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Apollonian and Dionysian Polarities in J.M Coetzee's "*Disgrace*"

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**Abstract**

The Apollonian and Dionysian is a philosophical dialectic /dichotomy based on Greek Gods Apollo (God of sun) and Dionysius (God of wine). This has been specifically linked to Frederic Nietzsche's work *The Birth of Tragedy*. Nietzsche associates Apollo with art since art has structure form and order and Dionysius with drunkenness and madness that diminishes reason and order and appeals to man's instinctive chaotic emotions. Thus Apollonian instinct works as the formal "measured restraint" which prevents one to dive in oneness of self or natural being. Moreover it also permits man to develop cultural and social structures to regulate his existence. Nietzsche sees this force to be complemented by Dionysius energy which "delights in destruction" and allows formation of a spontaneous, well fashioned self by integrating one's instinctual drives. Nietzsche does not see these two forces existing without each other rather these two must exist mutually in relationship to each other. And this mutuality of two drives make existence of one harmonious. Present paper tries to analyze the antagonism of two forces in the novel *Disgrace* by J.M. Coetzee. Development of character involves either seeking the balance between

these two drives or becoming imbalanced between these Apollonian and Dionysian forces. This duality of reason and emotion can be found among characters of a novel or within a single character as well. Paper makes an endeavor to analyze the duality in individual self and among individuals by comparing them to other characters presented in novels.

**Keywords:** existence, self, dialectic of self, existential forces

J.M Coetzee's novel *Disgrace* (1999) can be seen as the bundle of instances of plights of individuals who try to cope with the circumstances and maintain their existence. Apart from external social forces there are internal anxieties and impulses which govern their lives. Coetzee has presented the protagonist of the novel David Lurie as a tragic hero with healthy mind, abundance of knowledge and prestigious profession. His life forces readers to envision the darker side of human life which deals with animal and primitive instincts of human beings.

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David Lurie is a twice divorced middle aged college professor in technical university, Cape Town, teaching one class in romantic literature. Lurie does not really like his job and does his duty for sake of earning money. In the beginning of the novel Lurie is presented as a man engrossed in his animal instincts. He treats and views women as objects who are to be used for his pleasure. He sees sex as an activity or problem to be revolved devoid of any kind of emotions. "He has, to his mind, solved the problem of sex rather well" (1 Disgrace). He uses prostitutes and has many illicit relationships with students, which leaves him with devastating life and career. David though at the same time is also aware of his flirtatious character but he is incapable to eradicate his instincts. David's life is more governed by internal drives rather external forces. He makes his own choices taking responsibilities on his own being aware of the cataclysmic results. David Lurie's life can be seen as either seeking a balance or becoming imbalanced between his emotional and rational tendencies. The matrix of imbalance between reason and emotion can be understood by understanding the conceptual outline of Nietzsche's idea of Apollo and Dionysius.

For Nietzsche philosophy had definite practical purpose that is to fascinate the emergence of great individuals who dedicates their life to growth and self

overcoming. He believed that such a pursuit would provide one with the ability to completely affirm life in the face of suffering, pain and tragedy. The great individuals attain heights going through pain, tragedy, suffering. Nietzsche viewed or considered himself an educator of such a great individuals. He saw himself writing not for masses but for potential higher man alone. This higher man is separated from the rest of the mankind because he has internal struggle of powerful desires fighting with each other. It's a constant war with himself therefore who suffers is always in danger of self destruction. Therefore this individual becomes a chaotic being who is in constant war with himself. Nietzsche says to attain greatness one must impose order on his internal chaos. Because he suffers so deeply from the chaos that there is possibility that the higher man can evade his life's mission and instead seek out the comforts of mediocrity via conformity.

Nietzsche believes that within every individual exists a herd instinct that is an innate need to obey and conform to the masses. Individual makes use of this need by obeying the accepted morality which is designation of what is good and what is bad in one's culture. According to him it is herd morality, and if higher individual wants to achieve greatness, must escape the clutches of herd morality and renounce it in favor of his own self-created and life affirming

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morality. In order to live according to his own life affirming morality Nietzsche thought it was essential for a higher man to separate himself physically from the herd and live a life of solitude. Nietzsche also sees one possibility in which out of fear and laziness the masses structure their life in a way that they have become blind to most fundamental questions like , why do I live, how do I become what I am , why do I suffer from being what I am.

With his proclamation God is dead, Nietzsche sees the coming an era when the interpretation of life's purpose which had been dominant up to that point most importantly the belief in God would be unveiled for what they are mere myths and stories without the conviction that life has a purpose or goal Nietzsche believed that many individuals would fall into despair under the suspicion that we are nothing but meaningless animals in a meaningless universe and this stage Nietzsche says would lead to state of nihilism which is the belief that everything is devoid of meaning without goal or purpose. Although Nietzsche himself struggled with Nihilism throughout his life and he didn't belief life was devoid of meaning instead he came to realize that nihilism is consequence of the misguided attempt to acquire objective knowledge or objective of meaning to life.

