Decay and downfall in JM Coetzee’s *Age of Iron*
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Abstract

Downfall and decay are the two themes which this essay will be focused on, related to both physical and political attributes found in the novel. This essay argues that in the novel *Age of Iron* J.M Coetzee uses imagery of decay and downfall and its main protagonist Mrs Curren as its vehicle, to represent the social and political status of South Africa during the imminent downfall of Apartheid during the late 20th century.
Introduction

White writing is writing about the self and its relationship to Africa; it is writing in search of a language in which the self and Africa can enter into a fulfilled, reciprocal relationship. (David Atwell 14-15)

In the novel Age of Iron, by J.M Coetzee, first published in 1990, we follow the life of Mrs Curren, an old professor, dying of cancer, through a letter to her daughter in America. Coetzee, who himself is a native South African, gives Mrs Curren a chance to come on good terms with her daughter, the dark history and the present state of South-Africa that she has been impervious to for so long.

This essay is based upon a close reading of Age of Iron and how certain events experienced by Mrs Curren change her perspective of South Africa. Since the novel is constructed as an epistolary novel it has no omniscient narrator; all depictions and thoughts are those of Mrs Curren. There are passages that contain a use of similes, symbolism and several metaphors as a way to express current events in the life of the main protagonist. One common theme which follows as a main thread, both through the novel and this essay, is the theme of decay. How are the narrative uses of symbolism and figurative language such as Mrs Curren’s car, cancer and the political situation in South Africa used in relation to decay and downfall and what do they have in common?

Metaphors and symbolism are not definitive and can be interpreted in different ways. It is therefore important to sort out what they may imply in this novel and how figurative language can be used in general and how in this case it deals with the death of Mrs Curren and the dawn of the end of Apartheid. The narrative of the main protagonist Mrs Curren is analysed to
answer the question of how certain events, objects and passages describe decay and downfall, both in the bodily functions of Mrs Curren and in the country in which she lives.

The analysis is based on identifying figurative language and using Climax-Crisis-Compilation, a way to analyse how the plot progresses, to identify the point of peak interest and demonstrate how certain events bear significance for the main ideas of the novel, in this case the life of Mrs Curren’s declining condition and perception, and of course the closer analysis of the different passages crucial to back up my argument and thesis statement. As stated, *Age of Iron* does not just contain a single theme, but several that follow like main threads throughout the novel, such as mother and daughter relationship, examination and inquiry of one’s self, oppression by government (Apartheid) and the disease both found in Mrs Curren and in the decay of the country. One of the overarching themes found in *Age of Iron*, and one that this essay focuses on, is that of Mrs Curren’s questioning of her own beliefs and perception of South Africa. Fully aware of her own history and the ill-doings of her white ancestors and their oppression, she sets off on a journey where everything is questioned.

Stefan Helgesson, a Swedish author who both in fiction and reality, deals with problems of politics and history in his writing, discusses a problem that often occurs when you are to analyse fictive historical works of literature;

> History and writing are both extremely porous terms that call for elaboration. As Michael Green has shown, ‘history’ has been taken to mean a number of things by South African writers, in much the same way as the academic understanding of the term has shifted. (Helgesson 18)
The purpose of analysing history in *Age of Iron* is however not to offer any truth, but to elaborate what happened in South-Africa during the downfall of Apartheid and the events in the novel and the relation between them. Derek Attridge deals with the issue of Mrs Curren and *Age of Iron* in his book *J.M Coetzee and the ethics of reading*, where he analyses the narrative thread and how the personal struggle of Mrs Curren shapes the novel:

The story of Mrs. Curren, her absent daughter, and Mr Vercueil has its roots, as we have seen, in the politics of modern South Africa, but in itself, it does not deal directly with the imperatives of the political. (Attridge 105)

Consequently the reader is given the possibility to form his/her own opinion, free from any fingers pointing towards wrong or right, making the novel equivocal, leading to unfolded interpretations of certain instances and imagery.

To be able to explain and analyse certain passages and make use of figurative language a small list describing common terms such as Allegory, Metonymy, Simile, Symbolism and Metaphors will follow below.

Allegories often bear the resemblance of a fable or fairytale, where the message to be conveyed is replaced with a metaphor. The content of the story is to be interpreted to fit the actual event. A moral dilemma, fables of animals or the Bible are good examples of when allegories are being used.

