**Contributor: Nicholas Meihuizen**

**Entry: Coetzee, John Maxwell (J.M.) (1940–)**

Coetzee was born in Cape Town and grew up in the Cape. He was educated at the University of Cape Town and took his PhD (based on a stylistic analysis of Samuel Beckett’s English fiction) at the University of Texas. As recorded in his semi-autobiographical work, *Youth* (2002), he lived and worked as a computer programmer in England in the 1960s, before moving to the United States. He returned to South Africa in the early 1970s, and taught at the University of Cape Town until his retirement. He emigrated to Australia in 2002.

Coetzee combines in his carefully crafted and eminently readable novels both intellect and ethical vision. Apart from his creative work, characterised as ‘late modernist’ by Derek Attridge (2005: 2), he is also a skilled linguist, translator, and critic. The creative work is marked by self-consciousness and reflexivity, of a directed kind, in that the act of writing and its requirements are often at issue in his thought. This reflexivity and its implications (the foregrounding of linguistic, writerly features; the obscuring of discursive transparency) are modernist in the sense that their effects are to undermine the symbolic order and narrative structures which otherwise buttress expressions (even oppositional realist expressions) to do with the status quo. Coetzee’s intellectual and writerly affiliations are international, and include Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Kafka, Musil, Beckett, Nabokov, Achterberg, as well as Foucault, Chomsky, Lacan, and Derrida. His work until 2002 was largely involved with South African issues (though not necessarily in overt ways), the issues related to living and writing in both apartheid South Africa and post-apartheid South Africa. Despite his move to Australia, his own emotional commitment to South Africa is still clearly apparent in the third of his semi-autobiographical works, *Summertime* (2009), with, for example, its deeply felt response to the Karoo (*Summertime* 96-7). His fiction is underlain by his extensive reading in philosophy, literary theory, and linguistics, and this expresses itself in part in his writing through the metafictional games he plays (*Dusklands* (1976), *In the Heart of the Country* (1978)), his reflexive retellings of events (*Foe* (1987)), the various entrapments of human subjects he deals with (*Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980)), and the ethical, autonomous power of narrative in the face of historical forces and historical disquisition (*Life & Times of Michael K* (1983), *Age of Iron* (1990), *The Master of Petersburg* (1994), and, indeed, most of his ‘South African’ novels). *Disgrace* (1999) created a controversy in South Africa, as it – in its unwavering depiction of (far from unambiguous) sexual and criminal events – was felt to reflect poorly on the new democracy. The novel, also – as does another work from the same year, *The Lives of Animals* (1999) –, conveys Coetzee’s intense awareness of the plight of animals. But Coetzee’s ‘message’ is not to do with animal rights, sexual abuse, or appropriate responses to burgeoning criminality in South Africa. The message is the work itself, a meticulously produced piece of writing, which (as in Beckett) is its own justification, even though it might bear various interpretations. What can be thought of as Coetzee’s Australian novels, though they still have South African resonances, are *Elizabeth Costello* (2005), *Slow Man* (2005), and *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007). The same type of reflexivity and its concomitants is apparent in these works as in the earlier ones, though Coetzee explores new thematic material, such as what is involved in the aesthetics and ethics of photography and photographic reproduction, and the breaching of private information through computer technology. A two-time winner of the Booker Prize (for *Life & Times of Michael K* and *Disgrace*), his (public) crowning achievement was the award of the Nobel Prize for literature in 2003.

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*White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa* (1988)

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*Inner Workings: Essays 2000-2005* (2007)

**List of works**

*Dusklands* (1974)

*In the Heart of the Country* (1978)

*Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980)

*Life & Times of Michael K* (1983)

*Foe* (1987)

*Age of Iron* (1990)

*The Master of Petersburg* (1994)

*Boyhood: Scenes from a Provincial Life* (1997)

*Disgrace* (1999)

*Youth* (2002)

*Elizabeth Costello: Eight Lessons* (2003)

*Slow Man* (2005)

*Diary of a Bad Year* (2007)

*Summertime* (2009)