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Abstract

J. M. Coetzee, a South African-born writer, is renowned for his sparse yet potent prose. His writing often delves into complex themes such as apartheid, colonialism, and the human condition with a stark, introspective style. Coetzee explores the depths of human experience through his precise and evocative prose and invites the readers to confront uncomfortable truths about society and the self. He even writes about the fundamental themes of literature and examines the development of Johann Sebastian Bach's reputation as a classic from a critical standpoint expressed in his famous essay "What is a Classic". Coetzee draws parallels with contemporary writing and his research provokes reflection on the procedures and complexities of declaring a piece of writing a classic. According to Coetzee the discussions regarding the creation of canons, cultural identity, and historical conditioning keep on influencing opinions on classic literature in the contemporary literary landscape. Coetzee's admittance that our historical background influences how we play and interpret Bach's music provides a critical perspective on the subjectivity that permeates classical composition interpretation. Coetzee's research provokes reflection on the procedures and complexities of declaring a piece of writing a classic. Discussions about the creation of canons, cultural identity, and historical conditioning continue to influence the common human opinions on classic literature in the landscape of contemporary literature. By making a close reading of the selected essay from the book, the present paper will analyze J.M. Coetzee's notions on the nature of the classic along with his critique of canonical thinking, and his deep exploration of the rigidities and tensions of tradition and innovation in literary discourse.

Keywords: Literary Canons, J.M. Coetzee, Johann Sebastian Bach, historical context, Horatian.

In the present scenario J. M. Coetzee is a Nobel Prize-winning author and literary critic. He is a well known litterateur famous for his profound exploration of human complexities and social issues in his literary works. He is an illustrious writer not only for his captivating novels but also he is also famous for his insightful literary essays. Through his reflective essays, Coetzee attempts to engage in a profound exploration of literary theory, cultural critique, and the intricacies of storytelling. The chosen few essays of Coetzee offer a unique perspective on the evolution of literary canons, the role of the writer in society, and the complex interplay between language, power, and identity. Taking his 1955 meeting with Bach as a starting point, J.M. Coetzee clashes the difficulties of comprehending history and points out how it intersects with human experiences. He ponders on the varying cultural and intellectual viewpoints that have



shaped Bach's music and its interpretation. The continuous discussion over the canonisation, appropriation, and interpretation of ancient works is what makes them relevant to today's literary landscape. Coetzee's examination of historical comprehension as a force influencing the present applies to current debates about revising canonical texts and the dynamic character of literary canons. In the domain of literature, this calls into question how historical factors still affect how we connect with great works and mould our perception of the past. David Attwell aptly captures J. M. Coetzee's dedication to writing and his relentless pursuit of his subject matter, mainly focusing on the voice within a unique genre and historical context. Attwell emphasises Coetzee's commitment to regular writing, highlighting his constant exploration and refinement of his literary voice and themes. David Attwell says, "Writing as often as he can, daily, if possible, he is in search of his subject: the voice especially, embedded in a distinctive genre and a distinctive history." (Attwell xx)

Readers get encouraged to consider their personal experiences with great literary works as they consider their place in history and identity connected to the work. Coetzee's reflective investigation of his relationship with Bach in 1955 inspires modern audiences to consider their own historical situatedness and the ways the classics speak to different generations at a time when literature is constantly being reevaluated and reinterpreted. Irele's assertion regarding J. M. Coetzee's pivotal role in shaping the late twentieth-century novel is underscored by the recurring weighty questions that his work provokes. Coetzee's writing prompts us to reevaluate our conceptions of postmodernism and postcolonialism, signalling a profound engagement with the complexities of contemporary literature and cultural discourse. "Indeed, the importance of J. M. Coetzee to the direction of the late twentieth-century novel can scarcely be overstated. It is signalled by the weighty questions which recur in discussions of his work: how does his writing make us reconsider our definitions of postmodernism and postcolonialism?" (Irele ix)

