

Perversions and Reversals of Childhood and Old Age in J. M. Coetzee's *Age of Iron*

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Introduction

This paper is based on a critical rereading of J. M. Coetzee's *Age of Iron*. 'Surprise' as the central aspect of investigation is understood and used here in the sense of 'textual surprise': elements of unexpectedness or unorthodoxy within the text that provoke a new perspective on the overriding themes of the novel. *Age of Iron* in fact contains various interlinked elements of textual surprise such as the intersection of the personal and the political, the shifting identities of the characters,¹ or the symbolism and the ambiguities of language. All these elements are synthesised by Coetzee into new ways of considering age. The concept 'age' carries generational as well as historical, individual and social reference, which Coetzee makes subtle use of. The focus in this paper is on childhood² and old age as central issues. Middle age, which is slightly less prominent in the novel, will also be covered to some extent.

Notions of childhood have in fact undergone tremendous changes over the centuries. There is agreement among scholars that modern conceptions of childhood originate from the Enlightenment, especially from Rousseau, and from Romanticism. More recent childhood studies in children's and adult literature have provided us with more precise insights into children's culture(s) and images of the child in various historical periods and socio-cultural contexts. The application of varied critical approaches to childhood has revealed the sophisticated character of implied notions of 'the child' and childhood in the discourses of literature, education, pedagogics, psychology, religion,

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and philosophy.³ Old age, by contrast, has only recently seen a revival of scholarly interest outside science, medicine, and psychology, and come under the investigation of literary and cultural studies.⁴

Age of Iron, published in 1990 and written between 1986 and 1989, takes us to South Africa in the year 1986. While the main protagonist, Mrs Curren, an old white lady, is dying in Cape Town, desperately longing for a reunion with her daughter who has been living in the U.S. since 1976, we see South Africa literally and metaphorically ablaze.⁵ The writer exemplifies the state of a country deeply ruptured by racial conflict by offering unusual perspectives on childhood and old age, and modifies conventional assumptions about them by revealing their disturbing aspects, unstable character, and shifting and new meanings. More specifically, he discloses their perversions and the reversal of their mutual positions to each other. The result is an intriguing discussion of issues of status, authority, power, and legitimacy that transgresses the divisions of race and gender.

Perversions of Childhood

Throughout the novel, a constant undermining of conventional notions of childhood can be observed in the narrative structure. A substantial number of these notions are formulated through metaphors and images which tend to accentuate rather common qualities of being a child. These are, for instance, the need for comfort, dependence, and security⁶; helplessness and ineffectiveness⁷; immaturity, inexperience, irrationality, and emotionality⁸; irresponsibility,⁹ innocence and the lack of morality/amorality¹⁰; and insignificance and non-authority.¹¹

Two techniques used by Coetzee, however, create surprise here: Firstly, he takes a conventional assumption about childhood, such as a child's inexperience, and makes it part of a child-sex nexus: at the end of her life, Mrs Curren grasps the nature of her relationship with Vercueil as one of mutual care and help, induction instead of seduc-

tion. Vercueil is likened here to a boy who does not know how to love. The nearer Mrs Curren's end comes, the more faithful he is, but still she has to guide his hand (196). This is followed up by Coetzee with an animal-sex-death nexus: Mrs Curren suspects that Vercueil has neither a conception of death nor of sex, just the "curiosity of a dog that sniffs at one's crotch, wagging its tail, its tongue hanging out red and stupid as a penis" (196-97). Secondly, Coetzee uses childhood in a quite unusual way to represent—and reflect on—the historical and racial conflict in South Africa at the time the novel is set. For example, a striking metaphor employed by Coetzee to connote helplessness, irrationality and immaturity indicates the ethnic confrontation: Mrs Curren is ashamed to have spoken and behaved like a child—she was whinging with "a child's voice," (109)—towards the cousin of her black domestic Florence, Mr. Thabane, after the sight of the dead boys' bodies on the Cape Flats. Her lapse into child(ish) behaviour and the irrational wish to get back to the safety of her house, to her "bed of childhood slumber" (109), are contrasted with the fact that the blacks have nowhere to escape to in the conflict.

Other conventional assumptions about childhood, beyond the metaphorical use of the child, which conceive of childhood as an important phase in life with various positive connotations are modified, qualified and even annulled through ethnic, gender, and historical reference.

Childhood is often conceived of as a time of intellectual curiosity and linguistic discovery, when a child starts to explore the relationship between words and reality, or, between signifier and signified. Children in Coetzee's novel are easily impressed by words and stories that create illusions, i.e. verbal impressions and pictures of the imagination that differ from what things are like in reality. This is a general psychological feature of childhood, but Coetzee adds an ethnic dimension to it by using a white childhood for illustration—the talks of Mrs Curren's mother about her visit to the Piesangs River and Plettenberg Bay (18).

Childhood likewise connotes a life in a continuous state of present without the sense of danger, a conception of death, mortality or transience. This is confirmed by Mrs Curren's recollection of her own fearlessness in going downhill on a bicycle (16) and by Vercueil's comparison to a boy who doesn't know death (196-97). However, there are passages when Coetzee modifies this feature of childhood, actually questioning its truthfulness. He does this by referring to individual experience: Mrs Curren's retelling of the story of her mother as a child in the early years of the twentieth century, travelling with her parents in an ox wagon from Uniondale to Plettenberg Bay, reveals that *her mother* at least was indeed afraid of death as a child (16-17). Furthermore, Coetzee specifies the general assumption in terms of politics and ethnicity and turns it into an accusation: Mrs Curren assesses the engagement of young male blacks in the current political conflict as dubious; she criticises the use of violence and the short-sighted focus on present political concerns. It is exactly the fact that the children are *not* afraid of death, their misplaced courage and, consequently, their refusal to make proper use of their childhood, which disturbs her most (48-51).

Innocence, another common assumption about childhood, is continuously unmasked by Coetzee. He makes the reader aware of its false character: at first Mrs Curren's childhood, back in the old days of South Africa, is fashioned into a period of innocence. Her playing familiar tunes on the piano brings back the memory of the South Africa of her childhood, when people used to have servants and the maiden would play the piano on a hot Saturday afternoon (23-24). Of course, the narrator's nostalgic attitude is due to her retrospective view from the time of open racial conflict back onto a period which was supposedly stable and peaceful. At this stage of narrative development, the affirmative emotional recollections are not called into question, but later more rational and politically-minded considerations emerge in Mrs Curren. As the text gradually reveals, there has never been such a thing as childhood innocence—and there never will be under the present conditions in South Africa. What is more,

those present conditions are for the first time understood by Mrs Curren to be the result of a long existent political crime already in operation in her childhood. What she now grasps is that her white childhood innocence had been bought dearly at the expense of the blacks and that her own attitude towards the crime had over decades been shockingly uncritical.

For Coetzee, the most prominent conventional notion as regards childhood seems to be procreation. To give birth to a child implies biological succession, a link to life and some guarantee for the future, a means of transgressing one's death, of projecting oneself into the future (cf. the use of this motif in Shakespeare's 'procreation' sonnets). The sense of procreation is so strong in Mrs Curren that it even acquires a significance beyond life, in the afterlife. Her notion of heaven is that of a place without fear of the future because she has successfully secured biological succession (25).

