

## Susan's Elusive Unreliability and Coetzee's Existential Thinking in *Foe*

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47175/rissj.v4i4.825>

| Yinqi Zhao |

School of Foreign Languages,  
Yunnan University, Kunming,  
China

1219087605@qq.com

### ABSTRACT

*This paper explores the portrayal of Susan Barton as an unreliable narrator in J.M. Coetzee's novel, Foe, and its implications on storytelling, authorial authority, and existential themes. Through a comprehensive analysis of Susan's narrative, the paper delves into the dual interpretations of her (un)reliability and argues that Coetzee intentionally crafts her as an elusive unreliable narrator. Then this article examines the "re-deconstruction" achieved by Coetzee, which challenges traditional storytelling conventions and emphasises the underlying meaning conveyed by a story. It also tries to explore Coetzee's philosophical contemplations of existence and contends that aligning with Sartre's existential thinking, Coetzee discusses many concepts around freedom and existence. By incorporating existential reflections, the paper uncovers the consciousness and existence embedded in the narrative.*

### KEYWORDS

*Unreliable narrator; storytelling; authorial authority; existentialism; power dynamics; freedom; Foe, J.M. Coetzee.*

### INTRODUCTION

*Foe*, a novel by Nobel laureate J.M. Coetzee, was published in 1986. The novel retells Daniel Defoe's classic *Robinson Crusoe* from the perspective of Susan Barton. Susan, as she narrates in the story, a mother in search of her kidnapped daughter, travels to Brazil but fails to find her. She then boards a ship bound for England but is cast adrift by mutinous sailors. She is eventually washed up on a deserted island where she meets Cruso and Friday. Susan spends a year on the island with them, and they are discovered and finally saved by a group of sailors. However, Cruso dies on the voyage back to England, leaving Susan and Friday alone. In England, Susan tells her story to Foe, a novelist who she hopes will turn it into a popular book. But Foe alters her account, focusing more on Susan's search for her daughter than on her island experience. Susan becomes frustrated with Foe's interference, and she also faces challenges from a girl who claims to be her daughter and knows the truth about Cruso and Friday.

By analyzing Susan's narrative, readers can delve into various themes such as feminism, post-colonialism, and deconstructionism. However, by adopting a Sartrean existential approach to Susan's narrative, her portrayal as an unreliable narrator becomes evident, thereby necessitating a reexamination of the core aspects and themes of the book. Superficially, Coetzee employs Susan to retell Daniel Defoe's story, aiming to deconstruct Defoe's storytelling. Intrinsicly, Coetzee creates an unreliable narrator to deconstruct his own story once again, challenge authorial authority, and deconstruct storytelling. This exploration extends further as Coetzee seeks to unveil some of his thoughts about existence and freedom through the exploration of pivotal concepts such as fiction and reality, truth and meaning, writing and language, and so on.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

*Foe* has been the subject of numerous critical analyses since its publication. Scholars both domestically and internationally have conducted extensive research on the novel from a variety of perspectives.

Narrative, in particular, has been a noteworthy perspective that scholars have explored for many years. Scholars have reviewed the power of storytelling, the narrative strategy, the narrative voice, and the discourse in the story from this perspective. For instance, Marais (2000) argues that the novel demonstrates how writing can change history by focusing on people rather than events. De Villiers (2010) similarly contends that the novel depicts the unreliability of language, storytelling, and representation through a deconstructive reading within a Derridean framework. Lewis Macleod and Jennifer Rickel both discuss the narrative voice in *Foe*. Macleod (2006) explores the nature of narrative voice and elaborates that J.M. Coetzee's novels are not always like stories because they are a combination of imaginative storytelling and philosophical investigation into language and discursive practice. Rickel (2013) analyzes the narrative voice in J.M. Coetzee's *Foe* and *Disgrace*, arguing that these two novels reject a way of writing that forces people to speak in a certain way. Instead, they show how some voices cannot be fully expressed in the usual way of talking about things. The above research findings consistently highlight the profound influence of storytelling on the distinction between truth and fiction. Coetzee delves into the subject of challenging authorial authority through the deconstruction of storytelling or narrative.

