

**Africans, Afrikaner and the English-
'Race' Relations and Apartheid in
J.M. Coetzee's *Boyhood* and *Youth***

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Introduction

J.M. Coetzee is known as one of the greatest South African writers of all times. He is also a writer that divides critics, especially over the issue of race. Several black South African critics have accused his novels, *Disgrace* in particular, of being strongly racist and of depicting South Africa as a country running wild after the fall of apartheid (Majavu 1). *The New Republic* critic James Wood on the other hand congratulates Coetzee for daring to present a white man's racist fears and claims that the picture painted of South Africa's future in *Disgrace* is full of hope (Wood 1). Being a writer in post-apartheid South Africa can be complicated, and if like Coetzee you go against the grain of South African literary tradition, it is even harder.

The aim of this essay is to investigate how the apartheid system and relationships between different groups of people in South Africa are described in Coetzee's autobiographies *Boyhood* and *Youth*. The questions that I hope to answer are: How is apartheid depicted in the texts? How are different groups and the relationships between them described in the texts? What seem to be the roles of Afrikaner, Native/Coloured and white English-speaking South Africans in the system of apartheid in *Boyhood*? Has anything changed in the main character's attitude to and/or way of seeing the issues above from *Boyhood* to *Youth*? Through a close reading of both novels I hope to find the answers to my questions.

It would be impossible to analyze Coetzee and his style of writing without an understanding of the South African literary tradition and without knowledge of the South African history of colonization and apartheid. The background for this essay therefore has three subheadings. First, a brief historical background of apartheid in South Africa is given. Thereafter I present a summary of the South African literary tradition with a special focus on white South African writing. Finally, a background of Coetzee's writing, based on the findings of some of his most prominent critics is offered.

Apartheid

The role of apartheid in South African literature cannot be overestimated. In fact, the renowned critic Laura Wright has stated that it is impossible to read South African literature without at the same time reading apartheid (Wright 2). The word apartheid itself is Dutch, and it has become known all over the world, as no languages have

translated the term according to the American literary professor Susan Gallagher VanZanten. The meaning of the term is “apartness” or “separateness” (Gallagher-VanZanten 1). According to the UN website apartheid was at work in South Africa 1948-1994, and the system consisted of a large number of laws that allowed the small white South African minority to segregate, exploit and terrorize the majority of the population: Natives, Asians and people of mixed race. Native was a term used for the black South Africans. Another term that will be used frequently through the essay is Coloured, which was used for people of mixed black and white background. During apartheid the ‘non-whites’ were denied political as well as human rights. The apartheid laws covered all areas of life according to Boddy-Evans. In order to convey an idea of the situation of the ‘non-whites’ in South Africa during apartheid at least a few of the many laws ought to be mentioned: the Mixed Marriage Act of 1949 where mixed marriages were forbidden, the Group Areas Act of 1950 where a physical separation between the races were enforced by the creation of separate residential areas, the Separate Representation of Voters Act of 1951 where Coloured were removed from the voting roll and the Natives Act of 1952, more know as the Pass Laws, where black people were forced to carry a special identity card at all times, and were prohibited to leave rural areas without a permit (Evans 1).

The system started operating in 1948 when an Afrikaner-dominated government led by the Nationalist Party (NP) came into power. The NP won the election by a small margin although many of the English-speaking white had voted for the Liberal Party. After 1960 this voting behaviour changed, and the NP became the largest party among the English-speaking whites as well as among the Afrikaner (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Apartheid>). According to the website of Afrikagrupperna, the sole African party, African National Congress (ANC), was banned by the NP two weeks after the election. At the same time as the English-speaking whites began to vote for the NP, in the 1960’s, the rest of the world started to condemn the system of apartheid. The eye-opener was the Sharpeville Massacre, where sixty-nine people were killed as they participated in a peaceful protest. The protest and its aftermath led the government to announce a state of emergency. The following year, 1961, South Africa broke with the British Commonwealth over apartheid and declared itself the Republic of South Africa in May the same year.

The new republic engaged in an era of security practices of banning, censoring and detaining. In her book, *A story of South Africa: Coetzee’s Fiction in Context*,

Susan Gallagher VanZanten describes how large protests occurred in 1974 and frequent protests also took place between the years of 1984-1990. Several of these events led to imprisonments as well as murders of Native and Coloured South Africans. In the major riot of 1974 most of the 575 people that were killed were schoolchildren. Large numbers of people were also put in prison because of their personal beliefs, the most famous of these being Nelson Mandela, who spent 27 years in prison. The pressure for justice from the Black Consciousness Movement, from white liberal South Africans and from the surrounding world finally became too strong. In February 1990 the ban on the ANC, the Pan-Africanist Congress and other African organizations were lifted and a few days later Nelson Mandela was released from prison (Gallagher-VanZanten 1-3). Finally, in 1994 South Africa abandoned the system of apartheid.

South African Literature

'African Literature' is a broad term used for all the literature that stems from Africa. The Indian writer and African literature specialist Dr Mala Pandurang helps make the term less general by further dividing it into four widely accepted subcategories: traditional African oral literature, new literature written in African languages, primarily recently developed indigenous vernacular writing, and Modern African literature by native African writers in languages not indigenous to Africa. The latter is sometimes also referred to as 'Afro-European Literature' and it is within this subcategory that we find Coetzee's writings (Pandurang 1).

The role of literature has been and continues to be a sensitive question in South Africa due to the history of apartheid according to Laura Wright (Wright 2). Gallagher VanZanten agrees on this matter and illustrates just how sensitive the question has been by describing how the author Lewis Nkosi even discussed whether literature should not temporarily be put to the side in the 1960s, in order for authors to focus on trying to solve the country's political problems. The inspiration for this idea came from the actions of Nigerian author Chinua Achebe, and the South African writer Alan Paton decided to follow in Achebe's footsteps. This call for authors to fight against apartheid on the political arena, instead of the literary one, reflects a view of literature as having a purely aesthetic quality unsullied by political content (Gallagher-VanZanten 3-4). According to Phil Van Schalkwyk, South African literature developed in the opposite direction, however. Instead of avoiding political

issues, South African writers of all colours have rather been expected to write about apartheid and racial injustice (Van Schalkwyk 10-11). Thomas Thale claims that this expectation has often been fulfilled as many South African writers have been concerned and still are concerned with capturing the unique history and experience of South Africa in their works, especially in regards to apartheid (Thale 1). Nevertheless, several South African writers have also questioned this correlation between their art and the historical and political situation in the country and Coetzee is one of them, as we shall see later (Gallagher-VanZanten 4).