However, procreation, too, is placed by Coetzee in a historical and political context, to demonstrate its problematical aspects in apartheid South Africa. Mrs Curren's case is telling: unlike the people currently holding power in South Africa (fictionally as well as in reality at the time of publication), who secure their safe and prosperous existence abroad, who live up to their life expectancy and die peacefully in their beds, unbothered by their deeds of the past and surrounded by their grandchildren, she is cut off, as it were, from her biological successors, her daughter and her grandchildren abroad (128). Moreover, she has to admit to not only having been separated, but even estranged from her daughter and abandoned and deserted by her (139-40). The estrangement extends to her grandchildren, whom she has not yet met. Looking at a picture of her two grandsons taken on a lake, she acknowledges the limits of biological succession and reflects on the differences in child mortality and life expectancy in the U.S. and South Africa (195). The grandchildren may be her flesh and blood, but for her they are remote beings of whom she has only seen photographs. The biological line of succession to her seems to be "already dead"

(195). This is exactly why Vercueil can take up the function of a surrogate daughter for Mrs Curren at all.

In Vercueil, there is not even an indication of childhood—he is, as it were, old by nature. He has no wife, no children, no family of his own; “There is an air of childlessness about him” (11). This means that he is free of fetters, obligations, and responsibility. To the narrator, this has a touch of the unnatural. There is no line of succession, no biological extension, no evidence of evolution in him though he is a mother’s child as well. Surprisingly enough, Mrs Curren now extends her line of succession to him. In a highly complex passage, Coetzee links the two levels of nourishment and writing: Mrs Curren feeds Mr. Vercueil in a literal and physical way (even his dog, 7-8), and she feeds her absent daughter mentally, with words—inspired by Vercueil—that are related in a simile to the bodily liquid given by a mother to a child (9).

Not untypically for Coetzee, the importance of procreation in one thematic area—that of childhood—is extended to other areas such as fauna and flora, which serve as a foil. The device enables the reader to see the cross-connections between the biological and the political: the rabbits in Mrs Curren’s household have not been taken care of by her domestic’s son and have died; her garden was left unpruned so that the trees were overproductive and, as a consequence, the fruit was rotting (20). In the light of later developments, which include the killing of people, the passage seems to suggest the unconscious wish for procreation. Remarkably enough, it is the derelict Vercueil who is to be the future gardener in Mrs Curren’s home. Heightening the metaphorical meaning of his being ‘an heir’ to a person and a house (5) that stands for the country (later the house is called his home, 47), he is portrayed in a Shakespearean sense as a redeemer of the whole rotten country (21) and its new possessor.

Eventually Coetzee’s redefinitions of conventional assumptions about childhood reach a new quality as he shows them to become quite perverted. One perversion consists in the fact that the childhood connotation of procreation is modified in terms of race and gender, a

device which results in the denial of its life-affirming qualities. The writer in fact reserves these qualities to *female* childhoods only, but he does so across the divisions of race. They are exemplified by Mrs Curren and her daughter (5, 6, 76) as well as by Florence's daughters. Florence's daughters—with allegorical significance named Hope and Beauty (90)—remain alive, perhaps due to their not being involved in fanaticism and violence. In a sequence of allegorical dream vision (177-78, 185), Florence is heightened symbolically to a Greek Goddess, and her daughters to God-children. In contrast to these girls, Florence's son Bheki—only 15 years old (35)—and his friend get killed in the political conflicts. In other words, the young black females exclusively seem to represent South Africa's future hope. This is underlined by the fact that Florence has never entrusted Mrs Curren with their real African names (37), but then, of course, the girls are rendered allegorically as icons; unlike Bheki and his friend they are not characterised.

Missing biological succession is thus located by Coetzee in *male* childhoods, again across the divisions of race. Coetzee interpolates two complementary conceptions of futile *male* childhood in South Africa. Whereas the young blacks, left to themselves, kill time on the streets (67-68), waste their childhood on crimes and on acts of aggression, white male childhoods are spent in ignorance, in neglect of the possibilities of life, and in narcissism (7)—innocence turned into parasitism. Neither the young blacks nor the young whites use the chances offered by childhood and adolescence properly. Both modes of childhood are life-denying. Procreation seems to be tragically made void of its original purpose. As Coetzee presents it, the consequence is moral degradation among black *and* white children. In a language reverberating with religious imagery and implied humanist connotations of childhood, such as cognitive and emotional growth, Mrs Cullen describes that she is afraid—more than of the homeless people—of the behaviour of these black *and* white youngsters. The blacks are hard and cruel; the whites are unthinking softies (7).

In a second perversion, Coetzee portrays black male childhood in its ultimate consequence as the incarnation of a childhood which has been utterly deprived of its original positive impulses and has annulled itself: the young male black protagonists, Bheki and his friend, represent a whole generation of black children engaged in the current political struggle. Their childhoods are devoid of the characteristic elements which are highly appreciated in progressive white European educational sciences, such as curiosity, discovery, games, plays, and pleasure. Black children experience a childhood which involves (at best) an extremely rapid 'development' of sorts, (at worst) ignorance or blind fanaticism, yet in any case a fundamental challenge in personal and political terms, including the risk of losing one's life in the battle.

A case in point is the friend of Florence's son Bheki. Mrs Curren cannot love Bheki's friend at first. He is a child without a real childhood; in fact, his childhood is already over. His innocence is rather ignorance, for he only seems to have aged into adulthood without having truly developed or matured. So he appears to her as a rotten fruit (78-79). Whenever Mrs Curren tries to approach him, she feels a "wall of resistance" (79). He is not able to learn and has no prospects for the future. The humanist historical lessons that she, as a former teacher of classics, has to teach are lost on him (80, 81). Frustratedly, Mrs Curren grasps that this rising generation (which may not necessarily drink and be dirty like Vercueil), which represents the new Puritans, who hold up the rule, cannot (again unlike Mr. Vercueil) be talked to but only lectured to (81, 82)—and this in vain. She can only look with astonishment and incomprehension at the little Puritans who have put childhood behind them (125). And, indeed, Bheki's friend is placed by Coetzee into a life-denying context throughout the novel: his incomprehension, the refusal to listen and to learn will eventually lead to death.

Bheki is the first to die. What strikes Mrs Curren is that only when "he died he was a child again" (125, cf. 109). Mrs Curren weeps for dead Bheki as an example of a life sacrificed for questionable causes,

of the dashed hopes and chances of childhood, the broken line of biological succession (109). It is with this terrible example in mind that she later on tries again—and again in vain—to keep Bheki's friend from throwing his childhood away too.

Significantly, a black childhood is a time without games, for the racial confrontation is “not a game after all” (125), as Mrs Curren tries to demonstrate to Bheki's friend, but a war on children (144). In an ultimately futile attempt to dissuade Bheki's friend from throwing his life away, she uses her illness, cancer, as a means of persuasion. The boy appears to her as an immature man, or rather as a “poor child”: he wants to go home but does not know where it is (147).