George Yule, a linguist, described the word metonymy as “A word used in place of another with which it is closely connected in everyday experience” (Yule 245). If we use the example
“head of a company”, the head refers to the part in control, the brain and leader of the company, which is seen as a body, as the head of a human being is the one in control of your body. “Metonymy is a conceptual projection whereby one experiential domain (the target) is partially understood in terms of another experiential domain (the source) included in the same common experiential domain” (Antonio Barcelona 4). We can also use the representative-symbol or content-container relationship whereby “the white house” refers to the president, since that is his workplace and when you “fill up the car” you put gas in your tank.

The use of simile is based upon comparing two objects, often very different, with another, figuratively that is. The rule is that (in English) you use “as” or “like”, for an example, being dumb as wood or dirty like a pig, making use of the stereotypes and clichés we have in our own culture. It is important to know that they are just figures of speech and are therefore often very hard to translate.

In literature, whether fact or fiction, certain symbols are used to describe an event or an argument. This literary device has been used for a long time, dating back as far as the Bible and the creation of earth. Many of the symbols that authors use are the biblical ones, such as the snake representing sin and Satan, light representing revelation and truth.

“Metaphor is the cognitive mechanism whereby one experiential domain is partially mapped i.e projected, onto a different experiential domain, so the second domain is partially understood in terms of the first one” (Barcelona 3). In contrast to the simile, where the comparison is more explicit, the metaphor merely implies something. To use the same example as we did in the simile and instead apply a metaphor to the phrase, it would be; you are a pig. We do not of course say that the person is an actual pig with hooves and tail. We
refer to him being a pig because he has features and attributes that we associate with a pig, such as being filthy and having bad manners. In *Language, Society and Power* the authors explains that a metaphor can be used to give “human characteristics to inanimate objects and abstract ideas” (46). Metaphors can also be used to explain a problematic and complex issue in a more simple way, which can enable people to comprehend the problem or issue with help of their personal experience and put it into context in their everyday life.

I argue that the degradation of Mrs Curren’s perception and body work as symbols of the decay of South Africa during the downfall of Apartheid. Many critics, both in fact and through fiction, have analysed *Age of Iron* but it is not their views and opinions that are the basis of my analysis. They will merely be used to support my argument and claims. The analysis of the novel will first and foremost deal with the letter and Mrs Curren’s cancer, the central part which the novel revolves around, Mrs Curren’s perspective on South Africa and how her perception of the same becomes shattered.
The letter and cancer

When Mrs Curren receives the bad news of her terminal cancer she decides to put together the series of letters which at her death shall be posted to her daughter in the US. The novel is centred round this letter that Mrs Curren continuously writes to her daughter. The letter is of great importance, both for the main protagonist and the build-up of the story, since most of the deep thoughts that the main protagonist shares with us are those of the monologue in the letter. A distinction between Mrs Curren’s own thoughts and those that she writes in the letter is hard to find. The dialogue with other characters in the novel and different scenes seems to melt together as if the whole novel was a coherent letter itself. Derek Attridge discusses some of the problematic issues with one-sidedness in his *Ethics of Reading*:

> The letter will thus function more like literature than most letters, since the work of literature, too, casts itself off from its author and renders interrogation problematic, something that Coetzee, when questioned about his fiction, frequently insists upon. (Attridge 96)

It is, as Attridge states, difficult to make a distinct analysis of what might be implied in the text, not only because of the epistolary format, but more because the main protagonist Mrs Curren is almost solely challenged by herself and her own thoughts. Consequently, it is her own demons and how she relates to events taking place that the reader follows throughout the novel:

> When I write about him I write about myself! When I write about his dog I write about myself: when I write about the house I write about myself. Man, house, dog; no matter what the word, through it I stretch out to you. (Coetzee 9)
The use of symbolism could not be more evident as she states that everything is about “myself”. Everything is related to everything else as if it melts together becoming more of a story about life itself rather than of a haggard old lady. At one time there is a burglary in Mrs Curren’s home. She describes the intrusion in her house “like rape” (Coetzee 169). Because of the use of a simile to describe this event the readers are not given the chance to perceive and draw conclusions of what has happened by themselves. By means of this simile, her house, filled with all her personal belongings, material objects and memories, appears as an extension of her body. The violation of her person and property, her integrity, makes her feel dirty, and after the discovery of this event she says she needs to take a bath. Nevertheless the letter’s direction is clear, an initial reason of reaching out to someone long lost, but even if Mrs Curren wants to rekindle her lost relationship with her daughter it is her own past and that of South Africa she actually processes in her letter.