Regarding authorship, Coetzee implemented the concept of the death of the author and destabilized the authorial authority established by Defoe. (Suciu & Culea, 2021, p. 134) He created the new narrator Susan Barton and took (De)Foe as a character in the story to not only build the intertextuality with *Robinson Crusoe* but to challenge Daniel Defoe's authority. Just as Turk (2011) finds out that "The author not only tells a story but draws our attention to particular elements of the intertext(s), particular details..." As the author is dead, it is not accurate to say that "The author tells a story", but should be the author who let Susan, his agent narrator, tell the story. Chinese scholars Wang and Zhang (2010) analyze the use of multiple changes in first-person narration and unique female narrative perspectives in *Foe* which questions the author's authority, breaks the one-to-one correspondence between text and history, and deconstructs patriarchal and colonial cultural hegemony. While Zheng (2012) argues that *Foe* is a "postmodernist" work that challenges the traditional narrative structure of the novel and the idea of the "author" as a singular voice.

The deconstruction of storytelling, and the challenge of authorial authority, both point to an indispensable aspect: Coetzee's philosophical thinking on existentialism, which has long been ignored by scholars. To discuss the topics around existence, existential theories become necessary. Dragunoiu (2001) identifies that *Foe* has an existentialist and political responsibility theme. By applying Camu's, Watt's and Sartre's existential thinking, Dragunoiu finds that Defoe's *Crusoe* is different from Coetzee's *Cruso*: "Stripped of belief in higher principles, higher powers, and the existence of the Absolute, *Cruso*'s attitude toward himself and his world becomes profoundly ambiguous". By comparing Defoe's *Crusoe* and Coetzee's *Cruso*, Dragunoiu also finds that Susan's narrative is unreliable. However, this matter of fact is only revealed by comparison which is one sort of intertextuality reading rather than existentialists' theories.

Upon conducting a comprehensive review of the relevant literature, a notable research gap has emerged in the field of *Foe* studies. Specifically, there is a dearth of scholarship that applies an existential reading to the novel's narrator, and its purpose. The integration

of this theoretical framework has the potential to provide a fresh perspective and a more profound understanding of Susan's narrative. Additionally, an existential analysis could shed light on Coetzee's critique of storytelling, his exploration of power dynamics, and the fundamental nature of freedom and existence, all of which have received limited attention in existing research. Consequently, this article aims to address this gap by initially employing Sartre's existentialist philosophy to closely examine the evidence supporting Susan's portrayal as an elusive unreliable narrator. Subsequently, it will delve into a detailed discussion of Coetzee's purpose of creating such an unreliable narrator in *Foe*, to showcase his nuanced comprehension of storytelling, language, and authorship. Ultimately, through this exploration, the article endeavours to unveil how *Foe* manifests Coetzee's profound philosophical contemplation on the nature of freedom and existence.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### *Susan as an Unreliable Narrator*

Susan's role as an unreliable narrator is not readily apparent, as her level of unreliability differs from that found in traditional novels replete with obvious satire. James Phelan (2017) in his article proposed the level of (un)reliability. Susan's level of unreliability is based on Phelan's article, and it will be scrutinized later in this article. As previously discussed, Coetzee embraces the notion of the death of the author, abstaining from any interference in Susan's narrative and allowing her to perform freely on the literary stage. As the narrator who takes control over the discourse, Susan's storytelling consistently tempts readers to accept her version of events, thereby engendering a sense of perplexity that acts as a trap, constraining readers' thoughts and compelling them to acquiesce to Susan's perspective. Paradoxically, this narrowing of the gap between readers and the narrator aligns with Rabinowitz's (1977) notion of the ideal narrative audience. Rabinowitz distinguishes between four categories of readers: the actual audience, the authorial audience, the narrative audience, and the ideal narrative audience. In the case of Susan as the narrator, her adept storytelling skills make it effortless for her audience to embrace her narrative, thereby willingly placing themselves in the position of the ideal narrative audience, rather than the other three positions. One of Coetzee's remarkable achievements in *Foe* lies in the fact that even if being trapped in this position throughout the reading experience, readers are still able to decode a multitude of Coetzee's profound insights and ruminations.

