

Reader Response and the Co-construction of Meaning in J. M. Coetzee's *Foe*

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Abstract: This essay looks into some of the underexplored aspects of J. M. Coetzee's seminal novel *Foe* (1986), which has often been analyzed from a feminist or postcolonial perspective. While these critical frameworks have offered some invaluable insights, they have also played down the importance of the minor characters in the novel, which should be an integral part for the construction of meaning on the reader's part. Additionally, this essay addresses the question of coherence with regards to the disparity in style and narration in the first three sections and the last section of the novel, drawing attention to its metafictional features which require the reader to actively participate and respond to the intellectual and philosophical undertakings of this novel. In the end, what can be gained from the novel are more than the criticism of patriarchal and colonial oppression, it is also a reflection upon the traditional form of realism, narrativity, and language itself.

Keywords: J. M. Coetzee; *Foe*; Reader response; Construction of meaning

1. Introduction

In the criticism of J. M. Coetzee's *Foe*, a great amount of scholarship has been devoted to Friday's silence and Susan's writing and much has been yielded from a feminist or postcolonial critical perspective [1]. In addition, the novel's intertextual relationship with Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* and Roxana has been duly noted. From a feminist critical stance, the novel is often read as the silencing of female perspectives by dominant male perspectives and Susan is seen as a story-teller caught in a battle with *Foe*—a patriarchal oppressor—for authorial control. From a postcolonial perspective, Friday is a victim of colonial subjugation by Cruso and Susan and his silence is regarded as a passive silence. But in “Do We of Necessity Become Puppets in a Story?” or *Narrating the World: On Speech, Silence, and Discourse in J. M. Coetzee's Foe*, Lewis MacLeod argues against viewing Susan as a truth-seeking figure who is victimized by an oppressive patriarchal structure [2]. Instead, MacLeod suggests that Susan is a literary practitioner who actively seeks discursive authority through storytelling and is preoccupied with the production and consumption of narrative (5-6). Furthermore, MacLeod challenges any reader to give proof that Friday actually has no tongue, and he makes a convincing argument that Friday's silence may be seen as voluntary. In this essay, MacLeod warns us against accommodating *Foe* to well-established, recognizable critical frameworks at the expense of leaving out textual elements that do not fit into their scope.

My argument takes up MacLeod's suggestion that some of the details in the novel cannot be accommodated into a single critical perspective and therefore focuses on the aspects which remain under discussed by critics, namely,

how the mysterious girl—the other Susan Barton—fits into the novel and how we may make sense of the last section of the novel, especially the identity of its narrator. My argument is also informed by the insights of Derek Wright and Patrick Hayes who support that *Foe* is much more coherent if we read the novel as primarily about the process of fiction writing. It not only draws our attention to the fictionality of the novel but also to the limitations of the traditional form of realism.

2. Ghostly Presence and the Meaning of Existence

Throughout the novel, Susan's authorial control over her own story is progressively undermined by her anxieties about the many unresolvable mysteries in her life and by an increasing self-doubt about her own ontological status. She starts out as a determined albeit unconfident author for two reasons, one practical and the other ethical: she believes that the money she earns from publishing the novel will secure herself an independent life; she asserts that she would rather have a badly written story than have lies told about her [3]. She first dwells on self-authorship when she relates her tale to the captain who suggests that she should sell the story to a bookdealer because it is unique. At first, she declines the idea because she fears that she possesses no art of storytelling. But after the captain mentions hiring a ghostwriter, Susan feels scandalized and her change of attitude is reflected in the last part of section one: “It is I who have disposal of all that Cruso leaves behind, which is the story of his island” (45). In one of Susan's letters to *Foe* in section two, it is revealed that section one is essentially a manuscript of her memoir of

the desert island, set down by Susan herself and intended as raw material for the novel she wants to write and for Foe to modify [4]. It seems that upon completing the memoir, Susan is still very much assured of her authority. But curiously, as she starts to reflect on her writing, she becomes less certain about her authorship as an author and the more she writes (for she continues to write letters to Foe after writing the memoir), the less certain she is about the sense of her identity:

“When I reflect on my story I seem to exist only as the one who came, the one who witnessed, the one who longed to be gone: a being without substance, a ghost beside the true body of Cruso” (51).