Mrs Curren claims that the reason why she decided to write the letter to her daughter is because “she misses her” (Coetzee 6), especially after the news of her terminal cancer and that death now is imminent. However, Mrs Curren, who has mentioned that she had fallen sick, has not told her daughter about the severity of her condition, maybe to spare her daughter from any regrets or guilt towards her own mother; “I tell you this story not so that you will feel for me but so that you will learn how things are” (Coetzee 103). This quote would point to the fact that Mrs Curren actually wants to tell a relevant and truthful story of what has happened, as if her daughter has been ignorant and blind to the country’s 100 year old history, more than to just complain and seek compassion.

Even if there is a dark history of white oppression, which Mrs Curren describes; “A crime was committed long ago. How long ago? I do not know. But longer ago than 1916, certainly. So
long ago that it was born into it. It is part of my inheritance. It is part of me, I am part of it” (Coetzee 164), there are very few other white characters present in the novel, singling out Mrs Curren as the sole defender and inquirer, questioning what once was and what it now has become. With the help of a simile she exclaims “life in this country is so much like life aboard a sinking ship” (Coetzee 22). South Africa is just, as Mrs Curren describes it, on the verge of a collapse, her daughter got out while she could. Richard Wilson who has written a great deal on the subject of Apartheid and its effect on South Africa, speaks about what was going on during the late 1980’s, talking about a “stalemate” where the opposing fronts were unable to defeat each other, casualties rose and antagonism grew stronger between black and white (Wilson 5). If there ever would be something to build upon after a victory they knew that they had to reach an agreement, trying to steer the ship in the right direction so to speak.

Novels are structured differently and therefore pose different problems for the reader and the author. Derek Attridge discusses a problem with the epistolary approach, when the sole reason and function is to convey a message to the receiver. Whether the message be love, hate or consolidation, it is difficult to reach out when its essence, in the case of Mrs Curren is absence (Attridge 91). There is no way for Mrs Curren to receive any response to or effect of her writing. If Mrs Curren wants her daughter's love and affection why not send her thoughts in several letters instead of a single one sent after her death, to at least give her daughter a chance to become reconciled with her mother and to respond? Would we then receive a more variegated picture of South Africa than that of Mrs Curren? Mrs Curren confesses her guilt and years of neglect when having received the news of the terminal and malignant cancer; “Loving you, loving life, to forgive the living and take my leave without bitterness. To embrace death as my own, mine alone” (Coetzee 6), as if to say that she wants no pity, writing
the letter for herself, for she can not possibly know that it will reach its addressee. So whoever reads her testament of truth it has filled its function of conveying a message.

If we were to use the idea of displacement from the psychoanalytic critic Jacques Lacan, Mrs Curren’s feelings towards her daughter may very well be seen as displacement, a content container relationship as Peter Barry describes it (Barry 112), for her love to South Africa. The idea of displacement works as an unconscious force in the mind where emotions for a certain object, so to speak, are transferred to a substitute that is easier to comprehend and accept. Mrs Curren’s confession to her daughter, once a citizen of South Africa, could, as metonymy, actually be her attempt at reconciliation with South Africa itself.

The letter may at first be meant to deliver a certain feeling or idea. However, as the novel progresses Mrs Curren’s personality and opinion shifts. Nevertheless she is aware of what might have gone wrong in her storytelling. The confessions of her heart and the country she lives in, was her plan “This was never meant to be the story of a body, but the soul it houses” (Coetzee 185). As if she was not to speak of South Africa itself but of the people in it, merely explaining its functions and what makes it breathe, or not her own body and its fragile state, but her mind and soul. She even states herself, when previously invited by her daughter to come and live with her in USA; “would I truly escape South Africa by running to you?” (Coetzee 129), once more pointing to the fact that a country is never more than a land built of stones and dirt, it is its inner self that gives it life. So even if she moves to a different country, her past and mind, closely tied to South Africa, would follow.

