

# The Fluctuating Role of Male Homosocial Desire in Coetzee's Disgrace

By

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## Abstract

*This paper aims to explore the homosocial relationships and associations that the major character of the novel, David Lurie has with the males that he encounters. David Lurie is a fifty-two-year-old twice-divorced university professor of English who seems to have lost his connections with both interior and exterior worlds. He has been accustomed to taking advantage of prostitutes and other females in order to gratify his sexual desire, culminating in his sexual encounter with his female student, Melanie that has him fired from the university. He does not have any close dealings with any male person, despite the fact that there are those who are supposedly his friends and others who even confide in him, and this perplexes him. This paper will endeavor to indicate his bonds in five varied situations with: 1) his male colleagues in trial, 2) the most significant one with Melanie's boyfriend, Ryan, who along with Melanie and David Lurie himself form a love triangle in an urban setting, 3) Melanie's Father, Mr. Isaac, 4) Bill Shaw, who calls Lurie his friend and finally, 5) Petrus who works for his daughter in the rural setting. In order to achieve the goal of this study, this paper will discuss Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Between Men: English literature and Male Homosocial Desire*, a significant book that popularized the concept of Homosociality. In her book, Sedgwick introduced for the first time in sociology and literature, the love triangle and its relationship with, influence on and importance to the protagonist.*

**Keywords:** *Homosociality, Homosocial desire, Love Triangle, Male-Male Relationships*

## 1. Introduction

The term Homosociality which has dominated most of the recent literary and sociological works' analyses was coined for the first time by Jean Lipman-Blumen in 1976 and became popular mainly because of the influence of Sedgwick's (1950) book. Homosociality basically pays attention to social relationships or friendships between persons of the same gender especially between men (male-male relationships or masculinity) without any romantic core or sex-based intention, even though it is not out of the question for a homosocial individual to be a homosexual or heterosexual person under certain circumstances. Eve Sedgwick herself defines homosocial as "Social bonds between persons of the same sex," and she defines desire as "the affective or social force, the glue . . . that shapes an important relationship". Therefore, it should be mentioned that homosociality is a bridge between homosexual and heterosexual desires with dissimilar perspectives in a society.

As Sedgwick believes, her contribution is the notion that the boundaries between the social and the sexual are blurry, fuzzy; thus homosociality and homosexuality are connected and can never fully be disentangled. She acknowledges that the nature of this boundary varies from society to society and from era to era, and even within one society it can differ between women and men. She points to how, in the contemporary United States, there is a clear connection and continuum (but not an identity) between the desire of women to help their fellow women (feminism) and the desire of women for their fellow women (lesbianism). However, turning to men, the story is different: patriarchy is analogous to feminism; in that it involves social relations among men (she connects this to Heidi Hartmann's notion of patriarchy as "relations between men... create interdependence and solidarity among men that enable them to dominate women"); yet the men who furthest from patriarchy are also (at least publicly/consciously) those who are most homophobic. On the other hand, it is not unusual for people in a homosocial companionship to be

physically affectionate with each other, though not in a sexual way. Shaking hands, hugging, and teasing are all common features of this sort of relationship, as are frank discussions about sexuality, life, and health. Some researchers believe that the physical aspect of such friendships may actually be a significant socializing tool, pointing out that people with less physical contact in their lives would be less socially confident and less emotionally stable.

*Disgrace* is a novel of relationships between both genders\_ since homosexuality, heterosexuality and homosociality symptoms all together are evident in it\_ with a high dominance on male bonds in which the intention is to show the superiority of men over women even in post-Apartheid society of South Africa. *Disgrace* as the author's eighth novel written in 1999 and which brought Coetzee the second Booker Prize. Coetzee in 2003 became the second African writer to win the Nobel Prize for Literature, the first being Wole Soyinka in 1986.

*Disgrace* is the story of a 52-year-old man named David Lurie who is a South African professor of English Literature who loses everything: his reputation, his job, his peace of mind, his good looks, his dreams of artistic success, and even his ability to protect his own daughter. He is twice-divorced and dissatisfied with his job as a communications lecturer, teaching one specialized class in romantic literature at a technical university in Cape Town in post-Apartheid South Africa. His "disgrace" comes when he seduces one of his female students and then does nothing to protect himself from the consequences. Lurie is working on Lord Byron at the time of his disgrace, and "the irony is that he comes to grief from an escapade that Byron would have thought distinctly timid.