Before he too dies at the hands of the police, Bheki's friend is likened (or rather contrasted) to Christopher Columbus. Instead of “holding [a] compass to his chest” like a talisman, awaiting his glory and power, he has a bomb in his hand (150-51). The image could be interpreted in two complementary ways: Bheki's friend is a new hero who is at the same time a non-hero—his life is not committed to exploration or geographical discovery but to battle and death. And Bheki's friend is a decoloniser, a dead repossessor of the country undoing the effects of Columbus's colonial enterprise. Mrs Curren conveys the boy's collective function through the use of food as a cultural metaphor: destined to be a garden boy in the old system, eating bread and jam for lunch at the back door, drinking out of a tin, he is now battling for all the insulted and injured, the trampled, the ridiculed, for all the garden boys of South Africa. A garden boy has been turned into a warrior, a child soldier, yet this is a questionable improvement which again confirms Coetzee's doubting the value of personal sacrifices for political causes. Mrs Curren's last appeal to the police is: “‘Wait!’ I said. ‘Don't do anything yet, he is just a child!’” (152)—a child at best or worst. The phrase “the garden boy” carries yet an additional significance: it is symptomatic of a whole South African mode of thought about black workers, conceived, paternistically, as children. Whereas, for instance, ‘the girl’ was used colloquially to refer to a female domestic worker, ‘the boy’ meant a gardener.

These terms are still current in some sectors of South African society even today.

The annulment of childhood is finally depicted in the form of a country and adults devouring their own children—an unnatural process that forestalls the future. In the sense of a political allegory, the country is seen as one whose politicians “are munching without cease, devouring lives” (28). The victims are fascinated by what is about to devour them (29). The political deaths of children in South Africa are associated analogously through reference to other eras and regions of political conflict, such as the Spanish Civil War, the Cuban Revolution or the Boer War:

Between the hours of eight and nine we assemble and they show themselves to us. A ritual manifestation, like the processions of hooded bishops during Franco's war. A thanatophany: showing us our death. *!Viva la muerte!* their cry, their threat. Death to the young. Death to life. Boars that devour their offspring. The Boar War. (29-30)

This decisive aspect of the annulment of childhood is increased in its effect through images which indicate the extension of the personal into the political: South Africa is described as a land of buried youth, hope and chances for the future, in need of resurrection; adults walk over buried black children (125-26).

The third perversion of the concept of childhood is inherent in the defunct and dysfunctional role of parents and the changed notions about education. The debate of these issues is further complicated because Coetzee emphasises generational as well as ethnic responsibility here.

Mrs Curren addresses these issues in conversations with Florence at the time when the troubles in the schools begin. She criticises the *laissez-faire* methods of education practised by the middle generation: carelessness is transferred from an inactive or irresponsible middle generation to an aggressive young one, which is fearless of nothing and has no respect at all, not even for life, i.e. is careless of itself and of others (48). In the novel the events happen in a reversed order: first

the children are careless of Vercueil (49), and then of themselves. The result is that children—uncared for or left to themselves by their parents—become “children of death” (49).

Florence denies the charges brought forth by her employer, but Mrs Curren reminds her of the degree the children’s violence has reached. Her domestic puts the blame for it on the whites. Coetzee’s further treatment of the issue underlines that there is a relentless war going on between generations and races in which the guilt is shifted to and fro, and violence perpetuates itself because of the lack of respect, responsibility and conflict management. At this point of the debate, the aspect of generational responsibility is emphasised (49-50).

Florence, however, is not to be accused of having turned her back on her children. She transfigures Mrs Curren’s “children of death” (49) into “children of iron,” insisting that: “These are good children, they are like iron, we are proud of them” (50). Mrs Curren, in contrast, loathes this dangerous, child-sacrificing ideology. She points out the militaristic aspects behind it, the death for wrong (i.e. patriotic) causes, and uses historical precedent (Spartan matrons) and the world’s ages theory (clay, earth, granite, iron, bronze) to make her point clear (50-51).

Step by step, Coetzee thus gives the debate a different turn, moving it away from the generational question towards its historical and ethnic implications: Mrs Curren comes to regard the present conflict within a greater line of historical continuity. She has to admit that the whites are indeed to blame for having sown the seeds of fanaticism on both sides. The historical precedent is seen in the military and religious, i.e. socio-political and cultural influence of Afrikanerdom, which brought fanaticism to the country (50-51).¹² In this reflection, anthropology and evolution (ages of the earth) are linked to generations and human ages, national history, and religious missions. Catholicism may have committed its crimes in Latin America, but in Africa Calvin redivivus—the spirit of Calvin and radical forms of Protestantism—have had their own devastating effects. This implies

that Calvinism obviously has had different ethnic emanations in white and in black Puritanism:

Is it truly a time out of time, heaved up out of the earth, misbegotten, monstrous? What, after all, gave birth to the age of iron but the age of granite? Did we not have Voortrekkers, generation after generation of Voortrekkers, grim-faced, tight-lipped Afrikaner children, marching, singing their patriotic hymns, saluting their flag, vowing to die for their fatherland? *Ons sal lewe, ons sal sterwe*. Are there not still white zealots preaching the old regime of discipline, work, obedience, self-sacrifice, a regime of death, to children some too young to tie their own shoelaces? What a nightmare from beginning to end! The spirit of Geneva triumphant in Africa. Calvin, black-robed, thin-blooded, forever cold, rubbing his hands in the afterworld, smiling his wintry smile. Calvin victorious, reborn in the dogmatists and witch-hunters of both armies. How fortunate you are to have put all this behind you! (50-51)

Lastly, Coetzee synthesises ethnic and generational factors of difference in the attitudes towards political changes—whether they should be brought about through violence or peacefully, from within the system—and as to the question of what is of higher importance: the personal or the political, the present or the future. Bheki's position of 'liberation before education,' which was socially current at the time,¹³ is juxtaposed with Mrs Curren's position leaving options in personal lives open for the future, despite adverse political circumstances (67-68).

In Coetzee's fictional discourse, education has less and less importance; black children behave perversely out of protest and neglect or sacrifice their vital interests. Immediate class and race motivations take priority over long-term educational and larger social concerns of the future. This symptom is accompanied by a simultaneous withdrawal and loss of adult authority, responsibility and influence. Parents become non-entities.

Across the divisions of race and gender the concepts of parent- and motherhood are thus called into question by Coetzee. He does this by portraying childhoods in the "age of iron" as characterised by separation, estrangement, and death. Black childhoods are character-

ised by parent absentees; they are either physically not present (in the case of Bheki's friend) or not interfering (Florence, Thabane). While black children are deserted by their parents, white parents are deserted by their children (Mrs Curren by her daughter). The traditional interpersonal relationships are shown to be disrupted and dissolved in white *and* black family structures. What is particularly abhorrent to Mrs Curren is the idea of a wasted and despised childhood filled with brutality as a consequence of neglected mother- or parenthood (50-51).

