



## Storytelling as an Act of Self-Forgiveness in *Age of Iron* by J. M. Coetzee

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### Abstract

Storytelling can function as a powerful instrument of transformation by fostering self-awareness through ethical reflection. In *Age of Iron* by J. M. Coetzee, storytelling operates as a sustained mode of ethical inquiry rather than mere narration. The novel is presented through a series of letters written by Mrs Curren, an elderly woman terminally ill with cancer, to her estranged daughter. Through this epistolary form, Mrs Curren confronts both her impending death and the political realities of apartheid-era South Africa. As a white, retired professor of classics living in Cape Town, she begins to examine her moral responsibility within a system of racial injustice from which she has benefited. Her writing reveals an intensifying sense of shame alongside a gradual movement toward self-forgiveness. This process unfolds through prolonged introspection rather than dramatic revelation and remains marked by ethical tension and unresolved dialogue. This study argues that storytelling in *Age of Iron* functions as a process of ethical self-reconciliation. Although Mrs Curren does not achieve mutual understanding across racial and political divisions, the narrative itself becomes a site of ethical reckoning. Through confession and sustained self-examination, storytelling enables her to confront historical guilt and to pursue a fragile, provisional form of self-forgiveness.

**Keywords:** storytelling, shame, self-forgiveness, *Age of Iron*, J. M. Coetzee

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### Introduction

John Maxwell Coetzee (born 1940) approaches literature as an intrinsically ethical practice rather than a neutral aesthetic exercise. His oeuvre consistently operates under a strong moral imperative, positioning characters within situations where ethical judgment is difficult, uncertain, and consequential. Coetzee's protagonists confront fundamental conditions of human existence, including grief, physical suffering, emotional deprivation, and systemic cruelty. These experiences do not merely frame the narrative but actively shape the meaning

of the characters' lives. Ethical decision-making thus becomes central to narrative development, as each choice carries consequences that extend beyond the character to implicate the reader. In this respect, ethical conflict functions as a core narrative principle. It provides what narrative theory identifies as "tellability" or "reportability," the quality that renders a story not only recountable but necessary and "worthy of being told" (Prince, 2003, p. 83). Through ethical struggle, Coetzee transforms narrative into a site of moral engagement.

J. M. Coetzee is widely regarded as "an exemplary figure of contemporary world literature" (Etherington, 2020, pp. 171–172). Anthony Uhlmann (2020) characterises Coetzee as "an original thinker" whose work does not merely reproduce philosophical or literary theories but critically engages with and tests their assumptions (p. 3). Nimetullah Aldemir (2022) similarly underscores the intellectual demands of Coetzee's fiction, arguing that his novels "pose challenging questions regarding reality, representation, and textuality" (p. 239). Extending the emphasis on philosophical engagement, Anton Leist and Peter Singer (2020) contend that Coetzee's writing demonstrates a distinctive depth shaped by its introspective orientation and its resistance to conventional modes of thought. They note that his restrained and precise prose functions analogously to philosophical dialogue, in which linguistic economy intensifies conceptual reflection. Leist and Singer further argue that Coetzee approaches truth not as a determinate conclusion but as an open process of inquiry, structured through competing perspectives and unresolved claims. This narrative commitment to ambiguity underpins his sustained examination of ethical relations, particularly in contexts marked by racism and political violence (Leist and Singer, 2020, pp. 6–8).

Coetzee has produced a substantial and diverse body of work that includes fourteen novels, three volumes of autobiographical fiction, and numerous collections of essays, letters, translations, and short prose. Born in Cape Town, South Africa, in 1940, Coetzee has lived in Adelaide, Australia, since 2002, a geographical shift that has further sharpened the ethical distance and reflective quality of his writing. Across his fiction, Coetzee repeatedly interrogates moral responsibility, historical complicity, and the limits of ethical agency. As David James (2020) observes, his novels are marked by moments "kindled by shame, by the recognition of irremediable limitation, by intimations of personal redundancy, or by sensations of possessing a dry and deficient soul" (p. 81). *Age of Iron*, Coetzee's sixth novel, exemplifies these concerns by foregrounding shame as a catalyst for ethical awakening. Through Mrs Curren's introspective narrative, the novel transforms private moral discomfort into a sustained confrontation with historical guilt and personal accountability.

