Corpses and Cruelty: A Comparative Analysis of the Relationship Between Soul and Body

Very rarely, in third-person narratives, is death the end of the story. There is always the short denouement of the aftermath: the surviving characters are assigned either grief or recovery, the surrounding society filters the news through a film of indifference, and the concrete remains of the protagonist—house, belongings, children, body—are dealt with accordingly. It is often the fate of the body itself that speaks to the nature of the character’s death; a marble tombstone and a gold inscription indicate a very different end than an unmarked grave and a desecrated corpse. On a physical level, the misfortunes that befall the body should have no bearing on the soul, and yet it is impossible not to consider these injuries a final insult to the recent inhabitant.

This inevitable connection between soul and body, even after death, is not limited to literature. The trajectory of Benito Mussolini is a striking example of posthumous disgrace: his corpse was dangled upside-down from a garage, spat upon by his former subjects, and repeatedly (and redundantly) shot by members of the encroaching crowd.¹ Though his soul was theoretically safe from these punishments, they have nonetheless become an inextricable part of his mythology, as if the earthly shame his body experienced after death was somehow translated to his consciousness, living or imagined. Perhaps the power of the story lies in the juxtaposition between Mussolini’s former grandeur and the disturbing ignominy of his end. In the words of David Lurie from Disgrace, the principal humiliation might be to have “such high hopes, and to

¹ “Italian Partisans Kill Mussolini”
end like this.” Or perhaps there is something else at work; perhaps the soul and body are linked too tightly for us to believe that one can suffer without the other’s knowledge.

The question, then, becomes one of relationship. What is the connection between the body and the soul? Which outlives the other? And how can we make sense of the relationship in light of its predestined defeat at the hands of death? This discussion becomes impossibly circular when limited to the abstract, so we will explore it through the deaths and following injuries of the characters in three novels: Mood Indigo by Boris Vian; Disgrace by J. M. Coetzee; and Light in August by William Faulkner. Through investigation of the soul, the body, and the circumstances that connect or divide them, we will be able to approach the more concrete and potentially disturbing question: Is it possible to be cruel to corpses?

The first step is to start with the moment of separation. It is very rarely suggested that the soul stays in the body after death; rather, the soul is generally described in a motion of ascent, leaving the confines of skin and bone behind and floating into space, into Heaven, or into oblivion. David Lurie equates “the smell of expiration” with “the soft, short smell of the released soul,” going on to specify that when death occurs, “the soul is yanked out of the body.” This depicts the soul’s clear-cut detachment from its former container, an interpretation of death corroborated by the language Faulkner uses to describe the murder of Joe Christmas: “[the pent black blood] seemed to rush out of his pale body like the rush of sparks from a rising rocket; upon that black blast the man seemed to rise soaring into their memories forever and ever.” This motif of rising, coupled with the man’s “peaceful” eyes at a moment of incredible suffering,

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2 Coetzee 205
3 Coetzee 219
4 Faulkner 465
serve to further the idea of death as the soul’s release. When Chloe’s coffin is used as a battering ram to break through the window, Colin reminds himself that “she could no longer feel anything.” Her soul, presumably, has already escaped, leaving her body as nothing but an empty shell.

And yet, upon seeing how Chloe’s coffin has been “bashed about,” Colin still weeps “because Chloe must have been bruised and broken inside it.” Colin does not lament that Chloe’s body is bruised, but that Chloe is bruised, potentially suggesting that the scars sustained by her body are also being registered by her consciousness. David Lurie has a similar reaction to the way the workmen “beat the [dog body bags] with the backs of their shovels before loading them, to break the rigid limbs.” He takes over the job of putting the dogs in the incinerator so that their bodies will not be hacked apart by shovels, as if this courtesy makes a difference to the dogs. The theme takes on a still more gruesome guise when Percy Grimm castrates Joe Christmas moments before his death at the end of Light in August, telling him, “Now you’ll let white women alone, even in hell.” The implication is clear: whatever happens to Christmas’s body will carry over to the afterlife, permanently marking his soul with the same scars and disfigurements. Death, in this case, is not meant to be an escape for Christmas; it is his passage into a second phase of existence, still with the same baggage of injuries and agonies that plagued him at the moment of his death.