In addition, Coetzee calls into question the idea of timelessness. He has peculiar focus on viewing the classic as a historically created thing. This inspires contemporary the authors, readers and researchers to view classical works as dynamic, subject to shifting cultural perspectives rather than as unchangeable objects. Coetzee examines the historical factors influencing the interpretation of the classics that aligns with current literary conversations about inclusion, diversity of viewpoints, and the cultural relevance of ancient works. The reference to Canepari-Labib's perspective on J. M. Coetzee's works makes it evident that the



richness of Coetzee's texts extends far beyond a singular interpretation. Canepari-Labib highlights the multidimensional nature of Coetzee's writing, which invites readers to uncover diverse meanings and truths depending on their unique perspectives. This multiplicity of interpretations not only underscores the depth of Coetzee's work but also underscores its relevance and resonance across various domains, from linguistic and psychological realms to philosophical, social, and political contexts. Canepari-Labib is of the view:

Because his texts reveal new meanings and new truths according to the perspective the reader adopts, the implications on linguistic, psychological, philosophical, social and political levels seem endless. For this reason, the lines of analysis I adopt are only some amongst many possible. (Canepari-Labib 18)

In "What is a Classic?," J.M. Coetzee analyses the evolution of Johann Sebastian Bach's status as a classic from a critical perspective and makes links to modern literature. Coetzee explains how Bach went from being a little-known composer to a well-regarded classic, highlighting the influence of patriotic, religious, and historical circumstances.

The relationship to the modern literary scene is found in the more comprehensive analysis of how creative works—literature included—become canonical. Coetzee's study makes one think about the processes involved in identifying a work as a classic, as well as the inherent complications of this process. Conversations about canon construction, cultural identity, and historical conditioning still shape classic literature perspectives in today's literary scene. Referring to Carrol Clarkson's observation, it becomes evident that Coetzee's scholarly pursuits have not consistently delved into the connection between his overt focus on language through the lens of linguistic sciences and the ethical impact of his literary endeavours from a literary-philosophical standpoint. This gap in scholarly exploration raises intriguing questions about the intricate relationship between language, ethics, and literature within Coetzee's body of work. Carrol Clarkson says:

Coetzee's scholarship has not paid sustained attention to the link between Coetzee's explicit preoccupation with language from the perspective of the linguistic sciences on the one hand, and the ethical force of his work, from a literary-philosophical perspective, on the other. (Clarkson 2)

The connection between the popularisation of Bach's music and the promotion of German nationalism and the Protestant revival bears similarities to current discussions around cultural appropriation and the ideological exploitation of literary works. Coetzee's examination of the ways in which Bach's compositions were appropriated to further specific goals strikes a chord



with current debates about the influence of literature on the formation of national and cultural identities.

Coetzee's recognition that our historical training shapes our interpretation and performance of Bach's music offers a critical viewpoint on the subjectivity inherent in interpreting classical compositions. This realisation is essential for modern literature as discussions about understanding, adapting, and responding to classic works are still shaping the field. Coetzee critically investigates the concept of a classic in music, notably Bach, and this viewpoint is still relevant in today's literary landscape. Coetzee suggests that a musical classic is what survives the day-to-day trial and error process, highlighting a standard that transcends the simple Horatian measure of durability. This viewpoint suggests that professionals, generation after generation, give attention to maintaining works of lasting significance and have faith in the testing tradition. This idea of ongoing evaluation is consistent with current literary debates over the longevity and applicability of great works across time.

There is a continuous argument regarding what constitutes a literary classic, and the concept that a classic is not determined by an idealist explanation of "value in itself" but instead earns value via professional and societal acceptance resonates. Coetzee's reluctance to single out a fundamental characteristic or aspect of the classic reflects the difficulties of today in negotiating differing viewpoints on the worth of literature and the changing standards for canon building. Derek Attridge raises a pertinent observation regarding J. M. Coetzee's literary essays, noting that while Coetzee adeptly employs strong rational arguments when necessary, there are instances where the boundary between reason and other modes of expression becomes blurred. Attridge suggests that Coetzee's discourse can sometimes transcend conventional rationality, inviting readers to navigate a nuanced terrain where multiple layers of meaning intertwine. Attridge is of the view, "Coetzee doesn't, of course, shrink from presenting strong rational arguments when he feels it's appropriate to do so, but there are moments in his discourse when it's hard to know just how seriously to take him when reason seems to give way to something else." (Attridge)

Coetzee's investigation of his reaction to Bach in 1955—doubting if it was a sincere admiration or a symbolic adoption of European high culture—reflects the necessity that exists now for self-reflection and a critical analysis of the reasons that drive our reading of great literature. This self-awareness adds to the conversation about identity, cultural appropriation, and how



classics influence public opinion. In the current literary landscape, when discussions about diversity, inclusion, and the reappraisal of established canons are common, Coetzee's critical analysis of the definition of a classic offers a valuable foundation for comprehending and questioning the accepted ideas in literature.

