ideological self-justification long made by hit-and-run fathers, i.e., those who breed and leave: “Once the idea has been transmitted, the father is dispensable” (104).

And so it goes. Simón continues to recite a script that writes him out of the script. “I was made to be an uncle, not a father” (188), he says to Elena. He uses this as an excuse for being unable to intervene when David falls under the spell of a bad man, Daga, who gives the boy “firewater,” carries a knife, and shows him pictures of girls. This pattern will continue in *The Schooldays of Jesus*.

But the die has been cast much earlier. Inés had refused to let Simón see the boy, and when Álvaro finally arranges visitation, Simón discovers that David has been warped by Inés’ adoration: “There is a new note in the boy’s voice, a note of challenge that he does not like. It is going to his head, all this praise” (132). As Inés cedes all authority to the boy, he becomes ever more stubborn and headstrong. “Not a day passes without an argument, without raised voices and stamped feet” (168).

This narrative sounded all too familiar to me. After my son was classified as a “Special Student,” when he went to live with his mother the following year, she used that “specialness” as a badge of honor and exculpation. “Special” became an entitlement that warped my son’s social skills and his ability to listen to instruction from adults. Both his mother and his sister treated him as a genius. Sure enough, Samuel internalized that concept, and exhibited some of the behavior that Coetzee shows with David in *The Childhood of Jesus*.

Having seen this pattern in my own fractured family, when I read it in Coetzee’s text, the question arises: What is the authorial intent? Is Coetzee interrogating his earlier doubts as a father? Kannemeyer writes that John Coetzee’s daughter Gisela, who was his favorite, thought that her father “was not really cut out to be a parent” (394). This biography records instances in which, “[a]s a father, John Coetzee shied away from assuming a position of authority” (322). He was unwilling or unable to apply any discipline when guests saw his son Nicolas out of control.





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But at this remove one must assume that Coetzee is also interrogating the marginalization of fathers in a larger sense—in literature, in society, in law. What is the source of that matrix? Who writes, and who re-inscribes, the script? After all, Coetzee allows fierce criticisms of Simón by his friends, or more gentle rejoinders that the *de facto* father-son relationship is much more “natural” than whatever the law, or custom, might “artificially” dictate (95, 124).

The Childhood of Jesus, Yoshiki Tajiri suggests, “is a story of Simón who becomes a ‘true’ father while continuing to avoid being a ‘real’ father. In the end he serves as a loving and caring father for David” (83). There is some truth to this distinction between “true” versus “real” (i.e. biological) fathers. But as the continuation of this narrative arc into *The Schooldays of Jesus* shows, once the father cedes authority to the mother, and the mother allows for no discipline or structure to challenge the *specialness* of her child, dystopian outcomes seem inevitable.

Quixotic Dimensions of the Father-Son Relationship

Although a sustained engagement with *The Schooldays of Jesus* is beyond my scope, I nevertheless want to look at two dynamics that began in the first *Jesus* which Coetzee pursues to tragic conclusions in the sequel. First, Simón and David often read a children’s illustrated version of *Don Quixote* together. But while Simón feels compelled to play Sancho Panza to David’s Quixote, David is increasingly dissatisfied with his “father’s” answers, and then becomes contemptuous. David is not interested in rational explanations. He wants to fight giants. He wants to perform feats of magic. He wants to live beyond the rules—whether of numbers or of linguistics. He wants people to understand that he has “special powers” and that these powers of vision make him an exception to any role which adults would expect of him.

