

Disgrace

John Maxwell Coetzee

David Lurie is a professor of Communications at Cape Technical University in Cape Town, South Africa. He is a middle aged man, twice-divorced, living alone. He finds no pleasure in his work. His previous position was in modern languages, but his department was eliminated and now he teaches students something that he is not particularly interested in. He is a lonely man, and finds pleasure in going to a prostitute every week. One day he sees the woman, Soraya, in the city with her two sons, and shortly after that the prostitute stops working at the brothel where David frequented. He is now left alone and lonely.

David is a man who has had more than his share of women in his life. Most of these women have been strangers, one-time affairs that ended as quickly as they started. David pursues one of his young students, Melanie Isaacs. He sleeps with her on several occasions, despite her protests and complete lack of interest in him. He finds her exciting and doesn't really think about how she feels. Melanie, with the urging of her family and her boyfriend, files an official complaint against David with the University. David is given the chance to save his job by apologizing and taking the blame for what he did. When he is unwilling to do so, his only other option is to leave the university for good.

David goes to live temporarily with his daughter from his first marriage, Lucy. She lives on a farm in the Eastern Cape alone. She previously had a female companion who lived with her, but she has left. As David arrives on the farm, he begins to help out with the daily chores. He sees that his daughter is a country woman, despite himself being a city man. Lucy's neighbor is Petrus, a black man who was once her employee but has now bought a piece of land next to her and is a true landowner. David marvels at how the times have changed in South Africa with blacks and whites. One day, Lucy's farm is attacked by three men who take a lot of her belongings, set David on fire, and brutally rape Lucy. This incident leaves David shaken to the core, and Lucy in a state of disbelief. Lucy, however, does not tell the police about the rape, and keeps it to herself. She believes that in some way the rapists were paying Lucy back for all of the wrongs that have been done by whites towards blacks in South Africa.

As David continues to live on the farm, he often helps out Bev Shaw, who runs an animal clinic. He helps with the gruesome task of putting down unwanted and sick dogs. He feels a strange connection with the dead dogs, and goes to great lengths to ensure that their bodies are disposed of properly. David and Bev sleep together on a couple occasions, even though Bev is married. As David eventually finds out that Lucy is pregnant, he also learns that one of her rapists is living next door with Petrus. Petrus is now an independent man and even offers to marry Lucy in order to keep her safe. Lucy knows that he is only after her land, but thinks that this may be her only option. David keeps insisting that Lucy leave the farm immediately for her own safety, and this drives a deep wedge between father and daughter.

David is busy writing an opera that he has been contemplating for some time, and finds himself connecting to the character of the female lead. Returning to the city, he realizes that there is no place for him here anymore and that he is an outsider among his former peers. He returns to the country, lives in a small rented room, and tries to reconnect with his daughter. He continues helping out at the animal shelter.

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