He is dismissed from his teaching position, after which he takes refuge on his daughter's farm in the Eastern Cape. For a time, his daughter's influence and natural rhythms of the farm promise to harmonize his discordant life. But the balance of power in the country is shifting. 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 impregnated and he is violently assaulted.

This paper which aims to investigate homosociality and its fluctuating role and impacts will try to exhibit the manly associations of the major character of the novel, David Lurie, with other males around him, with his colleagues in trial the significant one with Melanie's boyfriend, Ryan - which, with Melanie herself and David Lurie create a love triangle according to Sedgwick's definition of love triangle, with Mr. Isaac, Melanie's father, with Bill Shaw who calls him a friend which was strange word for David, with Petrus, his daughter's neighbor and also employee, in diverse settings (rural and urban ones) and their impressions on behaviors. Qualitative research among straight men finds that their sexual relations with women are structured and given meaning by their social relations with other men, while David is against this premise that shows a problem in his character and personality. He has not been taught to be socialized. The attempts are done to go through the causes of his aversion of male associations and his preferring of females companies imperatively without any pure interest. He himself discerns his own errancy in his behaviors totally, although, does not want to alter his personality or point of view against his environment and individuals deliberately, in a way that, makes his age a bulwark as a reason against these actions and beliefs.

### ***David and Aram Hakim***

As mentioned earlier in the introduction, physical aspects and freedom in behavior or speech mainly non-sexual in male to male friendships can help the members of these relationships to be more socialized and bring them a good deal of confidence in social connections which is one of the signs of masculinity in the persons' lives in a normal and rational way. In contrast, the individuals with lack of this feature among their male partners and pals can lead them to isolation and disconnection from their surroundings. Therefore, the male bonds are quite significant in a person's future personality construction. Aram Hakim is a youthful Vice-Rector and has been a friend of David's for numerous years. They have known each other for years; they used to play tennis together in his tennis-playing days (p. 42). Hakim is very

sympathetic and friendly with David even in the trial held because of David's sexual harassment of his student. In their case their friendship is based on some mutual interests: they are both academics and they play tennis together sometimes. Their male-male bonding fits with the often stereotypical assumption about such friendships namely that they only occur within a sporting context, but Hakim does his best to support David in the trial due to their long friendship, providing him some useful advice and preventing him from being sacked by the university. He advises Lurie against the use of words which are or could be detrimental to the outcome of the trial. When Elaine Winter - one of the trial members who hates David a lot from the past - accuses him of marking Melanie while she in fact did not attend the class and the exam, David has no defence and when Hakim sees this he says:

'Friends, this is not the time or place to go into substantial issues. What we should do' - he glances at the other two - 'is clarify procedure. I need barely say, David, the matter will be handled in the strictest confidence; I can assure you of that. Your name will be protected; Ms Isaacs's name will be protected too (p. 43).

Even after the first session of the trial, when Hakim sees Lurie unhappy and bewildered, he walks with him, shares his umbrella with him and speaks with him to comfort him, even though the reaction is negative. Totally he does his best to prove his friendship with David. On the other hand, Lurie does not see or pay attention to these concerns and refers to them as "male chumminess". He is not a witty person or does not even like to have this manner in his masculine community; his best friend in his own idea is his solitude and loneliness. In the trial, David is the loser from beginning. Even for the sake of lack of confidence he has convinced himself that what he did was not harassment, and without anything to say in defense at the trial, he wants to abandon the trial as soon as possible. David's feedback to the concern of his friends, in particular that of his close male colleague, is that they are to protect his future as an academic and do not want to see him "begging the streets" (p. 52). So it is clear that he has a pessimist point of view against his male friends in the university. His negative feelings about being in the company of the other friends originates from his childhood when he saw no man around him, since as mentioned before he was from a family full of female individuals. This is the reason that he had not been able to learn how to communicate with males, so instead of doing it in his adulthood he tries to flee from this community because he cannot find that ability and confidence to support himself against other males while he is the absolute power facing the females that indicate the full superiority of men on women in post-Apartheid South Africa. This is the reason why in trial, Farida Rassool the female member of the trial wants him to receive "the severest penalty" (p. 51) without any mercy. The support of Hakim and other male colleagues, notwithstanding the strong refusal of Rasool, subverts the sexist assumption that men are intellectual and formal in their conduct, whereas women tend to be more emotional. In short, if David knew the value of his friendship with Hakim and other colleagues in the university, he would understand the meaning of life and people's position in his environment, or it would be better not to accuse him of this emotionlessness due to his childhood and being dominated by females that eventually made him an empty and senseless womanizer.