Therefore, she entreats Foe, “Return to me the substance I have lost ... For though my story gives the truth, it does not give the substance of the truth” (51). From this point onwards, Susan becomes ever more ghostly and she is faced with a full-blown existential crisis when the girl who claims to be Susan’s daughter appears at her doorstep.

My reading of the relationship between Susan and the girl highlights the constructedness of the characters and the self-reflexivity of the text as a metafiction. I argue that the intrusion of the girl breaks down the barrier between different fictional worlds and raises philosophical questions about the meaning of existence [5]. In *Reading People, Reading Plots*, James Phelan theorizes characters in terms of three types of components of the narrative: the mimetic, the synthetic, and the thematic. The mimetic components enable the

Characters to resemble real persons; the synthetic components reveal the characters to be artificial constructs; the thematic components cast the characters as representative figures in a specific cultural or ideological context of the narrative [6]. Phelan puts forward that the distribution of these different components may vary from narrative to narrative depending on the nature of its genre. For example, most narratives in the realistic tradition are dominated by mimetic components, and postmodern narratives usually put emphasis on the synthetic components. Phelan also emphasizes that while the synthetic component is always present in a fictional work, it may be more or less foregrounded (3). Indeed, whenever we read a piece of work with paratextual clues indicating that it is a novel, we know that we are reading something fictional and that the characters in fiction are artificially constructed. But such knowledge does not prevent us from participating in “the mimetic illusion” (5). In relation to the development of Foe, I argue that the narrative derives a special power from shifting the reader’s attention from the mimetic to the synthetic, to the effect that it leads the reader to question the meaning of existence.

At the beginning of her writing, Susan models her story in the eighteenth-century realist tradition, or what Ian Watt famously terms “formal realism”, a convention that

the real author Daniel Defoe adopted as well [7]. According to Watt, formal realism accepts the premise that the novel is an authentic report of human experience and therefore is obligated to satisfy the readers with details and particulars of a specific time and place (32). Therefore, formal realism calls for the reader to respond to the mimetic component of the narrative, luring the reader to think of characters as possible people inhabited in a world like their own. In Susan’s account, she is insistent on the truth claim of her story. She persists that “If I cannot come forward, as author, and swear to the truth of my tale, what will be the worth of it?” (40). Later she entertains herself by imagining what she would like to be the title of her novel—“The Female Castaway. Being a True Account of a Year Spent on a Desert Island. With Many Strange Circumstances Never Hitherto Related” (67), emphasizing on the truthfulness of her account. Moreover, she knows all too well that what makes her story authentic and unique “resides in a thousand touches” (18)—the numerous details of everyday life which seem of no importance at first glance. This is the reason why she pesters Cruso with endless questions about his past and why she attempts to rationalize the strange behavior of Cruso and Friday.

To some extent, Susan succeeds admirably in her task to present a truthful story of her experience on the island. She not only supplies for the reader vivid details of the natural environment of the island and of their routine lives, she also admits freely what she does not know [8]. There are many mysteries surrounding her relation: how Friday has lost his tongue; why Friday has submitted himself to Cruso; why neither Friday nor Cruso desired her more; the meaning of the terraces; the meaning of Friday’s scattered petals. However, by merely stating plainly what she does know and what she does not know, she has successfully passed down her story in the form of what we can read in the first three sections of Foe. The mimetic illusion of this part of the novel is that we are reading the backstory of how (De) Foe used the source of Susan’s account and reworked it into two separate novels: *Robinson Crusoe* and *Roxana* [9]. Therefore, Coetzee’s Foe gains coherence and unity if we read it as not only a rewrite of *Robinson Crusoe*, but also a rewrite of the writing process of *Robinson Crusoe*.

