

# Incarnation: Gender as Allegory

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DR EUGENE DE KLERK

# Outline:



UNIVERSITY OF  
MPUMALANGA

Coetzee: “Jesus” in titles of novels as symbolic of dilemma/trauma of embodied meaning-making consciousness

**In-carnation** (as in Christ) = tension between meaning/word/soul and being/flesh/body. This tension cannot be resolved, but “soul”utions will be sought through cultural or symbolic readings and re-readings of being (including sex)

Transgenderism and transsexualism: “‘A soul trapped in the wrong body’ is a common description employed by trans subjects to explain their unusual condition” (Ho, 2006: 228).

- Lacan: Gender as *objet petit a* (attempt to compensate for inevitable misalignment of being with meaning).
- Butler: Gender as “enrobement” (performance) to ascribe significance to sex.
- Paglia: “Physicality is our torment...the limitation of mind by matter” (1995: 3). Sex is a gap in culture and always threatens its constructions.



# J.M. Coetzee's novels

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➤ *The Childhood of Jesus* (2013) and *The Schooldays of Jesus* (2016)

➤ Reaction to the publication of his first novel in the series:

Yet Coetzee has never published a book as bizarre as *The Childhood of Jesus*, an unfathomable metafictional firecracker....But if you're looking for allegorical clarity or even a passing resemblance to the Gospels, *The Childhood of Jesus* will frustrate you at every turn. None of the characters seem especially Christian....Names and events are laced with allegorical possibility...but any this-for-that correspondence always collapses under examination. (Farago, 2013: 2-4)

➤ Reaction to his second novel:

There is much more to say and explore through this novel. (We still don't have any good answer to why these books are titled as they are. Is "Jesus" David's "real name"? Does the biblical allusion allow Coetzee a comfort with allegory that he has never had access to before?). (Cheney 2016)

The *Childhood of Jesus* has been frequently described as an allegory, but it doesn't hang together tightly enough for that. Instead, Christ's life provides faint terrain for Coetzee's culturally and historically vague un-nuclear family. (Lowry 2016)

➤ Not much has been written critically on the novels. Indeed the primary commentary can be found in an unpublished thesis from the University of Hong Kong entitled: *Problematizing allegory and interpretation in J.M. Coetzee's The Childhood of Jesus* by Kiah Tay.

[T]he novel's evocative title, suggests its reading as a biblical allegory....While biblical allegory offers us a ready context to interpret the novel, [critical] commentaries on reading [in the novel itself] act as anti-allegory that challenges this approach. (Tay, 2015: 2)

I argue that the problem (or opportunity) of reading allegorically is intrinsic in the narrative and foregrounded through the novel's title, which sets up a deliberate and unmistakable parallel between the narrative and the gospels. However, allegory as a mode of reading us also problematized....the reader's choice to read allegorically to bridge textual gaps (i.e. to engage in allegoresis) in order to achieve a sense of interpretative closure. The novel makes readers aware when they are imposing their desires onto the text, which undermines the certainty and resolution that allegory would provide. (2015: 4)