Nietzsche denies logo centric dominance of truth and says there is no

truth and objective knowledge about anything including the meaning of life is impossibility. Instead an individual is always confined to know the world through one's own personal interpretation off it. Since one cannot escape one's own personal interpretation or perspective of life. One of the principal problems Nietzsche sees in modern culture is that the form of life is judged according to its capacity to conform to certain moral norms. We need to determine the value of life through perspectives of life. We are the ones who create meaning with our experiences, with our epiphanies, with our struggle, pain and tragedy we are the one who paint this painting with colors of our experiences.

To the question of suffering Nietzsche responses that suffering should be interpreted in a manner which would be life promoting. Through the analysis of his life and his own suffering Nietzsche comes to understand that pain is not considered as an objection to life instead that life without suffering and pain would be a miserable life. Therefore he believes suffering to be precondition of greatness. Nietzsche considers tragedy, struggle, suffering and pain indispensable to human existence and sees them the life affirming forces. In his first published book *Birth of Tragedy* Nietzsche attempts to trace an evolutionary cultural history of Greek tragedy in three successive stages, birth, death, rebirth. In

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that he uses duality and dichotomy of two forces for artistic progress.

Nietzsche believes that both forces were present in Greek tragedy and true tragedy could only be produced by the tension between these two forces which are Apollonian and Dionysian. No doubt that the clash between two forces may be destructive but the result of this struggle will be creativity, procreation and wellbeing.

**Apollonian and Dionysian antagonism:**

Friedrich Nietzsche in his book *Birth of Tragedy* introduces a creative antagonism between Apollo and Dionysius. Apollo is the God of sun, order and harmony and Dionysius is the God of wine, revel and disorder. Apollo represents the capacity for order, clarity, proportion and formal harmony within the Greek spirit. It also manifests its power in the formation of self as a strong well shaped character. Apollo therefore represents a divine image of the *principium individuationis*: the well fashioned character who stands apart from the multitude (20). In opposite to Apollo, Dionysius finds solace in celebration of primitive, chaotic and ecstatic forces which is rebellious in nature and threatens the integrity of every formal structure. Dionysius strives for sexuality, unconscious desire and amorality of natural forces; it seeks to destroy the cultivated 'individuation' of the autonomous

individual and reunite us with the 'innermost core' of nature (20). Nietzsche sees Dionysian as destructive force which delights in destruction. Individual autonomous self *principium individuationis* are the result of system and patterns of social and cultural values which regulate his existence meaningful. Dionysian energy tends to break the structure and make individual to return to its primal, raw and natural being. Thus Apollonian forces work as measured restraint, restraining boundary that prevents man from falling from his higher self to wilder impulses. Opposite of this with Dionysian force one enters into inspiration, ecstasy, higher entity and community. The Dionysian force promises "an urge to unity, a reaching out beyond personality, the everyday, society, reality, across the abyss of transitoriness: a passionate-painful overflowing into darker, fuller, more floating states" (Nietzsche, *The Will to Power* 539).

Nietzsche condemns his own age though his words are equally applicable to present age. He criticizes the over rationality as the means of existence. According to him mere rationality cannot make existence and world meaningful. This is art, music and tragedy which make existence meaningful as whole. Nietzsche never sees Apollonian and Dionysian forces existing without each other rather two must exist he says, in a mutually defining relationship with each other

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(21). Individual's existence in this world governed by these two forces is decided by the extent to which both forces dominate each other. As they struggle to keep each other in check, both forces of the Apolline and the Dionysiac make great strains on the tragic hero. The hero is driven into a situation of constraint as a consequence of the above strife. This condition is an extent to what may call 'Apollonian/Dionysian polarity and antagonism. The above strife becomes a wearing task one cannot escape from in that it affects all spheres of individual's life: physical, emotional, intellectual, legal and so forth. In this struggle Nietzsche demands man's *will to power*. Which says that life is driven forward by an inhuman principle of creation that is imminent or interior to life: we should not judge life from the point of view of and external morality, but live life to its maximum potential (5). This way one should strive for self-preservation and not to restrain himself or herself by peripheral restraining forces. According to Nietzsche this kind of an effusive, heightened sense of being—gives the hero "a feeling of the necessary unity of creation and destruction" (Nietzsche, *The Will to Power* 539). In addition to this Further analysis of the novel *Disgrace* presents how character of novel David Lurie has been governed by external and internal forces philosophically termed Apollonian and Dionysian drives and how far is he able to sustain his *will to power*.