J.M. Coetzee's essay "What is a Classic" addresses the contradictory relationship between criticism and the classic as well as the live meanings of the classic. Coetzee presents a viewpoint that connects with the complexity of the modern literary world by drawing on the ideas of poet Zbigniew Herbert. This text's importance in today's scholarly world stems from its sophisticated interpretation of the classic as a living organism that defines itself by surviving against the attacks of barbarism. The way that Coetzee emphasises the persistence of classics— not because of their intrinsic qualities, but because generations have clung to them at all costs— makes one wonder about the lasting character of canonical works in the face of changing cultural, social, economic, and political landscapes.

Additionally, it defies conventional wisdom to suggest that criticism, even the most sceptic, is a tool for the classic's continued existence. Coetzee's viewpoint encourages reflection on how critical questioning adds to the vitality and resiliency of classic works in today's literary world when debates about canon construction, reinterpreting classics, and the function of criticism are common. "His essays, written in a customary lucid and elegant style, cover a range of important contemporary debates, including the modernist legacy; colonial identity; and the question of censorship." (Head 10) The understanding that the classic must endure decentring actions of critique to be validated reframes the connection between tradition and innovation. Coetzee's wisdom inspires an investigation of how critical interaction with existing works contributes to the continuous growth of the literary canon in a scholarly context characterised by a diversity of voices and viewpoints.

The essay under discussion is a foundational examination of the complex relationships surrounding the idea of literary classics. Much like literature, what makes a classic work constantly changes. This study aims to investigate the relevance of Coetzee's observations by examining the critical issues he brings up about the fundamentals of classicism. This essay seeks to present a detailed examination of Coetzee's viewpoints in navigating the always-shifting literary canons, providing insights into how classics are changing in modern literature. By applying a contemporary literary lens to Coetzee's article, this study advances our



comprehension of the current discourse around canonical structures and their applicability in today's diverse and dynamic literary world.

In "What is a Classic?" J.M. Coetzee critically analyses T.S. Eliot's October 1944 presidency speech to the Virgil Society. Eliot, a prominent character in English writings at the time, maintains that Virgil's Aeneid is the foundational work of Western Europe's singular civilisation, which has its roots in Roman ancestry. Coetzee observes that the text is tired, contrasting with Eliot's compelling but rather worn-out *de haute en bas* style. Coetzee highlights an interesting omission in Eliot's reflections—the recognition of his Americanness—even if Eliot foresees the post-World War II cultural transition with intelligence. Despite his American heritage, Eliot addresses a European readership in Virgil's honour. Coetzee asks what distinctive perspective Eliot has given his American upbringing.

Coetzee explores the nuances of Eliot's effort to position Virgil as a poet of all of Europe, saying that Virgil had a genuinely European identity and, thus, that English literature had a European ancestry. However, this necessitates addressing contentious ideas of Europeanness in the context of English literature as well as Eliot's British readership. In addition to deconstructing Eliot's ideas, Coetzee's critical analysis raises important questions about identity, cultural hierarchy, and the complex dynamics between post-World War II national and European allegiances.

The insightful examination by J.M. Coetzee on T.S. Eliot's transition to Englishness, especially in the 1940s, has significant ramifications for comprehending the modern literary landscape. The author in Coetzee explores Eliot's reasons for embracing his English identity, that ranges from anglophilia to a kind of bitter satire to a protective mask against the savagery committed by America. The author mentions Eliot's journey from living in London to assuming a social identity there leads to a more expansive assertion of a European and Roman identity that surpasses national and Anglo-American connections. Here we find the examination of Eliot's nuanced identity illuminates how cultural belonging is a dynamic concept in the current literary canon. The discussion that is still going on about cultural identities, experiences of diaspora, and how to negotiate literary roots in a globalised society makes it relevant today. As Coetzee indicates, Eliot's appropriation of cultural weight speaks to current debates about how authors traverse their cultural upbringings and cross-continental migrations, frequently incorporating their tales into larger historical and mythical contexts.