How to reconcile the soul’s release from the body and Grimm’s assumption that scars run deeper than skin? When Grimm finishes his task, Christmas does not writhe in pain or cry out.

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5 Faulkner 464
6 Vian 207
7 Vian 207
8 Coetzee 144-5
9 Faulkner 464
Faulkner describes: “The man on the floor had not moved. He just lay there … with peaceful and unfathomable and unbearable eyes.”\textsuperscript{10} This is followed by the previously described moment of release, wherein Christmas seems to rise up above the surrounding men, becoming a memory “of itself alone serene, of itself alone triumphant.”\textsuperscript{11} This is not the language of castration and eternal damnation. A more reasonable explanation, therefore, is that Grimm is wrong. If the body is a container being battered and bent, then the soul is the liquid inside—leaking out, perhaps, but never wounded by the blows, too fluid to show dents and bruises like its casing. Christmas’s castration is a physical torture, but not a spiritual one, just as Chloe’s bruises are not felt by the woman herself and Lurie realizes “the dogs are dead; and what do dogs know of honor and dishonor anyway?”\textsuperscript{12} Whatever cruelty is done to the corpses, it is not a cruelty they feel—and the swiftly departing consciousness behind the bodies does not feel it either.

And yet, the mistreatment of the corpses is inevitably painful to witness. Despite Colin’s precarious financial situation, he still promises one hundred fifty doublezoons for the most expensive funeral service he can manage for Chloe. This “pauper’s funeral” involves stone-throwing, raucous singing, and rough handling of the coffin, turning Chloe’s death into a grotesque mockery that Colin must endure.\textsuperscript{13} Colin’s failure to provide one of the “loveliest services” for Chloe is an interesting case of pointless survivor’s guilt; the funeral itself makes no difference to Chloe, who is long gone, and who would be equally indifferent to a funeral costing three thousand doublezoons.\textsuperscript{14} It must be the case, then, that funerals are not for the dead, but for the living. Lurie articulates the same idea in regards to his ritual with the incinerator: that he

\textsuperscript{10} Faulkner 464-5
\textsuperscript{11} Faulkner 465
\textsuperscript{12} Coetzee 146
\textsuperscript{13} Vian 205
\textsuperscript{14} Vian 205
performs it “for himself, then. For his idea of the world, a world in which men do not use shovels to beat corpses into a more convenient shape for processing.” The old possessors of the bodies have no continued interest in their upkeep—it is the living that attach meaning to the corpses, and to whatever indignities they suffer in death.

The living assign not only meaning to the dead, but also their visions of the afterlife. Any discussion of bodies and souls must include a discussion of religion; and yet, despite the religious symbolism pervading all three of the relevant texts, the ultimate verdict on religion that comes through ranges from ambiguous to negative. Jesus himself appears in Mood Indigo, adjusting his crown of thrones from his place on the cross, but he is unsympathetic to Colin’s grief. Joe Christmas, with his initials and the circumstances of his birth, in some ways parallels Jesus, but Christmas’s violence and involuntary rages are a bitter subversion of the goodwill and pacifism preached by his precursor. Disgrace presents another subversion in the frequent references to the Sabbath day, placed either in the context of the clinic, where every week innocent dogs are euthanized, or the incinerator, where the dogs’ bodies are burnt and disposed of. In these texts, religion is no longer the solace of the worthy or the privilege of the virtuous. Religion has become a mockery of the ideals it once manufactured; it stands now for indifference, for cruelty, for a corrupted version of its intended message.