Prior to discovering Susan's unreliability, a Sartrean existential reading is limited to an analysis of the narrator Susan at the textual level. Within Susan's narrative, she finds herself subjected to the Gaze of Others, such as Cruso, Foe, and a girl who claims to be her daughter. In terms of the Gaze, Sartre proposed his thinking about Gaze in his book *L'être et Le Néant* (1943) and used the French phrase "Le Regard". In Hazel E. Barnes's translation version (1993), "The Look" is applied to refer to Sartre's "Le Regard". Nonetheless, this article would prefer to apply the phrase "The Gaze" to replace Barnes's "The Look" because "gaze" has a relatively precise semantic meaning that can describe different forms and effects of human visual behaviour, such as looking, staring, and glancing. In addition, this term is widely used in philosophical and cultural studies. Sartre's (1993) Gaze concerns mainly with the relationship between the Subject (Self) and the Object (Other):

But the original relation of myself to the other is not only an absent truth aimed at across the concrete presence of an object in my universe: it is also a concrete, daily relation which at each instant I experience. At each instant the Other is looking at me (p. 257).

In Susan's narrative, an intriguing aspect emerges as she consistently portrays herself as the Object (Other), positioned under the gaze of others and in a position of the oppressed. Susan describes Cruso as "gazing at me more as if I were a fish cast up by the waves than an unfortunate fellow creature" (p. 9). When Susan employs Cruso's self-made needle to remove a thorn from her foot, Cruso "watched in silence" (p. 10). Under such gaze and watch, Susan perceives herself as Cruso's "second subject, the first being his manservant Friday" (p. 11). In her relationship with Foe, her position becomes even more precarious, as Susan eagerly desires Foe to serve as her ghostwriter. It is within this desperate need that Susan envisions Foe having "spies who peer in at the windows" or residing in an attic, where he spends his time "perusing through a spyglass the life we lead" (p. 71). Only subsequently does a girl claiming to be her daughter appear: "A Stranger has been watching the house" (p. 72).

Based on the preceding evidence, it becomes evident that Susan consistently portrays herself as the object of the gaze. By doing so, she implicitly conveys that her freedom has been usurped by others, leaving her devoid of choice. Sartre (1993) posits that humans possess inherent freedom, yet this freedom becomes challenged by the presence of others, who can objectify and restrict their subjectivity through their gaze: "It is the recognition of the fact that I am indeed that object which the Other is looking at and judging. I can be ashamed only as my freedom escapes me in order to become a given object" (p.261). Under such gaze, Susan experiences a sense of shame and self-consciousness when aware of being observed by others, as she becomes aware of herself as an object in the eyes of the Other. However, such limitations, shame, and the loss of freedom would only make sense if Susan were a reliable narrator. Superficially, Susan's narrative appears coherent, but if we apply Sartre's concept of "bad faith", Susan's narrative would lack reliability.

Susan's unreliability stems from her self-deception (bad faith). Throughout her narrative, she consistently presents herself as the object, the Other, due to the gaze of others. However, there exists another situation in which an individual may find themselves positioned as the object, the Other. Sartre posits that consciousness, or the individual, possesses absolute freedom and the ability to make choices. Yet, absolute freedom also entails absolute responsibility and the anxiety that accompanies decision-making. Many individuals resort to bad faith as a means of evading the weight and distress of this responsibility. Sartre explains, "Moreover, we are always ready to take refuge in a belief in determinism if this freedom weighs upon us or if we need an excuse. Thus, we flee from anguish by attempting to apprehend ourselves from without as an Other or as a thing" (p. 43). That is bad faith, and Susan exemplifies this pattern.

Susan repeatedly presents herself as being constrained by others, using her portrayal as an Other to evade the responsibilities and burdens brought by freedom. In her narrative, she consistently compares the small island to Cruso's kingdom and likens herself to Cruso's subject (p.11, p.13, p. 39, p. 43). She attempts to persuade Cruso to leave the island but is rejected. What's worth mentioning is that Cruso's first response about leaving this island is also one kind of bad faith. He mentions the far distance and cannibals but denies his love for this island. But this is also part of Susan's narrative, its reliability is also needed to be verified. She narrates that she is even warned not to venture beyond their hut (p. 20). In other words, Susan blames Cruso for limiting her freedom and failing to assist her in her desire to be saved (p. 36). However, there is substantial evidence to indicate that she is engaging in a state of bad faith. Physically, she is "nearly as tall as he" and "stronger than he" (p. 20, p. 30), suggesting that she possesses the capability to resist Cruso's control. She is also free to leave the hut and explore the island on her own (p. 35), indicating that she has the agency to escape from the island independently. Furthermore,