Within this framework, Coetzee's study encourages modern academics to consider the complex relationships among personal identity, literary interpretation, and cultural narrative appropriation. Eliot's use of Aeneid as a life allegory raises questions about how modern writers interact with ancient literature and adapt it to fit their own narratives. Chris Danta aptly captures the essence of J. M. Coetzee's literary prowess when he remarks, "Coetzee is nothing if not a master prose stylist." (Danta 12) This succinct statement encapsulates Coetzee's exceptional ability to craft language with precision, elegance, and depth, elevating his works to literary excellence. Coetzee's mastery of prose is evident in his novels, essays, and literary criticism, showcasing his keen attention to detail and profound understanding of the power of words. The dynamic interaction between cultural legacy and personal stories influences the way that authors create their literary identities in the twenty-first century.

Coetzee provides a valuable starting point for comprehending the modern literary scene with his analysis of T.S. Eliot's 1940s retelling of Aeneas and Virgil. The many layers of Eliot's ideas of history and the notion of the classic emerge when this study is connected to contemporary significance. Establishing a beachhead in Europe is a metaphor for Eliot's intellectual and cultural penetration into the classics and a nod to actual occurrences such as the Normandy landings. Similar issues of re-evaluation, appropriation, and reinterpretation of canonical literature are present in today's literary environment. Coetzee's description of Eliot's sophisticated idea of the classic fits well with the contemporary debates over the adaptability and lasting value of classical works in the face of evolving cultural and ideological landscapes. Coetzee writes:

Of course, I would be traducing Eliot if I left the impression that in 1944, he was in any simple-minded way setting himself up as the reincarnation of Virgil. His theory of history and his conception of the classic, are much too sophisticated for that. To Eliot, there can be only one Virgil because there is only one Christ, one Church, one Rome, one Western Christian civilisation, and one ordinary classic of that Roman-Christian civilisation. (Coetzee 5)

Eliot's claim that there is only one Virgil in the framework of one Christ, one Church, and one Western Christian culture makes us stop and think about the current discussion over inclusion, cultural pluralism, and the value of different voices in the literature of today. Furthermore, Eliot's receptivity to the notion that Virgil may have been a prophetic figure in European history suggests connections with modern writers who wrestle with the issue of literature serving as a vehicle for social criticism and foresight. Through the perspective of this theory, modern researchers may examine the difficulties involved in interacting with ancient writings, the



negotiating of cultural identities, and the potentially prophetic aspects of literature. Eliot's attempt to give the Aeneid significance for his day inspires modern literary scholars to consider how they, too, approach classical works in a manner that speaks to the exigencies of the present.

In addition to exploring the complexities of T.S. Eliot's intellectual interests, Coetzee's critical analysis of Eliot's lecture in "What is a classic" also connects Eliot's conservative political programme and the post-war European context. According to Coetzee, Eliot's talk might be seen from the outside as an effort to offer historical support for a conservative political agenda in post-World War II Europe. The proposed programme promotes a nation-state-based Europe with a significant role for the Catholic Church. It emphasises national cultures, agricultural foundations, and upholding a general Christian character. This reading is consistent with the more general conversations seen in recent literature about the relationship between politics and cultural identity, especially considering changing power dynamics.

Coetzee refers to so many arguments in the context of Eliot's ongoing attempt to rethink his national identity. He suggests a personal component to his reasons. Rather than being seen as an American alien teaching people about their background, Eliot seems to intend to become a respected voice in Western European culture. This feature encourages contemplation on the difficulties that Modern authors today meet in resolving issues related to identity, ancestry, and the nuances of cultural belonging. This examination also addresses Eliot's mistake in foreseeing the post-war order. Though Eliot envisioned a cultural-historical unification of Europe, the actual course was more shaped by the burgeoning North Atlantic order, which was led by Washington and rather than London or Rome. This insight aligns with recent conversations in the literary community and hints about the geopolitical changes that affect literary and cultural landscapes.