*Age of Iron*, released in 1990, examines both societal and personal challenges by integrating public and private experiences. David James (2020) posits that it embodies the "shame of colonialism [...] the immediate political upheaval and violence of South African apartheid in the late 1980s," while simultaneously presenting a "distinctly private narrative of confession," characterised by a "double vision – looking into the private self, looking out, though often intermittently, at immediate atrocity" (pp. 70–71). Expanding on this, Hotaman (2025) notes that the work "distinguishes itself by foregrounding the internal drama of complicity" (p. 1647). Mrs Curren's ethical dilemma originates in her personal life, where her physical deterioration, emotional seclusion, and increasing dependence on Vercueil illustrate her awareness of her culpability. Nonetheless, this awareness is not fixed. As she confronts the humiliation produced by her privileged position within an unequal system, she recounts her life with increasing candour. Through confession, personal suffering becomes

a catalyst for ethical transformation. This approach directs her towards a delicate yet genuine manifestation of self-forgiveness.

*Age of Iron* offers Mrs Curren's introspective story, spanning the years 1986 to 1999. Dominic Head (1997) notes, "The dynamic of the novel is that of personal dissolution involving Mrs Curren's relinquishment of all personal investment in life in South Africa [...] The novel is thus a paradoxical, inverse novel of personal development, a procedure which depends upon the self's acceptance of its own unimportance" (p. 129). The grim reality of apartheid in the depicted narrative alters Mrs Curren's viewpoint, which is portrayed as contrasting with other perspectives throughout much of the work. Exposure to a racially stratified world catalyses her consciousness and self-awareness regarding her complicity. Throughout this process, a pervasive sensation of humiliation engulfs her entire existence. According to Head (1997), the work illustrates Mrs Curren's decline as a hesitant coloniser, depicting her "process of abnegation" or "renunciation" (p. 141).

The story is presented through a sequence of letters composed by Mrs Curren to her daughter, who has relocated to the United States. In her correspondence, Mrs Curren discusses her existence, encompassing her battle with cancer, her serendipitous encounter with a homeless individual named Vercueil, and the demise of her maid's son, Bheki. These incidents compel her to examine and investigate her role and responsibilities within the overarching repressive social reality she faces. Consequently, *Age of Iron*, as posited by Katherine Hallemeier (2023), "challenges Mrs. Curren's conviction in individual expression and liberal ideals during a historical period that necessitates collective, revolutionary action" (p. 127). Having observed the injustices directly and perceived them from the perspectives of the impacted Black South Africans, Mrs Curren feels a deep feeling of shame. This enlightenment prompts a profound emotional and ethical conflict as she confronts her complicity and seeks to reconcile her newfound awareness with her societal role. Consequently, as she nears the conclusion of her life, she pursues self-forgiveness, striving to reconcile her complicity and moral enlightenment.

### **The Ethics of Shame and Self-Forgiveness in *Age of Iron***

Self-forgiveness emerges as a central psychological and ethical concern in *Age of Iron*. Within the fragmented sociopolitical conditions of apartheid South Africa, the protagonist confronts guilt and pursues redemption as personal experience increasingly intersects with political reality. This pursuit of self-forgiveness structures Mrs Curren's narrative and shapes her ethical development. As a white South African, she contends with significant remorse regarding the structural injustices inflicted against Black South Africans during apartheid. Her background as a history professor provides the intellectual resources necessary to recognize the legitimacy of the anti-apartheid struggle; however, her initial hesitation reveals the depth of the ideological conditioning she must confront. As her engagement with the plight of others deepens, she becomes immersed in a reflective process that reveals the personal implications of a broader historical and ethical dilemma. A significant question that emerges from this process is whether self-forgiveness is attainable without the forgiveness of those who have been wronged. Mrs Curren's attempts to reconcile racial and political divisions have mainly been ineffective. She denounces the violent strategies adopted by the oppressed, yet those she hopes to persuade often disregard her position. As a result, her movement toward self-forgiveness does not culminate in reciprocal reconciliation with

others but instead unfolds through the act of writing. Within the confined space of her epistolary narrative, she adopts new perspectives, articulates remorse, and confronts the consequences of her participation in sustaining a racially hierarchical order.

