

Introduction

You can listen to a recording of this story at:

<http://learnenglish.britishcouncil.org/stories/coetzees-novels>

This support pack contains the following materials:

- a pre-reading vocabulary task
- the synopses of the novels that you can listen to
- a comprehension activity based on the stories

Before you read

Activity 1

Match the words at the top to their definitions.

a. backdrop	b. barren	c. decay
d. essays	e. frontier	f. meek
g. mutiny	h. offspring	i. plight
j. protagonist	k. ransacks	l. scatters
m. stabbing	n. vows	o. wallflower

1. become gradually damaged, worse or less
2. border
3. causes to move apart in different directions
4. general situation in which specific events occur
5. injuring with a sharp knife
6. main character
7. promises
8. quiet and gentle
9. searches a place violently
10. serious or difficult situation
11. short pieces of writing on a topic
12. socially shy person
13. someone's children
14. unable to produce plants or fruit
15. when a group of people refuse to obey orders

Read the story

The Novels of J.M. Coetzee

Dusklands

The novel actually consists of two separate stories. The first one, *The Vietnam Project*, relates the gradual descent into insanity of its protagonist Eugene Dawn. Eugene works for a U.S. government agency responsible for the psychological warfare in the Vietnam War. However, his work on mythography and psychological operations is taking a heavy toll on him; his fall culminates in him stabbing his own son, Martin.

The second story, *The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee*, which takes place in the 18th century, is an account of a hunting expedition into the then unexplored interior of South Africa. After crossing the Orange River, Jacobus meets with a Namaqua tribe to trade, but suddenly falls ill. He is attended to by the tribe and gradually recovers, only to get into a fight for which he is expelled from the village. His last slave dying on the way home, he returns alone and later organizes a punitive expedition against the Namaqua. The narrative concludes with his execution of the slaves that deserted him on the previous journey and the massacre of the tribe.

In the Heart of the Country

In the Heart of the Country (1977) is a novel which delves into the the complex relationships that form between the colonizer and the colonized. It takes place on a desolate farm in South Africa told through the perspective of an intellegent yet meek European woman. She clashes with her father when he takes an African mistress causing a rift that leads towards vengeance, violence and a muddling of her own relationship with the Africans.

Waiting for the Barbarians

The story is set in a small frontier town of a nameless empire. The town's magistrate is the story's main protagonist and narrator. His rather peaceful existence on the frontier comes to an end with the arrival of some special forces of the Empire, led by a sinister Colonel Joll. There are

rumours that the barbarians are preparing an attack on the Empire. That is why Colonel Joll and his men conduct an expedition into the land beyond the frontier. They capture a number of "barbarians", bring them back to town, torture them, kill some of them, and leave for the Empire's capital in order to prepare a larger campaign against the barbarians. In the meantime, the Magistrate becomes involved with a "barbarian girl" who was left behind crippled and blinded by the torturers. Eventually, he decides to take her back to her people. After a life-threatening trip through the barren land, he returns to his village. Shortly thereafter, the Empire's forces return and the Magistrate's own plight begins.

Life and Times of Michael K

After her death, she is cremated and the ashes given to him. He vows to return them to her birthplace. He begins a long, arduous journey across the country to her childhood farm, sleeping rough and enduring many hardships along the way. The country is at war, and he sees many convoys going past. One of the soldiers ransacks his belongings and takes his money. Eventually he reaches the place of his destination and finds the place deserted, the owners long gone. He scatters the ashes on the ground and takes up residence there. He kills goats and birds for food and drinks from the nearby dam. A member of the old family comes and wanting to escape the war, hides in the farmhouse.