However, such an attempt to read Foe as a replacement of historical truth with another version of truth is thwarted by the girl who invades Susan’s secluded life in Foe’s residence, which shifts the reader’s attention to the synthetic component of the narrative. In the following, I argue that the girl is a fictional character who has escaped from the story-world of Defoe’s *Roxana* to intrude upon Susan’s story-world in Foe, thus drawing Susan’s (and the reader’s) attention to her own fictionality. The encounter takes place at a time when Susan’s many letters to Foe have reached dead ends and she starts to ponder

whether her story will ever be written down by Foe. At one point, she muses that Foe would think the story is “better without the woman”, better with “only Cruso and Friday” (72). Of course, this points to the actual novel that was written by Daniel Defoe in which Susan is removed, but it also leads Susan to doubt her own existence in relation to writing and storytelling. Susan suspects that it is Foe who sends the girl to her, and that by imposing a lost-then-found daughter on her, he is imposing a larger narrative which she would not tell on her own[10]. The synthetic component of the girl is underlined when Susan questions her ontological status—“What kind of being is she, so serenely blind to the evidence of her senses?” (76)—and when she describes the girl in terms of literary constructs: “Your father is a man named Daniel Defoe”; “You are father-born. You have no mother” (91); the girl is a “creature from another order speaking words you [Foe] made up for her” (133). Eventually, this leads to Susan debating with herself whether she is a substantial being:

“But now all my life grows to be story and there is nothing of my own left to me ... Nothing is left to me but doubt. I am doubt itself. Who is speaking me? Am I a phantom too? To what order do I belong?” (133).

As phantoms and ghosts begin to haunt Susan, it turns out not only she and the girl are ghostly beings, but also Friday, Cruso and Foe: “the townsfolk pay us [Susan and Friday] no more heed than if we were ghosts” (87); “I talk to you as if you [Foe] were beside me, my familiar ghost, my companion” (107). Time and again, the novel calls into question what it means to exist and to be a “substantial being with a substantial history in the world” (131). Despite Susan’s claim that she is “not a story” (131), she cannot help but subscribe to the idea that the meaning of existence is determined by the ability to narrate: “Friday has no command of words and therefore no defense against being re-shaped day by day in conformity with the desires of others”; “What is the truth of Friday?”; “What he is to the world is what I make of him” (121-22). And because Cruso has no story to tell about his past life, Susan secretly wishes that he might not be saved, for he would be a disappointment to a world that “expects stories from its adventurers” (34). Therefore, Susan’s contemplation points to a bleak notion that there is no history or knowledge outside language; what cannot be transcribed into words cannot be known and therefore does not exist. By the end of section three, the synthetic components of the narrative have drowned out the mimetic, and the carefully constructed fictional world of Foe has broken down to “the world of words” (60). In a way, Friday, Cruso and Susan are all embodiments of people who are erased from history because they have kept their silence. In the last section of the novel, I argue that the basic ontological barrier will further break down between

fictionality and reality as real readers are invited to respond to the philosophical investigations of the novel.

3. Breaking Boundaries of Existence

As has been stated above, the first three sections of the novel offer a unity to the narrative which can be read as a literary deconstruction of traditional realism and a critique of narrative construction as a process of selection and exclusion. Towards the end of section three, Foe and Susan start a project to break Friday’s silence by teaching him to write. With Friday seated at Foe’s table writing rows of what looks like the letter o, and with Foe’s instruction to Susan that she must continue to teach him the letter a, the narrative provides a temporary closure and an illusory hope that Friday might eventually succeed in learning to write. However, such a reading is quickly upset by the brief, surrealistic last section of the novel in which every character except Friday and an unidentified narrator appears to be dead. The narrator states that “this is not a place of words ... This is a place where bodies are their own signs” (157). This last section poses a great challenge to the reader with respect to the identity of the first-person narrator. To begin with, I would like to suggest that it cannot be any of the characters that have appeared in the rest of the novel because they are seen by the narrator from outside as characters. Therefore, one way of interpretation is to identify the narrator with a fictional counterpart for the actual author, Coetzee, for the reason that “the mud of Flanders, in which generations of grenadiers now lie dead” (156) alludes to the Grenadier Guards of the British Army, which was first raised in 1656 in the Spanish Netherlands, also known as Flanders.

