

I.B. Extended Essay

Subject: Group 1 – Language A: English, Category 3

How are cycles of violence and racial politics portrayed through South African and African American experiences in J.M. Coetzee's *Age of Iron* and Kendrick Lamar's *To Pimp a Butterfly*?

Subject: Group 1 – Language A: English, Category 3

Date: January 18th, 2018

Word Count: 3984

Table of Contents

I.	Butterflies and Iron: Contextual Information.....	3
II.	Rationale.....	3-4
III.	An Otherworldly Messenger.....	4-8
IV.	The Prevalence of Violence.....	8-12
V.	The Police as Instruments of Violence.....	12-14
VI.	Conclusion.....	14-15
	Works Cited.....	16

How are cycles of violence and racial politics portrayed through South African and African American experiences in J.M. Coetzee's *Age of Iron* and Kendrick Lamar's *To Pimp a Butterfly*?

I. Butterflies and Iron: Contextual Information

To Pimp a Butterfly is the universally and critically acclaimed 2015 album by Compton native Kendrick Lamar, a tour de force that earned him eleven nominations at the fifty-eighth annual Grammy Awards.¹ Lamar's sophomore album is a complete departure from his debut album *Good Kid M.A.A.D City*; *To Pimp a Butterfly* ventures away from his west coast hip hop roots and is instead characterized by an unorthodox and avant-garde incorporation of jazz, funk, soul, and spoken word poetry inside the contemporary structure of hip hop music.² Within this intersection of classic and modern genres exists an almost-dizzying exploration of political and personal themes relevant to urban African Americans.

Age of Iron, a novel written in 1990 by Nobel Prize in Literature winner J. M. Coetzee, follows the story of Mrs. Curren, a white South African woman who, upon a terminal cancer diagnosis, writes a series of letters to her estranged daughter that document her final days. In these letters, E.C. (as she is also known) refers to personal events that reflect the tense and often violent political landscape of her country. The novel expresses the deleterious effects of institutionalized racism and cultural struggle in apartheid South Africa.

¹ Platten, Adele. "Kendrick Lamar on 11 Grammy Nominations: 'I Want All Of Them.'" *Billboard*, 29 Dec 2015, www.billboard.com/articles/columns/hip-hop/6828127/kendrick-lamar-11-grammy-nominations-new-york-times.

² Hale, Andreas. "The Oral History of Kendrick Lamar's *To Pimp a Butterfly*." *Medium: Cuepoint*, 9 Feb 2016, www.medium.com/cuepoint/the-oral-history-of-kendrick-lamar-s-to-pimp-a-butterfly-622f725c3fde.

II. Rationale

This essay will explore the relationship between *To Pimp a Butterfly* and *Age of Iron*. There is admittedly no intentional connection between the two as Lamar is not paying homage to Coetzee with his album; in fact, it is possible that he is not even acquainted with the South African novelist's work. However, there exists an undeniable link between the way these two men – one an illustrious writer and the other a street-hardened rapper – separated by countries, generations, and their craft, use evocative language in their respective novels and lyrics to depict the struggles of oppression and institutionalized racism. Literature is often regarded as a true reflection of the artist, a factual or fictional interpretation of what is happening within and around the one who pens it. A rap album is not literary by any willing suspension of disbelief, but it can certainly qualify as a genuine expression of self and society. Therefore, one can arguably compare two texts that are representative of the artists' introspective inquiries and their acute awareness of the world around them – even if one of those texts is a contemporary rap album. African American and South African culture are similar in their contentious nature and history of oppression, and these shared struggles are explored in both *To Pimp a Butterfly* and *Age of Iron*. Lamar and Coetzee investigate themes of apartheid and racial discrimination and their effects on the black populations of South Africa and the United States of America. While belonging to very different genres, Coetzee's fictional epistolary novel and Lamar's sophomore rap album are both steeped in the reality of two countries marred by vehement and violent racial politics – and both texts seek to challenge and change institutionalized racism.