### **Love Triangle**

#### **David Lurie, Melanie, Ryan**

The triangle is useful as a figure by which the "commonsense" of our intellectual tradition schematizes erotic relations, and because it allows us to condense in juxtaposition with that folk-perception several somewhat different streams of recent thought. (Sedgwick, 1985)

The love triangle, as Eve Sedgwick notes, is an excellent literary tool to represent the complexity of human desire. She claims "The bonds that link the two, 'rivalry' and 'love', differently as they are experienced, are equally powerful and in many senses equivalent". She believes in the triangulated desire, which portrays female characters that serve as the conduits facilitating male homosocial relations. She stresses the unique power structures that emerge when two men become competitors over the female object. Sedgwick links triangulated desire with the traffic of women; she highlights how this process politically and economically oppresses women through a strengthening of male bonds.

However, in the novel, this triangulated love is somehow different from its definition, even though, in the course of the story, the definition in the opposite form is proven. Unlike Sedgwick's definition here at the beginning there is no love among the members, on the other hand, the rivals do not possess a deep or positive homosocial desire for each other which remains to the end. However, these two males' behavior toward Melanie, the target character in this part, as an object not as a person to be loved - of course in this novel it is out of the question to look for love - shows the mentioned superiority of men over women in South Africa's society after Apartheid. Besides, the rivals are from two varied generations (old versus young) with various attitudes and behaviors but the same rate of pride; besides, there are no rivals to deepen their own relation but rival to frighten each other via the tool which is Melanie. This rivalry originates from the uttered arrogance that both possess. Another example of male-male interaction between David and another man is found in his dealings with Ryan, Melanie's boyfriend. Sedgwick (1992:21) posits that within a particular erotic triangle the bond between the rivals is "even stronger, more heavily determinant of actions and choices" than is the case with the bond "between either of the lovers and the beloved".

David meets Melanie alone for the first time in the university yard on a Friday evening when he is on his way home from work. As he is sexually active, he just takes her to his house and has sex with her, thus bringing along all the subsequent consequences. Having taken advantage of her, David finds Melanie very attractive and repeats his sexual encounters with her. He does not think of love for the girl who is at the age of his daughter; even at the beginning he was not aware of Melanie's boyfriend; to David, it was a matter of gratifying himself sexually after Soraya, the prostitute he sleeps with weekly, disappears. On the other hand, Ryan, Melanie's boyfriend, is a proud young man who is lover of Melanie or it is better to say, the owner of her. He misuses this opportunity (sexual harassment) to underscore his power even in the class. The battle over the desired female is fought within an intellectual context and the two men wish to humiliate each other. True to his haughty nature,

David shuns the boyfriend as being the stereotypical possessor of motorcycles and flashy clothes and nothing more. Ryan at the end causes David to find an especial feeling for Melanie, to consider her like his daughter and the same feeling is created in Melanie gradually, and the positive point of rivalry is that he understands he is not suitable for Melanie due to the big difference between their ages. He comes to the decision to apologize for whatever has happened. In short, this competition for belittling had some positive aspects like David apologizing for seeing Melanie as an object, causing a class to understand the problem. Therefore, a love triangle can lead to both a deeper relation between the males and can deepen the problem between them, depending on how the three in the triangle are bonded.

### ***David and Mr. Isaacs***

In homosocial desires among men there is a sort of trust and directness that seems to be not possible among women because as mentioned before, the female homosocial bonds are more emotional while the males are bonded rationally and have more intellectual aims. This is the reason that makes men free to speak with each other even if it is their first meeting. Males mainly prefer to confabulate with their same genders about their private life and problems and even secrets.