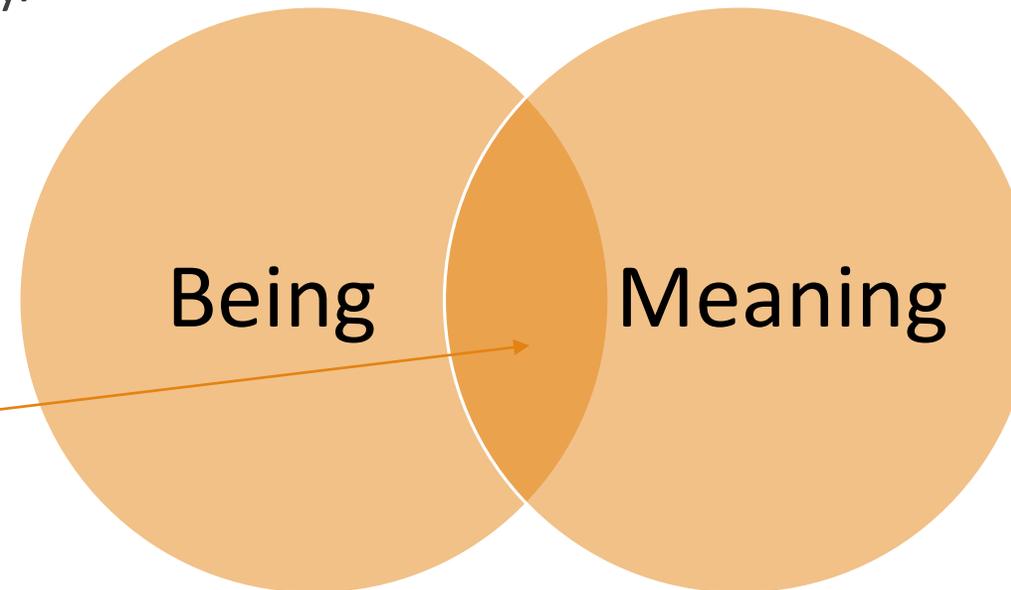
➤ Tay suggests that the novel resists attempts at interpretation in order to instil a moral lesson about the impossibility and immorality of foreclosing the necessity to constantly reread and reinterpret experience and the world: "readings are contingent on fixed contexts that are not transcendental but come into being through acts of reading" (37)



# Lac(k)an

- Jacques Lacan (psychoanalytic theorist) suggests that there is a shortfall that results from being entering meaning that the symbolic universe of meaning can never make up for and that the subject is a result of trying to negotiate this shortfall. It desperately tries to affix identity to privileged signifiers in order to resolve the distress of the perceived lack of a fixed or destined meaning or identity.

Non-meaning or gap.  
Site where a primary  
signifier to explain being  
(like sexual difference or  
gender) is located. This  
is where the Lacanian  
subject is located and  
where it allegorically  
reads being into  
meaning. (1964: 211;  
modified)



# Lacan through Althusser

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- The distress caused to the subject by the fact that its symbolic ex-sistence never fully aligns with its physical being (especially when it comes to gender not mapping onto sex) is perhaps described in the words of Louis Althusser (a cultural theorist and follower of Lacan):

[P]sycho-analysis is concerned with another struggle, with the only war without memoirs or memorials, the war humanity pretends it has never declared, the war it always thinks it has won in advance, simply because humanity is nothing but surviving this war, living and bearing children as culture in human culture (...) the long forced march which makes mammiferous larvae into human children, *masculine or feminine subjects* (1971: 190).
- Furthermore, it is the subjectivity and accompanying signifier adopted by the subject as privileged signifier (*object petit a*) that comes to dominate identity and masquerade as essence. It seems that the Word has been made flesh and not that the flesh has been made Word.



# Judith Butler

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- Judith Butler suggests that sex is the illusion on which gender depends and that even the body is a surface where “nature” as discursive construction is performed:

I have argued...that, for instance, within the sex/gender distinction, sex poses as "the real" and the "factic," the material or corporeal ground upon which gender operates as an act of cultural inscription....The "real" and the "sexually factic" are phantasmatic constructions - illusions of substance - that bodies are compelled to approximate, but never can. What, then, enables the exposure of the rift between the phantasmatic and the real whereby the real admits itself as phantasmatic? Does this offer the possibility for a repetition that is not fully constrained by the injunction to reconsolidate naturalized identities? Just as bodily surfaces are enacted as the natural, so these surfaces can become the site of a dissonant and denaturalized performance that reveals the performative status of the natural itself. (*Gender Trouble*, 1990: 146)

- For Butler the repetitive performance of gender can be subverted through parodic acts that emphasize the artificial nature of gender. Whereas, for Lacan, the subject is born when pre-discursive being is interpolated (neither fully nor effectively) into the symbolic universe, for Butler, subjective agency is a result of the over-determination of constructing signifiers:

The injunction to be a given gender produces necessary failures, a variety of incoherent configurations that in their multiplicity exceed and defy the injunction by which they are generated. Further, the very injunction to be a given gender takes place through discursive routes: to be a good mother, to be a heterosexually desirable object, to be a fit worker, in sum, to signify a multiplicity of guarantees in response to a variety of different demands all at once. The coexistence or convergence of such discursive injunctions produces the possibility of a complex reconfiguration and redeployment; it is not a transcendental subject who enables action in the midst of such a convergence. There is no self that is prior to the convergence or who maintains "integrity" prior to its entrance into this conflicted cultural field. There is only a taking up of the tools where they lie, where the very "taking up" is enabled by the tool lying there. (145)

# Camille Paglia

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- Camille Paglia maintains that the corpo-real is threatening and therefore encircled, but never contained, by culture. This leads to constant conflict and anxiety.

