

# Thirty Years After... The Childhood of Jesus by J.M. Coetzee

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**Abstract:** Although J.M. Coetzee's body of works – unique and highly idiosyncratic – defies easy generalizations or summations, it is possible to identify several major tendencies present in his extraordinary oeuvre. Coetzee's novels published in the 1970s and 1980s, such as *In the Heart of the Country*, *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *Life and Times of Michael K*, were seriously concerned with the power relation between the oppressor and the disfranchised under the oppressive systems and, according to a number of critics, often took the form of an allegory. In the late 1980s and 1990s, Coetzee focused on experimental fiction in which he expertly combined history, biography and fantasy and entered into intertextual dialogue with the masterpieces of Western literary tradition as well as their creators (e.g. *Foe* and *The Master of Petersburg*). In the last decade or so, the nature of Coetzee's work has significantly changed. Old forms have been abandoned and Coetzee, instead, has turned towards other genres such as the memoir, essay, lecture, polemic – all of them being, in fact, intimate conversations Coetzee is having with himself, or, to be more precise, his multiple alter egos that he invents for the purpose of his fiction. Most notable examples include his autobiographical trilogy *Scenes from Provincial Life* and *Diary of a Bad Year*. This paper discusses Coetzee's most recent novel titled *The Childhood of Jesus*. Will the novel – published thirty years after *Life and Times of Michael K* – open a new chapter in Coetzee's oeuvre? Does it hail – as the title seems to suggest – a return to allegorical fiction? Or, perhaps, can it constitute another experiment in self-referentiality? My discussion of the novel will try to position the book in relation to Coetzee's other works and investigate its formal and thematic aspects in a comparative manner. The paper will also attempt to trace various literary and intertextual references and will ultimately see *The Childhood of Jesus* as a tribute to Miguel Cervantes and a work of a supreme ironist – a feature that is hardly ever considered when talking about Coetzee and his oeuvre.

**Keywords:** J.M. Coetzee; intertextuality; irony; Miguel Cervantes; South Africa