The criticism of Coetzee challenges modern academics to discuss politics, cultural identity, and the intricate relationship between historical events and literature. The idea expressed in the essay continues to address nationalism, cultural diversity, and global power dynamic. In this regard, Eliot's miscalculation serves as a useful lens through which to examine the ongoing development of Western European cultures in the context of shifting geopolitical conditions. Coetzee critically analyses T.S. Eliot's attempt to create a new identity in "What Is a Classic?" This study reveals a complex examination of Eliot's self-fashioning and the broader ramifications of this transformation process. According to Coetzee, Eliot's project goes beyond



traditional accounts of immigration and acculturation. It establishes him as the creator of his own nationality, which is firmly based on a particular form of internationalism that is Catholic. Coetzee states:

Continuing this reading from the outside, at a personal but still unsympathetic level, the Virgil lecture can be fitted into a decades long programme on Eliot's part to redefine and resituate nationality in such a way that he, Eliot, could not be sidelined as an eager American cultural arriviste lecturing the English and/or the Europeans about their heritage and trying to persuade them to live up to it a stereotype into which Eliot's one-time collaborator Ezra Pound all too easily fell. (Coetzee 6)

This text's analysis of the complex processes of identity-building and negotiating cultural affinities makes it relevant to modern literature. Eliot's quest, marked by a declaration of prophetic identity and a redefining of paternity that can be traced back to Dante and Virgil, makes one stop and consider how modern writers negotiate their cultural upbringings and create literary personas. Furthermore, a recurring topic in Eliot's early poems is feeling out of date or being born into a too-late era, which speaks to people's feelings in a world that is changing quickly. Colonialists struggled to balance their inherited culture with their everyday lives, which reflects the difficulties experienced by people today navigating cultural intricacies and historical legacies.

According to Coetzee's perspective, there are two ways to approach Eliot's enterprise. The first is sympathetic and it recognises transcendental experiences as the source of Eliot's self-reinvention. The other one is socio-cultural, and it examines Eliot's attempts as a kind of magical redefining of the universe. These viewpoints offer a framework within which modern researchers may examine the complex process of literary identity formation during globalisation, cultural fluidity, and changing socio-cultural environments. J.M. Coetzee's reflection discloses a life-changing experience as a teenager when he encountered classical music, especially Bach's Well-Tempered Clavier. Coetzee's examination of this private incident supports the current literary debates, highlights classical art's timeless influence on people's experiences and standpoints.

The universality of Coetzee's interaction makes it relevant to the literary environment of the present. The autobiographical approach is a methodological decision and a powerful example of the transformational power of exposure to classical art, be it music, literature, or other cultural expression. Elleke Boehmer argues that Coetzee's autobiographical work offers a unique perspective on his writing practice, positioning it concerning broader literary theories.



She contends that Coetzee's work presents a distinctively South African response, distinct from traditional English literature, by embracing a prosaic and non-poetic form of fiction. She says, "I will argue that Coetzee's autobiographical work situates his own writing practice in relation to these positions and that they ultimately formulate a specifically South African (i.e. non-English) response to them that consists in an explicitly 'prosaic' (i.e. non-poetic) form of fiction." (Elleke Boehmer 49) Furthermore, Coetzee's open acknowledgement of his early ignorance of and even mistrust of classical music speaks to a prevalent belief in today's culture. The experience with Bach serves as a symbolic starting point for conversations on the democratisation and accessibility of classical art, upending stereotypes and encouraging an appreciation beyond traditional cultural backgrounds.

Coetzee's essay resonates with readers and researchers of today, encouraging them to consider how their experiences with great literature may have influenced their literary sensibility. The essay emphasises the enduring quality of these life-changing experiences, supporting the idea that great works of literature have the power to profoundly impact people even in the face of shifting social mores and rapid technological development. Coetzee starts by setting his childhood in the Eisenhower-era cultural environment influenced by American popular music. While acknowledging the widespread impact of European classical music, he also points out how organisations like the Boston Pops have mediated and orchestrated it in the former British colonies that are now becoming American cultural provinces.