when Cruso falls ill, she takes care of him and willingly engages in sexual relations with him (p. 30, p. 44), indicating that she does not consider herself subservient to the “Ruler” of this kingdom. This state of bad faith persists even when Susan encounters Foe. She implores Foe to be her ghostwriter, stating, “For though my story gives the truth, it does not give the substance of the truth” (p. 51). Susan believes that only Foe possesses the ability to breathe life into her narrative. Nonetheless, as we can observe, Susan’s narrative, whether recounting her experiences on the island or her subsequent letters to Foe, remains coherent and captivating. This suggests that she is capable of telling her story independently. And as an individual, she is free to improve her narrative till she satisfies. She may just not want to take the responsibility of not narrating her story as satisfactorily as she wants. She may be just afraid of failing her imaginative readers. Thus far, due to Susan’s prior unreliability, the truth surrounding her daughter’s story remains a mystery. However, her daughter’s story is the beginning of her experience, when it lacks reliability, it will lead to the collapse of her entire narrative.

In conclusion, Susan’s narration easily tempts readers to accept her perspective, although she does not fit the conventional notion of an overtly unreliable narrator. Because of the notion of bad faith, it is hard to categorize Susan’s unreliability. This article can only for now categorize it as “misinterpreting/underinterpreting” which represents the weakest form of unreliability of Phelan’s FIGURE 3 in his article “Reliable, Unreliable, and Deficient Narration: A Rhetorical Account”. If Susan were a reliable narrator, readers could still extract some of Coetzee’s intended insights from her narrative. Hence, the question arises: why Coetzee deliberately crafted a narrator with such elusive unreliability?

### **Why Foe Needs an Unreliable Narrator**

Coetzee effectively achieves his objective of “re-deconstruction” through the use of an unreliable narrator. As previously discussed, readers can still interpret Coetzee’s ideas even if Susan were a reliable narrator. However, it is only when Susan assumes the role of an elusive unreliable narrator that Coetzee can further the exploration of storytelling, authorship, authority, and truth. This section discusses both situations.

When readers interpret Susan as a reliable narrator, only the first layer of deconstruction becomes apparent. Typically, upon first reading *Foe*, readers pay close attention to the intertextuality between the novel and *Robinson Crusoe*. Susan’s presence as a narrator challenges the notion of narrative and story ownership, raising questions about who tells the story and whose truth it represents:

“Better had there been only Cruso and Friday,” you will murmur to yourself: “Better without the woman.” Yet where would you be without the woman? Would Cruso have come to you of his own accord? *Could you have made up Cruso and Friday and the island with its fleas and apes and lizards? I think not* (72).

In addition, Coetzee (2003) presented some clues in his Nobel Lecture, wherein he recounted his childhood confusion regarding the identity of the narrator and author of *Robinson Crusoe*. Upon checking a Children’s encyclopedia, he discovered that Daniel Defoe was credited as the book’s author, which puzzled him greatly, as the opening page of *Robinson Crusoe* explicitly stated that the story was recounted by the protagonist himself. He pondered whether Daniel Defoe might be an alternative name for Robinson Crusoe. This speech intimately reveals Coetzee’s contemplation of the fundamental nature of storytelling and authorship, themes that are extensively explored in *Foe*. Why cannot I (Coetzee) make up a story now that *Robinson Crusoe* is not narrated by Crusoe himself but by you Defoe? Thus, he employs Susan as a means to challenge *Robinson Crusoe*’s



narrative without interference. However, Coetzee does not seem satisfied with solely deconstructing Defoe's storytelling. He also endeavours to deconstruct his own story—Susan's storytelling.