A large part of South African literature falls under the label realism, according to David Attwell, one of Coetzee's most well known critics (Attwell 11). According to Svenska Akademien's webpage realism is, as the word indicates, a kind of writing that depicts subjects as they appear in everyday life without much interpretation and it often emphasizes the sordid things in life, and with apartheid in place reality was undoubtedly sordid for many South Africans.

After 1994 South African authors have found themselves in a space between apartheid and a new political order. Wright claims that the expectations of the South African people are high, but people are not sure what form the change will take yet, which has led to a feeling of temporality in the country. This feeling is something Wright believes that contemporary writers ought to try and capture in their works (Wright 9). As for narrative frames the history of racial oppression is still the most common one (Wright 5).

Critical works of South African literature more broadly are still few. Most works tend to focus on particular writers, particular novels, or particular themes. When it comes to analyses that focus on the specifics of black and white writing respectively there are even fewer (Barnard 4). Phil van Schalkwyk's essay 'Whiteman's Blues: South African English Literature' focuses specifically on white English writing in South Africa, however, and he describes how white authors have been accused of failing to capture the South African experience the way black authors have been able to. Instead of the realistic, angry and passionate text like those produced by the black South Africans, white authors have tended to write with what van Schalkwyk describes as a troubled inwardness. The history of apartheid has led white and black South Africans to have different worldviews and sensibilities. Because of these differences the white writing most often focuses on the individual and its dignity and liberty whereas the black writing tends to focus on communal

aesthetics. Another distinctive feature in the identity of white English-speaking South African writers, like Coetzee, is that they are inclined to be passive and not place themselves in the given historical context, as if they are on the outside looking in (Van Schalkwyk 10-12).

South African literature can be written in many different languages. Coetzee's works are all in English, which is one of the eleven official languages in South Africa. English has had a high status in South Africa since it was brought to the country in the early 19th century, as it is considered an international and neutral language. The neutrality comes from the fact that English, unlike in many other former colonies, is not seen as the language of the intruder. The language of the Afrikaner, Afrikaans, instead holds this position (Van Schalkwyk 10).

The fact that South Africa used to be a British colony places South African literature within the area of expertise of the British university professor John McLeod; postcolonialism. Postcolonial literature can be defined as literature written by authors that come from or have ancestors from a country that has been colonized (McLeod 1). The British Empire had colonized large parts of the world by the late 18th century with Northern America, Australian, New Zealand and many African, South Asian and Caribbean countries as their colonies (McLeod 9). The literary works that come from these various countries naturally have historical, geographical and cultural specifics, but they can still be positioned under the postcolonial umbrella (McLeod 15). The term postcolonial can also be used to describe writing that came about as a consequence of and a reaction to the European imperial process (Pandurang 5). The dominant mark of postcolonial literature is that it writes back to the centers and thereby questions their claims to knowledge (McLeod 25). The centre in South Africa's case is their old colonial power, Britain, and more specifically London as it is Britain's publishing centre. Kenneth Parker argues that Coetzee is not taking part in the writing back to Britain however. Instead, Coetzee as well as most of his fellow South African writers are mainly focused on the settlement in South Africa (Parker 85). The postcolonial process of finding native identities and roots has also become particularly hard in South Africa due to the history of apartheid (Boehmer 52).

South Africa forms a great example not only of postcolonialism, but also of what McLeod refers to as neo-colonialism. Newly independent nations often find that the old colonizer is replaced by a new one, and the nation might once again be colonized, but this time the colonizer is not a foreign country but a group with a

privileged education and position, within the country, that continue to exploit people (McLeod 89). Because of this South African writers have two colonizers to write back to and to rebel against after 1994, both the British and the Afrikaners (Wright 8).

Coetzee's Writings

Coetzee's genre within South African literature is white South African writing in English (Van Schalkwyk 9). South African professor Ian Glenn states that Coetzee has often been placed within the Western European or American tradition rather than in the African (Glenn 22). There could be several reasons for this according to David Attwell. It could have to do with the fact of him being educated in England and the US, but it could be that the Western intellectual discourse offered South Africans a forceful critique of the situation in their home country in the 1970s (Attwell 4-5). Ian Glenn claims Coetzee has moved closer to the American writing tradition with his later use of structuralist and poststructuralist theories which has distanced him from the British-oriented traditions (Glenn 24). According to Attwell the fact that Coetzee writes within a Western tradition along with the fact that he is an English-speaking, white, South African writer has created somewhat of a crisis for him in regards to cultural authority (Attwell 4-5). Critic Ian Glenn also claims that being white, of mixed Dutch-Afrikaner and German roots, yet neither an Afrikaner nor a South African of British origin, Coetzee is somewhat of an outsider in his own home country. This often shines through in Coetzee's literary work as the theme of identity crisis and displacement often reoccur in his novels (Glenn 20).

Laura Wright's book *Writing "out of all camps": J.M. Coetzee's Narratives of Displacement* deals with how Coetzee's works place him outside the traditions and themes that have dominated and therefore defined South African literary history (Wright 2). Many critics claim that Coetzee's novels do not take a strong enough ethical and political stance when it comes to South Africa (Wright 1). The critique has been particularly strong from black South African and left-wing critics according to Glenn (Glenn 20). Gallagher VanZanten states that Coetzee defends this choice however, as he claims realism can be counteractive. As an example he mentions the descriptions of torture often found in South African novels, which Coetzee claims assist the state as the readers becomes terrorized and paralyzed from the reading (Gallagher-VanZanten 19). Coetzee argues that storytelling is forgotten in realism and he refuses to put history before storytelling the way realists tend to do (Gallagher-

VanZanten 22). Wright describes how Coetzee on several occasions has rejected the idea that there is only one way to tell any story including the important stories of colonization, apartheid and democracy in South Africa (Wright 2). Although Ian Glenn describes Coetzee as ‘politically correct’ because of the implicit way he writes about apartheid, Coetzee has often publicly expressed his strong opposition to apartheid (Glenn 11). This view also shines through in several of his novels. In for example *Age of Iron* the protagonist’s struggle against cancer is used as a metaphor for the struggle against apartheid. This more indirect or concealed criticism of apartheid made it possible for Coetzee’s novels to be published in the days of censorship during the apartheid era.