This book shows how much in culture goes against our best wishes. Integration of man's body and mind is a profound problem that is not about to be solved by recreational sex or an expansion of women's civil rights. *Incarnation, the limitation of mind by matter, is an outrage to imagination*. Equally outrageous is [sex], which we have not chosen, but which nature has imposed on us. Our physicality is torment, our body the tree of nature on which Blake sees us crucified. (1995: 3; emphasis added)

- Camille Paglia maintains that the rituals of Christianity are performative and serve the purpose of quelling the anxiety of needing to shut out nature and tame the body. Yet she sees in such rituals (and the ritual of communion is alluded to) a taming of existential anxiety through aestheticized re-enactment of the very trauma in question:

The blood that is shed will always be shed. Ritual in church or theatre is amoral fixation, dispelling anxiety by formalizing and freezing emotion. The ritual of art is the cruel law of pain made pleasure. (1995: 30)



Descent from the Cross  
(centre panel) 1612-14  
Peter Paul Rubens  
Retrieved from  
<https://www.1st-art-gallery.com/Peter-Paul-Rubens/Descent-From-The-Cross-Centre-Panel-1612-14.html> (25 September 2018)



# Transgenderism/Transexualism

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- Josephine Ho (2006) made a study of trans-subjects in Taiwan and writes, concerning the self-characterization of such subjects:

[It] includes two important premises: that the body and the soul (or identity, self-image, etc) are two separate and independent entities whose correct alignment makes up the effect of gender; and that the soul occupies a higher position than the body, to the extent that any mismatch between the two is to be resolved by modifying the body (through cross-dressing, hormonal therapy, SRS, or other procedures). (228)

- Ho (2006) also points out that there have been various attempts to blur the boundaries between this distinction, locating cognition across the boundaries of the feelings of the body and the constructions of the mind. Yet the experience of misaligned embodiment (mis-incarnation) remains central to the accounts of most trans-subjects.
- Yet Shanna Carlson (2010) suggests, in accordance with Butler and Lacan, that, in actual fact, trans-subjects are no less at the mercy of the need to embody the alien signifier of gender than non-trans subjects:

Inasmuch as the transsexual subject strives to pass and/or (for not all transsexuals strive to pass) identifies with one gender or another with an apparent degree of certainty, he or she is psychically no different than any other subject who lines up under one banner or another. Ostensibly “nontranssexual” subjects also strive to pass; they also identify with an apparent degree of certainty with one gender or another. In other words, “transsexuality” is not in and of itself any more extreme a type of symptom than is “man” or “woman” .... Oftentimes, the upshot of this false monopoly [on the part of nontranssexual subjects] on a piecemeal “certainty” is that transsexual subjects – particularly those who do not rigorously fit the demands of the public’s “incessant need to gender every person they see as female or male” (Serrano: 117) – are excluded, objectified, exploited, scapegoated, and silenced. (2010: 65)



# Transgenderism/Transexualism

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- A response to the question of transsexual surgery from a specifically Christian ethical perspective by Todd Daly (2016) results in a confrontation with the thorny (pun intended) issue of incarnation. Daly writes that the description of self as that coming from “inner conviction”:  
(...)tends to bring one into conflict with one’s body. If, however, we are created as embodied souls and ensouled bodies, then we may rightly wonder whether the body can and should be so readily reshaped to fit one’s desires. (41)
- Intriguingly, Daly suggests that the idea that the soul or essence of selfhood is transcendent and immortal while the body is mortal is the “residue of Romantic philosophy” (2016: 41) and not at the heart of Christian doctrine. Interestingly, however, his offer in place of reshaping one’s body, is to find comfort in the experience of Christ:  
[W]e might also consider the formative influence of a regular enactment of the Eucharist, where Jesus’ words, “this is my body broken for you,” might begin to mute the thoughts that “this is my broken [trans] body,” enabling a degree of “identity transformation” in this life that will be perfected in the age to come. (47-48)
- Here the passion of Christ is directly invoked as a parallel to the experience of trans-subjects.