Although prevailing literary interpretations of *Age of Iron* foreground its symbolic structure or political allegory, the novel's psychological depth merits closer examination. Olfa Belgacem (2019) describes the novel as "an allegory of fall and demise," illustrating "how physical degeneration can be read as an allegory of a state shattered by the violence of races killing each other in the name of freedom and equality" (p. 15). Mrs Curren's terminal cancer diagnosis parallels the moral deterioration she witnesses beyond her home, while her physical decline becomes a site for reflection on both personal mortality and social disintegration. She employs the epistolary form not only as a mode of confession but also as a means of confronting two converging crises: her approaching death and the violent realities of the world around her. As Martin Woessner (2017) observes, she understands herself as "caught between the crushing weight of the violent world outside her door and the reality of death awaiting her inside it" (p. 154). The conflict between exterior disorder and interior deterioration compels her to reevaluate the ethical significance of her existence and her obligations as both an individual and a member of a failing state. Her narration serves as a profoundly personal testament, seeking to provide coherence to her self-reflection and ethical responsibility.

The novel's sustained interior monologue, combined with its confessional tone, enables a continuous and intimate exploration of self-forgiveness as an ethical process rather than a sudden emotional release. As Mrs Curren's moral awareness deepens, she begins to confront not only her individual culpability but also the ideological structures that shaped her long-standing silence and passivity. This recognition does not immediately produce resolution. Instead, self-awareness gradually intensifies into guilt as she reflects on the privileges that insulated her from responsibility. Over time, guilt gives way to a tentative reconciliation with the self, marked by restraint rather than absolution. This development unfolds slowly through extended reflection, physical decline, and sustained ethical self-examination. The narrative avoids moments of dramatic revelation and instead emphasizes duration, repetition, and discomfort. The resulting form of self-forgiveness remains fragile and provisional, grounded in persistent introspection and in the acceptance of enduring moral failure rather than its erasure.

In philosophical scholarship, self-forgiveness is commonly understood as a structured moral process rather than a form of emotional consolation. Nancy E. Snow (1993) defines self-forgiveness as "a teleological process directed to achieving the end of self-restoration or self-rehabilitation" (pp. 75–76), suggesting that it enables moral agents to sustain ethical commitment even in the aftermath of serious wrongdoing. Byron Williston (2012) similarly delineates two essential characteristics of self-forgiveness. The first emphasises the crucial function of moral guilt in restoring an individual's perception of virtue, while the second asserts that interpersonal forgiveness is devoid of complete significance unless it is paired with internal forgiveness from the transgressor. He elaborates that self-forgiveness entails "the forswearing of self-directed negative attitudes like contempt, anger, and hatred, attitudes generated by an agent's belief in her own moral failing" (Williston, 2012, p. 67). These emotional and cognitive processes do not indicate denial; instead, they function as necessary conditions for moral rehabilitation.

Philosopher Per-Erik Milam (2015) advances an account of self-forgiveness grounded in systematic moral awareness. He asserts that four elements are essential for authentic self-

forgiveness: recognition of having perpetrated a moral transgression, acceptance of accountability, the existence of self-imposed negative emotions such as guilt or shame, and a subsequent alleviation of these emotions following moral transformation (pp. 7–8). Margaret R. Holmgren (1998) reinforces this view by identifying three essential components: acknowledgment of wrongdoing, emotional transformation, and self-acceptance despite past transgressions (pp. 75–76). Taken together, these frameworks show that self-forgiveness is not a passive or superficial gesture but a deliberate and often demanding moral practice. It necessitates the offender to face disquieting realities and to experience a metamorphosis of both conscience and self-identity. In *Age of Iron*, Mrs Curren's tale reflects this paradigm. Her confession does not exonerate her in the perception of others, but it allows her to restore a degree of ethical consistency. Her remarks, addressed to an absent daughter, constitute an incomplete yet earnest attempt to reclaim moral agency through sustained introspection and narrative articulation.

Although critical discussion has extensively addressed the novel's political symbolism and existential dimensions, the psychological complexity of Mrs Curren's self-forgiveness remains underexamined. Interpretations persist about whether her confession provides redemptive closure, illustrates an unsolved moral conflict, or serves as a broader commentary on historical complicity. It is evident that Coetzee's narrative structure and the protagonist's moral journey provide a rich foundation for comprehending self-forgiveness as a multifaceted, intricate, and frequently distressing human experience. The story eschews easy conclusions, highlighting that forgiveness—particularly self-forgiveness—may not hinge on receiving forgiveness from others but rather on the arduous process of ethical contemplation, acknowledgement of complicity, and dedication to moral restitution, even in isolation.