Coetzee’s works are written both about and most often from within South Africa (Attwell 10). Attwell mentions that apartheid is a recurring theme dealt with both in *Age of Iron* as mentioned above and in *Disgrace*. Another theme Coetzee frequently uses is colonialism and decolonization, which can be seen in his novels *Dusklands*, *In the Heart of the Country*, *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *Life and Times of Michael K* (Attwell 14). Yet, according to Svenska Akademien’s home page, it is hard to categorize Coetzee as he has written many different types of books that span over a great number of themes, which is partly why he was given the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2003. The major critique of Coetzee’s writings is not that he does not deal with South Africa, however, but as was mentioned above, that he does not deal with the country’s problems head on. David Attwell describes how Coetzee tries to hold South Africa at arm’s length by using strategically nonspecific settings or socially improbable protagonists (Attwell 3). Laura Wright points out that Coetzee’s unwillingness to link his novels to a specific historical time and place has earned him critique for missing out on the earlier described feeling of temporality and change in today’s South Africa (Wright 9). He has also been criticized for his tendency not to represent or voice black South African characters in his novels (Wright 6). According to Stephen Watson Coetzee claims this to be a conscious choice made because he refuses to speak for ‘the Other’ as it is impossible for him to know their feelings and thoughts (Watson 25). Instead Coetzee has focused on describing the situations of and feelings of whites in South Africa.

Another striking feature in Coetzee’s writing, according to the Svenska Akademien, is honesty, as he does not try to cover up the darker sides of human beings. Instead he focuses on the weaknesses and failures of human beings and takes

a particular interest in the distinction between right and wrong, which at times makes his works seem pessimistic and dark. Michael Gorra with the *New York Times* goes as far as to describe Coetzee's writing as depressive and claustrophobic. As for the language that Coetzee uses it is easy to follow as it is informal and his use of words sparse.

My particular interest for this essay is Coetzee's autobiographies. They are very different from most of his other novels, not least because of the fact that they, like *Disgrace*, are linked both to a specific time, but also to a specific place, or rather specific places. Compared to other works by Coetzee the autobiographies have received far less attention and been less analyzed by critics than his other works, which makes my analysis potentially more fruitful.

Boyhood takes place in post-war South Africa between the years of 1947-1953. The main focus is on the protagonist, John Coetzee, and his relations with the rest of his family, his education and his sensitivity to the racial inequalities in South Africa. The background of the protagonist is that his father is a white Dutch-Afrikaner and his mother has German roots, but the language spoken between the family members is nevertheless English. Although John is situated within the context of South Africa, he is still an outsider who does not go along with what everyone else seem to go along with and accept, like apartheid or even cheering for South African athletes.

Youth starts off in 1959 and goes into the mid 1960s. Once again we follow John in his everyday life, first in South Africa as a student and then as he moves to London to flee from South Africa and its political problems as well as his own emotional and personal problems.

Both *Boyhood* and *Youth* are written in the third person and in present tense. Professor William Deresiewicz writes in the NY Times that he finds this peculiar as it breaks with traditional autobiographical writing and its tension between 'then' and 'now'. By writing in present tense Coetzee simply ignores the problem of memory (Deresiewicz 1). David Kurnick with *The Boston Phoenix* claims there are two central themes in *Boyhood*, John's sense of alienation from the Afrikaner culture and his discomfort with love (Kurnick 1). The Swedish cultural critic Magnus Eriksson agrees with Kurnick on the alienation issue and says that the most powerful theme in *Boyhood* is the alienation, or more specifically, John's lack of belonging (Eriksson 1).

In *Youth*, John flees from racism and apartheid, but Hermione Lee concludes that the book focuses very little on these issues, instead John's behaviour and awareness after he arrives in London is what is in focus (Lee 14-15). The online literary page Ibok conclude that Coetzee's earlier novels dig a lot deeper into the workings and problems of apartheid that *Boyhood* and *Youth* do.

I expect my analysis to show that Coetzee has written quite little about apartheid and 'race' relations in both books. What is said I expect to be said in Coetzee's characteristic indirect style.

'Racial' Relations and Apartheid in Boyhood and Youth

As mentioned in the introduction there are several questions I hope to answer in my essay in order to see the larger picture of apartheid and 'racial' relations in Coetzee's autobiographies. To make the analysis clear and more reader-friendly I have divided the analysis into subcategories, where my previous questions have inspired my categories. The different subcategories are naturally intertwined. The way Natives and Coloured are described is undoubtedly also connected to apartheid, which means that some matters might be brought up under more than one subcategory, but they are then looked upon from different angles. The two books are discussed separately, and the first part of the analysis deals only with *Boyhood*. First of all the different groups and their relationships are analyzed. Then I move on and take a closer look at how John views apartheid, and finally the findings from *Boyhood* are compared to those from *Youth*, to see if a change in how John perceives the peoples and the political system of South Africa can be detected.

Before I begin the analysis I would like to point out that the two books used are autobiographies describing the life of a child and young man, which also means that the books are not primarily political books. One should keep in mind that what we get to see, as readers, we see through the eyes of a child in *Boyhood* and of a young man in *Youth*. It should also be pointed out that it is not Coetzee's personal opinions to apartheid and 'racial' relations that we are investigating, but the views conveyed in the novels. Whether these can be said to be Coetzee's own personal views, since the books are autobiographies, is not something I attempt to look further into.

I would also like to justify my choice to analyze Coloured and Natives under the same subheading when it comes to characteristics and 'racial' relations. The reason for this is that both groups were discriminated against in South Africa during apartheid, but also because of the fact that Natives are rarely present in either book, as the protagonist lived in an area where few Native people lived, and I therefore have too little material to analyze Natives on their own.

The Image of Afrikaner

The descriptions and view of Afrikaner people that John mediates in *Boyhood* are far from flattering. The characteristic that is most often mentioned in connection to the

Afrikaner is violence. John claims that the reason behind his dislikes for- as well as his urge to escape from-- his hometown, Worcester, is the Afrikaner boys around him and the rage and resentment he feels crackling through them. He later concludes that the rage seems to come from: "...hearts [that] are hurt" (73). The Afrikaner people around him seem to feel that they have been wronged and that time has now come for revenge. John's view is mainly based on the behaviour of the Afrikaner boys at his school. His opinion of the grown up Afrikaner is all the same not much higher than his opinion of their children, and John concludes that: "There is a manner that Afrikaners have in common too -- a surliness, an intransigence, and, not far behind it, a threat of physical force" (124).

The only Afrikaner people John knows are the Afrikaner boys in school, his father and his father's relatives. John says himself that he has few social contacts outside of his family, which gives the reader limited information about the lives of other people than his closest family. It is mainly through school that John meets other people, but it seems like John would even want to avoid most of these encounters. The violence and anger of the Afrikaans boys in John's school, but also of adult Afrikaner men that John encounters, is one of the most repeated features in the book. A characteristic to be added to John's lists of flaws and shortcoming of the Afrikaners is unfairness. The Afrikaner teacher flogs a fellow English boy at school, and John cannot seem to understand why the beating takes place, and therefore mentions the incident to his parents:

"When he let slip that Rob Hart is being flogged by Miss Oosthuizen, His parents seem at once to know why. Miss Oosthuizen is one of the Oosthuizen clan who are Nationalists; Rob Hart's father, who owns a hardware store, was a Union Party town councilor until the elections of 1948". (67)

John does not seem too surprised about the answer. Both the Afrikaner teacher and the Afrikaner boys at his school seem to believe in the group's supremacy, and hence that they have the right to treat people who do not belong to the group in a condescending way.