When, in the relevant death scenes, the characters appeal to religion, it functions as a sadistic presence more responsive to society than to ethical merit. Faulkner cynically describes “the Player” moving Grimm throughout the house to find his quarry crouched behind a table, as if God were supporting Grimm in his quest to kill and castrate the haggard Christmas. Christmas, who by this point has become a conflicted but sympathetic antihero, is far closer to

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15 Coetzee 146  
16 Faulkner 464
the reader’s heart than the lately introduced Grimm, whose invocation of religion comes across as fanatic and diseased. When Colin in *Mood Indigo* tries to draw the connection between morality and Christianity, Jesus is dismissive. “She never did anything bad—and she never had an evil thought,” Colin says, speaking of Chloe. “‘That’s nothing to do with religion,’ mumbled Jesus with a yawn.” Religion, for all its high hopes, fails in these novels to offer any sort of moral code or consistent set of guidelines. Left to its own devices, as seen in *Mood Indigo*, it is apathetic and distant; when fanatics such as Grimm from *Light in August* take up religion, it is used as justification for unrelenting hatred and passionate crimes.

However, the greatest failure of religion is seen in its inability to fulfill its most basic purpose: to offer relief in the aftermath of death. When Lurie grows attached to a certain dog who must be put to death at the clinic, he reflects that “what the dog will not be able to work out (not in a month of Sundays! he thinks) … is how one can enter what seems to be an ordinary room and never come out again.” He is speaking of the process of euthanasia, but with his reference to Sundays he could easily be describing the futility of church, a construct still unable to make sense of “this room that is not a room but a hole where one leaks out of existence.” No matter how many Sundays pass—or, metaphorically speaking, how many church ceremonies one undergoes—death will remain incomprehensible to the dog, to the person, to the mourner. In a fundamental way, organized religion in its current form is shown to be irrelevant to death. When Colin asks why Chloe had to die, Jesus responds, “Nothing to do with me … It’s not my responsibility.” Religion can be a cause, an excuse, an argument, a system, but it consistently

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17 Vian 208  
18 Coetzee 219  
19 Coetzee 219  
20 Vian 208
fails to satisfactorily explain the relationship between soul and body. The characters, often in the face of death and senseless suffering, are forced to look elsewhere for answers.

If religion cannot solve the mystery of this relationship, then what can? In these texts, the body is the vessel of the soul, and once the body expires, the soul must expire as well. This is an uncommon view for many who would rather believe in an eternity of self, but it is a view that is quietly impressed upon the reader after the deaths of the main characters in *Mood Indigo* and *Light in August*. In the former, Colin never once implies the belief in an afterlife of the soul, repeating that Chloe is dead: “Do you realize what it means to have to say to yourself that ‘Chloe is dead’?”\(^{21}\) What it means, as Colin later explains, is that Chloe is irretrievably gone. The permanence of her death is emphasized by a rejection of God’s capacity to help; “[Colin doesn’t] think he’d be able to do much anyway, you see, because Chloe is dead…”\(^{22}\) Chloe’s death is a comprehensive death, of body and soul both at once.

As for Christmas, his eternity is a memory that will be carried on “in whatever peaceful valley, beside whatever placid and reassuring streams of old age,” but the man that was Christmas is gone—his body defiled by blood, his soul rising and disappearing like “the scream of the siren mounted toward its unbelievable crescendo, passing out of the realm of hearing.”\(^{23}\) This disappearance of the soul is described most explicitly in *Disgrace*: “Here the soul is yanked out of the body; briefly it hangs about in the air, twisting and contorting; then it is sucked away and is gone.”\(^{24}\) The soul cannot exist outside of its home for long, and after an indistinct interval, it too disappears into the void.

\(^{21}\) Vian 205
\(^{22}\) Vian 205
\(^{23}\) Faulkner 465
\(^{24}\) Coetzee 219
If the body and soul are cut off from each other at the instant of death, then it ought to follow that any abuse of the body is a meaningless gesture—the consciousness it was meant to offend is already gone. And yet, in a world where the soul perishes along with the mind, the wasted body is all that is left to commemorate the previous existence of a consciousness. The corpse, then, functions as a relic or souvenir. This is why David Lurie continues to “take care of [the dogs] once they are unable, utterly unable, to take care of themselves.” This is why Chloe’s burial is so painful for Colin (“Colin had sunk down on to his knees with his head in his hands”) when the porters begin “yelling and howling like wolves and flinging stones and earth into the hole.” The body’s scars are transferred, not to the soul of the deceased, but to the minds of the mourners. Once the connection between body and soul is severed, the only import of what happens to the corpse is in its effect on the living.