Mrs Curren's movement toward self-forgiveness in *Age of Iron* originates in her recognition of a long-neglected moral responsibility. This understanding drives her to scrutinise her past actions and address the ethical ramifications of her role in apartheid. The humiliation she experiences compels her to confront the suppressed truths of her personal history and to seek reconciliation with them. She turns to storytelling as a means of self-reconciliation, using narration to confront shame and to mitigate self-blame for her involvement in the systemic oppression of Black South Africans. Accordingly, her pursuit of self-forgiveness remains inseparable from her willingness to acknowledge wrongdoing and to assume responsibility for her actions.

*Age of Iron* closely examines the protagonist's inward journey by tracing her reflections, emotional responses, and ethical deliberations concerning the meaning of her life and conduct. In this respect, Mrs Curren exemplifies a recurring figure in Coetzee's fiction: a character who, across varied contexts and identities, confronts moral uncertainty through sustained introspection. Derek Attridge (2004) emphasises the common confessional aspect in Coetzee's oeuvre, noting that “much of his fiction partakes of the confessional, presenting characters [including Mrs Curren] who experience the need to reveal in language their histories, thoughts, feelings and desires, however private and shameful” (p. 136). Mrs Curren's narrative functions as both a personal witness and a reflection on accountability and the ethical implications of one's history.

Mrs Curren's quest is a harrowing introspection. She begins to recognize the distance created by her privileged position and struggles to align her personal suffering with the broader distress that surrounds her. Her developing relationship with Vercueil, a homeless individual, confronts her prior beliefs regarding human connection, while her engagements

with Florence and the township youth expose the pronounced moral and social disparities that characterise her environment. In this way, Mrs Curren's narrative articulates Coetzee's philosophical stance: truth resists simplification, morality remains inseparable from personal and political conditions and understanding unfolds as an ongoing process rather than a fixed conclusion. Rather than yielding to guilt, Mrs Curren confronts her failures with candour and redirects her focus toward what carries ethical weight, including growth, understanding, and a renewed sense of moral responsibility. Her self-reflection does not exonerate her from previous culpability but enables her to partake in a significant moral reckoning, illustrating that self-forgiveness entails not only progression but also the active recognition of wrongdoing and the pursuit of ethical transformation.

### **Mrs Curren's Self-Forgiveness: A Transition from Shame to Reconciliation**

Derek Attridge (2004), drawing on Coetzee's essay "Confession and Double Thoughts: Tolstoy, Rousseau, Dostoevsky" (1983), examines the intimate relationship between confession and shame and argues that "an inevitable component of confession is shame" (p. 147). Unlike remorse, which can permit forms of self-justification or moral closure, shame resists "self-deceit" and operates as an immediate, embodied response that is felt both physically and emotionally. Attridge emphasizes that shame does not dissipate after confession but persists as "the interminable process of sceptical self-examination," in which each disclosure exposes "the inadequacy of what has been revealed so far" (2004, p. 147). Confession therefore does not function as a singular act of moral release. Instead, it unfolds as a recursive ethical process in which truth-telling intensifies vulnerability, deepens self-doubt, and sustains moral accountability rather than resolving it.

Coetzee's oeuvre consistently exposes the fragile boundary between complicity and redemption. In *Age of Iron*, the recurring cycle of shame and introspection constitutes a central dynamic, as Mrs Curren's letters to her daughter function not as instruments of absolution but as stark acknowledgments of her involvement in apartheid. Rather than offering comfort, her sustained self-examination intensifies her awareness of ethical failure, rendering shame a persistent force that resists resolution. Her confessional practice thus illustrates the paradox identified by Attridge: instead of producing closure, confession heightens vulnerability and confirms that shame does not culminate in tranquillity but endures as an ongoing confrontation with the self. Although Mrs Curren repeatedly confronts shame as she recognizes the extent of her moral blindness under apartheid, she ultimately moves beyond its immobilizing effects. She redirects shame toward a more measured and reflective assessment of herself and of the structural injustices that surround her. Through this shift, introspection expands from personal culpability into a broader ethical awareness, enabling a more truthful engagement with reality.