I would, however, not go so far as to fully agree with Dominic Head's largely negative interpretation of Coetzee's treatment of childhood in the novel. He interprets Mrs Curren's relinquishment of her own authority—through her childhood notions—as an atonement for her complicity with the dying colonial order. He denies her any moral authority in discussions about childhood, regards her development in the novel as a process of abnegation and renunciation, but understands the relinquishment of the innocence of childhood as Curren's political progression.¹⁴ Here, a few subtle, but important distinctions have to be made: certainly—and remarkably enough—Coetzee relinquishes childhood innocence. Yet Mrs Curren's notions of childhood do not result in a relinquishing of her own moral authority. Childhood is not 'sold' to make good for her historical guilt as a coloniser. Nor is childhood irrelevant in the age of iron—on the contrary. And by no means does the critical discussion of the status and position of childhood within colonial discourse lessen the personal significance of childhood for Coetzee as a writer and as a person, as he has demonstrated in his autobiographical work. It does not relinquish the simultaneous significant aspect of wonder and innocence in childhood.¹⁵

In conclusion, it can be stated that the elements of textual surprise in Coetzee's rendering of the concept of childhood stem from diverse factors. He fills the conventional assumptions with new, unusual or more critical meanings, modifies them in terms of history, race and gender, and juxtaposes them with perversions of childhood, such as

the denial of procreation, the annulment of black childhood, and defunct or dysfunctional parent- and motherhood.

Perversions of Old Age

Coetzee starts with conventional connotations of old age, exemplified mainly by Mrs Curren. The writer shows old age to be concerned with retrospective views accompanied by a number of irrational wishes: for a reversal of the effects of time (for becoming young and beautiful again), for a return of the old secure and peaceful times, a renewal of the happy conditions of childhood, for having prospects in life or enjoying the former close daughter-mother relationship (55, 57, 139). In old age, the moments when one experiences the feeling of being alive—as in childhood—are supposedly rare. Childhood recollections reveal this fact all too clearly and are therefore often bitter-sweet recollections of youth (cf. Mrs Curren's recollection of going downhill on a bicycle, 16). Childhood and youth, contrasted with old age, come to stand for the possibilities once offered in life.

Orderliness and discipline are singled out by Coetzee as further conventional connotations of old age—at least in Mrs Curren's generation, which has been brought up with a firm sense of mutual duties and responsibilities. Even under the conditions of illness and political terror, Mrs Curren finds it impossible to part with these principles: she commissions Vercueil to bring her garden back under control though she is also aware of other pressing concerns (21).

Highly prominent (negative) aspects of old age are physical decline and bodily deformation. An old body is shown to betray an old person, refusing to do its physical duty. It becomes a burden, defunct; especially the female body because it loses its capacity to nourish. Coetzee interprets the holistic concept of a person as a kind of contract which can no longer be fulfilled in old age and illness when the physical and the mental diverge. For him there is no such thing as healthy dying. Being alienated from one's body is equated with being

weaned from it. It is a reversal of the process of feeding a child (12-13). Characteristically, Coetzee extends the refusal of nourishment to animals: the cats are fed by Mrs Curren, but they refuse to eat (12).

Coetzee represents the old body as an ugly body. In a way that is slightly disturbing, he has the narrator, Mrs Curren, constantly examine herself, noticing her effects on others (cf. 180, 152, 156), especially other people's responses to her appalling physical state (152, 155, 156). These passages have a strong somatic component to them, but eventually they may acquire an almost pornographic dimension, as in the following quote. The description of the narrator's own appearance as almost naked is not fully scrutinised, but it definitely goes beyond a simple statement along the lines that Mrs Curren's clothes were soaking wet. The additional mention of a male gaze by a young spectator of the scene gives the passage at least a voyeuristic touch:

Under the eye of a boy in an olive rain cape I got out of the car, so cold in my wet clothes that I might as well have been naked. (105)

The struggle of old people with illness and (fear of) death is accentuated throughout the novel (10, 26). It often results in a craving for love and communication. Life means to touch and be touched, and death to do so no more (73, 74); the longing for a touch in moments of frustration over the approach of death has an almost seductive quality. In Coetzee's rendering of that impulse, he associates religion, prostitution, and eventually paedophilia. Yet more oddly, the wording of the following quote seems to suggest male desire in a female narrator constructed by a male writer (a practice which differs from Coetzee's procedure in other novels or in his autobiographical work):

When those nurses passed us a little while ago I was on the point of getting out of the car and giving up, surrendering to the hospital again, letting myself be undressed and put to bed and ministered to by their hands. It is their hands above all that I find myself craving. The touch of hands. Why else do we hire them, these girls, these children, if not to touch, to stroke, in that brisk way of theirs, flesh that has grown old and unlovable? Why do we give

them lamps and call them angels? Because they come [...] But also because they put out a hand to renew a touch that has been broken. (73-74)

As with the concept of childhood, Coetzee gradually also enriches the concept of old age through concrete historical, political and ethnic reference: he presents Mrs Curren as an individual old person who allows herself to get involved in the political conflict and take sides in it. The focus is still on old age, but Coetzee treats issues of history and ethnicity as equally important or firmly interlinked with the concept of old age. In his attempt to represent the current apartheid realities, he employs old age as an object of disrespect on the part of the young and middle generations: Mrs Curren has a difficult time explaining to Bheki and his friend that it is not acceptable to sleep in her garage without asking for her permission. In the episode containing the boys' bicycle accident, she suffers another example of disrespectful treatment at the hands of the police. This politically determined connotation of disrespectfulness is picked up in the description of a second encounter with military authorities after the episode in the hall on the Cape Flats. Old age committed to political justice is made to appear as silly or mad (105). Later Thabane speaks to Mrs Curren like a teacher; she feels like a child in his presence (98).

Along with old age (and especially old age and illness) goes the fear of being regarded or found out as incapable of coping. Mrs Curren is taught such lessons by Florence, Vercueil and Thabane. From a certain point in time, she can no longer manage her household. She depends on her domestic, Florence. Again Coetzee places the personal problem within a concrete historical, social and ethnic context and employs a synecdoche: he uses the breakdown of the conventional relationship between mistress and servant to reflect changes in the social and ethnic order of South Africa at large, i.e. he renders the personal relationship as symptomatic of larger political and societal concerns. The identities of mistress and servant are shifted; their new relationship is based on a reversal of power. Soon Florence is indispensable in all essential things in life and newly empowered. Her superiority (36, 38, 41, 54, 128) stems from two sources: a decrease in her mistress's

domestic authority due to her old age and illness and, additionally, her employer's growing awareness of her own long, silent compliance with the existing regime and the subsequent feelings of guilt and shame.

Finally, there is the concern of old age about the last things in life: wills, bequests, various arrangements, and the afterlife. Coetzee depicts moments of despair, of panic about the notion of non-existence, accompanied by reflections on the nature of the afterlife—will it be better than the first life on earth? (13). Afterlife has in fact various dimensions for Mrs Curren. It is associated with memories, visions, and some mystery. The narrator anticipates it either with realism, worries or humour. A romantic-escapist notion is that of heaven as a hotel lobby. It is a carefree zone (cf. above; with biological succession secured), a posh waiting room or antechamber filled with music and memories, devoid of pain and earthly sorrows (25).

Surprisingly enough, however, Coetzee contextualises even the afterlife in historical, political and ethnic terms.

When Mrs Curren, in a talk to Vercueil, reflects on possible rules and allowances in afterlife, a more worried notion comes to the surface. It is an afterlife without privacy and individuality; people are watched over, there is no possibility to keep secrets (188). This frightening notion of afterlife has Orwellian qualities of a continuous supervision that have been sketched on the basis of the social reality of current South Africa.