The second dynamic is that David demonstrates a pattern of attraction to “bad men,” men who are willing to defy conventions, even engage in criminal behavior. David begins to show a particular preoccupation with the themes of sex and legitimacy. His attraction to males who are “negative role models” eventually produces tragic results. After David begins to tune





out Simón and to seek out other male figures who in two cases are sexual predators, Simón is forced to recognize his failure as a father figure, in contrast to the “passionate” and lawless models. Simón eventually seeks to “become a different person,” which includes taking a writing class and a dance lesson. By the end of *Schooldays*, he has glimpsed two co-existing truths: that David is “excessively indulged” (256), but also, that his son’s dance is touched by genius. And so although “David thinks I am unteachable, past redemption” (258), by the novel’s end Simón has come to have faith in his son, so to speak. He is willing to follow the indulged son’s lead, and even seems to have glimpsed something of his son’s Quixotic passion.

This “special child’s” self-conception seems primarily to originate with Simón’s willing erasure of his fatherly authority. But what are we to make of the “strange spectacle” in the first *Jesus*, when Simón and Diego return from a confrontation and discover that Inés, in her first moment alone with David, is “straddling the boy” on the bed, showing her thighs, while “her fingers drift down his chest to his belt buckle” (81). No matter how much the reader reasons that Inés is acting innocently, the fact that she “scrambles off the bed, her face flushed” is warning enough. Inés is on one level “turning him into a baby,” as Elena surmises (106), but this sort of babying cannot be “the nature of things” as Simón wants to believe (86). The pampering and infantilization seem to help produce David’s dictatorial and quasi-messianic tendencies. David’s rejection of his own father-substitute is part and parcel of his seeming contempt for almost all male authority figures, especially teachers. The boy disrespects and often infuriates a series of teachers. One result, being expelled from school, results in the fugitive flight from Novilla to Estrella, which is where *Schooldays* begins.

A pivotal scene early in *The Schooldays of Jesus* occurs within the context of a search for an appropriate school for the boy, who continues to reject and sometimes humiliate tutors or would-be teachers. After Simón has bought an expensive pair of dance slippers for David, they have a characteristic dialogue, in which the boy seems intent on undermining everything Simón says. Discussing the relative value of money, Simón explains how priceless water can be in a desert.





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“Why?”

“Why? Because staying alive is more important than anything else.”

“Why is staying alive more important than anything?” (51)

This response produces a breaking point, and prefigures David’s attraction to lawless men who are not afraid of violence, or death. Simón shifts gears.

He is about to answer, about to produce the correct, patient, educative words, when something wells up inside him. Anger? No. Irritation? No: more than that. Despair? Perhaps: despair in one of its minor forms. Why? Because he would like to believe he is guiding the child through the maze of the moral life when, correctly, patiently, he answers his unceasing *Why* questions. But where is there any evidence that the child absorbs his guidance or even hears what he says? (51)

Something snaps in Simón, producing a response which must be something like what Coetzee had pronounced to his son on occasion, and certainly sounds similar to exchanges I have had with my own son. The “breakage” is evident because Simón stops on a busy sidewalk, and speaks from his wounded heart:

Think of it this way [...] We are tramping through the desert, you and Inés and I. You tell me you are thirsty and I offer you a glass of water. Instead of drinking the water you pour it out in the sand. You say you thirst for answers: *Why this? Why that?* I, because I am patient, because I love you, offer you an answer each time, which you pour away in the sand. Today, at last, I am tired of offering you water. Why is staying alive important? If life does not seem important to you, so be it. (51)

This produces the following response from David: “You say you love me but you don’t love me. You just pretend.”





Thereafter David enters a dance academy where teachers tell him that he is special, has genius within him. A key theme of this novel is that Simón, having been displaced in his son's heart, begins a sort of Quixotic quest in which he seeks to re-write his own script. At one point he muses: "Perhaps that is the kind of father he should become: idle, selfish, and dangerous. Perhaps the boy will respect him then" (104).

David seems, from the father's point of view, to seek love "in the wrong places." Early in *Schooldays*, David demonstrates a preoccupation with sex and legitimacy. When a young girl named Maite at a farm where they work temporarily asks David to show her his penis, he reasons that he is an orphan, because "you and Inés are not my real parents" (17). Simón can only offer empty words, that "in Inés you have the best mother in the world" (19). But the boy is thinking about parenting in a completely different way, and wonders if he were to impregnate Maite, would their baby be an orphan? This scene ends with Simón musing, prophetically: "Passions have a life of their own" (21).