This interpretation makes sense because the Grenadier Guards’ participation in the Boer War in South Africa, when taken into consideration, would be known by Coetzee who is deeply concerned about the history of South Africa[12]. Without rejecting this possible reading, I will make the case that the unnamed narrator is the implied reader and that the narrator’s exploration of the immediate environment in the narrative represents the reader’s repeated attempts to understand the central enigma of the novel—Friday’s silence. In my view, the novel encourages breaking down the boundaries of different realms of existence and engages the reader in the co-construction of meaning. However, I refrain from suggesting an identification of the narrator with the real reader because they do not exist on the same ontological level. Therefore, to start with, it is necessary to make a distinction between the real reader and the implied reader.

The “implied reader”, or in Phelan’s terms, the “authorial audience”, is the ideal reader who “possesses the requisite knowledge and interpretive skills to respond as the author intended” (1996, 200). In other words, s/he is sensitive enough to recognize all the textual cues and com-

petent enough to understand them in the appropriate way. According to Seymour Chatman's diagram in *Story and Discourse*, the implied reader is a projection of the text and necessarily differs from the real readers (Phelan's "flesh-and-blood reader") who exist outside the world of the text (149-51). If we understand writing-reading as narrative transactions from maker to audience, the implied reader is how the text wants the real reader to react. Of course, the real reader may refuse to participate in the authorial audience, especially when his/her values are in conflict with those of the text, but an imaginary acceptance of its ideological bases is necessary to the comprehension of a complex narrative like Coetzee's. In Phelan's view, entering the authorial audience allows us to reexamine our values and beliefs and explore the ethical dimension of the narrative: "Sometimes our values may be confirmed by those of the text, sometimes they may be challenged, and sometimes they may be ignored or insulted" (1996, 100). Either way, the dialogue we establish with a narrative is a productive one that has the potential of altering our worldviews.

There are several signals in the last section of *Foe* which suggest that the narrator is the implied reader. The most obvious clue is when the narrator opens Friday's mouth to listen to his voice, s/he begins "to hear the faintest faraway roar: as she said, the roar of waves in a seashell" (154). It strongly evokes what Susan says to Foe earlier: "It is for us to descend into the mouth ... It is for us to open Friday's mouth and hear what it holds: silence, perhaps, or a roar, like the roar of a seashell held to the ear" (142). Thus, it is reasonable to assume that the implied reader, having finished reading the previous part of the novel, now takes up Susan's suggestion seriously and literally opens up Friday's mouth. Of course, this could only happen in a fictional and impossible world from which the real reader is excluded, but the real reader is invited to join the imaginary activity as if s/he was there. The sense of participation is enhanced by the use of present tense in this section, a narrative strategy which can be called "simultaneous narration". Quite unlike Susan's narration which reports the events retrospectively, this section tells what the narrator sees and feels as the events unfold. The first sentence in this section goes, "The staircase is dark and mean" (153), which is identical to the first sentence in section three—"The staircase was dark and mean" (113)—apart from the different use of tense. From what we have read, we know that section three takes place in Foe's hiding place. It follows that section four also starts at the same place. The narrator proceeds to do a series of live reporting: "I stumble over a body", "I make out a woman or a girl", "I draw the covers back" (153), etc. In my view, the act resembles a reading process of discovering and making sense of pieces of information in the reader's mind. What the narrator hears from Friday's mouth—the "sounds of the island" (154)—

is a natural conclusion that the implied reader will arrive at after reading the novel: silence may as well be one way of expression while expression may produce silence; Susan's narration is eventually used against her, but Friday's silence resists interpretation and therefore resists description.