The South Africa of the past and the present determines Mrs Curren's notions of afterlife. She nostalgically recalls sleepy weekends spent by the white middle classes of South Africa in the past. This childhood recollection is shaped into a reflection of historical and political awareness now; she comes to grasp the unique and historically irretrievable nature of this (family) experience. Surprisingly, Coetzee does not leave it at that, but creates an unusual family situation: the white woman who is deprived of her own child because her daughter lives in exile acquires a new family. This is composed of people with ethnic backgrounds other than her own and includes the

non-white, non-privileged classes: when Mrs Curren is waiting in her car in the parking lot at Groote Schuur, she is accompanied by Vercueil, Bheki and Florence (69). Furthermore, in a second childhood recollection of a sleepy South Africa, which is juxtaposed with the new "landscape of violence" (92), Mrs Curren expresses her doubts about a peaceful continuation of life in afterlife because of the whites' detestable behaviour in the country. The fear of being denied the entrance to paradise is now reinterpreted in terms of South African history and colonialism:

Will we at least be allowed our Nirwana, we children of that bygone age? I doubt it. If justice reigns at all, we will find ourselves barred at the first threshold of the underworld. (92)

Mrs Curren's development in the latter part of the novel is remarkable as she becomes committed to a political cause and hence much more active than the middle generation, which—by contrast—remains surprisingly inactive. A telling image for this activity in old age is that of Mrs Curren's car. The old car, still allowing her to coast downhill, is a remnant from a world of reliability. Mrs Curren is shown to belong to that old world, not simply because of her age but because this world offered options for activity. Paradoxically, she is resisting change not because of backwardness, but because of a greater flexibility inherited from that past world. She refuses to be made helpless by the times, or by technology, and wants to hold options open for the future. Therefore Mrs Curren is not a fossil from the past, but active, in contrast to the representatives both of the middle and the young generation (72). They are the fossils, not fit for the future.

The middle generation (Florence, Thabane, Vercueil) is inert. It is the one that refuses to take up responsibility or watches with pride as the young generation gets killed in the conflicts. Whereas Mrs Curren questions the justifiability of personal sacrifices for a political cause, Thabane, the schoolteacher, who left his profession in times of trouble and became a shoe-seller (100), justifies the new political role and function of black children (as does Florence). He confuses a political

problem with a generational one and praises the young generation for its comradeship (149-50).

Florence, represents a model of motherhood different from Mrs Curren's. On the private level, Mrs Curren respects Florence's resoluteness, though she clearly recognises that this is a quality she would probably not enjoy herself if she were her daughter (36). On the political level, the two women's notions of mother- or parenthood clash. Whereas Florence—with her children at home—comes to represent absent, passive, or irresponsible motherhood,¹⁶ Mrs Curren—with her daughter in exile—represents active surrogate motherhood, for other people or their children (Vercueil, Florence, her children, Bheki and Bheki's friend). She assumes new educational and political responsibility despite her illness and frustration—thus compensating for a motherhood which is defunct and acting as a deputy.

Moreover, the reader perceives, with surprise, various processes of adoption and learning and eventually little acts of protest, resistance, and subversion in Mrs Curren, who seems not to have been a very politically-minded person before. Coetzee's depiction of old age in "the age of iron" highlights the narrator's newly won political insights and newly developed political attitudes. Personal, historical, political, and ethnic considerations are interlocked. Thus, Mrs Curren copes with the conflicting claims of the old and new inhabitants of her home: the new inhabitants trigger off new insights into her relationship with her daughter, essential aspects of motherhood, and the poignancy of the present political situation.

She adopts Vercueil as her surrogate daughter (to some extent also as her surrogate mother) and trusts the derelict with his mission as the decisive tool and medium of communication between mother and daughter—although the fulfilment of his function is thwarted because the novel ends without Mrs Curren's letter reaching her daughter. It is only through Vercueil that Mrs Curren fully understands the personal and the political situation she is in. Coetzee fashions her situation into a complex one with personal, social, historical, political, ethnic and

gender components. He surprises the reader by giving the exile situation, which is so symptomatic in the novel, a wholly unusual interpretation: for him it is not Mrs Curren's daughter who is the true exile, but Mrs Curren, who holds out in South Africa in times of national disaster and international isolation (75, 76).

Florence becomes her second ambivalent daughter surrogate. She gains power over her employer, but she also becomes a silent, imaginary addressee of panicky emotions that Mrs Curren would otherwise have unloaded on her daughter (40). Significantly enough, the black domestic acts as her white employer's political and social conscience. Florence and her family increase Mrs Curren's awareness of the present political conditions as well as of the nature of the political crime and the historical guilt of the whites.

Florence herself is a living model of black South Africa: confronted with Florence and her needs and problems, Mrs Curren is divided between pressing personal and political concerns—her illness and the political fate of the country. Both are associated in the simile of the smoldering country and her burning body (39). To underline her identification with black issues, Mrs Curren evokes a parallel to Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*. She identifies with the outsider position of Shylock the Jew to point out that blacks *and* whites are exposed to similar trials (40).

Through Florence and her family—husband, children, and relatives—Mrs Curren is related to the harsh realities and the physicality of black life, for instance in factories and schools. South Africa becomes concrete and visible for Mrs Curren through the domestic and social life of the blacks. The method Coetzee employs here is to let material or physical objects relating to food and meals, sexuality, procreation, politics, and ethnicity (41-44) signify socio-cultural relationships. The black material culture is shown to be part of these relationships: blacks work for the daily welfare of whites (44).

In the latter part of her life, the potential for identification with the black cause grows in Mrs Curren. She begins to feel empathy for Bheki's friend, who at first is only a touchstone in the newly com-

posed household challenging the status of both Mrs Curren and Vercueil. From being an unwanted and unloved son, Bheki's friend is transformed into a third child surrogate. Mrs Curren uses her cancer as a political metaphor for shame and self-loathing (145) to shake the child into awareness of the consequences of his deeds. Later the "cancer of the heart" is used in a similar way in her political resistance against the police (155).

In old age, Mrs Curren comes to display rare qualities of survival and perseverance. She exhibits an astonishing potential for resistance in personal and in political terms—to the seeming fatalism and the inevitabilities of old age and to the oppressive regime. She struggles against being dispossessed of her own house, by her body, by other (young and middle-aged) people and her country at large. She defies old age, illness, dependence, death, and personal and political disempowerment. Eventually, Mrs Curren comes to fight political arbitrariness and the regime in power. She may be old and ill, but she is a critical observer of the regime as it presents itself through the media, such as TV (9, 10, 28, 29), radio (23) and the newspapers. Dying as she is, she does not refrain from enlightening Vercueil with her critical opinions about the deceptive and illusionary practice of the media in South Africa to correct his naïve views.

In the end, she turns out not to be an "ineffectual bird." Rather, she takes action and commits little acts of political subversion: she helps when the bicycle accident with the boys happens; she lays a charge against the two policemen; she confronts the police with moral exhortations; she searches for Bheki; she behaves bravely on the Cape Flats (89-107). Furthermore, as she confides to Vercueil, she thinks of killing herself in order to end this state of shame (86, 113) and set a signal. Later, however, Mrs Curren admits that "there was always something false" about this heroic impulse. Significantly, it is Florence who is to be a judge on the seriousness of her death (141-42).