Once Susan's unreliability is unveiled, the second layer of deconstruction emerges. Following Coetzee's use of Susan to deconstruct Defoe's story, Foe enters Coetzee's narrative as a "reciprocal gesture". Foe's presence serves to deconstruct Susan's storytelling. It is worth noting that Daniel Defoe, originally named Daniel Foe, added the prefix "De" to his surname, imbuing it with an aristocratic connotation. Coetzee's act of removing the "De" from Defoe's name echoes his deconstruction of authority and titles. Interestingly, the prefix "de" signifies an action of undoing and is closely related to the concept of "deconstruction" itself.

Within the story, Foe engages Susan in discussions about the divide between fiction and reality, storytelling and truth, ultimately deconstructing Susan's narrative. Foe opines that Susan's story "is not a dull story, though it's too much the same" (p. 127). He then reconstructs her story by giving it a proper beginning, middle, and end, with the island narrative forming its middle part (p. 117). However, Susan insists on preserving the authenticity of her original story, leading to a conflict of perspectives between her and Foe. Subsequently, when the girl who claims to be a character from Susan's story appears at Foe's house, Susan believes that not only her story but also the truth of her life has been usurped. In essence, Foe's statement and action unveil a general observation: truth is invariably determined by those in positions of power. The one who narrates wields the power of discourse and establishes their authority. This observation contradicts Susan's view that truth always matters most. She always wants to keep her story as authentic as she wishes and is always exploring the truth of the story of Others like Crusoe and Friday. However, Foe's statement challenged Susan's point of view about the primacy of truth in storytelling. Thus, through Foe, Coetzee deconstructs his own storytelling, successfully achieving his objective of "re-deconstruction."

In conclusion, Coetzee's deliberate use of an elusive unreliable narrator contributes to the intricacy of the narrative, prompting readers to engage in critical analysis of storytelling and truth. The complex interplay between Susan, Foe, and the act of storytelling invites readers to reevaluate their assumptions and interpretations; that is, readers can come down on the side of Susan or just the opposite. Through this deliberate narrative approach, Coetzee successfully achieves a "re-deconstruction" that challenges traditional storytelling conventions and facilitates a deeper exploration of the novel's themes. It becomes apparent that storytelling, or narrative and language, can never fully capture the truth, reality, or essence. Just as Foe in the story raises his question: "Do we of necessity become puppets in a story" (p. 135)? So far, Coetzee guides readers towards an additional field: his philosophical thinking about existentialism.

### ***Behind the Storytelling***

Through the process of "re-deconstruction," Coetzee delves into his existential reflections behind storytelling, encompassing several core existential notions explored by Sartre. As readers come to realize the implications of this "re-deconstruction," it becomes evident that the truth of a story can never be fully unveiled. The act of storytelling and the narrative itself are mere forms, engendering the need to look beyond the surface (form) and delve into the depth (essence) that lies beneath. Consequently, it becomes paramount to thoroughly examine the underlying existential elements behind the novel *Foe's* storytelling.

Freedom is central to Sartre's existentialism, and Coetzee explores this notion alongside power dynamics. As previously discussed, Susan's assertion of being subjected to the gaze and her consequent restriction of freedom exemplify power dynamics, bad faith, and freedom. It is not solely the narrator who wields control and power through their speech, but the one who gazes also holds sway over power and truth. This is precisely why Coetzee repeatedly underscores the notion that truth is never an absolute truth in itself, thereby necessitating Susan's role as an unreliable narrator and subjecting her to challenges. As Sartre explores in his fourth section, "The Look," since every individual is free, they can impose any meaning on the Other. That is to say, the one who casts the gaze can define the truth based on their perspective, while the one who is the object of the gaze experiences limitations in their transcendence.

Ironically, despite Susan consistently presenting herself as a recipient of the gaze, she apparently wields the power of her own gaze over Friday throughout the entire narrative. Yet, she is good at bad faith and never acknowledges her gazing on Friday. On the island, Susan exhibits a keen curiosity towards Friday, closely observing his eating habits (p. 24), and frequently monitoring his fishing activities (p. 31). After leaving the island, Susan's gaze becomes more intense, as evidenced by her growing fascination with Friday's silence. She attempts various means to elicit a response from him, including drawing pictures (p. 68), playing the flute (p. 95-96), and attempting to teach him writing (p. 151-153). However, none of these endeavours succeeds in unveiling the mystery surrounding Friday. As Susan says, "Friday has no command of words and therefore no defence against being re-shaped day by day in conformity with the desire of others... what he is to the world is what I make of him" (p. 121-122). The only ways that Friday could break Susan's gaze were what Sartre notes: to deny or capture others' freedom through language, love, and desire—qualities that appear to be absent on Friday. Susan's consistent narrative of her being gazed at and her bad faith in gazing at Friday makes such power dynamics and freedom scramble unpredictable and perplexing.