The relationship between soul and body therefore begins as one of residence, and becomes one of memory. The two may at first seem indistinguishable, as the character’s soul and personality animate the body so that both speak with the same voice. But once the body is vacant and the soul departed, the only link left between the two is the connotative relationship drawn by the surviving characters. When Nicolas takes Alyssum’s “blindingly blonde fleece” of hair in *Mood Indigo*, he is not preserving Alyssum herself but just a small token of her, a piece of proof that she existed. At open-casket funerals, the body of the deceased has the same function: to make tangible the shift from animated to empty. The corpse now belongs to the living, and it behaves as a kind of museum, memorializing the physical in an effort to regain some of the individual. To desecrate the corpse is to vandalize the museum; it leaves Colin without a last

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25 Coetzee 146  
26 Vian 211-2  
27 Vian 200
glimpse of Chloe, and it dismays Lurie so much that he chooses to “[save] the honor of corpses” and inconvenience himself rather than subject them to such degradation.28

But there is a flaw in the logic of the museum analogy. If the preservation of the memory is so important, how is Lurie’s ultimate action—wheeling the dogs into the incinerator—any more reverent than the actions of the men with shovels? “It [is] little enough,” he calls it, “less than little: nothing.”29 And yet his conscience can accept the cremation of the dogs—a complete obliteration of the supposed museum—when it cannot accept their broken limbs in garbage bags. What is the difference? The same theme reappears in Light in August; the fatal shooting of Christmas feels less egregious than his castration, and it is the latter that causes one of the men watching to “[give] a chocked cry and [stumble] back into the wall and [begin] to vomit.”30 The outrage committed here is not murder—that much is a common cruelty—but dismemberment. To cut apart a corpse is far worse than to discard it. Though the effect is the same, the fate of the body can cast a gruesome shadow over the end of a life. Burial is acceptable, because it leaves the body intact; cremation is acceptable, because the body is intact when it is consumed. But any sort of mutilation violates this principle by leaving the corpse imperfect, unrepresentative of its state during life.

Though this idea is alluded to in the three texts discussed so far, it appears most clearly in Herman Melville’s Benito Cereno. The revolting Africans murder Alexandro Aranda, the white slaveowner and friend of Cereno, on deck with a hatchet, after which point “the body was carried below … nothing more was seen of it by [Cereno] for three days.”31 When the skeleton is later revealed as the figurehead of the ship, it is heavily implied that the Africans cannibalized the

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28 Coetzee 146
29 Coetzee 220
30 Faulkner 464
31 Melville 244
body to render the skeleton bleached white in so few days. Cereno later identifies this figurehead as “Aranda! [his] murdered, unburied friend!”32 The chief horror here is the fate of his body: unburied, defiled, and deprived of “internment on shore.”33 Captain Delano originally mistakes Cereno’s grief as a result of throwing Aranda to the sharks, and clumsily tries to reassure him: “Were your friend’s remains now on board this ship, Don Benito, not thus strangely would the mention of his name affect you.”34 The tragedy is not dependent on where the body ends up, because there is horror both in a water death and a death on-ship. The tragedy is in the disfigurement of the corpse, whether torn apart by sharks or by the Africans on Cereno’s ship. A traditional burial, it seems, is the only permissible handling of a body after death; the destruction of the body as a unit stains it with dishonor.

This makes Babo’s threat all the more menacing when he tells Cereno: “Keep faith with the blacks from here to Senegal, or you shall in spirit, as now in body, follow your leader.”35 Cereno follows the figurehead in body as it leads the ship, but Babo’s double meaning implies a potential cannibalization for Cereno’s body as well. His ominous words about following in spirit seem to suggest a correlation with Grimm’s theory: that the indignities of the body after death will mar the spirit in the afterlife. But it must be remembered that cruelty to corpses takes the living as its victim, and not the dead. Aranda’s consciousness is gone; his soul will never be informed of the defilement of his body. It is only Cereno who is truly affected.