Mrs Curren's most impressive deed in terms of old-age protest, resistance against disempowerment, and political subversion happens during the seizure of her house by the police, to which Bheki's friend

has resorted with a weapon. The wording of the passage suggests a similar affection for Bheki's friend shortly before his death as that she has always felt for her own daughter. This is a new quality in their relationship (152). After Bheki's friend has been killed, she insists on accompanying him in the same ambulance—a spectacular form of resistance, as touching as it is doomed to futility. When the police deny her this, she relinquishes her home.

A very striking feature is Coetzee's instrumentalisation of the concepts of "history," "blood" and "race" in this context. The idea of an historically obsolete country is foremost in the novel. Through her education and profession, Mrs Curren has an acute sense of history. Her situation is one in which she tries to keep her self-respect in the face of a self-confident, satiated country that has long outlived the culmination of its colonial power. She feels that life under the conditions of this regime is humiliation, a disgrace, and that it cannot last. Mrs Curren perceives South Africa as an obsolete, die-hard, illegitimate, parasitic, self-perpetuating system that has produced a stupefied country. Coetzee adopts a number of striking images to illustrate this awkward condition. For example, the phrase "a locust horde, a plague of black locusts infesting the country, munching without cease, devouring lives" (28-29) mixes issues of politics, power, food and eating.

Many more images are linked with history and blend the personal and the political: e.g. the image of the desolate house, which suggests a dissolving body, giving the passage an additional political meaning. Mrs Cullen feels that even her house is doomed to death because it was built on doubtful or dishonest historical foundations—erected by convicts and without a human past (14-15). Furthermore, the sight of the face of a woman is associated with a reversal of evolution (the scales thickening on the eyes) and interpreted as a metaphor for backward evolution in South Africa (127). Elsewhere, obsolete South Africa is likened to a sinking ship, a country of closed borders, cut off from the international community (22, 23). The references to the powerful force of the cultural boycott in operation then are actually,

and not just fictionally true. Another telling image links the ideas of an historically obsolete South Africa *and* futile old age: South Africa is seen as a prison or cage for animals with the inhabitants safely locked up by their own wish, connected with their surroundings only through wires: the technology (telephone, TV, radio) is perfect, but the spirit of freedom and autonomy is gone. The inhabitant, Mrs Curren, is called “some wingless, ineffectual bird. A dodo: the last of the dodos, old, past egg-laying” (28).

Last but not least, in Mrs Curren’s letters to her daughter, where she voices her just fury and anger about the prevailing political conditions, the dimension of private writing is expanded through historical reference: Mrs Curren feels entitled to political protest precisely because she has witnessed the traumatic event in which Florence’s son Bheki has been killed. She passes her own mission as a historical and emotional witness on to her daughter as an absent, non-affected, physically and geographically distanced recipient. Her task will be to filter things and find truth (103, 104). All in all, Mrs Curren’s attitude towards her own white race and its historically wrong colonial mission in South Africa is one of deep distrust and self-contempt (79-80).

This is related to the issue of “blood,” which has historic reference in the racial politics of South Africa and refers both to the lives of individuals in the present, and the “race” it defines over a number of generations. Mrs Curren characterises South Africa as a country that drinks the blood of animals and people, and that is never satiated. Gradually she becomes fully aware of the national disaster of the literal (i.e. physical and social), but also moral and mental disintegration of South Africa. The narrative techniques of the novel anticipate the massacre of the black boys by the police through powerful images of a whole hierarchy of deaths in flora and fauna and in people: first the rotten fruits and dying animals (rabbits and chicken, 20, 41-42), then the dying of people, especially black children, finally the death of Mrs Curren.

Coetzee creates a whole line of association through blood: the scarlet and black blood of Bheki's friend, the blood generally of whites and blacks, the daughter's menstrual blood in the U.S., Mrs Curren's menstruation and menopause, her bloodless illness of cancer (63-64). The little amount of blood lost by Mrs Curren's daughter in a childhood accident (she stayed in the same hospital as later Bheki's friend) in comparison to the huge amounts of blood spilt by blacks is critically assessed as irrelevant (62-63). The blood connection evoked is a device constructed by Coetzee to demonstrate the historical guilt of the whites. Coetzee uses the occasion for further comments on the special quality of black blood (cf. also 124). Blood is seen as something special and precious that needs to be preserved; it is a mark of individualism, yet at the same time a connecting human factor and a physiological constant across the spectre of races. The political question formulated here is: will there be a common future for blacks and whites together, or will the races remain segregated by blood? This is expressed through a nature metaphor: will the South Africa of the future be a Baikal Sea (the black waters and white shores representing a restored mankind) or another Karoo (the barbed wire signifying a segregated mankind)? (63-64).

In conclusion, it should be stressed that while Coetzee does not spare the reader the appalling details of physical decay, he shows old age to be superior to youth and middle age when it comes to political activity. By combining the personal resistance to illness and death with political resistance, the writer treats issues of history and ethnicity as equally important or firmly interlinked with the concept of old age.

Reversals of the Mutual Positions of Childhood and Old Age or Adulthood

Age of Iron presents the reader with surprising, even alarming reversals of the conventional positions of childhood and old age or adulthood across the divisions of race.

The first reversal can be seen in adults who are in need of being mothered and comforted like children and in children who take up the role of care-takers of adults (5, 6, 20, 54-55, 73, 127). Mrs Curren signals several times that she wants to be comforted and taken care of by Vercueil, who thus becomes some sort of mother substitute for her. Actually, anybody could step in and provide that consolation for a 'child' (cf. above, the role of Florence). There are passages, however, where Coetzee gives this reversal of the relationship and responsibilities of child and parent a negative edge: Mrs Curren and her daughter are both like iron. The daughter refuses to come back to South Africa before the political conditions have changed, and the mother does not ask her to come before her death (75) though she painfully misses her. Coetzee describes an adult craving for a child's love as a reversal of the natural order of things and assesses it as something bordering on paedophilia.

"Because that is something one should never ask of a child," I went on: "to enfold one, comfort one, save one. The comfort, the love should flow forward, not backward. That is a rule, another of the iron rules. When an old person begins to plead for love everything turns squalid. Like a parent trying to creep into bed with a child: unnatural." (73)

The second reversal is that children take over or gain authority and exert power over adults. They start to instruct and direct the elderly and middle-aged in a newly gained feeling of self-importance, behave disrespectfully towards their elders, adopt threatening forms of behaviour, become cruel monsters and raise their hands to their elders. They also assume 'unnatural' roles, but in a different sense. This happens across the spectre of skin colours. Mrs Curren's responses to such a kind of behaviour alternate between bowing to her fate and protesting in personal and political terms. The attempts by the black children in Mrs Curren's home to disempower her and Vercueil are prominent: after the arrival of Bheki's friend, the boy at once teaches Vercueil, the earlier arrival, a lesson about alcohol (45). Coetzee broadens the incident into one of political significance by

comparing the self-important child to uninvited political leaders, "the new guardians of the people" (45). Florence checks her son's approval all the time (66), thus attesting to the undue authority of children exercised over adults.

When Mrs Curren addresses Florence on the question of responsible parenthood, she refers to the violence in the townships the year before and especially the cruelty exercised by children, hitherto unheard of. Florence had seen a woman on fire: when she screamed for help, the children laughed and threw more petrol on her (49).