In John's eyes no group is equally as horrible as the Afrikaner group, and even his description of their appearances is filled with aversion: "...Afrikaans women are either huge and fat, with puffed-out breasts and bullfrog necks, or bony and misshapen..." (126). The looks of the grown up Afrikaner as well as the Afrikaner

boys of his own age are distasteful to him, and he dislikes the boys shaved heads and their naked feet, as they do not wear shoes. At the same time he does feel sorry for the Afrikaner children around him when it comes to their language, because they are not allowed to use the word 'you' in Afrikaans, but have to speak in a very formal way. John concludes that the Afrikaner are slaves to their own language.

John's mother is not particularly fond of the Afrikaner either. She tells John to pick a Jewish doctor, although they, like all other doctors, are not really interested in their patients. But she claims they are still better than the Afrikaans doctors, who are incompetent as well. John seems to like his Afrikaner relatives though, and they are described as pretty fair people. He does not think highly of his father however, but that has more to do with personal characteristics than with the fact that he is Afrikaner or has an Afrikaner's worldview. All in all, John's father's opinions and ideas are hardly present in the book. In the family, apart from John, it is mainly the mother's opinions that are presented. The Afrikaner might rule South Africa, but the mother runs John's house, whereas the father is merely a weakling in John's eyes. By the end of the book the father become both an alcoholic and a gambler, to John's disgust.

The way Afrikaner are described is not in any way embellished, John simply describes the qualities that he sees: violence, rage, and supremacy. This type of honest writing and the interest in the darker sides of human beings is described as a distinguished feature of Coetzee's writing by Svenska Akademien and it is true for *Boyhood* both when it comes to the descriptions of the Afrikaner and the descriptions of John himself who at times has a very awkward behaviour.

Relations with Other Groups

The relationship between John as a white English-speaking South African and the Afrikaner is not like that between two equals. John sees their traditions as forced upon him at school and therefore comes to despise both the traditions and the Afrikaner boys. He describes how he wants to stand up against their cultural dominance by screaming and making farting noises when he is forced to sing songs in Afrikaans at school. Once home he is allowed to live like any English boy, since the family do not follow Afrikaner customs and only use Afrikaans when they interact with the father's relatives, and even then they mix Afrikaans with English.

John's school is a mixed school, and not an all Afrikaner school, but in the classroom the Afrikaner children are in one class where they are taught in Afrikaans

and the English-speaking children are in another and are taught in English. No Coloured or Native children are allowed in the school. At one point there is discussion of a law that would force John, and everyone else with an Afrikaans surname, into an Afrikaans class. John's disgust with the idea could not be stronger: "But he will not go to Afrikaans class. ...[He will] tell his mother that he is not going back to school, that if she betrays him he will kill himself" (70). John is not the only one who seems to be critical and suspicious of Afrikaner people. His mother is not fond of her husband's Afrikaner relatives, who, during the time her husband was at war, refused her help even with housing, although they had a large farm with empty rooms, as if she is not good enough for them because she is not Afrikaans.

The relationship between the Afrikaner and the Natives/Coloured is not very frequently discussed. The reason for this is mainly because we get to follow John and see the world through his eyes, that of a white English-speaking boy. Black people are seldom present in John's life because of apartheid and out of school he knows few Afrikaners, which make descriptions of their relations with Natives/Coloured very infrequent. The relationships that are discussed are therefore mainly relationships between English-speaking South Africans and the groups they encounter, primarily through John. The exception is when John is at his relatives' farm and gets to see how they treat the Coloured working on the farm.

There is a significant difference in how John and the people around him, even his Afrikaner relatives and his Afrikaner father, perceive Native and Coloured people. This can be seen through John's surprise over the fact that no one but him seems to be questioning the way Natives and Coloured are treated. John claims that the relatives treat the Coloured on their farm much better than the Afrikaans-speaking in Worcester treat the Coloured, because the Coloured in Worcester are forced to beg for everything. On the farm the relationships with the *volk*, the Afrikaans word for the Native or Coloured workers, are described as formal and correct. This indicates that there are Afrikaner that treat Coloured decently, but the Coloured on the farm are still servants working for the whites, and their lives are very restricted. The servants are given next to nothing, yet they are supposed to feel ashamed of what they lack, something John finds peculiar. He thinks that the members of his father's family are the ones who should be ashamed, but they see the subordination as a given and interaction as unimaginable. Therefore John:

“...is discouraged from visiting their house. It would be rude he is told-rude because Ros and Freek would find it embarrassing. If it is not embarrassing to have Ros’s wife and daughter work in the house, he wants to ask, cooking meals, washing clothes, making beds, why is it embarrassing to visit them in their house?” (86)

So although the Afrikaner and the Colored work on the same ground and in the same house there is next to no interaction between the two groups, especially not after working hours.

John’s dad has drawn his own conclusions in regards to Native and Coloured South Africans regardless of not seeming to have interacted with them on many occasions. He tries to spread his views to John and in a conversation tells him that:

“They have harder heads than white people. ...That is why they are so good at boxing. For the same reason they will never be good at rugby. In rugby you have to think fast, you can’t be a bonehead”. (75)

How his dad has found out this piece of information is not revealed, but it is presented as if it is a simple ‘scientific’ fact.

The English-speaking faction at John’s school includes several different religious groups. Our protagonist, who lives in an unreligious home, decides to lie and say that he is a Catholic when asked at school. The theme of identity crisis, which Glenn claims is a common theme in Coetzee’s novels shines through here. John wants to fit in, and he wants to be something, anything, as long as it gives him a feeling of belonging and identity. His choice to pretend to be Catholic turns out to have more far-reaching consequences for John than he had imagined. Instead of going to assembly with the Afrikaner boys he is allowed to stay behind with the Catholic and Jewish boys, something the Afrikaner pupils are not slow to realize. The Afrikaner boys are relentless in their bullying of both the Catholic and the Jewish boys:

“...in revenge for what the Jews did to Christ, the Afrikaans boys, big, brutal, knobbly sometimes catch a Jew or a Catholic and punch him in the biceps, short, vicious knuckle-punches, or knee him in the balls. ... the boy whimpers: Please! ‘Jood!’ they hiss back ‘Jood! Vuilgoed!’ Jew! Filth!”(19)

Once again John concludes that it is the ‘hurting heart’ of the Afrikaner due to past wrongdoings, this time against their religion, that make them feel like they have the

right to mistreat the Jews. The Catholics are simply seen as of less value because they are not Protestants as the Afrikaner are.