David falls under the spell of Dmitri, who shows the boys at the dance school pictures of naked women and eventually murders Ana Magdalena, the beautiful dance teacher with whom both David and Simón are smitten. After the murder, during the trial, Simón even seems to see Dmitri, whom he loathes, as something of a model for passionate feeling, because it is this passion that has attracted David, his de facto son.

The questions of passion, and true love, and the underlying dynamic of sexuality, become central to a tug of war between father and son. David's model of love is Dmitri's loudly professed, unrestrained, eventually destructive love for the beautiful dance teacher, Ana Magdalena. Simón still tries to be the rational, wise father who teaches morality: "Passion is selfish. Love is unselfish. Inés loves you in an unselfish way. So do I." But David is dismissive: "It's boring being with you" (122). And so passion, or the lack of it, becomes the fault line between David and both of his parent figures. After David discovers Ana's body (Dmitri has strangled her in a "crime of passion") the problematics of passion become quite concrete. Inés believes that "If there were less passion around the world would be a safer place" (131). But Simón knows that Inés knows nothing about passion, and to some degree, he recognizes in the attraction of David to





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Dmitri a sign of a lack of sufficient passion in himself, which he seeks, in Quixotic fashion, to rectify.

At the trial for Dmitri's "*crime passionnel*" (144), when the judge orders a meditative recess to "allow our passions to cool," Simón reflects: "what passion do I feel except a passion of irritation?" (149). Simón takes a writing class—basic composition—with Dmitri's voice in his head. Dissatisfied with his rational, expository style, he internalizes Dmitri's criticisms: "Dmitri would call that passionless writing, as he would call me a passionless man. A man of passion, Dmitri would say, pours himself out without paragraphing" (176).

The son David is of course at the root of all the ageing father's self-doubts and contortions: Simón is coming to agree that "a coldly rational person is not the best guide for a boy who is impulsive and passionate by nature" (176). Having come to the conclusion that he is "deficient in passion" (194), Simón seeks to follow his son's Quixotic lead.

Conclusion

In closing, it might be worthwhile to return to Coetzee's own words about the limits of reading his works as allegories. This is just as true for his late *Jesus* fictions as it was for *Waiting for the Barbarians*. In an interview with Joanna Scott, Coetzee remarked that "I've always been slightly bemused by the description of me as an allegorist" (Scott 97). Derek Attridge has argued for the interpretive value of resisting "the allegorical reading that the novels seem half to solicit, half to problematize" (35). Attridge points to Coetzee's own remarks to legitimate his argument for the need to sometimes *resist the allegorical impulse*. In his essay "The Novel Today," Coetzee observed that critics have many methods "in the games handbook" with which to interpret stories, and that these "games" have their value. However, reading allegorically, or through one particular literary theory, can also lead to myopia: "You may have missed not just something, you may have missed everything" (4).

Coetzee's *Jesus* fictions are rich in allegorical possibilities. But by bringing the father-son relationship to the center of my analysis, and drawing on my own experience of the Quixotic nature of many father-son



psychodramas, I hope that readers can see more clearly the shadow that Coetzee's son has cast on his writing. Beyond biographical dimensions of this lingering shadow, the manner in which Coetzee has transmuted this experience into a literary meditation on father-son relationships has broader relevance, especially regarding the increasingly common experience of "senior fathering."

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Biography

At the University of Puerto Rico-Mayagüez, Gregory Stephens teaches Creative Writing, and grad seminars in Cultural Studies, and Literary Nonfiction. He is the author of *On Racial Frontiers: The New Culture of Frederick Douglass, Ralph Ellison, and Bob Marley* (Cambridge UP, 1999). He is currently working on a book about his experiences in Saudi Arabia 2013-2014.