Melanie's father, Mr Isaacs is a middle school teacher and has had two totally dissimilar relationships with David: respect and then disrespect. After his daughter's incident with the professor, Mr. Isaacs does

not know the exact reason for Melanie dropping out from university, while he knows that the reason is her involvement in the play in which she had a role. And due to this he finds David the best person to ask for advice and help. Therefore, he calls David and wants him to speak to Melanie and persuade to continue with her studies. The Isaacs family know that Melanie has such high respect for David. Isaacs says:

'Professor, I wonder if you can help us. Melanie has been such a good student, and now she says she is going to give it all up. It has come as a terrible shock to us.' [...] But if you talk to her, maybe you can persuade her to think again. She has such respect for you. We don't want her to throw away all these years for nothing' (p. 69).

What Isaacs says is a revelation to David as he does not realize that Melanie has not mentioned their liaison to the family. He knows the reality of Melanie's situation and deep down does not wish to agree to talk to Melanie but out of politeness he agrees to do so. Before the truth is out, David is known as a great source to guide and advice because a university is the source of respectable and trustworthy people, but, everything changes when the real reason for Melanie's dropping out emerges. Men are full of pride to the extent that they do not wish to be destroyed easily especially in front of the individuals who have been taught to respect and trust them. Mr. Isaac is understandably very angry when he finds out the truth and goes to the university to look for David. Finding him in the aisle and without any warning he says:

'You may be very educated and all that, but what you have done is not right.' He pauses, shakes his head. 'It is not right'.... 'We put our children in the hands of you people because we think we can trust you. If we can't trust the university, who can we trust? We never thought we were sending our daughter into a nest of vipers. No, Professor Lurie, you may be high and mighty and have all kinds of degrees, but if I was you I'd be very ashamed of myself, so help me God. If I've got hold of the wrong end of the stick, now is your chance to say it, but I don't think so, I can see it from your face' (p. 74).

And having uttered these words, Isaacs immediately leaves the office. What has happened to the respect that Mr. Isaacs spoke of in their first conversation over the phone? He has the right to support his daughter; he did not know the university to be the origin of corruption, but how come David did not apologize after the meeting even with a call? Is it because of the arrogant manner that he possesses? Days pass. David is fired from the university, leaves the city for his daughter's rural farm, but part of his mind is occupied with Melanie's incident. When David decides once to go back to the city, he visits Isaacs in his house but is guided to Mr. Isaacs's office by Melanie's young sister who looks like her and raises in David a lustful desire. He meets Isaacs at the office and asks for pardon and apology the first positive happening of the story. The significant point in a normal male homosocial desire is, men never keep or look for grudges and can easily forgive the others if they want to. Isaacs forgives David and even invites him to dinner.

#### ***David and Bill Shaw***

Bill Shaw, Bev's husband who lives in the vicinity of Lucy's (David's Daughter) house and who, with his wife are useful and kind neighbours. Bill works in a hardware shop and is a very warm and kind guy. He and David get acquainted receives David very intimately and without any expectations and calls him a friend. After the invasion of Lucy's house, Bill accompanies the injured David to hospital and stays there until he is able to bring David back to the house. This behaviour is very strange to David since he has

never experienced such treatment from any male or female individual. When David asks Bill the reason for his kind behaviour toward him and apologizes for ruining his evening, Bill Shaw warmly replies:

'Nonsense!' says Bill Shaw. 'What else are friends for? You would have done the same.' ... Bill Shaw believes that, because he and David Lurie once had a cup of tea together, David Lurie is his friend, and the two of them have obligations toward each other (p. 102).

David is moved by these words, that having a simple cup of tea makes a friendship and implies being there for each other in difficult times. This remains a puzzle in David's mind for a while, since he has another definition for friendship, especially male friendships. This is a shock to David as a university lecturer, who sees life, the world and people as very complicated while an uneducated man sees the same things very naïvely and simply, uncomplicated by the complexities of art and intellect. David cannot understand the men easily as the women in his life as he has been more associated with women all his life. It appears that here, Bill plays the role of a teacher to David and teaches him how to make friendships with males and not to make it hard to be in their company. His behaviour and words influence David a lot and one of the reasons that persuaded him to apologize for his past stems from his short and shallow homosociality with Bill. He showed David a simple way to be respectful of other personalities and lives and to be sympathetic when encountering them. Bill Shaw, even though he has a superficial and minor role in the story, proves to have had the strongest effect on David by the mere act of just drinking tea with him and sharing his company for a while. This is a positive point in David's life for here in the country, from a simple and uneducated man; he encounters an aspect of life that was alien to him in his previous urban and intellectual environment. To put it simply, in this particular aspect of homosociality it is good to organize male to male bonds without pride or any expectations from each other.