Upon giving the verdict of terminal cancer the doctor says to Mrs Curren “We must face the truth” (Coetzee 26). Mrs Curren is well aware, even the doctor knows, that she is alone in the
struggle, which would be yet another reason for Mrs Curren to plead to her daughter, an embodiment of South Africa, for forgiveness and understanding. Sharing the burden, her burden of guilt, a disease that she refuses to put on others, she does not want to be pitied. Even if the letter itself is directed to her daughter, it bears the resemblance of a plea to South Africa. Derek Attridge speaks of a “personal struggle” that leads to Mrs Curren taking up the pen, when the pressure of history is boiling up to the surface, the very reason why her daughter left the country, and the insight one gets when facing death (Attridge 93). It is possible that the haze lightens when you are about to pass on to eternity. In this case the issue of Apartheid and that of the white man's troubled past might become clearer to her.

The idea of symbolism does not only apply to Mrs Curren’s relationship between her daughter and South Africa, but pervades most of the ideas expressed in this essay. The medical condition that she is suffering from is never stated or explained in detail; we are only given the personal feelings of Mrs Curren “I have a child inside that I cannot give birth to. Cannot because it will not be born. Because it cannot live outside me. So it is my prisoner or I am its prisoner” (Coetzee 82). Mrs Curren’s tumour and disease is an extension of the condition of South Africa and is a direct effect of what she states; “To each of us fate sends the right disease. Mine a disease that eats me out from inside” (Coetzee 112). Correspondingly, the Apartheid conflict is what is eating up South Africa from inside out. Countries can collapse for different reasons, war or famine. People can be shot and grow sick from a disease that stems from external influence. By comparison Mrs Curren and South Africa face the same fate. South Africa needs to be cleansed from its sickness for it to rise again led by the children of South Africa. Mrs Curren faces an inevitable death, but the letter, her own thoughts and confessions, will live on with her daughter, her very own flesh and blood.
Cancer is not a simple disease, reasons may differ from genetic to dietary ones. However, Mrs Curren tries to make a self diagnosis of why she has grown sick:

I have cancer. I have cancer from the accumulation of shame have endured in my life. That is how cancer comes about. From self-loathing the body turns malignant and begins to eat away at itself. (Coetzee 145).

Surely she knows that, medically speaking, no actual disease stems from self-loathing, so to further use the symbolism of Mrs Curren’s cancer, she uses it to point out the deterioration in South Africa. Apartheid has been suppressing people for too long, refusing their needs and demands, just like a patient may neglect the doctor’s order, the government refused to listen, resulting in worsening conditions.

Mrs Curren’s disease has rendered her unable to control her own destiny, since its grip diminishes her self-control. Her pride is something that she holds tight to, afraid of an unworthy death: “Death by fire the only decent death left …; to burn and be gone, to be rid of, to leave the world clean” (Coetzee 65). Comparing what she wants to what is needed for the country to change, for something new to arise, she reflects that another thing must fall to give “time for what grows out of ash to grow” (Coetzee 65). Cultivating your land by the help of fire, burning it down to later grow something new out of the ashes have very long been a technique used in regions with low accessibility. In the same way old buildings are torn down to make room for new ones, since it sometimes can be hard to create something long lasting and strong when the foundation is rotten or frail, just like the political and, at that time, current state of South Africa.
South Africa through the eyes of Mrs Curren