Then, after two asterisks, the scene seems to start over again. This time, it does not start inside the house, but outside. The narrator sees a plaque on the wall that writes "Daniel Defoe, Author". I suggest that this is another interpretive act undertaken by the implied reader, embodied in the narrator's revisit to the house. In this scene, we see the narrator "stumble over the body ... of a woman or a girl" again, suggesting it is the same house. The narrator also notices that "the room is darker than before", suggesting it is the same narrator, who has become more perceptive of the space s/he enters and found something which s/he has not observed before—a scar "like a necklace, left by a rope or chain" around Friday's neck and a script inside a dispatch box. Apart from "Dear Mr Foe", the words that appeared on the script in quotation marks—"At last I could row no further"—are an exact copy of Susan's first words on her manuscript in section one. The next words—"With a sigh, making barely a splash, I slip overboard" (155)—are also the same words from Susan's script except they are recast in the present tense and appear without quotation marks. The implication is that by reading the words on the script, the narrator is literally transported from Foe's house to the middle of the sea, which is the fictional world that s/he is reading about. Therefore, the ontological boundary between the implied reader's world and Susan's story-world is broken down, and the real reader's imaginary projection into Foe is presented as a real projection of the narrator into Susan's narrative. This parallel strengthens the connection between the implied reader and the real reader. In the following, I will explain what the narrator discovers in this repeated attempt of reading and the significance of that discovery.

In one of Susan's conversation with Foe towards the end of section three, she blurts out her thoughts about substantiality, asserting that "we are all alive, we are all substantial, we are all in the same world", to which Foe replies, "You have omitted Friday" (152). This contrast indicates that the world in which Susan, Foe and others live is the "world of words" (60), whereas "the home of Friday" is a world where "bodies are their own signs" (157). Therefore, the novel not only constitutes a critique of narrative practice, but also a critique of language: the distorting ramifications of story-telling resides in the nature of language. Language is the expression of our need to define ourselves and to narrate our experience in relation to the world, but Foe challenges the idea that our subject positions are determined by our discursive ability. In the end, Friday appears to be more alive than the oth-

ers because in a way, he is a more substantial being than Susan or Foe: his speechlessness prevents him from being absorbed by a totalizing grand narrative and therefore preserves his idiosyncratic identity.

But there still remains the mystery of Friday's scar, which has hitherto never been mentioned in the narrative. In my view, this scar is left by Susan who, as Derek Wright suggests, becomes a reluctant colonizer and bears the burden of an arbitrary historical role to treat Friday as not himself, but a thing. Initially, on the desert island, Friday has "a bag that hung about his neck" (31) containing the white petals that he scatters over the water. Later, this bag is replaced by another bag containing a deed written by Susan "granting Friday his freedom" (99). Unwittingly, Susan has condemned Friday to be a colonized subject by her gratuitous benevolence. Leaving the island behind, Susan feels it is her responsibility to set Friday free, but the need to be set free alone suggests that Friday is always already colonized, as Foe discerningly points it out to Susan, "The words you have written and hung around his neck say he is set free; but who, looking at Friday, will believe them?" (150). Furthermore, Wright observes that language colonizes people through conventional sign systems passing off as "natural" and "universal" (114). When Susan teaches Friday the word "Africa" using pictures of lions and palm trees, she doubts whether the picture she presents has the same meaning to her as to Friday. Seemingly, Friday is making progress in his writing lesson, but it is indicated in the text that Friday will never learn to write in the way that Susan and Foe write. At the end of section three, even though Susan is convinced that Friday is writing the letter o, we as readers are made aware that we cannot know what Friday writes, for it is ultimately just a "design" (147) which can incorporate limitless meanings. Therefore, Susan's imposition on Friday with her set of language code also cripples Friday and leaves a scar on his body.

Friday's writing lesson warns of the violence that may lie in imposing meaning on what is by nature unknowable, but what is incomprehensible is not necessarily meaningless. As Chris Bongie points out, Friday's scattering of petals is his own form of writing, and Susan is incapable of reading Friday's "flowery script" (271) because it is markedly dissimilar to her own system of writing. If we understand language as a means of communication, what might be added is that the monotonous flute music and

the enchanted dance may also be a form of language and are not meaningless, at least not to Friday.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, through an active interaction between the narrator and the physical space of the novel, the ending educates the readers ethically that we must recognize Friday's silence as a form of language. In the end, none of the mysteries in Susan's narrative is revealed, but that is precisely the point. Foe is a novel that resists interpretation from a single framework and speaks the unspeakable by drawing attention to what is unspeakable.

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