In a later scene, Mrs Curren tries to find her way back to the Cape Flats. It is a child, a "little boy wearing a balaclava cap too large for him" (92), ten years old at most, who leads the way in a self-assured manner. He is characterised as a "child of the times, at home in this landscape of violence" (92). The boy acts as a guide to Mrs Curren and Thabane (94) in this "looming world of rage and violence" (96), which sharply contrasts with Mrs Curren's own protected childhood in the sleepy South Africa of the past. On her return to her car from the Cape Flats, she finds that a rock has been thrown through the windscreen. The rock becomes a symbol of the disempowerment of adults by children: "Big as a child's head, mute, it lay on the seat amid a scattering of glass as if it now owned the car" (104).

After the police have seized her house and killed Bheki's friend, Mrs Curren leaves it and wanders off. In Buitenkant Street, she is attacked by three boys only ten years old and younger. What they want from her—her gold teeth—is at first incomprehensible to her, but they show no mercy (161). Coetzee surprises the reader again by creating a political analogy that underpins the extreme ambivalence of child behaviour: the child-scavengers are about the same age as the children in the Soweto school strike of 1976 (156, 157).

On a more abstract level, Coetzee entwines the personal and the political. He creates the image of South Africa as an old country in the process of being repossessed by new children. Significantly, the passage follows one expressing satisfaction about the security of biological succession in old age, about leaving the house to one's

children. But now it is the derelict who is the heir to the lady's home, and black children are the heirs to the country. This unexpected effect of colonialism is described through the interface of land, house, and children. The coloniser is likened to a rapist, and the new heirs are the offspring of this act. Again, there is a child-sex nexus employed:

I think of those abandoned farmhouses I drove past in the Karoo and on the west coast whose owners decamped to the cities years ago, leaving fronts boarded up, gates locked. Now washing flaps on the line, smoke comes from the chimney, children play outside the back door, waving to passing cars. A land in the process of being repossessed, its heirs quietly announcing themselves. A land taken by force, used, despoiled, spoiled, abandoned in its barren late years. Loved, too, perhaps, by its ravishers, but loved only in the bloomtime of its youth, and therefore, in the verdict of history, not loved enough. (25-26)

In a food-and-eating metaphor, both the body and the country are seen as being eaten by ravenous children (cf. the boys who are rapacious as sharks, 7). Coetzee uses the cancer image as an inversion of pregnancy and motherhood. A healthy body and a natural process are thus turned into something inhumane, unnatural, and destructible. Furthermore, Coetzee brings in Mrs Curren's care of a wounded child (Bheki) to support the idea of motherhood parodying itself and, by some hints at paedophilia, possibly indicating the nature of a crime of adult against child or coloniser against colonised:

There is something about it that does not bear thinking of. To have fallen pregnant with these growths, these cold, obscene swellings; to have carried and carried this brood beyond any natural term, unable to bear them, unable to sate their hunger: children inside me eating more every day, not growing but bloating, toothed, clawed, forever cold and ravenous. Dry, dry: to feel them turning at night in my dry body, not stretching and kicking as a human child does but changing their angle, finding a new place to gnaw. Like insect eggs laid in the body of a host, now grown to grubs and implacably eating their host away. My eggs, grown within me. How terrible when motherhood reaches a point of parodying itself! A crone crouched over a boy, her hands sticky with his blood: a vile image, as it comes up in me now. (64)

Elsewhere this interpretation of cancer as a perverted pregnancy (with pregnancy being anomalous in an elderly woman anyway) is

reinforced. In the end, cancer, or the unwanted child, will eat Mrs Curren up:

[...] 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. It beats on the gate but it cannot leave. [...] My daughter is my first child. She is my life. This is the second one, the afterbirth, the unwanted. (82-83)

After Mrs Curren has looked at the children's corpses on the Cape Flats, she admits to Thabane to being moved. Coetzee demonstrates her internalisation of the conflict by giving the metaphor of a children's war a literal meaning. Mrs Curren applies it to herself and even locates it within her own body: this war lives inside her now and she lives inside it (103).

The illness in the body and the country imply that body and country consume themselves destructively and perversely. South Africa is presented as a country that has outlived itself, is pregnant with cancer, but is ready for a new start out of the ruins of the past:

Monstrous growths, misbirths: a sign that one is beyond one's term. This country too: time for fire, time for an end, time for what grows out of ash to grow. (65)

Conclusion

In *Age of Iron*, J. M. Coetzee surprises the reader with highly ambivalent, disconcerting and even alarming notions about childhood and old age. Conventional characteristics are modified by the writer in terms of history, race and gender. General notions as well as individual and unique stances are made more poignant through political reference. In other words, Coetzee exemplifies notions of childhood and old age through the depiction of the social realities in the State of Emergency, at the time at its height, or, vice versa, uses these concrete examples to pinpoint the perversions of childhood and old age in the colonial discourse. In Coetzee's rendering, the ages of life cease to be

clearly defined stages of *human* development. Rather, they turn out to be precarious states of existence exemplifying what has gone amiss in society at large. Childhood and old age function as synecdoches for apartheid South Africa at its most extreme.

Childhood is thus presented as wasted, manipulated, sacrificed, perverted or annulled. It is no longer a time or state of paradise. Moreover, Coetzee undermines and eventually rejects any notion of innocence. He does so by juxtaposing the seemingly eternal, peaceful childhood of the white colonial South Africa of the past with the non-existent black and the parasitic white childhoods of the present. Black childhoods are more specifically characterised by non-protection, adult manipulation, victimisation, terror, and dubious personal sacrifices for political causes. To be or to have a black male child implies a precarious future, more likely no future at all, futility instead of fertility, procreation perverted and annulled. The consequence of the lack of adult care and responsibility and incapability of learning in children is death.

Characteristically, the personal and the political are constantly interlocked in these presentations. The promise for the future ideally represented by procreation, biological succession, and generational bonds is no longer valid because of the essential rupture in the parent-child relationships as well as absent, passive or irresponsible parenthood, and a power shift from adults to children. This relinquishing of reciprocity in the generational relationships affects society at large; the future of the country is gloomy as well. Because of the self-destructive war of South Africa against its children, there is no nurturing of a future generation. Consequently, Coetzee has no promising prospects for the future to offer for whites, non-whites or blacks. Significantly, the only offspring Curren and Vercueil leave is a text.¹⁷ The question of responsibility—white colonial guilt or black irresponsibility/aggressivity, the latter perhaps a response to the first—is assigned generational *and* ethnic explanations.

As a consequence, the status of the child is a dubious, ambivalent and critical one: children are manipulated and victimised, but they

also take on a caring role and assert power over adults. They are only children by appearance. Drawn into adult conflict, they face and take up adult tasks, but have no chance of surviving. Childhood becomes an aggressive political metaphor: both a country devouring its own children and a country eaten by its children are unnatural processes that forestall the future.

In his rendering of old age, Coetzee stretches the limits of what can be said about its physical and mental realities. But he also fuses it with historical, political, and ethnic issues that expand the concept of old age beyond the personal, the individual, and the unique. As he sees it, old age is betrayed as well. The voices of the old and the sick rarely get a hearing. The old, however, may be more active than the young and middle-aged, though they are at the same time in need of being mothered and comforted.