In a word, the exploration of power dynamics in storytelling revolves around the struggle for freedom between oppressors and the oppressed, and it is within this exploration that Coetzee makes his plea for freedom. However, freedom is often constrained by the power of language, engendering Coetzee to continually dig into the theme of storytelling and its profound impact. Through his scrutinization of storytelling, Coetzee seeks to uncover the limitations imposed on freedom by the control of discourse.

Three crucial themes - authorial authority, the purpose of storytelling, and ethical responsibilities - form the foundation of Coetzee's exploration of storytelling through an existential lens. Through his process of "re-deconstruction," Coetzee completely challenges the concept of authorial authority, unveiling the idea that authorship should not equate to absolute authority. Both authors and readers possess freedom, with the former having the freedom to write and the latter having the freedom to criticize. Consequently, authors should keep tolerance towards diverse interpretations and criticisms of their works. Coetzee personally embodies this concept by creating Susan as an elusive unreliable narrator and embracing the notion of "the death of the author," allowing readers to freely interpret Susan's reliability or lack thereof.

Alongside authorial authority, the purpose of storytelling holds significant importance in Coetzee's exploration. "Just as Sartre's Roquentin realizes that language cannot fully recover the essential reality of the past" (Dragunoiu, 2001, p. 314), Coetzee's Foe recognizes that storytelling also falls short of capturing the ultimate truth. Consequently, the purpose of storytelling should not solely be to uncover the truth, but rather to endow narratives with meaning. Foe's two stories to Susan, one depicting a woman spared by endless confession

before execution and another recounting a female prisoner's search for a foster mother for her baby (123-126), exemplify how stories often serve as allegories, conveying deeper meanings. This aligns with Sartre's notion of "committed literature,":

*He tackled the question from the angle of committed literature as he had defined it in What Is Literature?, but emphasized that committed literature is not the same as militant literature. It is committed because it seeks to provide the reader with an answer to the question of meaning. The reader seeks something that he lacks and, Sartre says, what he lacks is the meaning of life. The book's task is to give meaning to life. This meaning, however, is created by the free reader who encounters the signs on the page (Qtd in Daigle, 2009).*

Given the immense influence of literature (storytelling), Coetzee also explores the theme of ethical responsibilities, emphasizing that writers must take responsibility for their narratives. As controllers of discourse power, writers possess the freedom to tell stories, but they are also responsible for the content they create, which aligns with Sartre's view of freedom. Through the experiences of characters like Friday and "Susan's daughter," readers witness how a writer's story can profoundly impact an individual's life - Storytelling possesses a profound influence capable of shaping an individual's existential trajectory.

Since Coetzee's philosophical thinking has been under discussion, his ontology cannot be intentionally skipped. Coetzee and Sartre share a similarity in their contemplation of ontology. Neither of them directly delves into the essence of existence, as doing so would risk falling into metaphysics. (Ontology is a branch of metaphysics. Both metaphysics and ontology originally encompass the study of the nature of existence, but over time, metaphysics has acquired negative connotations due to its historical association with theology and mysticism. It's important to note that some philosophers, like Graham Harman in his work on Object-Oriented Ontology, equate the two terms.) Like Sartre, Coetzee incorporates phenomenological perspectives when discussing existence. There are three most prominent instances in *Foe*: (1) Susan and the girl claiming to be her daughter meet at Foe's house; (2) Susan teaches Friday how to write; (3) The unnatural narrative in the last chapter.