III. An Otherworldly Messenger

Part of Lamar's creative process when writing *To Pimp a Butterfly* was his trip to South Africa, and he mentions in an interview with *Complex* magazine that "I felt like I belonged in

Africa, [...] I saw all the things that I wasn't taught. Probably one of the hardest things to do is put [together] a concept on how beautiful a place can be, and tell a person this while they're still in the ghettos of Compton. I wanted to put that experience in the music.”³ *To Pimp a Butterfly*'s “How Much A Dollar Cost” follows a true story that inspired Lamar. The narrative of the song closely mirrors a real experience Lamar had whilst in South Africa, where he faced the dilemma of his own personal greed obscuring his humanitarian instinct. In the song, Lamar denies a homeless man's request for charity, making excuses and assumptions about the homeless man to justify his frugality. Then, after a wave of guilt inspires him to rap about his selfishness, the homeless man reveals himself to be God and punishes Lamar with eternal damnation. The panhandler in Lamar's song is similar to the character of Vercueil in Coetzee's *Age of Iron*. Vercueil exists as an unlikely guide with sage advice for Mrs. Curren who, against all intuition and reason, develops a strong bond with him. Homeless and haggard, Vercueil is an almost-otherworldly figure who guides E.C., the protagonist who pens the letters through which the story is revealed, through her last days. By acquainting her with death and the possibility of an afterlife, he often acts as a messenger of God – a type of guardian angel. This is apparent when Vercueil appears suddenly after E.C. is diagnosed with cancer; upon returning home after news of her terminal prognosis, she stumbles upon Vercueil in her yard. Even though he is nothing but a drunken panhandler, she recognizes something special within him and he quickly becomes her closest companion.

“How Much a Dollar Cost” is an introspective song where Lamar reflects on the true value of life beyond money and materialism during his visit to Cape Town, South Africa. The

³ Morris, Jessie. “Kendrick Lamar Breaks Down the Making of *To Pimp a Butterfly*.” *Complex*, 9 Feb 2016, www.complex.com/music/2016/02/kendrick-lamar-breaks-down-the-making-of-to-pimp-a-butterfly.

track's central idea lies within Lamar's interaction with the panhandler camping outside a gas station. As mentioned previously, this panhandler bares similarities to Vercueil, as he too appears drunk but is still capable of offering sage advice for listeners to reflect on. Lamar describes him as "A homeless man with a semi-tan complexion / Asked me for ten rand, stressin' about dry land." There is common diction in the dialogue used by Vercueil and the panhandler, where both ask for a handout. Vercueil also requests "ten rand" when he inquires "Can I borrow ten rand? My disability comes through on Thursday. I'll pay you back then" (86). Both of these characters are portrayed as homeless, dirty, and drunk, and Lamar refers to this when he observes, not entirely with approval, that "I smell Grandpa's old medicine, reekin' from your skin / Moonshine and gin, / n**** you're babblin', your words ain't flatterin'" in what appear to be false justifications. Lamar focuses on the smell of alcohol on the homeless man's breath and body to justify not giving any money to him. His continuous barrage of insults regarding the old man's inebriated, grimy appearance is suddenly interrupted by the panhandler saying:

Know the truth, it'll set you free
 You're lookin' at the Messiah, the son of Jehovah, the higher power
 The choir that spoke the word, the Holy Spirit, the nerve
 Of Nazareth, and I'll tell you just how much a dollar cost
 The price of having a spot in Heaven, embrace your loss, I am God.

Someone who seemed the least likely candidate for holiness and righteousness turns into an embodiment of God himself. The previous requests for charity and the allusions to the Bible by the homeless man were not pleas of help but instead a test by God to show Lamar how greed has corrupted him.

E.C. notices a similar quality in Vercueil, who has an ethereal, almost-mystical aura surrounding him; he is frequently regarded as an angel of death, the one who will guide E.C. into

the afterlife. The concluding events of the novel confirm this idea when he holds Mrs. Curren as she begins to pass away. This is evident in Coetzee's choice of narration, where – through E.C.'s letters – readers notice her developing an affinity for the mysterious man who appeared in her life when she needed him most. Vercueil begins to lose all the negative features and characteristics that he was described with previously. Instead, E.C.'s final words focus on how Vercueil helped her pass peacefully and with dignity: "He took me in his arms and held me with mighty force, so that the breath went out of me in a rush" (198).