The Afrikaner are not interacting with other groups very often as the Afrikaner children are separated from the white, non-Afrikaans speaking children at school and they are separated from Coloured and Natives since they are not allowed to live in the white areas in Worcester. It is obvious that the Afrikaner see themselves as supreme, and all other groups, whether of colour or white, are therefore seen as of less value. In John's eyes the Afrikaner are bullies, and although he himself speaks Afrikaans and has an Afrikaner father he chooses to think of himself as English.

The Image of English-speaking South Africans

John's identity crisis has much to do with the fact that he is not an Afrikaner, nor has English roots. He is well aware of the fact that he does not really belong in South Africa and claims that: "...not everyone who lives in South Africa is a South African, or not a proper South African" (18).

As a child who speaks both Afrikaans and English John can at times, as has been mentioned, choose which group to belong to, although he claims he does not really belong to any group. By his own logic he is English in view of the fact that they speak English at home, and since he always comes first in English at school. This feeling of being an outsider and of not belonging goes well with Coetzee's themes of displacement, which is a theme Coetzee commonly uses in his novels, according to the critics mentioned earlier.

John does not know many English people, as he has no English family and the English are a minority in John's hometowns Worcester and Reunion Park, where only two other boys apart from John and his brother can be considered as English. Yet John's picture of the English and everything to do with England is very clear. The English are relaxed, the language is informal and the mother country, in stark contrast to South Africa, is full of heroes. This image makes him question South Africans' opinions of England:

"He cannot understand why it is that so many people around him dislike England. England is Dunkirk and the Battle of Britain...Sir Lancelot of the Lake and Richard the Lionheart and Robin Hood. ...what do the Afrikaners have to compare?" (128)

The image John has of England and its history is, as can be seen above, mainly based on what he has read in books and it is highly romanticized, but it is also fuelled by his mother's talk of the English as gentlemen and by the well-mannered English children he sees at the all-English school. John's mother tells him about relaxed, but well-mannered English men, who behaved like gentlemen when stopping at the farms during the Boer War, whereas:

“When the Boers arrived on their farm ...they demanded food and money and expected to be waited on. When the British soldiers came, they slept in the stable, stole nothing, and before leaving courteously thanked their hosts”. (66)

The tale agrees with the stories from the children's books about England that John has already been reading.

The characteristic of violence, which John so closely connects with the Afrikaner, is not a characteristic he has considered that the English might possess, as they live behind walls and guard their hearts, according to him. This prevents them from rage, or so it seems, until John sees English Trevelyan beat the young Coloured servant boy Eddie at his relative's farm:

“In fact, Trevelyan, who was ruddy of complexion and already a little fat, went even ruddier while he was applying the strap, and snorted with every blow, working himself into as much of a rage as any Afrikaner.” (75)

The thought of the English as violent people chocks John, who, as has been mentioned, has a very idealistic picture of the English, where they have been the good guys and the Afrikaners the bad. He cannot fit this new experience into his picture of the English as through and through good, which makes him upset and saddened.

There is one other thing about the English that disappoints John, and that is their contempt for Afrikaans. Their refusal to learn how to pronounce the words properly annoys John, who, despite his disgust for the Afrikaner, is fluent in their language. He feels free when he speaks Afrikaans and does not mind talking to his Afrikaner relatives, as he does not have to be overly polite to them, the way Afrikaner people are when they speak Afrikaans to each other. The reason John likes Afrikaans might be because Afrikaans gives John some kind of belonging to a group, to his Afrikaner relatives. As Eriksson points out, John's lack of belonging is an important theme in *Boyhood* and he tries hard to fit in when he is at his relatives' farm. With his

perfect Afrikaans he can almost pass as one of them. English on the other hand, which is the language he normally speaks, does not give him this kind of belonging, as he has no English roots.

The Afrikaans language might not be all-bad, but as we have seen John's descriptions of the Afrikaans people is far from flattering. The English on the other hand are described as beautiful, and John sometimes stops outside the all-English school just to: "admire their straight blonde hair and golden skins, their clothes [that] are never too small or too large, their quiet confidence" (136). John's own appearance is seldom commented on. He says he has soft feet and a shy defensive look. He also comments on how he dislikes his haircut as it is too short but he never says anything about the colour of the hair or its texture. From the way he says his clothes are never as tight as he would like for them to be one can guess that he is pretty slim, but his features are never described in more detail.

Where the Afrikaner are loud and egocentric the English instead have a "quiet confidence"- the two groups are in many ways each others opposites in John's eyes, which makes his choice to belong to the English group easy to understand. When John does realize that all English might not live up to the high standard he has expected them to, he still seems to conclude that the ones that do not must be anomalies and hence continues to think of himself as English with pride.

Relations with Natives/Coloured

John is clearly upset about the way whites are allowed to treat primarily the Coloured, something that will be discussed at more length under the apartheid heading. Still, John has very little knowledge of the lives of the Natives and Coloured, particularly the Natives as he claims he has only known four Natives his entire life. John still wants to both respect and expect good things of the Natives and the Coloured. He seeks confirmation from his mother, who he finds shares his feelings, which makes him conclude that: "It is possible to respect Natives - that is what she is saying. It is a great relief to hear that, to have it confirmed" (65). But although his mother says she thinks highly of the Coloured, John has the feeling that she is not honest when she says so as her behaviour is a bit ambiguous: "Coloured people are the salt of the Earth, she says, yet she and her sisters are always gossiping about pretend-whites with secret Coloured backgrounds" (37). The sentence implies that it is somewhat better to be white than of colour, why would Coloured pretend to be white otherwise?