**Analysis:** As the novel unfolds David Lurie is seen guided by his impulses making love to prostitute named Soraya. He is a middle aged man, professor by profession but his intellect does not allow him to control his impulses as author narrates "his temperament is fixed, set. The skull, followed by the temperament" (2) *Disgrace*. He also tries to establish balance between his impulses and his work by trying to teach rather properly, attending libraries but not able to resist his instincts. He himself wonders that how "ninety minutes a week of a woman's company are enough to make him happy, who used to think he needed a wife, a home, a marriage. His needs turn out to be quite light, after all, light and fleeting, like those of a butterfly....like the hum of traffic that lulls the city-dwellers to sleep...". This shows his primitive tendencies lurking in his heart which does not allow him to think rationally. As the novel progresses Lurie is seen obsessed by the beauty of his student Melanie Isaac. "she is a student, his student, under his tutelage" He is so fanatical to her that he least bothers about the catastrophic consequences of his deeds. She is thirty years junior then him. Engrossed in pleasure Apollonian principles try to guide him as he thinks "a child! No more than a child! What am I doing?" (20). But these restraining boundaries society, social values, a civilized society is abided by do not work on him. "On the living-room floor,

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to the sound of rain pattering against the windows, he makes love to her.” After this he is trapped in his own impulsive deeds and starts facing immeasurable tribulations and problems. By now he has lost everything his power, name, reputation and his job. He is brought up on disciplinary charges that result in his dismissal: “The notification-...3.1 addresses victimization or harassment of students by teachers.” David thinks that whatever he has done is not flawed, he is not accountable of anything, “He does not feel nervous. On the contrary, he feels quite sure of himself.” as for him “Erring”: a being who chooses his own path, which lives dangerously, even creating danger for himself”. (32) David Lurie when inquired about his crime gives the reason that “I was no longer a fifty – year old divorce at a loose end. I became a servant of Eros”. (52)

Teaching in class David explains about what kind of creature Lucifer is that “he doesn’t act on principle but on impulse, and the source of his impulses is dark to him. “his madness was not of the head, but heart”. (33)“it will not be possible to love him, not in deeper, more human sense of world. He will be condemned to solitude”. (34)

Guided by his personas David moves on in his life leaving everything back. Moreover his attitude towards life does not make him loose his inner strength.

He starts a new and fresh life with his daughter in countryside. His acceptance of the facts and circumstances of past life and assimilation with new one makes his traumatized life on a right track. “Do I regret it? I don’t know. What happened in Cape Town brought me here. I am not unhappy here”. (148) everything seems very blissful in David’s life in countryside. David is living with his daughter loving her and showering compassion and pampering her. But as Freud says “The theory of the drives is, so to speak, our mythology. The drives are mythic in essence, magnificent in their elusiveness. We can’t ignore them for a moment in our work- yet, at the same time, we are never sure we are never actually seeing them clearly; and that of course, would in no way rob the drives of their mythic power, or their importance. “Bev Shaw, a dumpy, bustling little woman with black freckles, close-cropped, wiry hair, and no neck” (72). He does not find Bev Shaw attractive at all. Bev is physically not good looking, but the rebellious Dionysian instincts compel David to overlook her physical appearance and to contemplate in fulfilling his unquenchable thrust. On one side David is desperately concerned for her Daughter Lucy’s security and her sexual relations and on the other he is again in illicit relations with Bev.

Lurie is also authentic to his existence because In authenticity is expressed in a person just following the

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crowd avoiding responsibility (Guignon 2008). Lurie grows towards the authentic, owning the Mineness that “I” which constitutes him what he is. For Heidegger Authenticity is not to be abided by the moral norms and to be true following culture and behaving accordingly but to embrace the flaws and individuality of being. It takes years Lurie to understand the facticity of his life but eventually he knows and accepts the fact that death is a ‘way of being’ (Guignon 2008).

David throughout the novel relates himself to Byron as he finds many similarities between them. He also adopts the qualities of Byronic hero. Byron also had abundance of affair and illicit relationships with women. Thus David’s predicament is the struggle between his Apollonian Dionysian tendencies. David becomes the prey and puppet of desires and his desires lead to his actions. As he says “my case rests on the right of desires” (89). Readers may feel revulsion about him for how a man of fifty years or above and in a dignified profession may get indulged in such kind of cheap activities. David is physically fit well settled and well aware of his position yet he has not been able to control his primitive desires. David is not alien landed or from different society. He is a strong headed modern man knowing his drawbacks. Yet he is never ashamed of his deeds and consequences. His life becomes full of ups and downs. And this is none

other than the result of his apollonian and Dionysian instincts. Coetzee has presented David as a character not solely perfect but full of human frailties common in our milieu.

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