In such a racially-charged novel, the fact that Coetzee makes Vercueil racially ambiguous only strengthens readers' suspicions that he exists as an instrument of God. In a text that portrays everything as either black or white, and where the words and actions of characters are informed by their racial identity, this can only be interpreted as a deliberate omission by Coetzee. Mrs. Curren is white and attaches a certain degree of shame and guilt in being white. Florence is black and hates white people. The police are white and hate the black population. Bheki and John are black and believe that white people do not understand their culture. Even Mrs. Curren's daughter, who is never physically present in the novel's plot, is mentioned to be white, so the ambiguity of Vercueil's racial identity only reinforces the otherworldly dimension that he occupies. Both of these South African panhandlers expound the effects of greed on man and the destructive and despondent nature that possesses those who value wealth and possessions over everything else. Vercueil is a victim of others' greed, selfishness, self-interest, and the erroneous assumptions that classify some individuals as superior. Mrs. Curren elaborates on this when she speaks to Florence after witnessing Bheki, who is Florence's teenaged son, kicking Vercueil and physically abusing him for no reason. In this conversation, Mrs. Curren laments that "They kick and beat a man because he drinks. They set people on fire and laugh while they burn to death.

How will they treat their own children?” (50). She suggests that Bheki, through his dismissal of Vercueil as a drunken panhandler, is dehumanizing, degrading, and beating Vercueil to assuage the pain he experiences as a young black man in apartheid South Africa. Thus, Vercueil becomes a victim of the greedy, selfish, violent, and unsympathetic environment that apartheid has created.

Lamar, however, is the perpetrator of this greedy behavior, and possesses a selfishness that has been embedded in him and inspired by a society that romanticizes material wealth. The inclusion of a panhandler character is a literary trope sometimes employed by writers and artists alike; these sage old man archetypes are used as vehicles to express Coetzee’s and Lamar’s opinions indirectly. They inspire self-reflection for the characters within, and by extension the readers/listeners outside of, the plot. This in turn empowers readers and listeners to reflect on themselves and the effect materialism has on them.

IV. The Prevalence of Violence

Violent behavioral patterns characterize both African American and South African communities, and this is a prevalent theme in all of Lamar’s work. Lamar explores the effects of violence holistically in terms of those who commit it and how it permeates everything and everyone around him. This multi-tiered exploration of violence is present in a couple of tracks that span from his debut album *Good Kid M.A.A.D City* with the song “Sing About Me, I’m Dying of Thirst” to a track entitled “u” from his sophomore album *To Pimp a Butterfly*. Both tracks follow the tale of Dave Lamar and Dave’s younger brother, the latter first mentioned on a guest verse in BJ the Chicago Kid’s track “His Pain” from the album *Pineapple Now-Laters*. The song revolves around all the poverty, pain, and violence that inescapably surrounds him. He

opens “His Pain” with the lines “Yesterday my n**** had told me his brother died / A day before that his homeless uncle was cold outside / A week before he seen the cancer in his mother's eyes / Two weeks before that, couldn't pay his rent ‘cause he lost his job / A month before that he lost the custody of his daughter” in reference to Dave, a companion who recently lost his brother and is receding into a downward spiral because of the systemic violence that exists around him. Unfortunately, the only way that Dave knows how to cope with violence is to perpetuate it. This is expanded further in the song “Sing About Me, I’m Dying of Thirst,” which begins with a phone conversation between Dave and Lamar the morning after the shooting. Speaking entirely from Dave’s perspective, the song alludes to the events that transpired in “His Pain.” The verse begins with “I woke up this morning and / figured I'd call you / In case I'm not here tomorrow / I'm hopin' that I can borrow / A peace of mind” before recalling the events of the night before: “Last night was just another distraction / Or a reaction of what we consider madness.” After remembering all the conflicting emotions threatening to consume him, he then expresses how he sought revenge for the murder of his brother by remarking how “my plan’s rather vindictive / Everybody's a victim in my eyes / When I ride, it's a murderous rhythm / And outside became pitch black / A demon glued to my back, whispering "Get ‘em” / I got 'em, and I ain't give a f**** / That same mentality that told my brother not to duck.” The “ride or die” mentality instilled in the consciousness of Dave is the same mentality that got his brother murdered, and now Dave is perpetuating that same behavior by seeking revenge. And so he contributes to the same cycle of violence that had hurt him so much in the past – the same violent behavior that continues cyclically within the black community.