If we return to the idea of the museum, then, it is clear that a deceased artist whose works are put on display will not suffer if the museum is ransacked. It is instead the museumgoers and the curators who stand something to lose. In keeping with the theme, these fans of the artist

32 Melville 234
33 Melville 181
34 Melville 181
35 Melville 245
would surely rather that the museum be disbanded—like a body put below ground—than that it be vandalized and strewn to pieces. It is this sense of preservation, preservation even in death, that makes loss more palatable; without it, characters like Colin and Cereno grieve perpetually and presumably perish because of it. A soul may be considered preserved thanks to religion, but religion is a tenuous concept in the studied works and for the grieving characters, it cannot offer the same tangible solace that a body at rest seems to provide.

There is another component of this relationship that has not yet been discussed: that of the conscious mind. The body can be beaten and scarred before or after death, but there is only one chance to similarly inflict the soul. Just as the living are comforted by a character’s body that retains its innocence, remaining pure and unblemished, the reader can be comforted by a character whose death protects him or her from the worst of the truth. When this hope is subverted—when death does not come soon enough to save a character from some awful knowledge—the reader feels a pity beyond the physical. As an example from Mood Indigo, even the debatably unsympathetic character Chick is made pitiable by his final exchange: “‘Don’t touch my books…’ he burbled. His voice was thick and indistinct. ‘We’re going to pulp them with our boots,’ said the commissar. ‘In a few seconds you’ll be dead.’” 36 This final moment of spite exacerbates the harshness of the scene. The commissar does not allow Chick the courtesy of dying in delusion; he must be painfully enlightened at the moment of his death, so that his soul cannot escape to oblivion without being scarred to the last.

The euthanized dogs of Disgrace present a more ambiguous case. Lurie “is convinced that the dogs know their time has come. Despite the silence and the painlessness of the procedure … despite the airtight bags in which they tie the newmade corpses, the dogs in the yard smell

36 Vian 198
what is going on inside.” Again, the death is not the problem so much as the premature recognition of death. It is the final dog whose death feels cleaner and more humane, the young dog “who, given half a chance, would already have lolloped after his comrades into the clinic building” in its complete innocence of death. The soul departing untarnished turns out to be among the main criteria for a civilized passing; poisoning the mind with last-minute misery can prove just as harmful as poisoning the defenseless corpse with injuries.

The body and the soul are both vulnerable to disaster, but the soul can be spared if it escapes the body in time. The disaster then becomes subjective, as the body’s disgrace is relegated to the awareness of loved ones and mourners in place of the character in question. They are the ones that process any cruelty done to the indifferent corpse, which now functions as an uninhabited shell or, literally, a shed skin. The soul is gone—at least according to the texts discussed, whose religious systems fail to relocate it—and its connection to the body has been permanently severed. The relationship lasts for the duration of the individual’s life, and once the individual dies the responsibility is fractured: the loved ones must care for the body and ensure its preservation, and they must cultivate their own ideas of the endurance of the soul.

Lurie puts this responsibility into words towards the end of *Disgrace*: “But a time must come, it cannot be evaded, when he will have to bring [the young dog] to Bev Shaw in her operating room … and whisper to him and support him in the moment when, bewilderingly, his legs buckle; and then, when the soul is out, fold him up and pack him away in his bag, and the next day wheel the bag into the flames and see that it is burnt, burnt up. He will do all that for him when his time comes.” Lurie feels that he owes this much to the dog, just as Colin feels he

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37 Coetzee 143  
38 Coetzee 219  
39 Coetzee 219-220
owes Chloe an expensive and elegant funeral. It is part of one’s debt to the dead to ensure that they are *burnt up* and not just *burned*, the event taken to completion. This does not contradict the principle of preservation; in fact, the difference between *burnt up* and *burned* is the difference between a body maintained as a whole and a body disfigured by incomplete violence. This theme reoccurs throughout all of the mentioned texts. The disfigurement of Chloe occurs first through a water-lily, then through her bruising in the coffin and her rough burial. Grimm castrates Christmas to effect his disfigurement. And before Lurie took over the job of wheeling dogs into the incinerator, “the dog would as often as not come riding back too, blackened and grinning, smelling of singed fur, its plastic covering burnt away.”