In her correspondence with her daughter in America, Mrs Curren subjects her newly awakened conscience to sustained scrutiny as she reflects on her conduct and moral responsibilities. These altered conditions initiate a transformative phase in her life, one that signals an authentic reorientation rather than simple consolation. As she undertakes a profound reassessment of her identity, her perspective undergoes a decisive change. Resolute in her quest to restore her pristine identity, she undertakes a journey towards redemption: "I do not want to die in the state I am in, in a state of ugliness. I want to be saved. How shall I be saved? By doing what I do not want to do. That is the first step: that I know. I must love,

first of all, the unlovable” (Coetzee, 2018, p. 136). Through her letters, Mrs Curren conveys her newly formed understanding of what she perceives as the sole truth to her daughter and implores her to acknowledge this truth by stating, “But the fact is, there is no one else. I am the only one; I am the one writing: I, I. So I ask you: attend to the writing not to me. If lies and pleas and excuses weave among the words, listen for them. Do not pass them over, do not forgive them easily. Read all, even this adjuration, with a cold eye” (Coetzee, 2018, pp. 103-104).

Coetzee uses the epistolary form to intensify the realism of *Age of Iron* and to give Mrs Curren a voice that sounds immediate, deliberate, and accountable. The letters do more than report events. They also attempt persuasion, since the narrator writes across a personal and ideological distance. Early in the novel, she commits herself to an uncompromising honesty, calling her account “Home truths, a mother’s truth” (Coetzee, 2018, p. 5). That pledge frames the letters as both private record and ethical exposure. The epistolary form also allows the narrator to register political violence as a direct moral pressure rather than distant information. After the police invade her home and intimidate residents, she goes to the station to file a complaint. The officers dismiss her as “not affected” (Coetzee, 2018, pp. 85–86). Mrs Curren responds by naming shame as her own condition rather than a flaw located only in others. She insists that she is “very directly affected” by what the uniform authorizes (Coetzee, 2018, pp. 85–86). The scene marks a shift in her ethical self-understanding. Shame no longer stays abstract. It becomes lived, bodily, and immediate. Once Mrs Curren leaves the station, her language turns inward and exposes how shame begins to structure her daily consciousness. She describes the prospect of living “in a state of shame” and links that state to “death in life” (Coetzee, 2018, p. 86). At this point, shame exceeds the realm of emotion and assumes the form of an existential condition shaped by complicity, inaction, and delayed moral awareness. The epistolary form plays a decisive role in this shift by transforming private reflection into ethical testimony. It also blurs the boundary between confession and accusation, since the narrator condemns the system while also naming herself as implicated within it.

Mrs Curren’s shame persists because she cannot reconcile her private safety with the violence that surrounds her city. As the narrative develops, she becomes increasingly aware of the gap between her domestic protection and a public world shaped by inequality and routine brutality. That awareness becomes painful because it exposes her previous habit of returning to comfort. She describes the lure of the “ordinary” and admits that she can “lose [her] sense of shame” when she gives herself back to it (Coetzee, 2018, p. 119). The return to normality brings relief, but it also produces a secondary shame because it reveals how easily moral urgency can be suspended. She compares this cycle to addiction and concludes that there seems to be “no limit” to the shame a person can feel (Coetzee, 2018, p. 119). The comparison is not decorative. It shows how ethical knowledge can coexist with retreat, and how retreating generates a self-directed contempt that intensifies the longer it continues.

Mrs Curren’s shame also deepens as she confronts the racial separation that apartheid normalized in her own perception. After Bekhi’s burial, she states with blunt simplicity, “I have not seen black people in their death before” (Coetzee, 2018, p. 124). The line matters because it captures apartheid’s spatial and psychological partitioning in a single admission. Black suffering has not been absent from her society, but it has been kept “somewhere else” in ways that protected white consciousness from sustained encounter (Coetzee, 2018, p. 124). The letters therefore become a place where the narrator names what her earlier life allowed her not to see. As she writes, she begins to understand that her former distance was not neutral. It was a condition of privilege, and it helped the system endure.