The encounter with the individual claiming to be her daughter in Foe's house triggers a series of contemplations within Susan. She questions the existence of this "daughter", which in turn leads her to question her own existence. Discussions with Foe regarding the authenticity of dreams and memories, and whether the beings within them are real, echo Sartre's existential ponderings on the "embodied being" of consciousness. Sartre regards the for-itself as an embodied consciousness. In other words, when consciousness engages with the world, it throws itself into the world through the body and interacts with the world through the body. Human existence is the existence of the body within the objective world. Susan's concern lies in the existence of substance, which is, in Sartre's point of view, controlled by consciousness. To discover the existence of consciousness is more suitable than the substance. Susan tries to confirm "her daughter's" substance through touch, embrace, and kiss, yet, touch, embrace, and kiss is phenomenal. Rather than investigating the substance of phenomena, it is more profound to delve into the existence of consciousness. When it comes to the reality of imagination and dreams, it holds no more importance than the truthfulness of stories. Sartre considers imagination as a mode of conscious existence, a free expression of consciousness, transcending and negating the world. Writing (storytelling) itself is a form of imagination, and thus, its transcendence and negation to the world are worth more discussion.



Susan's endeavour to teach Friday writing reflects Coetzee's contemplation about modes of conscious existence. Susan wonders if Friday, who cannot speak, can comprehend the meaning of words: "How can Friday know what freedom means when he barely knows his name?" Foe responds: "What concerns us is the desire, not the name (p. 149)." Desire and words represent the first two levels of conscious topology in Sartre's philosophy. Desire is pre-reflective consciousness, while words are reflective consciousness. Desire is consciousness's intentionality entering the world, while words are consciousness's understanding of the world or an object. Thus, focusing on the representation or meaning of the word "freedom" easily leads to imposing one's will onto the other. In fact, Friday can write, and those strange paintings he makes on the slate are Friday's words, incomprehensible to Susan as a representative of the white civilized world. Words are symbols, phenomena, but more important is the essence behind these phenomena.

The unnatural narration in Chapter Four, like an experiential practice undertaken by Coetzee after his philosophical contemplation of existentialism, features unknown narrators, ambiguous story attribution, weird event, and enigmatic characters. But as we have been exploring throughout this article, do these elements truly matter? This is precisely what Coetzee seeks to convey through his writing: When a story breaks our cognitive understanding of the phenomenal world, shattering the perceived world of sights, sounds, touches, and scents in a story, is it still a story? If it is, then what lies beneath the surface of this story and what is the essence of existence?

## CONCLUSION

The two interpretations regarding the (un)reliability of Susan's narration represent two stages of reading. In the initial reading, most readers are likely to be deceived by Susan's captivating storytelling, only to discover her unreliability upon closer scrutiny or during subsequent readings. This article posits that Susan, the narrator crafted by Coetzee, is intentionally portrayed as an elusive unreliable narrator. Coetzee's greatness lies in the fact that regardless of readers' interpretations of Susan's (un)reliability, the story can still unfold, and Coetzee's insights can be unveiled. However, it is only when Susan is perceived as an unreliable narrator that Coetzee's hidden intentions can be discovered.

The article contends that Coetzee presents Susan as an unreliable narrator as part of his goal to achieve "re-deconstruction." Coetzee seeks to deconstruct not only Defoe's story but also his own narrative. Through this dual deconstruction, Coetzee challenges the authority of the author and emphasizes a fundamental truth: the authenticity of a story is not its primary concern; rather, what holds significance is the underlying meaning it conveys.

In this exploration, Coetzee demonstrates his philosophical reflections rooted in existentialism. He examines the interplay between freedom which is a central concept in Sartre's existentialism, and power dynamics. The wielding of power extends beyond language; the act of gazing also assumes a form of power. Furthermore, Coetzee addresses themes of freedom, authorial authority, the purpose of storytelling, and the ethical responsibilities of writers. While writers possess the freedom to create, they also bear the responsibility for their narratives and must be open to criticism from readers.

Ultimately, Coetzee's narrative embodies existentialist philosophical reflections on consciousness and existence, which are prominently explored in the fourth part of the novel. This section richly encompasses existentialist elements.

It is crucial to acknowledge that these perspectives presented above are this article's interpretations and reflections. This article aligns with Coetzee's view of embracing

criticism from fellow scholars with an open mind and modesty. The literary criticism in this article is freely composed while also recognizing the accompanying responsibility.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The initial draft of this paper was mostly completed in June 2023, but as July arrived, with deeper contemplation and further examination of texts and theories, I nearly rewrite the entire content of the initial draft. Whether it was the first draft or subsequent revisions, Professor Zou provided me with immense support and assistance. Without her, I could never have completed this article. The following is a short essay I wrote at the end of June, respectfully dedicated to Professor Zou.

