

J.M. Coetzee. *Elizabeth Costello*.

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Classifications made by literary theory are brought into question when a text like *Elizabeth Costello* is examined, since its creation is so different to that of any other. The novel's ability to break the bonds of conventional classification indicates that it could be classified as "post-modern," since post-modernist works are said to undermine the classification of any work under any broad label. Ironically, however, if *Elizabeth Costello* does create a new genre, it still succumbs to the convention of being classified.

Ostensibly this is the story of the fictional Australian author Elizabeth Costello. Rather than focusing on her thought processes, or fictional events of Elizabeth's life, as a traditional narrative would, Coetzee places the emphasis of the novel on the portrayal of a range of issues contextualised and then narrated within Elizabeth's fictional world.

Thus, there are eight of these "lessons" – as the chapters are called – most of which were written and presented by Coetzee himself before the novel itself was published. Since these lessons already existed prior to their collation and publication under the heading of a "fictional" novel, it calls into question how one defines a novel and if this work falls under that category. This is the novel resisting classification on a most basic level that is expanded upon considerably when other aspects of these lessons are examined.

Although the book does not presuppose that the reader was present at any of the previous readings of the lessons contained within it, the fact that these lessons were in fact read to an audience indicates that Coetzee values the primacy and immediacy of the spoken word. Taking this tract, the novel is then only an extension of these lessons presented in written form.

This debate over the validity of the spoken word over the written is one that dates back to Plato, who contended that a work that is spoken can be interrogated or questioned. The written word on the other hand cannot defend or clarify itself. The word printed on the page will not change when questions are asked of it. It seems that Coetzee, being aware of this, has emphasised the importance of the spoken word by presenting his lessons in spoken form first and therefore emphasising the primacy of it.

It is in these lessons that the novel obtains the latter part of the label “ficto-criticism.” The lessons are non-fiction. They are essays that talk about various issues such as animal rights and the state of the African novel. Although it is difficult to argue that the views expressed in these lessons are actually those of Coetzee himself without interrogation, it is certain that the views are validated by logic. They are concise and academic. Placed on their own, without the context of the novel, they would be classified as academic criticism.

This is perhaps a secondary reason for Coetzee presenting these lessons individually to various groups over several years before publishing them as a novel. The publication of some lessons in previous volumes also lends the novel and author a great deal of credibility. This further validates the contention that they are works of academic criticism.

The former part of the label “ficto-criticism” is primarily obtained through Coetzee’s framing of these academic lessons. The entire novel contains a narrative thread of the character of Elizabeth Costello, a novelist who presents these works at various occasions in her life. By linking these lessons through the narrative framework of Elizabeth and her story, Coetzee creates a dilemma for the reader.

The reading of the novel in itself becomes problematic because of its narrative framework. The reader is confronted with the question of how the novel should be read. It contains both fictional and non-fictional elements. Should the information contained within the lessons simply be read as musings of a non-fictional character? This question, it seems, over-simplifies the issue by dismissing the essays as created by the character. Reading the novel in this way would in fact undermine what is achieved by other readings.

A more problematic reading is revealed when the narrative framework of Elizabeth is examined more closely. Elizabeth is a fictional character. The words however that she speaks in a fictional context are words that have been spoken by the author Coetzee some years before the appearance of the text which Elizabeth inhabits. Not only does this blur the lines between fiction and reality (and non-fiction) but it means that the novel as whole cannot be read as entirely fiction or as entirely non-fiction.

This conflict between fiction and non-fiction can be seen in an even more superficial sense. The work itself is published as a paperback, the traditional medium for a work of fiction. Some of the information contained within it does not fit this medium, and would perhaps be more suited to (not surprisingly) an academic lecture. This conflict between narrative framing and content is difficult to reconcile.

This is clearly seen when one questions how story and narrative interact. No content within the novel has a definite form that is true all the time. Since the framing of each lesson is constantly changing according not only to its fictional elements but the time and place and context in which it was first presented, there can be no stable distinction between story and narrative (or indeed fiction and reality).

It is true, however, that the fictional narrative does provide a framework in which the lessons can be read. This is established through the focalisation of the principle character Elizabeth Costello, as mentioned previously. Is it then possible that this narrative framework can influence a reading of the lessons that were presented in reality?

This question brings into focus the issues of performance and audience, and the political impact of the text. If the reader is active in the creation of the context of the fictional framework, that is, by being aware of the lesson's previous performances, their perception of the reality of when those lessons were performed are also altered. In this way the novel not only frames itself but the reader and reality.

The political significance of the novel is also seen in the narrative/story relationship. That the text is performed questions the very formulation of what a reader assumes constitutes a narrative/story relationship. This questioning of the relationship between narrative and story has implications for the novel in general. Since the reader is active in the construction of the narrative, the novel becomes more interactive than it was previously.

Having examined these arguments it is clear that one could in fact classify *Elizabeth Costello* as "ficto-criticism" since it contains elements that fit that genre. However it seems that by giving this text a label such as that one undermines the significance of what it has tried to do. By taking elements from both fiction and non-fiction, the book has resisted classification by traditional means. Creating a genre in order to classify and label it seems to undermine its struggle to resist classification in the first place.