The turning point comes when Coetzee hears Bach's music one day in the garden. He characterises it as a realisation that radically alters his understanding of classical music. Coetzee's relationship with Bach is marked by consistency and clarity beyond simple musical arrangement. He describes Bach's exceptional capacity to combine discrete musical parts into a higher-order entity that incorporates more general concepts of resolution, intricacy, and exposition.

And then the afternoon in the garden, and the music of Bach, after which everything changed. A moment of revelation which I will not call Eliotic - that would insult the moments of revelation celebrated in Eliot's poetry - but of the greatest significance in my life nevertheless: for the first time, I was undergoing the impact of the classic. (Coetzee 10)

The section explores the philosophical aspects of Coetzee's meeting with Bach, raising issues on the nature of cultural impact and one's relationship to elite European culture. Coetzee asks himself if Bach was indeed imparting specific values to him through the spirit of Bach or if he



was adopting European culture as a cultural ideal. Coetzee's reflective analysis in the context of modern literature is in line with current debates in cultural studies and analysis. The paragraph raises issues regarding the validity of cultural experiences and the degree to which they go beyond symbolic gestures by encouraging readers to reflect on how they interact with classical art and culture. Coetzee's examination of his musical epiphany offers a framework for modern scholars to consider the nature of cultural values, individual ties to ancestry, and the transformative power of classical art in the contemporary world.

Coetzee explores the intricacies of his relationship with the classics, questioning whether his desire to learn about culture was primarily motivated by material concerns, aesthetic enjoyment, or an impersonal and disinterested search for knowledge. This reflective study is still relevant today in the literary world, especially regarding conversations about identity development, cultural appropriation, and why people engage with canonical works. The continuing discussion concerning the linkages of social systems, personal identity, and how people navigate and understand the classics in a globalised and linked world resonates with Coetzee's inquiry.

In two of the three senses, Bach is a classic of music. Sense one: the classic is that which is not time-bound, which retains meaning for succeeding ages, which 'lives'. Sense two: a proportion of Bach's music belongs to what are loosely called 'the classics', the part of the European musical canon that is still widely played, if not particularly often or before particularly large audiences. The third sense, the sense that Bach does not satisfy, is that he does not belong to the revival of so-called classical values in European art starting in the second quarter of the eighteenth century. (Coetzee 11)

As shown by Bach's compositions, Coetzee's three definitions of the classic challenge modern academics to reevaluate the standards used to identify works of literature as classics. In changing literary environments, questions of timelessness, canonical position, and devotion to classical norms are still up for discussion. In addition, Coetzee's question about being “spoken to by the classic across the ages” (Coetzee 11) makes one consider how people today deal with the voices of the past and the enduring appeal of classic works.

Coetzee's analysis encourages modern readers to reflect on the range of voices found in the classics and how these works may function as bridges and obstacles across cultural and chronological divides in a time when cultural diversity and diverse viewpoints are valued. Coetzee also links the modern literary world and the historical trajectory of Johann Sebastian Bach's acceptance as a classic. Coetzee explains how Bach went from being a little-known



composer to a well-regarded classic, highlighting the influence of patriotic, religious, and historical circumstances. The relationship to the modern literary scene is found in the more comprehensive analysis of the process by which creative works (literature included) become canonical. Coetzee's study makes one think about the processes involved in identifying a work as a classic as well as the inherent complications of this process. Conversations about canon construction, cultural identity, and historical conditioning still shape classic literature perspectives in today's literary scene. The connection between the popularisation of Bach's music and the promotion of German nationalism and the Protestant revival bears similarities to current discussions around cultural appropriation and the ideological exploitation of literary works. Coetzee's examination of how Bach's compositions were used to further particular agendas is relevant to current debates over the function of literature in shaping cultural and national identities.

To sum up, Coetzee's recognition that our historical training shapes our interpretation and performance of Bach's music offers a critical viewpoint on the subjectivity inherent in interpreting classical compositions. As we engage in contemporary discussions on the appropriation and interpretation of literary classics, Coetzee's perspective offers a valuable framework for understanding the multifaceted dynamics at play in the evolution of cultural and national identities through literature.

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