This cycle of violence and vindication draws a stark parallel to the aggression that Bheki is a product of in the hostile environment of politicized South Africa. This is introduced in the

first chapter when Bheki and his close friend John are caught in an altercation with Vercueil, and the verbal sparring quickly turns physical as Bheki and John gang up on him. Their violent behavior is a direct response to the violence that surrounds them, and Mrs. Curren's house serves as a microcosm of apartheid South African society. E.C. recalls how "Vercueil was on the ground; they were kicking him; Bheki took out the belt from his trousers and began to lash him" (46). This is a true reflection of the unabashed hatred present in her time and place, and Mrs. Curren recognizes the implications it has for the future. Scolding Florence for praising Bheki's harassment of the supposedly "good-for-nothing" Vercueil, Mrs. Curren reminds Florence that children learn hatred from adults (47). Florence had once told her she witnessed a woman on fire, "and when she screamed for help, the children laughed and threw more petrol on her" (49). Florence blames "the whites who made them so cruel," and while Mrs. Curren agrees that racial politics are to blame, she believes that adults can teach children to break the cycle of violence (49). She argues "They kick and beat a man because he drinks. They set people on fire and laugh while they burn to death. How will they treat their own children? What love will they be capable of?" (50). Here, Mrs. Curren contemplates an issue deeper than "monster[s] made by the white man" (50). E.C. argues that if the current adult generation permits its children to reciprocate this violent behavior, it will only beget more violence. This is perhaps most poignant when E.C. later finds the body of Bheki, "still [wearing] the gray flannel trousers, white shirt, and maroon pullover of his school" in "a mess of rubble and charred beams" (102) – a victim of the violence he often participated in.

Lamar further reflects on black-on-black violence in *To Pimp a Butterfly* on the track "The Blacker the Berry." An angry and emotionally-charged song, it delivers a message about the dangerous intersection of race and politics, loaded with strong visual imagery such as "I'm

African-American, I'm African/ I'm black as the moon, heritage of a small village/ Pardon my residence/ Came from the bottom of mankind.” Lamar alludes to how the African American community is shunned by the general American population and are treated as outsiders. Lamar points to how the system is stacked against them in the lines “You never liked us anyway” and “You hate me don't you? / You hate my people, your plan is to terminate my culture.” While it appears he is targeting the American government, Lamar quickly hones in on gang culture within the black community, stating “You sabotage my community, makin' a killin' / You made me a killer, emancipation of a real n****.” This is a reference to how black people were lawfully emancipated yet have, in some ways, remained stagnant because they have not been emancipated culturally. Lamar suggests that the presence of drugs, violence, poverty, and crime are still rampant in the community and are a catalyst for this behavior, thus serving as a hindrance towards any real progression or social advancement. This serves as a cautionary tale for his audience, and as soon as the tempo winds down, Lamar provides a powerful message for his listeners to dwell on. The abrupt ending, delivered in the form of a final couplet, is a hypophora: “So why did I weep when Trayvon Martin was in the street? / When gang banging make me kill a n**** blacker than me? / Hypocrite!” Lamar spotlights the regressive nature of black-on-black violence while posing a question to his listeners. He delivers these shocking lines to pose the idea that true change comes from within. The black community cannot expect change from the government to solve the issue of violence without any real change first coming from within the black community itself.

This same type of black-on-black violence occurs in the third chapter of *Age of Iron* when Mrs. Curren heads to Gugulethu, the predominately black hometown that Florence and Bheki hail from. Readers previously learn of the regressive state in the town of Gugulethu when

Florence mentions how they closed down “All the schools in Gugulethu, Langa, Nyanga. The children have nothing to do. All they do is run around the streets and get into trouble” (8-9).

While in the town looking for Bheki, Mrs. Curren witnesses violence in Gugulethu when she recalls “There was a fight of some kind going on to my left; all the people who a minute ago had been fleeing into the bush were just as suddenly pouring back” (95-6). She is barely able to cope with the violence enveloping her, noting how “A woman screamed, high and loud. How could I get away from this terrible place?” (96). E.C. reveals how unaccustomed she is to the violence present in Gugulethu, claiming “When I think back to my own childhood I remember only long sun-struck afternoons, the smell of dust under avenues of eucalyptus, the quiet rustle of water in roadside furrows, the lulling of doves” (85). She is in disbelief that children can exist in such an evil place: “Ten years [old] at most. A child of the times, at home in this landscape of violence” (85). However, the zenith of the conflict occurs toward the end of the chapter when, as the violence clears for a brief moment, Mrs. Curren and Vercueil stumble upon the body of Bheki.