Mrs Curren confronts the emotional cost of repeatedly suppressing shame and exposes the damage produced by a cycle of self-protective detachment. This pattern has generated not resilience but a form of moral numbness that she can no longer sustain. Her voice adopts a defiant and reflective tone as she resists the assumption that her grief is superficial. When she rejects the notion of “cheap tears... here today, gone tomorrow,” she insists that her distress signals a deeper crisis of conscience rather than transient emotion (Coetzee, 2018, p. 126). Her admission that she has repeatedly “got over it” in the past points to a habitual strategy of denial through which grief, guilt, and even complicity were managed and neutralized. Instead of functioning as a source of strength, this repeated act of recovery becomes the origin of spiritual exhaustion.

The turning point emerges when Mrs Curren recognizes that perseverance itself has become ethically compromised. Her declaration that she can no longer “get over” getting over marks a decisive shift in moral awareness, where endurance ceases to signify survival and instead reveals a failure of ethical reckoning (Coetzee, 2018, p. 126). By refusing to repeat this pattern, she seeks what she names a “resurrection,” understood not as absolution but as rebirth through acknowledgment rather than evasion. This refusal signals an attempt to reclaim moral integrity by confronting shame directly and sustaining its discomfort rather than displacing it through emotional withdrawal.

Mrs Curren arrives at a visceral recognition of her complicity in South Africa’s violent history through the disturbing image of walking “upon black faces,” a metaphor that collapses land, body, and memory into a single moral terrain (Coetzee, 2018, pp. 125–126). At this point, the suffering she has inhabited no longer appears abstract or distant but becomes materially inscribed in the landscape itself, as though the ground carries the weight and testimony of the dead. These figures refuse erasure. Their “spirit has not left them,” and they “lie there heavy and obdurate,” insisting on remembrance and moral accountability (Coetzee, 2018, pp. 125–126). The imagery intensifies Mrs Curren’s shame by directing it not only toward acts committed against others but also toward her earlier failure to perceive their magnitude. Her movement across the land assumes the character of transgression, as each step registers as an intrusion upon a silenced and buried history. The reference to “millions of figures of pig iron” further underscores this realization by evoking both the industrial brutality of the apartheid state and her belated awareness of how deeply its violence has structured her world. By naming this moment as the return of the “Age of Iron,” Coetzee binds personal reckoning to historical continuity and frames Mrs Curren’s shame as a delayed confrontation with a legacy from which she once benefited but can no longer disavow (Coetzee, 2018, pp. 125–126).

Confronted with the certainty of imminent death, Mrs Curren becomes determined to restore moral integrity and to avoid leaving life “in a purgatory of pain and shame” (Coetzee, 2018, p. 141). While her suffering originates in the physical deterioration caused by cancer, the deeper torment she confronts is psychological, shaped by a persistent and corrosive shame that has remained largely unacknowledged throughout her life. In an intimate confession to Vercueil, she establishes a direct link between illness and moral burden when she attributes her cancer to “the accumulation of shame” she has endured, describing how the body “turns malignant and begins to eat away at itself” (Coetzee, 2018, p. 145). This image of self-consumption captures the way suppressed ethical reckoning materializes as bodily decay. Cancer therefore exceeds its medical meaning and assumes symbolic force as an embodiment of self-reproach and moral paralysis sustained under the protection of privilege. By giving voice to this shame, Mrs Curren pursues not only confession but the

possibility of moral restoration. Although this gesture arrives late, it represents a deliberate refusal to face death through denial.

In one of her recurring imagined exchanges with Vercueil, Mrs Curren confronts the weight of shame with a heightened awareness of its resistance to articulation. When she stages Vercueil's implied challenge—"What is the point of consuming yourself in shame and loathing?"—she offers no defense or explanation and responds only with a restrained affirmation: "Yes" (Coetzee, 2018, p. 145). This monosyllabic reply signals the limits of justification and reflects her perception of standing under moral judgment, reduced to a binary choice akin to being "on trial for your life." The analogy conveys both ethical exposure and confinement within the boundaries of language and self-understanding. The passage then turns inward by suggesting that this affirmation is not empty but animated by "other words stirring inside you like life in the womb." By comparing these unspoken words to something "not yet ... but like the very beginnings," the narrative evokes an emergent moral clarity that remains inchoate yet active. This imagery captures the slow and painful formation of ethical awareness, in which conscience develops through sustained shame rather than resolution. Even within silence and linguistic constraint, Mrs Curren thus registers the initial movement of inner transformation and gestures toward the possibility of ethical renewal despite the burden of an irredeemable past.