Mr Nobody's Anxiety and Tranquility

Time is a train, madly with the passage of years, accelerating, faster and faster, flashing by, truly becoming the residual shadow of moments. Looking back at this shadow, sigh: "How poignant it is". Timeline - a wire - unfinished matters knot along this wire, akin to tangles in a ball of yarn, the more Mr Nobody tries to untangle, the more chaotic it becomes, the more impatient Mr Nobody is. Anxiety brought forth by impatience, then driving away sleep. On nights when the mind is clearer, the more eager Mr Nobody is to untie the knots of time, yet each time he just begins, exhaustively falling asleep.

Learning brings the greatest tranquillity to the soul. Knowledge acts as a lubricant, allowing Mr Nobody once-rusting brain to whirl at high speed, only then does he feel himself slightly liberated from mediocrity and folly. It is precisely this rapid whirl of the mind that engenders an illusion of catching up with time, the accelerating train, and yet, it is this very illusion that brings Mr Nobody profound serenity.

## RESEARCH FUNDING

This work is supported by the project titled "Research on Fatherhood in Contemporary African American Literature," funded by the Scientific Research Funds of Zhejiang Provincial Education Department, China (Project No. Y202250203) and the Scientific Research Funds of Yunnan Provincial Education Department, China (Project No. 2023J0075).

## REFERENCES

- 汪正平, & 张旭春. (2010). 库切小说《福》的叙事策略分析. 求索(10), 227-229.
- 郑禄英. (2012). 西方父权帝国话语的颠覆者——《福》对《鲁滨逊漂流记》的解构. 江西社会科学, 32(09), 90-93.
- Coetzee, J. M. (2003). *He and His Man, 'Nobel Lecture*. NobelPrize.org. Retrieved Tue. 4 July from <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2003/coetzee/lecture/>
- Coetzee, J. M. (2010). *Foe*. Penguin UK.
- Daigle, C. (2009). *Jean-Paul Sartre*. Routledge.
- de Villiers, R. (2010, 2010/06/01). Narrative (De)construction: Mr Coetzee, in the Basement, with the Quill: A Discussion of Authorial Complicity in J.M. Coetzee's *Foe*. *Journal of Literary Studies*, 26(2), 118-126.
- Dragunoiu, D. (2001, 2001/01/01). Existential Doubt and Political Responsibility in J. M. Coetzee's *Foe*. *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 42(3), 309-326.
- James, P. (2017). Reliable, Unreliable, and Deficient Narration: A Rhetorical Account. *Narrative Culture*, 4(1), 89-103.
- MacLeod, L. (2006). "DO WE OF NECESSITY BECOME PUPPETS IN A STORY?" OR NARRATING THE WORLD: ON SPEECH, SILENCE, AND DISCOURSE IN J. M.

- COETZEE'S "FOE". *Modern Fiction Studies*, 52(1), 1-18.
- Marais, M. (2000, 2000/06/01). The novel as ethical command: J.M. Coetzee's *Foe*. *Journal of Literary Studies*, 16(2), 62-85.
- Rabinowitz, P. J. (1977). Truth in fiction: A reexamination of audiences. *Critical inquiry*, 4(1), 121-141.
- Rickel, J. (2013). Speaking of Human Rights: Narrative Voice and the Paradox of the Unspeakable in J.M. Coetzee's "Foe" and "Disgrace". *Journal of Narrative Theory*, 43(2), 160-185.
- Satre, J.-P. (1993). *Being and Nothingness* (H. E. Barnes, Trans.). Washington Square Press.
- Suciu, A. I., & Culea, M. (2021). FROM DEFOE TO COETZEE'S FOE/FOE THROUGH AUTHORSHIP. *BALTIC JOURNAL OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE LITERATURE AND CULTURE*, 11, 121-137.
- Turk, T. (2011). Intertextuality and the Collaborative Construction of Narrative: J. M. Coetzee's "Foe". *Narrative*, 19(3), 295-310.