### ***David and Petrus***

Petrus is one of the other neighbours of Lucy who also works for her as her assistant. At the beginning of their facing he exudes enough positive energy to make David think of him as a friend as he believes Petrus is from his generation as they both have some stories to share with each other. However, everything is dramatically altered when Lucy is gang raped and David discovers that one of the rapists, the youngest, is a relative of Petrus. When Lucy and David meet one of the rapists named Phollux at a party in the house of Petrus, David understandably gets very angry and makes a big fuss, leading to the father and daughter leaving the party in a huff. That very night, David confronts Petrus and demands the reason for the presence of Phollux at the party and receives this response:

'No, I do not know what this is,' says Petrus angrily. 'I do not know what the trouble is. What is the trouble?' [...] 'He says he does not know what you are talking about' (p. 151).

This is the night that increases David's suspicions about Petrus and is the beginning of his dislike for Petrus. To some extent, this feeling is mutual between him and Petrus, since Petrus changes his behaviour toward David as well. After numerous days Phollux is again seen in Petrus's house but this time he is going to live there ever with them. This issue infuriates David he had once admitted that he might become friends with Petrus but because of Petrus's decision to allow Pollux to stay with him ("He is my family, my people", p. 201) and because David feels that Petrus is not an innocent party when it comes to the rape of Lucy, he detests Petrus. David and Petrus are two individuals from two different classes of urban middle class and rural working class. By comparing the relationship between David and Petrus there is the conclusion that they both share some similar features as having a shortage of good bonds with their own gender.; Petrus is considered as an object to be analysed by David and on the other hand, David is considered as a weak and irresponsible man, a father who has been irresponsible toward family his daughter. Considering the story as a whole, it is clear that Petrus plays the role of a protector or

a surrogate father to Lucy while David has done nothing, not even being able to help Lucy during the invasion, whereas Petrus in the same situation would have done something to help. This issue becomes more intriguing when Petrus proposes that Lucy be his third wife with her land for the price of protecting her. This proposal drives David nearly mad, but deep inside he knows that he is not a proper father for his daughter like Petrus, as a neighbour (and protector).

By carefully analysing Petrus's and David's homosociality we can find another 'love' triangle in the novel, but instead of love there is protection and thus the triangle could be called a "protection" triangle instead. The rivals in this particular triangle are Petrus and David vying to protect Lucy, the common interest. David wants to do it since she is his daughter and he loves her while on the other hand, Petrus wants to protect her not for love but for her properties and land. In the end the winner in this protection triangle is Petrus and the loser, as usual, is David.

## 2. Conclusion

Associations and bonds among the same gender have had especial attention in contemporary novels and sociology works, since their influence on the members' behaviours in society is considerable. According to Sedgwick (1992), in some instances of male to male interaction, there is no sense of brotherhood, but of extreme, compulsory, and intensely volatile mastery and subordination. This paper has investigated the masculine homosociality of David Lurie, the protagonist in Coetzee's novel, *Disgrace*, with his urban and rural male associations from different points of view. This investigation attempted to indicate the effects of lack of homosocial desire of the person in his social behaviours. David Lurie is an undeniable loser in all the relationships in all levels of life - with his kind friend, Aram Hakim in the university trial held for the student sexual harassment, with Ryan, Melanie's boyfriend, with Mr Isaacs, Melanie's father, with Bill Shaw, a simple man in the rural area, and finally with Petrus, which finally isolates him totally from the environment, leading him to admit his weak but unchangeable personality. David does not know how to relate in the company of men, due to the dominance of females in his childhood and in the absence of male figures like a brother or father, it has made him a ready womaniser in his adult years.

If all other male roles like Pollux and the rapists in the novel are considered, to the conclusion is that post-apartheid masculinity is associated with some form of homosocial behaviour in which men act together, are sexually violent, especially when it comes to women, and protect one another (Petrus takes care of the young Pollux, for instance).

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