Little is known about Mrs Curren’s daughter. However, there are certain reasons why she no longer lives in South Africa. Presumably it is because of the urbanisation, something that Jeremy Seeking and Nattrass Nicoli discuss in *Class, Race and Inequality in South Africa*, which led to an un-ruly state in South Africa: “The continuation between these trends during the late 1970’s and 1980’s meant that the relation between race and inequality changed dramatically” (Seeking and Nicoli 121). The countryside was not the dream for any South African, they were told that if you moved to the city there would be work and opportunities. There, they switched their routine-like everyday life for an uncertain existence among other 100’s of thousands that also resided in small sheds on the city outskirts, making the line between poor and rich even clearer. The whites built homes for themselves in the "good" areas, leaving the blacks homeless and outcast, but Mrs Curren states that they could never run away from the fact that “…the chickens would come home to roost” (Coetzee 159). The blacks were not content with living in what Mrs Curren describes when visiting the projects: “Around us was a wilderness of gray dune sand and Port Jackson willow, and a stench of garbage and ash. Shreds of plastic, old iron, glass, animal bones littered both sides of the path” (Coetzee 93). This specific quote is from when the so-called “shacks” were burnt down, fuelling the peoples rage and helplessness towards a supreme force, a reality far from that of Mrs Curren’s. In contrast to Mrs Curren, who is old and long ago has lost touch with reality, her daughter might have had more understanding and awareness of what was actually happening in South Africa, since she grew up among other children, certainly not unprivileged but more in contact with its contemporary history. Knowing this, her daughter had no choice but to break free and leave South Africa, whereas Mrs Curren, not ignorant, but unsuspecting of what was happening out in the streets, that a new South Africa was growing, molded by injustice and poverty, sat staring out the window.
Mrs Curren lives alone in a big house in Cape Town with her housekeeper and her housekeeper’s children, Bheki, Hope and Beauty. On the first page of the novel there is a good description of how Mrs Curren perceives South Africa when she is addressing her daughter: “There is an alley down the side of the garage, you may remember it, you and your friends would sometimes play there. Now it is a dead place, waste, without use, where windblown leaves pile up and rot” (Coetzee 3). However, Mrs Curren finds a homeless man, Mr Vercueil, who resides in the alley, a silent catalyst for her emotional evolution. There is a passage where Mrs Curren’s housekeeper’s son has treated Mr Vercueil badly and she states “‘You are showing Bheki and his friends that they can raise their hands against their elders with impunity. That is a mistake. Yes, whatever you may think of him, Vercueil is their elder’,” pointing to the differences in values between Mrs Curren and her housekeeper (Coetzee 48). Because even though Vercueil may be a drunk, he overtrumps the children by age and is therefore superior in the eyes of Mrs Curren and deserves to be treated with respect, that is how she was brought up. In comparison she herself is also growing older and dreads what she has become:

We who marry South Africa become South Africas; ugly, sullen, torpid, the only sign of life in us a quick flash of fangs when we are crossed. South Africa: bad-tempered old hound snoozing in the doorway, taking its time to die.

(Coetzee 70)

It takes time for her to adapt to the fact that she now is aware of what she is becoming; lonely and bitter.
It is clear that Mrs Curren is growing more conscious about the interchangeable world around her. At one point she points out that “it was like living in an allegory” when referring to her housekeeper’s two young daughters by the name of Hope and Beauty (Coetzee 90). Seeing the children as the future, for it is in them their parents put their faith and “hope” when all else has forsaken them, whether it is to provide for them when they grow old or to build a new country founded on values of equal rights and justice.

The pessimism of Mrs Curren cannot be mistaken. Her old South Africa has changed, she is aware of that, but she is not willing to embrace the new South Africa, yet. She cannot identify with the young children who now rise up against oppression and injustice, while their parents stand back for the new South Africans. “It is all changed today. There are no more mothers and fathers” (Coetzee 39). Mrs Curren is questioning if it is just that easy to let go, to blame or point towards oppression to justify misbehaviour. She says that you just can not say “This is not my child, this is the white man’s child, this is the monster made by the white man” (Coetzee 50). Even though she never gets any answers or reaches any conclusion in her discussions and scarce debates with her housekeeper, she questions her own beliefs, day by day, as the novel progresses, leading her to find her own answers. As a result she is awakened by the disdain of her own feelings towards South Africa “Is this how I feel about SA, not loving but habituated to its bad smell?” (Coetzee 70). Atwell directs his attention to the phenomenon of Mrs Curren’s criticism towards the inconstant South Africa:

The scepticism and inconsequentiality of Elizabeth’s discourse enable her to say exactly what she pleases about the way the national conflict is conducted. The ethicalism of Age of Iron emerges from this paradox. Elizabeth’s judgement of the rule of white nationalism, the rule of the “boars”, is direct and unsubtle. On
the insurrection she is harsh, indeed confessional, in her condemnation of the
new forms of Puritanism and militarism evident in the township youth.

(Atwell, 122)

It is indeed easy to direct critique towards an instance when you are standing and looking at it
from an outside perspective. Correspondingly Mrs Curren cannot gain insight until she has
seen the conflict from both perspectives.
Mrs Curren’s lost perception

Laura Wright, who conducted a study of Coetzee and published the book *Writing out of all camps*, comments on the theme in *Age of Iron* “In *Age of Iron*, as in his preceding female-narrated texts, Coetzee again provides a critique of authorial and historical truth” (Wright 70). Coetzee is never explicit in this critique that Wright discusses, and does not offer any solutions, merely pointing out the issues without any direct answers to what went wrong or why. Solutions are not available for Mrs Curren either, nevertheless it is when she starts to question the world she lives in that she is awakened from her former drowsy and listless state.