The Natives' position in South Africa is somewhat different to that of the Coloured in John's eyes, at least in Worcester, where there are quite a few Coloured, but few Natives. John concludes that:

“One can dismiss the Natives perhaps, but one cannot dismiss the Coloured people. The Natives can be argued away because they are latecomers, invaders from the north, and have no right to be there.” (61)

Nevertheless, John has high thoughts of the Natives, as more pure than the white and Coloured South Africans. These high regards shine through when he is told a story about three brothers of which the third is the humblest and most derided, and the only one who helps an old lady in need. The first and second brothers are boastful, arrogant and uncharitable and just walk past her. In the end the first two brothers are sent away, and the third made prince. John applies the story to South Africa and concludes that: “There are white people and Coloured people and Natives, of whom the Natives are the lowest and most derided. The parallel is inescapable: the Natives are the third brother” (65). He says nothing about whether the Coloured then are the second brother, or whether there are no second brother in this case, but rather that all ‘non-whites’ are the third brother. In John's opinion Coloured seem to have an easier time than the Natives. This might be because the Natives are used as work-force only when the Coloured misbehave, which to me suggests that the Coloured have some kind of freedom to behave as they want, whether the Natives do not have any choice but to be shipped around and work for the white. Yet at the same time John shows us how a Coloured child, Eddie, is taken away from his mother, against his will, to work on his relatives' farm, which goes against this idea of freedom for Coloured people.

Children of Colour are nice and friendly according to John. The rage and violence that John sees in the Afrikaner, and particularly in the Afrikaner children, he does not see in the children of Colour. This surprises him somewhat as he would consider anger to be justified in the Coloured children's case, but:

“On the faces of these children he sees none of the hatred which, he is prepared to acknowledge, he and his friends deserve for having so much money while they are penniless”. (72)

Not even when they have to stand outside of the circus tent and peer in through the holes do they show any sign of anger, but John sympathies with them for not being able to see the circus from inside the tent.

The fact that John has only known four Natives his entire life and hardly knows anything about Coloured either, although he interacts with them more frequently, makes him very curious, as he seems to think their life is different in every way from the life he lives. He wants answers that ought to be evident, since there are Coloured living on the same farm as him at his relatives place and he sees them every day, but yet:

“He burns with curiosity about the lives they live. Do they wear vests and underpants like white people? Do they each have a bed? Do they sleep naked or in their work-clothes or do they have pyjamas? Do they eat proper meals, sitting at tables with knives and forks?” (85)

As the book shows South Africa from John’s perspective the relationships between English-speakers and other groups are described frequently, although John does not really get to meet that many people of Colour and even fewer Native people. The critique Wright brings up about black people not being voiced in Coetzee’s novels is definitely true of *Boyhood*. Yet John often thinks and reflects about the situation and reflects about the relationship with the Coloured. The issue of right and wrong, that critics claim is a common theme in Coetzee’s novels, is definitely important in *Boyhood*. It is always present in John’s thoughts in regards to how white treat Natives and Coloured, and he clearly thinks apartheid is wrong and immoral.

The Image of Natives/Coloured

Relationships between Coloured/Natives and the Afrikaner and English-speaking people have already been discussed, and the general views of these two groups in regards to the Native and Coloured have already been uncovered to some degree. As was just described, John often reflects over the situation of the non-white Africans, especially of the children as he is a child himself and can most easily compare his own situation with the situation of other children. When John and his mother are in town he admires the beauty of a Coloured boy, but gets sad when he realizes that despite the boy’s beauty: “...he is also Coloured, which means he has no money, lives in an obscure hovel, goes hungry...” (61).

John is confused about the lives of Coloured children, as they have to grow up so quickly and despite the fact that they are no older than him have grown up chores and have work to attend to, and: “...he simply does not know when they cease to be children and become men and women. It seems to happen so early and so

suddenly...” (86). John is very fond of school and of learning in general at this point, which make him feel sorry for the Coloured children for not having the opportunity to educate themselves properly.

John describes many of the Coloured children as beautiful, and he gets shy when a young Coloured woman looks at him. The Natives that he gets to see are mainly men that come to Worcester to work, and they are described as strong and patient. We get to see the situation of a few Natives and Coloured, but it is always John who tells us what it is like. There are a few dialogues between John and Coloured, but it is mainly when they answer short questions and it does not give an insight to their world. This because Coetzee, as he himself has stated, does not want to talk on behalf of someone else. It is also a way of showing the readers just how little interaction there is between the groups, which in itself in a brilliant way shows one of the problems with apartheid: the problem that division creates, the feeling of ‘Otherness’ and of difference between humans that are really all the same but for colour.

Apartheid and the Role of the Groups in the System

We have already seen many traces of apartheid in the way the different groups interact and behave towards each other. Another proof of apartheid and its policy of separateness is of course the lack of interaction between whites and Natives/Coloured mentioned above.

John’s mother, as has been shown before, thinks well of the Coloured, yet it is obvious that she has stopped reflecting about the injustices of apartheid. John declares that she does not understand his concern with the Coloured, and how they have to obey whatever whites tell them. He claims that her response, if he were to bring the issue up for discussion, would be: “But they are used to it!” (61). According to John’s mother this makes it acceptable, but John cannot agree with her.

As we follow John’s daily life we see the workings of apartheid. The knowledge of how Coloured children are subordinate to him as a white is something John is always aware of. As he passes a Coloured boy on the street he thinks about how the boy, if John’s mother were to call for him, would have to stop and come and ask what he could do for her. The power imbalance between himself and the Coloured boys he meets makes John feel most uncomfortable, and during an interaction with a Coloured boy John realizes that:

“...this boy, who is living reproof to him, is nevertheless subjected to him in ways that embarrass him so much he squirms and wriggles his shoulders and does not want to look at him any longer, despite his beauty”. (61)

The word ‘embarrassed’ in the quote above is used again later in the book, then in regards to John’s relationship with the servant girl Lientjie. Every time they pass each other they have to pretend like the other one is invisible, and if she wants to talk to him, she has to call him ‘die kleinbaas’, the little master, which makes him very uncomfortable.

Natives and Coloured are only allowed a few years of education. This is a clear indication of the apartheid system, and of how the government only thought whites were worth educating. John, who is happy to be in school, still questions what the history book tries to teach him, and he finds it hard to believe that the adults do not see what is clear to him, that the history in the books at school are made up by a racist government, that does not want to give Native and Coloured Africans what is rightfully theirs:

“The Coloured were fathered by the Whites, by Jan van Riebeeck, upon the Hottentots: that much is plain, even in the veiled language of his school history book. ...the people called Coloured are not the great-great-grandchildren of Jan van Riebeeck or any other Dutchman. He is expert enough in physiognomy, has been expert enough as long as he can remember, to know there is not a drop of white blood in them. They are Hottentots, pure and uncorrupted. Not only do they come with the land, the land comes with them, is theirs, has always been.” (62)

John is aware that he as a white is the invader, and that seems to make him even more embarrassed of the fact that the Coloured are subjected to him, the descendent of the intruder.