The cruelty of these half-completed acts, whether registered by the conscious mind or implemented after death, dishonors the body and the person who possessed it. To do the soul justice, then, one must ensure that the body is as purely eliminated as the soul itself. The relationship requires not only a clean break, but a complete annihilation of both parties—for the soul is ephemeral and fragile without a body to house it, and the body is dead without the soul to light its windows.

These matters—body and soul, the ethics of corpses—are impossibly abstract without literature to ground them and give them a stage. In daily life, of course, the soul has no visible effect on the machinations of the body, since we more often attribute our motivations and desires to the workings of the mind. In fiction, however, the soul is allowed different guises: it can be a religious entity walking the afterlife; it can be a shadowy presence flitting about in the moment after a death; it can even be dismissed altogether. It is death, interestingly, that tends to bring the soul to the forefront. Until that moment, the dichotomy of body and soul is less apparent, and only at the split can one begin to distinguish where one ends and the other begins. Death reduces

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40 Coetzee 144
all constituents to their simplest terms, and when Christmas is killed he is described “with his eyes open and empty of everything save consciousness, and with something, a shadow, about his mouth.”\textsuperscript{41} Consciousness, the prisoner of the body, is confined to his eyes, while the “released breath” of his soul is a shadow escaping from his lips.\textsuperscript{42} The soul disappears; the consciousness dies; and the body is left an empty husk, memorialized for an occupant it no longer remembers. The relationship is doomed from the start to end in separation, but this divorce of soul and body can be carried out on good terms. One must only die in such a way that the body is preserved as a whole, and the soul is allowed to hope for that brief moment when it leaves the body at last.

Is it then possible to be cruel to corpses? Disfiguring, maiming, humiliating a corpse is cruel in the same way that vandalizing a once-loved house is cruel, even if the occupants are long gone and will never know. A corpse is a memory, and it is possible to be cruel to memories, to twist or dismiss them as one might twist or dismiss the expired truth of the dead. It must therefore be true that the unfeeling body and the vanished soul can still be stung by insults—stung in the sense that, though they themselves do not notice, the world around them registers the injury.

\textsuperscript{41} Faulkner 464
\textsuperscript{42} Faulkner 465
Works Cited


Benito Mussolini Benito Amilcare Andrea Mussolini 29 July 1883 – 28 April 1945 The dictator was killed along his mistress, Clara Petacci. Their bodies were taken to Milan from the Lecco district near Lake Como where they were arrested and killed. According to the Times correspondent in Milan, the corpses of Mussolini, Petacci and... The partisan commander-in-chief General Raffaele Cadorna said such incidents were regrettable but desirable in this case as a way for the public to vent their anger against the former dictator and his cohorts. Among the bodies were former general secretary of the Fascist Party, Roberto Farinacci and Carlo Scorza, former secretary of the party. Mussolini was spotted heading towards Switzerland by an Italian customs guard at Dongo, near Lake Como. The death of Benito Mussolini, the deposed Italian fascist dictator, occurred on 28 April 1945, in the final days of World War II in Europe, when he was summarily executed by an Italian partisan in the small village of Giulino di Mezzegra in northern Italy. The generally accepted version of events is that Mussolini was shot by Walter Audisio, a communist partisan who used the nom de guerre of "Colonel Valerio". However, since the end of the war, the circumstances of Mussolini's death, and the identity of his killer, have been subjects of continuing confusion, dispute and controversy in Italy. ... More like Caesar because it was a mistake to kill him. permalink. embed. Deposed Italian dictator Benito Mussolini and his mistress, Clara Petacci, are shot and executed by Italian partisans. The 61-year-old deposed former dictator of Italy was established by his German allies as the figurehead of a puppet government in northern Italy during the German occupation toward the close of the war. As the Allies fought their way up the Italian peninsula, defeat of the Axis powers all but certain, Mussolini considered his options. Not wanting to fall into the hands of either the British or the Americans, and knowing that the communist partisans, who had been fighting the remnants of roving Italian fascist soldiers and thugs in the north, would try him as a war criminal, he settled on escap