When Mr Vercueil asks Mrs Curren why she does not fix her car she explicitly claims that it “belongs to a world that barely exists any more” (Coetzee 71). Her determination could be seen as potential evidence of the fact that the car is used to represent Mrs Curren’s perspective of South Africa; the world is no longer what it once was. People do not keep holding on to dysfunctional or damaged objects or ideas, the new South Africa wants to fix and change what is not working properly, in this case the Apartheid system, rendering Mrs Curren lost in her old world, still not fully aware of the injustice.

Longing for security and familiarity she can not seem to get rid of the need to shake off the bitter taste and notion of reality. She writes,

I had a vision of the little green car waiting quietly at the roadside. There was nothing I longed for more than to get into my car, slam the door behind me, close out the looming world of rage and violence. (Coetzee 96)
As we shall see the car is a vehicle, both as a means of transport and that of a carrier of values and ideas. Locking herself up in her own world where there is no need to question anything, things are what they have always been and will stay that way. Similarly she is challenged when her car refuses to start, but once ignited a little red light appears and her driver says “There is something wrong with your alternator,”... pointing to the red light glowing on the dashboard. I am letting things run down, I said. I did not feel like explaining” (Coetzee 93). It is clear that Mrs Curren is aware of the fact that her old values are flaking and that they can not function in the new world that is taking form in South Africa. If we were to venture further into the symbolism of the car, we would find that the alternator is what gives the car power, one of the most vital functions. Nevertheless you are still able to jump-start or push it to get it running, making the alternator in Mrs Curren’s case somewhat redundant as long as she has someone ready, willing and able to help her. However, she can not rely on other people around her, neither for help with her car or to justify her beliefs in the ever so interchangeable South Africa. Being what she is, old, broken and sulky, just like her car, unwilling to change or fix what is not functioning properly, she will face the same fate as her car, forgotten and neglected.

Another interesting passage, where there is a symbolic suggestion, is when Mrs Curren cannot locate Florence, and she is worried about what might have happened. She is aware that Florence's son, Bheki, was lost and that she might have gone looking for him. When she finally finds her, she parks her car outside a school. In front of the school is a crowd, and they are all looking at five bodies laid out for public display. This is Mrs Curren’s first real encounter with the rebelling young South Africans, a reality that for too long has been as distant as her daughter. The young children possess no fear, the only way to stop them is to put a bullet through their chest. This new appalling sight reshapes her former view upon
society into a new one. Not only does Coetzee describe this revolutionary experience by means of depicting it, he again uses the car to describe Mrs Curren’s changed perspective. When she returns to her car she finds that someone has thrown a stone through her windshield. If we once again would use her car as a symbol to describe her view of the world, a shattered windshield could not be a better symbol to describe the adjustment of her new reality. The windshield being her eyes and vision as well as that which had shielded her from the truth, has been broken so that she sees things in their true light. The car is the last bit of the past that Mrs Curren so tightly clings on to, but when its windshield is smashed “Someone had thrown a rock through the windscreen…it lay on the seat amid a scattering of glass as if it now owned the car” her old values are shattered and replaced by a stone which irrevocably changes her perception (Coetzee 104). The stone, most probably thrown by a young black boy or girl, represents the thrower's values which now color Mrs Curren's mind.

Moreover she exclaims that “This is the worst thing I have witnessed in my life. And I thought: Now my eyes are open and I can never close them again” (Coetzee 103). Speaking about the passage when the dead bodies are on display, the part where the novel reaches its climax, Mrs Curren finally gains insight into what the world looks like outside her once so idyllic existence, an inevitable change born out of experience. Even though she has not been ignorant, she has been indifferent towards these killings: “They are dying all the time, I know, but always somewhere else. The people I have seen die have been white and have died in bed...” (Coetzee 124). The emotional relation to the victim could be what triggered her neutral state into full consciousness.

After what she has seen, how can she ever go back to where she once was? Derek Attridge sums up and concludes Mrs Curren’s perceptual issues
What is enacted in this novel is the acute ethico-political trauma of the post-colonial world, where no general rule applies, where a conflict of values is endemic, and where every code of moral conduct has to be tested and justified afresh in terms of the specific context in which its is being invoked. But this is not a lesson to be learned, a conclusion to be reached. Mrs Curren’s new understanding is not something she has achieved; it exists in, and cannot be separated from, the negations and questionings she has experienced.