Racist customs and beliefs are not only present in government, or among those who support the apartheid system, as has been shown before. John is time and again surprised at how the people around him, even his own family, seem to somehow incorporate apartheid and the strange customs that come with it. A Coloured man visits John’s house and:

“After he has left there is a debate about what to do with the teacup. The custom, it appears, is that after a person of colour has drunk from a cup the cup must be smashed. He is surprised that his mother’s family, which believes in nothing else, believes in this. However in the end the cup is

simply washed with bleach.” (157)

Although, or perhaps because we see South Africa through the eyes of a child, the system of apartheid is somehow always present. John shows us first and foremost how the government, which we know is lead by Afrikaner, is making sure that Africans remain oppressed by rewriting history and making sure the Natives and Coloured are not properly educated. We also see how the Afrikaner children believe in their supremacy and therefore the right to denigrate other groups, in the book primarily Jews and Catholics, as we see the Afrikaner interact with these groups the most. The few Afrikaans we get to hear talk about Coloured, like John’s dad, seem to support the government’s view that Coloured are of less value than whites.

The English-speaking that we encounter in the book, mainly John’s mother, has somehow accepted apartheid, and she seems to have stopped reflecting over it. She appears to think that the Coloured are used to obey the white, and therefore sees no real problem with it. Trevelyan, who is outraged when Eddie, the seven-year-old servant-boy, is taken away from his mother to work on the farm, runs away shares this view and is the only English person in the book that takes an active role in the subordination of the Coloured. By not questioning apartheid and the way that Coloured and Natives are treated they indirectly support the regime and make sure apartheid can live on.

We never get to see the Coloured and Natives thoughts and view. The ‘non-whites’ that are present in the book seem to go along with the system, but what choice do they have? Little Eddie, who is the only one who does not accept his situation and tries to flee, is dragged back to the farm and flogged by Trevelyan. In the end the Natives and Coloured probably do not feel that they have a chance to stand up against the dominance of the whites. If they feel otherwise it is not something that can be told from reading the book, as they never get to voice their thoughts themselves. The white people that can stand up against the system chose not to, for one reason or another. The only one that seems to reflect about the system is our ten year old protagonist, who after all is not really sure he is a South African, and therefore can sort of stand on the outside and look in at the faults and problems that the country are wrestling with. This perspective is, like Van Schalkwyk described in the introduction, a distinctive feature in white English-speaking South African writing.

Changes in Attitude from *Boyhood* to *Youth*

The accommodating behavior of the black Africans in *Boyhood* has changed by the time *Youth* takes place. In the beginning of *Youth* John finds himself caught in a country on the brink of revolution after the Sharpeville Massacre, with a government fighting for the survival of a system John has never believed in. One day he receives a draft-letter telling him he has to join the South African Army and stand up against the rebellion. This is not an option for John, who sees no use in fighting for something he does not believe in, for a government he does not approve of. He finds it all disgusting: "From beginning to end the business sickens him: the laws themselves; the bully police; the government, stridently defending the murderers and denouncing the dead..." (37). In fact John is tired of the political problems in the country, after having to live with them his entire life, although he has never supported apartheid, which we could see in *Boyhood* as well. Still, John is white and although he dislikes the system it seldom affects him directly, but he can see the consequences of it all around him. One day after a large riot, in regards to the Pass Laws, John and his fellow white students at the university want to forget all about politics and apartheid:

"...all they want to do is go home, have a Coke and a sandwich, forget what has passed. And he? He is no different. *Will the ships be sailing tomorrow?* - that is his one thought. *I must get out before it is too late!*" (39)

John describes how he wishes there were enough pity among white South Africans for the Natives and Coloured, to make up for the cruelty of the laws, but finds that this is not the case. In fact, the relationship between white and black has never been worse according to John, and he sees no way to bridge the distance which he describes as a fixed gulf. Yet John's own pity clearly is not strong enough to make him consider staying in South Africa to fight against the laws he finds so cruel. John's decision to move away is not in any way defended. He considers himself a coward for leaving. I can see how Wright's claim that Coetzee does not take a strong enough ethical stance is called for, because John definitely does not stand up against what he believes to be wrong. Atwell writes about Coetzee's improbable protagonist, and John is definitely one of them. He is boring, weak and socially incompetent. There are many things he ought to do in *Youth*, but does not.

The whites are not the only ones that are racist by the time *Youth* takes place. PAC has grown stronger, and their message is no more integrationist than the message

of the apartheid government. John concludes that: “The PAC is not like the ANC. It is more ominous. *Africa for the Africans!* says the PAC. *Drive the whites into the sea!*” (38).

Once in London John is visited by a cousin and her friend Marianne from South Africa. He tries to talk to Marianne about the political situation in their home country, but just like him before leaving South Africa, she is tired of the problems, and especially of foreign countries trying to meddle in South Africa’s business. In her opinion: “Black and whites would get along just fine if they were just left alone. Anyway, she is not interested in politics” (128). John’s mother agrees with Marianne and maintains that it is the Afrikaner in Transvaal and the hatred they harbor that has given South Africa such a bad reputation abroad. In fact, she claims that: “...South Africa is misunderstood by the world. Blacks in South Africa are better off than anywhere else in Africa” (100).

John’s view on apartheid has not changed since childhood. He feels ashamed of what is going on in South Africa and feels that he, as a white South African, carries part of the guilt. He realizes that he is mistaken if:

“...he imagines [that] he can get by on the basis of straight looks and honourable dealings when the ground beneath his feet is soaked with blood and the vast backward depth of history rings with the shouts of anger”. (17)

Guilt is a recurring theme, and the feeling of guilt does not stop once John arrives in London as he had hoped. It becomes more and more obvious that the reason for his escape has more to do with this feeling of shame, which he could no longer bear, than with anything else. When asked about the situation for whites in South Africa he replies that it is bad, but chooses not to explain his answer any further as he is not sure the British can understand how guilt can make one’s life miserable. For the same reason he fears to be called to the British Home Office and be asked a question they cannot understand the answer to: “From what are you fleeing? From boredom, he will reply. From philistinism. From atrophy of the moral life. From shame” (104).