Mrs Curren's reflections increasingly reveal that shame exceeds the personal and assumes a historical dimension. This burden appears not as an isolated emotion but as an inherited condition rooted in the foundational injustices of the society into which she was born. She acknowledges that "a crime was committed long ago," one whose origins extend beyond her parents' generation, "longer ago than 1916, certainly" (Coetzee, 2018, p. 164). Although the crime remains unnamed, it clearly refers to the entrenched system of racial domination and exploitation that structures South Africa's colonial and apartheid history. When Mrs Curren admits, "I was born into it. It is part of my inheritance," she recognizes that her identity is inseparable from structures of oppression that have secured her privilege at the expense of others (Coetzee, 2018, p. 164). Shame thus emerges from her recognition of herself not as an innocent bystander but as both a product of and a participant in this historical legacy. This realization marks a decisive ethical shift. Rather than pursuing absolution through claims of ignorance or distance from the past, she accepts responsibility by acknowledging the injustice as "part of me" and affirming that she is "part of it" (Coetzee, 2018, p. 164). Through this framing, Coetzee presents shame not merely as a private affect but as an awakening to collective historical guilt and to the impossibility of moral detachment from it.

Toward the end of the narrative, Mrs Curren's long-suppressed sense of moral integrity reemerges through the painful acknowledgment of her complicity in a shared history of violence and injustice. As she reflects on the "crime" of apartheid and its ethical cost, she accepts that its burden must be borne "in shame: in a life of shame and shameful death, unlamented in an obscure corner," and understands this outcome as a warranted consequence rather than an injustice inflicted upon her (Coetzee, 2018, p. 164). This recognition marks a decisive transformation in her moral outlook. Shame no longer functions as passive self-reproach but develops into an active ethical position grounded in responsibility and accountability. By accepting shame as the appropriate response to historical wrongdoing, Mrs Curren rejects the desire for moral exoneration. Instead, she affirms the necessity of enduring shame as a condition of ethical integrity, even when it offers no comfort, redemption, or release.

Her earlier indignation toward those who enacted state violence, whom she describes as “the men who did the dirty work,” is gradually exposed as ethically insufficient. She comes to recognize that these perpetrators also “lived inside” her, a realization that marks a decisive shift in self-understanding. Violence no longer appears as something external or distant but as a force embedded in her identity, history, and whiteness. When she previously raged and “wished them dead,” she now understands that such condemnation also targeted a part of herself (Coetzee, 2018, p. 164). This recognition transforms shame into a deeper ethical reckoning. Crucially, Mrs Curren articulates this reckoning not only through shame but through the language of honour. By invoking *honestas mors*, meaning “an honorable death,” she elevates her emotional response to a philosophical register. Rather than seeking absolution, she aspires to a meaningful end that affirms her moral awakening. Through this gesture, Coetzee frames the reactivation of honour as an ethical recovery of the self, achieved through the explicit acknowledgment of complicity rather than its denial.

For Mrs Curren, shame functions not as a mark of weakness but as a prerequisite for the preservation of honour. Within this context, shame operates as a moral compass that prevents her from sliding into ethical indifference or dishonour. Her repeated confessions, addressed both to Vercueil and to the implied reader, constitute sustained acts of ethical self-examination. By articulating her complicity and confronting the unsettling truths of her past and identity, she resists the pull of moral numbness and denial. Shame therefore assumes a constructive rather than destructive role. It enables her to confront her place within a history of violence with a sense of ethical seriousness, even when such confrontation entails personal suffering. Her insistence on sustaining shame reflects a deliberate refusal of premature absolution. When she declares, “I cannot get over it this time,” she recognizes that overcoming shame would entail the erosion of conscience itself (Coetzee, 2018, p. 126). In this sense, she does not merely confess shame but enacts it as a final gesture of ethical resistance. Through this enactment, she attains a form of moral dignity that allows her to face death without surrendering ethical responsibility in a profoundly unjust world.