By contrast, middle age in *Age of Iron* is not to be trusted; its representatives are shown to be incapable of shaping society constructively. Middle age is associated with a lack of insight or historical and political conscience, inertia, a lack of decision and responsibility, a waste of life and human resources, and blind fanaticism. Old Mrs Curren comes to exhibit a greater potential for resistance, more political vigour and social responsibility than all the representatives of middle age in the novel.

Traditional generational relationships are dissolved in a process cutting across the divisions of race. The status of the old is challenged by the aspirations of the young, i.e. the white and the old are in the process of being replaced by the black or non-white and the young—in personal as well as political terms. Coetzee thus presents an entanglement of issues of age, generation, parenthood, ethnicity, gender, and politics.

The ideological effects or purposes of the perversions and reversals of childhood and old age are to free them of their conventional, unreflected or innocent connotations. These are loaded by Coetzee with new and surprising meanings that critically reflect the colonial history of South Africa. Discourse and counter-discourse are thus

firmly entwined. The discussion of childhood and old age is surprisingly, but very consistently, shaped into a vehicle for the writer to come to terms with colonialism: its past wrongs, its destabilising force at present (at the time of publication), and the ambivalent positions of coloniser and colonised. Coetzee unmasks colonialism at the same time as he unmasks illusionary concepts of childhood and old age.

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NOTES

¹Cf. my essay "Mr. Vercueil and His Dog: Shifting Identities in J. M. Coetzee's *Age of Iron*," *Literatur und Lebenskunst: Festschrift für Gerd Rohmann zum 65. Geburtstag*, ed. Eva Oppermann (Kassel: Kassel UP, 2006) 184-205. Some of its ideas have been included in the present paper.

²The term 'childhood' is understood here in the broader sense and includes adolescence.

³As a result, insights have emerged into the intersection of childhood and socio-cultural and gender practice, of the workings of language and ideology. Cf. Jacqueline Rose, *The Case of Peter Pan or The Impossibility of Children's Fiction* (1984; London: Macmillan, 1994); Karín Lesnik-Oberstein, *Children's Literature: Criticism and the Fictional Child* (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1994); Valerie Sanders, ed., *Records of Girlhood: An Anthology of Nineteenth-Century Women's Childhoods* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000); Charles Sarland, "Ideology," *International Companion Encyclopedia of Children's Literature*, ed. Peter Hunt (London: Routledge, 1996), 41-57; John Stephens, "Linguistics and Stylistics," *Companion Encyclopedia* 58-70.

⁴Cf. Christa Jansohn, *Old Age and Ageing in British and American Culture and Literature* (Münster: LIT Verlag, 2004).

⁵The metaphorical level of the text exemplifies the intersection of the personal and the political in the categories of person, body, house, and country—categories which are associated through personification. See, e.g., mad person and mad country (105); burning child, woman, body, house, burning/smoldering country (39, 49, 110, 186); children of iron and age of iron (50); heir(s) to a person, a house, and a country (5, 25, 26, 47); a body, a house, and a country in dissolution (14, 15); a smelly person and a smelly country (70); marriage to a person and a country (70); blood in a body, a person, and in a country (5, 29, 62, 63, 64, 65, 110, 124); an ugly/ill body or person and country; children/people, a body, a country being eaten or devoured (7, 12, 28, 29, 30, 64, 65); dying fruits and animals, dying children/people, and a dying country (20, 41, 42, 65). All references and quotations are taken from J. M. Coetzee, *Age of Iron* (1990; New York: Penguin Books, 1998).

⁶Mrs Curren wishes her daughter to "Come and bury your head in my lap as a child does [...]" (139).

⁷Mrs Curren dreams of being trapped in a crowd: "I hit back, but my arms were a child's arms: *foo, foo* went my blows, like puffs of air" (51).

⁸Vercueil looks with "childish hurt" (116) when his attempts at assisting Mrs Curren in her suicidal plans are not appreciated enough by her. Mrs Curren knows that it is "childish [...] to point fingers and blame others" (117). When Bheki died "he was a child again. The mask must have dropped in sheer childish surprise when it broke upon him in that last instant that the stone-throwing and shooting was not a game after all" (125). Mrs Curren is haunted by Bheki's "look of childish puzzlement with which he had met his death" (109).

⁹Vercueil, as Mrs Curren tells him, wastes his life like a child does. He does not work to earn a living (8), but will have to do so in a South Africa of the future (72).

¹⁰Mrs Curren senses: "I lose my sense of shame, become shameless as a child" (119). For her, Vercueil is "[l]ike those children on Mill Street: no decency in him" (197).

¹¹When the police seize Mrs Curren's house and she insists on not leaving her home to support Bheki's friend, the police "paid my words no more attention than they would a child's" (155).

¹²For more background information on the Afrikaans language, Afrikanerdom, the Afrikaner history, myth, heritage, colonialism and nationalism, see the respective passages in Michael Atwell, *South Africa: Background to the Crisis* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1986); Jörg Fisch, *Geschichte Südafrikas* (München: dtv, 1990); Martin Pabst, *Südafrika* (München: C. H. Beck, 1997); Leonard Thompson, *A History of South Africa* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1990); Dieter Mahncke, *Konflikt in Südafrika: Die politische Problematik Südafrikas in ihren innen- und außenpolitischen Dimensionen* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 1989); Ampie Coetzee, "South African Literary History—The Black and the White Perspective," *Proceedings of the Anglistentag 1995 Greifswald*, ed. Jürgen Klein and Dirk Vanderbeke (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1996) 335; Dominic Head, *J. M. Coetzee* (Cambridge: CUP, 1997) 6, 7, 17, 133, 135; Susan VanZanten Gallagher, *A Story of South Africa: J. M. Coetzee's Fiction in Context* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1991) 28-31, 37-41.

¹³The Soweto School Strike had been a consequence of the government enforcing Afrikaans upon blacks in secondary education. For more detailed reference to the history of South Africa (especially the Soweto uprising of 1976, the 1985 student-led educational boycotts, the Cape Town unrest of 1986 and the wave of nationwide unrest in the mid-1980s, the respective educational issues involved and the government's efforts to control the media etc.), see: Michael Atwell chs. 7-9; Mahncke ch. 2; Fisch 336-38, 344; Thompson ch. 6; Pabst ch. 6; Albrecht Hagemann, *Kleine Geschichte Südafrikas* (2001; München: C. H. Beck, 2003) ch. 9 ff.; David Atwell, *J. M. Coetzee: South Africa and the Politics of Writing* (Berkeley: U of California P; Cape Town: David Philip, 1993) 120; Head 131-33; VanZanten

Gallagher 2, 194-96, and Sue Kossew, *Pen and Power: A Post-Colonial Reading of J. M. Coetzee and André Brink* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1996) 179, 190.

¹⁴Cf. Head 130, 134-36, 139-41 (with special references to the ox wagon episode, the debate about comradeship vs. the mystique of death, the doll folk metaphor or doll motif, the episode of the scavenging children, the family album episode). Elsewhere he speaks of the irrelevance of childhood in the age of iron.

¹⁵J. M. Coetzee, *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews*, ed. David Attwell (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1992) 29.

¹⁶There is no indication in the text that she becomes politically active, e.g. in an institution such as the Detainees Parents Support Committee. Cf. VanZanten Gallagher 195-96.

¹⁷Cf. VanZanten Gallagher 209.