In *Boyhood* John speaks Afrikaans without reflecting about the language, but when Marianne starts to speak Afrikaans with him in *Youth*, in a loud voice, he becomes very uncomfortable: “Speaking Afrikaans in this country, he wants to tell her, is like speaking Nazi, if there were such a language” (127). Afrikaans seems strange to him once he is in London. He no longer sees it primarily as the

language of his father's family, but merely as the language of the racist Afrikaner. Afrikaans is not the only thing once natural to him that he starts to question once he is out of South Africa. Although John questioned the fact that the Hottentots came from Dutch ancestors in *Boyhood* he seriously starts to question the fact that the Afrikaner have a right to South African territory in *Youth*:

“*Africa is yours*. What had seemed perfectly natural while he still called the continent his home seems more and more preposterous from the perspectives of Europe: that a handful of Hollanders should have waded ashore on Woodstock beach and claimed ownership of a foreign territory they had never laid eyes on before; that their descendants should now regard that territory as theirs by birthright”. (121)

In *Boyhood* as well as in *Youth*, John and the white people around him try to pretend that the problems do not exist. The difference in John's case this time is that he is old enough to flee from the problem. The government is still fighting for apartheid, but the Natives and Coloured have started to fight back against the system that oppresses them. John does not stay to fight for the government, but chooses to flee the country and try to bury his feeling of guilt. Nor does he try to fight the government from abroad, but rather tries to forget the existence of South Africa altogether. Unlike his mother, John wants the outside world to help put an end to the oppression of the Coloured and Natives in South Africa:

“... the Russians ought to invade South Africa. ...Justice must be done. ...As far back as he can remember, Afrikaners have trampled on people because, they claim, they were once trampled upon”. (100)

John's opinions in regards to apartheid and the different 'racial groups' do not seem to have changed in *Youth*, although the issue is brought up much less frequently than in *Boyhood*, which can be explained by the fact that John does not have to see the system at work when in London. What has changed is that he can articulate his views more clearly and that he realizes that the rest of the world seems to support his views on apartheid when he comes to London and can see newspapers, even South African one, that speak out against the South African government, papers that are banned in his home country.

It is somewhat hard to compare the two novels in regards to apartheid and groups within South Africa, as *Youth* does not deal half as much with these subjects as *Boyhood* does. But what is said shows that John's opinions of both the

different groups and apartheid has remained the same in both books, but whereas he is still discovering apartheid and its workings in *Boyhood* he is more than fed up with it all in *Youth* and as a result chooses to focus on himself and describing his own inner life and failures in *Youth*. The most evident change is probably that his disgust with the Afrikaner and apartheid has grown stronger, as he even starts viewing Afrikaans, which he used to speak with happiness, as soiled and wishes for a war against the Afrikaner led by the Russians. His rationale for this is simply that he is older in *Youth* and understands the implications of the apartheid system better, yet the responsibility that comes with age, to stand up against oppression and injustice and defend what you believe in, is not something John wants to deal with. Instead he chooses to flee from it all to try and start over in London.

Discussion and Conclusion

Apartheid is a recurring theme in both *Boyhood* and *Youth*. *Boyhood* describes apartheid as unfair, illogical, shameful and unintelligible. John tries to understand how adult, educated people can go along with its strange customs and ideas. To me this is a powerful critique of apartheid and the many South Africans that did not try harder to put an end to it. John is relentless in his portraying of the Afrikaner. They are described as ugly, violent, bullies who are always in a rage. When it comes to John's descriptions of his Afrikaner relatives he gives a somewhat more balanced picture as he claims they treat Coloured better than the Afrikaner in his home town. Nevertheless they support segregation and apartheid and do not prevent the young servant boy Eddie from being abused. The English on the other hand are described as well mannered, beautiful and heroic. As John does not know many English his idealist picture of the English is acquired mainly from books and his mother, and it is rarely challenged. The only person that does not fit his image is Trevelyan, who beats up little Eddie, something that leaves John confused and disappointed. Although John has more Afrikaner blood in him than English, he chooses to belong to the English group and does not want anything to do with the Afrikaner boys at school. It seems like John needs his positive image of the English, and to have them as a foil to the Afrikaner, in order not to give up on human beings after all the unpleasant things he sees growing up during apartheid. Natives and Coloured are rarely present in the book, as they are not allowed to live in the area where John lives either in Worchester or in Reunion Park. John likes both groups, however, and describes them as kind, hard working and mysterious, since he does not know hardly anything about their life after working hours. The group that is described the most is the English, if John can be said to be English, as we foremost see his thoughts and daily life. The Afrikaner are also often present in the book, both through the boys at school, through his dad and through his relatives. As mentioned John seldom meets Natives and Coloured. He does so mainly in town and on his relatives' farm, where they are workers and maids. The roles of the groups in apartheid seem to be that the Afrikaner support it and think they are superior to all other groups, the English seem to go along with it and the Natives and Coloured do not have much choice but to go along with it.

In *Youth* John is still expressing his disgust with the apartheid system, but the revulsion is now accompanied by dejection. His mind might be all made up

about the right of the Coloured and Native to the land of South Africa, but instead of fighting against the system he does nothing, just like the grown ups he used to criticize. And this despite the fact that Natives and Coloured have started to organize and protest against apartheid by the time *Youth* takes place and John could well have joined their fight. Most of *Youth* takes place in London, so the 'racial' groups in South Africa are not described at any length, but John's loathing of the Afrikaner and the government remains. He flees not to have to fight for their ideas and their government. He still likes the Natives and Coloured and continues to feel pity for them. The English are hardly mentioned, but his mother, who is the closest to English he has in his life, says that the system is not all that bad. The English in London detest the system however, but then they have the geographical distance and are not in the turmoil having to take action against apartheid, but can criticize it from a safe distance. The largest difference from *Boyhood* in regard to the issues discussed in this essay is that the Natives and Coloured have organized themselves and started to fight for their rights. John understands their position, but does not stay to support it.

Critics' objection to Coetzee's texts not taking a strong enough political stance can be seen as a valid point in regards to the autobiographies, *Youth* in particular, as almost all of the characters seem to go along with or even support apartheid. Yet at the same time I disagree. John's mind is all made up about the unfairness apartheid brings along, so there is a strong critique from the protagonist. And what Coetzee shows us is the true situation in South Africa at the time, where most people did in fact support the system. In *Boyhood*, Coetzee also shows us the absurdity of grown up, well-informed people refusing to see things a small child himself can see ever so clearly. Coetzee is criticizing the apartheid system in both books, but no action is taken in either. Many times John could offer his soda to a Coloured boy, or fight with the Natives for their rights, which he simply does not. This is both frustrating and unfair and I truly understand that black critics react to it. John never tries to question the views of the racist people around him, at least not out loud.

The novels might not be as political as South African novels often are, but they are definitely realist in that they do not try to make John a hero that he is not. Neither do they try to beautify our protagonist, the apartheid system nor the everyday lives of the people in South Africa. Guilt, oppression and bullying are always present when South Africa is in focus. All in all the critique of the system was stronger and

more straight forward than I thought it would be, but the feeling of hopelessness and defeat was also stronger. Not so much in *Boyhood*, as there is only so much a small boy can do, but in *Youth*, where John could have stood up for his opinions and fought against his bullies, but chooses, in a typical Coetzee-fashion, to do the less moral thing and flee from his problems.

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