(Attridge 110)

Attridge suggests that Mrs Curren could not have gained her knowledge and insight if she had not examined herself and, that which is the very core of the letter, her values and own beliefs. Forced to experience situations where her ethics are put to the test, not only empty words, but respect and equality expressed through actions, indeed lead her to a revelation. Whether she is willing to accept and learn how to embrace this new found existence is however much more indefinite.

Mrs Curren confesses her new understanding of the political struggle she is caught up in. After returning to her home after the death of Bheki she finds that one of his friends, John, has taken refuge in her apartment. He is, just like Bheki, a child shaped by the oppression, afraid and insecure, not knowing what life has in store for him, but eager and persistent in his struggle to rebel. But she detests these sacrifices of young boys; “You say it is time to fight, ... you say it is time to win or lose” (Coetzee 145). Derek Attridge addresses this very issue, explaining that it is a conflict that must have its time, for it can not be talked through or analysed. To gain something you must first sacrifice something for it to have effect, otherwise
its moral and political nature will only grow out of its opposite. True change is a necessity that needs to be won and conquered (Attridge 109).

The young boy by the name of John will mean more for Mrs Curren than she knows. He and Bheki represent the same struggle, but they are yet so different. One of them Mrs Curren has seen grow up and seen dead in person, the other is a shallow and brief acquaintance. In the letter to her daughter she writes

I do not love this child, the child sleeping in Florence’s bed. I love you but I do not love him. There is no ache in me toward him, not the slightest. Yes, you reply, he is not lovable. But did you have a part in making him unlovable? (Coetzee 136)

Her daughter in this case represents the old South Africa, while the boy, young and rebellious, embodies what the new South Africa stands for. Mrs Curren's feelings towards him shift, however, and when he is killed by the police she speaks about how he enters her consciousness and together they relive that day when he was shot dead: “A time being, a suspension, before the return of the time in which the door bursts open, and we face, first he, then I, the great white glare” (Coetzee 176). It could be the fact that when she comes closer to death and now can start to relate to the events she has experienced, with the help of John, waiting for and anticipating the inevitable.

Towards the end of the novel Mrs Curren speaks about her feelings towards her daughter’s two sons. How she can not seem to relate to them, how very different they are compared to John and Bheki, and how they will never fully live. When seeing a picture of them paddling in
a canoe with their life jackets on, she states that life in America is too safe. A nature and life tamed, her daughter having tied wings on their backs. Wisdom is gained through experience and setbacks, when you are forced to struggle she insists, condemning that her grandchildren

will die at seventy five or eighty-five as stupid as when they were born…The wings you have tied on them will not guarantee them life. Life is dust between the toes. Life is dust between the teeth. Life is biting the dust. (Coetzee 195)

Mrs Curren disdains life so very distant from that in South Africa and despite the hardship that people face, she still would consider a life in South Africa more worthy or more vivid than one in the US. When analysing the last phrase she sums up what life is concluded to be, biting the dust, dying. But preventing people from dying, always granting them safety, is to deprive them of life itself.
Conclusion

Apartheid is truly a difficult issue. Any issue involving oppression and racism forces us to examine ourselves and question our own prejudices. In the case of Apartheid, a whole country and society was built on the idea that people are not allowed the same rights and resources.

How has Mrs Curren’s perception changed in relation to the symbolism of decay and the faltering state of South Africa? At first Mrs Curren was content with her old values and perspective, but as time goes by and events unravel, her disease challenges her to open up her heart to her daughter, symbolically representing South Africa, to let her know of the love that she long ago should have confessed. The death of Bheki and the uprising in the townships finally make her see what was happening outside her window as she starts to shift in her opinions, created an understanding for other values and ideas.

A country is in an ever-changing state. Mrs Curren was stuck in the old, but had to learn to adapt and accept what South Africa had become and who the new South Africans were. What lies hidden in the future is frightening, even more when you face death, but reminiscing, regressing back in time, just because it is familiar, will lead you nowhere. It is however most unfortunate that it was, primarily, because of her disease that she started to write the letter, igniting her mind. In the same way it is tragic that it was necessary for a whole country to bleed to create change. But even though Mrs Curren lost the struggle against her disease, she ultimately gained true comprehension of life in South Africa.
References