# Conclusion

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- Coetzee, in his novels, alludes to Jesus. My contention is that he does to highlight the fact that the trauma of the in-carnation of imagination (as pointed out by Paglia) is at the heart of the human existential experience.
- My contention is further, that this allusion serves to support the case that he is suggesting that human life is a form of reading the fact of one's existence into meaning (Tay), an act of endlessly deferred and tangential allegoresis.
- Allegory as defined by M.H. Abrams (1999: 5):

An allegory is a narrative, whether in prose or verse, in which the agents and actions, and sometimes the setting as well, are contrived by the author to make coherent sense on the "literal," or primary, level of signification, and at the same time to signify a second, correlated order of signification.
- As to what may be signified, however, requires the agency of subjective, but culturally and contextually-mediated, interpretation.
- In other words, the Word made Flesh, represented by Jesus as symbol, is really a representation of the incomplete allegorical mode we, as humans, are made to inhabit. His passion, his crucifixion is really a re-enactment (perhaps mollifying) or our own.
- One of the primary allegories offered for understanding existence and explaining being is gender (premised on sexual difference), although this remains troubled (Lacan, Butler, Paglia).
- I contend then that trans-subjects, who confront - and make others confront – the gap between Flesh and Word/Body and Soul are Christ-like in their playing out of the human condition. One may suggest it is ironic that Jesus is worshipped whereas as trans-subjects are vilified instead. However, we must recall that Christ was crucified for claiming to be the son of God and also that his crucifixion has since been (sometimes luridly) aestheticized (what Paglia would see as a form of formalising and freezing of emotion). Perhaps trans-subjects are on a similar course with the likes of Vanity-Fair-worthy Caitlyn Jenner and Laverne Cox receiving public admiration.



Vanity Fair Cover by Annie Leibovitz. Retrieved from <https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2015/06/caitlyn-jenner-photos-interview-buzz-bissinger> (25 September 2018)



Laverne Cox. Retrieved from <https://twitter.com/lavernecox> (25 September 2018)



# Conclusion cont.

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- There still remains, however, as Butler's theory would suggest, the possibility of trans-subjects troubling gender. As Carlson writes:

For it could be argued that the transgender subject – as someone who is not necessarily or only very strategically invested in “passing” as one gender or another (e.g., someone who could be described as “bigendered” or “gender-fluid” [Serano 27]), as someone who may be invested in embodying a gender that would attest to what he or she may define as the constructedness of gender (e.g, “genderqueer” [Serano 27]) – would be the human subject as such, the unconsciously bisexual subject for whom sexual difference is only ever an incomplete, unsatisfactory solution to the failure of the sexual relation. In this way, transgenderism would figure as a solutionless solution to the impasses of sexual difference, a sort of unconscious scene of undecideability fundamentally shared by all human subjects, no matter their seeming “gender”. (2010:65)

- Such “undecideability fundamentally shared by all human subjects” sounds as if it may be the basis of a universalism equal to that offered by Christianity.
- To close, I would like to quote from *The Childhood of Jesus* where the narrator, the guardian of the child David, contemplates David's fear of falling through the cracks in the symbolic relations we assume to be stable (represented here by mathematics):

Perhaps. Perhaps. But what if we are wrong and he is right? What if between one and two there is no bridge at all, only empty space? And what if we, who so confidently take the step, are in fact falling through space, only we don't know it because we insist in keeping our blindfold on? What if this boy is the only one among us with eyes to see? (296)
- It is Jesus's incarnation that leads to a troubled life and painful death; yet it is also the open-ended mystery or allegory of incarnation that invites re-reading, re-interpretation, and transformation.

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