Mrs Curren recognizes the complex moral function that shame performs in her ethical life. For her, shame does not indicate a weakness to be overcome but operates as a moral compass, a “touchstone” that guides her navigation of the fragile boundary between integrity and complicity. She acknowledges that she “strove always for honour, for a private honour,” and identifies shame as the internal mechanism that sustained this commitment over time (Coetzee, 2018, p. 165). Through this admission, shame emerges as an organizing ethical principle rather than a disabling emotion. Her metaphor, which compares shame to an object a blind person touches in order to orient themselves, emphasizes its constant and stabilizing presence within her moral framework. Unlike guilt, which can be externalized, resolved, or displaced, shame remains inward and enduring. It persists as a continuous reminder of ethical responsibility and prevents moral disengagement by anchoring conscience in sustained self-awareness.

Crucially, Mrs Curren distinguishes between experiencing shame and indulging in it. When she states that “shame never became a shameful pleasure,” she acknowledges the danger of moral exhibitionism and self-pity without aestheticizing her suffering (Coetzee, 2018, p. 165). Shame appears instead as raw, persistent, and corrosive, captured in the image of “ashes in my mouth day after day” (Coetzee, 2018, p. 165). This language evokes a condition of spiritual deprivation that resists closure and demands sustained confrontation with her failure to act or to resist injustice more decisively. By asserting “my shame, my own,” Mrs Curren claims responsibility for both her complicity and her conscience, emphasizing the personal and non-transferable nature of ethical accountability. In this way,

shame does not immobilize her. It becomes the final remnant of honor, a bitter yet necessary affirmation of humanity in the face of historical and personal guilt.

In the final section of the narrative, the fourth and concluding part, earlier expressions of guilt, shame, dishonor, and ethical conflict largely recede. Physically weakened and approaching death, Mrs Curren confronts the end with relative composure and a steadier moral awareness. In contrast to the earlier sections, which concentrate on sustained ethical introspection, her attention shifts toward the immediacy of death and toward a reflective concern for Vercueil's past and future. She entrusts him to her daughter and listens attentively to his account of life as a former mariner, a story she chooses to accept despite its implausibility. This deliberate suspension of disbelief rests on her conviction that "there is no lie that does not have at its core some truth" (Coetzee, 2018, p. 196). Through this gesture, Mrs Curren signals that truth need not depend on factual accuracy alone. Metaphorically, she suggests to both her daughter and the reader that her narrative, although consciously shaped, nonetheless conveys a form of truth grounded in ethical responsibility. The truth articulated through her epistolary account is therefore moral rather than empirical. It affirms that individuals remain accountable for actions carried out in the name of collective identity, even when those actions are mediated by distance, privilege, or historical inheritance.

## Conclusion

*Age of Iron* functions as an elegy for Mrs Curren's moral failures and her urgent need to confront them before death. The narrative traces her emotional and ethical transformation as she moves from denial and resistance toward recognition and eventual acceptance. This trajectory unfolds within the context of apartheid, where her position as a white South African implicates her in a system of violence and injustice. At first, she apprehends shame at an intellectual distance, acknowledging its legitimacy while deflecting its emotional weight. As the narrative advances and she becomes increasingly immersed in the surrounding suffering, loss, and social disintegration, shame shifts from an abstract concept to an immediate and embodied reality, emerging as illness, fear, and grief that she can no longer evade.

Rather than attempting to suppress or escape this pain, Mrs Curren gradually comes to accept it. She recognizes that shame is not an emotion to be resisted but a morally appropriate response that demands openness, sustained reflection, and ethical self-examination. In this way, such acknowledgment allows her not to deny her complicity but to let it inform her view of the past. Shame is not something to be escaped but rather one road to truthfulness and moral clarity. In accepting it, she finds the potential to forgive herself. This process is not redemption in any complete sense, and it does not eliminate the pain of her past. It brings her instead to a moment of reflection and acceptance that allows a fragile yet meaningful sense of moral resolution. This reckoning allows her to face death with a measure of serenity as she approaches the end of her life. She does not try to rewrite or deny her history but learns to accept it in humility. The novel suggests that if the event does not happen, death comes with unresolved guilt and inner turmoil, not resolution. As historian of her own conscience, Mrs Curren reconstructs the narrative of her life through introspection, confession, and writing. With her reflections directed to her daughter, to Vercueil, and finally

to herself, she confronts the past without sentimental compromise. Her final gesture is not one of justification but of preparation. In articulating her emotional and rational experience, Mrs Curren comes to accept that the past cannot be cleaned; rather, it must be faced if stillness is to be achieved before death.

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