Foe

"Returning from Bahia, where she has been searching for a lost daughter, Susan Barton is put off the ship after a mutiny; she is accompanied only by the dead body of the captain, whose mistress she had been. She swims ashore and finds herself on the island with Cruso and Friday. Friday has been mutilated: he has no tongue. Who did this, where or how it happened, we are never told. After their rescue by a passing merchantman, Cruso dies aboard the ship and Susan and Friday are left to make their way in

England. After she arrives in England, Susan drafts a memoir, "The Female Castaway" and seeks out the author, Foe, to have her story told. Coetzee's novel comprises four parts: beginning with Susan's memoir, it continues with a series of letters addressed to Foe, letters that do not reach him because he is hiding, trying to evade his creditors. The novel proceeds to an account of Susan's relationship with Foe and her struggle to retain control over the story and its meaning; it ends with a sequence spoken by an unnamed narrator (possibly standing for Coetzee himself) who revises the story as we know it and dissolves the narration in an act of authorial renunciation." (from D. Attwell "J.M.Coetzee. South Africa and the Politics of Writing" University of California Press)

Age of Iron

The novel depicts the agony of Mrs. Curren, a classically educated white woman. She lives in the Cape Town of the apartheid era, where she is slowly dying of cancer. Against a backdrop of violence by whites and blacks alike, Mrs. Curren remembers her past and her daughter, who left South Africa because of the situation in the country: the book is framed as an extended letter from the mother to her distant offspring. As the story progresses, she constructs a relationship of a different kind with Vercueil, an old black man who happens upon her home.

Coetzee brings together important themes in this book: the drama of a tragic end of life, the separation of mother and daughter, a strange friendship between diametrically opposed people, and the metaphor of decay from within — atop which is painted a picture of social and political tragedy unfolding in an undeveloped country.

Disgrace

The novel tells the story of David Lurie, a professor of Romantic literature at a technical

university in Cape Town, South Africa, twice-divorced and unsatisfied with his job. The disgrace comes when he has an affair with one of his students and is dismissed from his teaching position, after which he takes refuge on his daughter's farm in the Eastern Cape. Shortly after becoming comfortable with rural life, he is forced to come to terms with the aftermath of an attack on the farm in which his daughter is raped and he is brutally assaulted.

Elizabeth Costello

In this novel, Elizabeth Costello, an aging Australian writer, travels around the world and gives lectures on topics including the lives of animals and literary censorship. In her youth, Costello wrote *The House on Eccles Street*, a novel that re-tells James Joyce's *Ulysses* from the perspective of his wife, Molly Bloom. Costello, becoming weary from old age, confronts her fame, which seems farther and farther removed from who she has become, and struggles with issues of belief, vegetarianism, sexuality, language, and evil.

Slow Man

Slow Man tells the story of Paul Rayment, a man who loses part of a leg after a car accident. He becomes a wallflower, but one attracted to his Croatian nurse. It is obvious that they could never come together, and their interactions become awkward.

It is not until the famed author Elizabeth Costello – the eponymous heroine of Coetzee's 2003 novel *Elizabeth Costello* – finds her way into Paul's life that he is able to become a stronger and fuller person.

On a deeper and more meaningful level the book is a discourse on the inter-relationship between the literary author and the characters, and with reality.

After reading

Activity 2

In the table are the names of Coetzee's novels that have been summarised in the text. Below is a description of the plot of each of them. Can you match the novels and the plot descriptions?

a. Age of Iron	b. Disgrace
c. Dusklands (Jacobus Coetzee)	d. Dusklands (Vietnam)
e. Elizabeth Costello	f. Foe
g. In the Heart of the Country	h. Life and Times of Michael K
i. Slow Man	j. Waiting for the Barbarians

Which novel deals with/is based on

1. , among other things, the relationship between a daughter and her father?
2. a man going mad because of his work?
3. a quest undertaken because someone dies?
4. adventure and revenge?
5. four separate important themes?
6. re-imagining of a classic novel?
7. someone internationally well-known who feels s/he is no longer who s/he used to be.
8. someone who loses his job and then suffers a terrible experience?
9. someone whose easy life changes forever because of some soldiers?
10. someone whose life is improved by someone famous?

Answers

Exercise 1:

1. c; 2. e; 3. l; 4. a; 5. m; 6. j; 7. n; 8. f; 9. k; 10. i; 11. d; 12. o; 13. h; 14. b; 15. g

Exercise 2:

1. g; 2. d; 3. h; 4. c; 5. a; 6. f; 7. e; 8. b; 9. j; 10. i