V. The Police as Instruments of Violence

The existence of police brutality, an external source of violence in the African American community, is addressed by Lamar on the tracks “Alright” and “The Blacker The Berry.” The subjects of police brutality and discrimination are frequently brought up by social activists such as Lamar. Superficially, the song’s hook is an optimistic message that reverberates in the ears of everyone, reassuring its listeners how “We gon’ be alright” through any struggle as long as they trust in God’s plan,” a comforting promise that continues in the interlude of the first verse: “But if God got us, then we gon’ be alright.” This message, however, carries a strong undertone driven by the pain and struggle African Americans endure in the United States. Often questioning whether or not the United States justice system has made any progress in ensuring racial

equality, Lamar points to the disproportionate ratio of police brutality against the black population as evidence that they are still living in a racist and unequal society. With this omnipresent sentiment in the song's pre-hook, evidenced by the lines "and we hate po-po / Wanna kill us dead in the street fo sho'," Lamar echoes the thoughts of those who harbor the same disdain for law enforcement. The hook has been adopted as a mantra for social activist groups such as Black Lives Matter, who – during the time of the song's release – marched in the streets of Baltimore, protesting the many deaths related to police shootings of unarmed black men.⁴ It soon became an anthem of positivity amidst a backdrop of civil unrest. Lamar discussed his relationship with the police in an interview with *XXL Magazine*. He recalls his first exposure to police brutality: "For me, it was being held at gunpoint by numerous state troopers who thought I fit the profile of a black man who stole two cars."⁵ He uses this experience as a point of reflection, one that he continues to look back on when he talks about the severity of the racial climate in America.

Age of Iron also examines relationships between police and the black population. Mrs. Curren, a white woman once immune to and untouched by the violence of her country, becomes a witness to several instances of police brutality. The novel captures the strained relationship between the black population and the police force in an event involving Bheki, John, and two white police officers. When the two boys ride their bikes down the street, they are run off the road for no reason by two officers in their squad car. John is injured as a result, and Mrs. Curren is shocked not only by the unnecessary assault but by a responding paramedic's nonchalance.

⁴ Spanos, Brittant, and Sarah Grant. "Songs of Black Lives Matter: 22 New Protest Anthems." *Rolling Stone*, 13 Jul 2016, www.rollingstone.com/music/pictures/songs-of-black-lives-matter-22-new-protest-anthems-20160713/kendrick-lamar-alright-20160713.

⁵ Kevito. "Kendrick Lamar Talks Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown in New XXL Magazine Issue." *Okayplayer*, www.okayplayer.com/news/kendrick-lamar-talks-trayvon-martin-michael-brown-in-new-xxl-magazine-issue.html.

E.C. expresses her worry for John and states “He has lost a lot of blood;” rather “curtly,” the paramedic dismisses the event and claims “It's not serious” (20). It occurs to E.C. that the paramedic does not care about John because he simply lacks empathy for black people, and the way he rebuffs her proves that point. However, the most concrete example of police brutality is a shocking event that transpires at the end of the novel. After the death of Bheki, John is given shelter under Mrs. Curren’s roof; however, the police search for him and at last find him. Mrs. Curren recalls that day’s events:

The policemen, half a dozen of them now, were crouching on the veranda, guns at the ready.

"Weg!" shouted one of them furiously.

"*Kry haar weg!*" [...] there was a curt explosion, a fusillade of shots, then a long stunned silence, then low talk and, from somewhere, the sound of Vercueil's dog yapping (156).

It is an event that can only be described as an unaggravated case of police brutality that results in the death of another young man – an execution that is as swift as it is emotionless. This shocking event reflects the ways in which the law legitimizes and normalizes such violence, a legal phenomenon that runs parallel in South Africa and the United States of America.

Conclusion

Through an analytical exploration of *To Pimp a Butterfly* and *Age of Iron*, there is a discernable relationship between the influences and themes present in the work of J.M. Coetzee and Kendrick Lamar. This points to the political and cultural connections between South African and African American communities. Both Lamar’s album and Coetzee’s novel reflect on themes concerning apartheid, political oppression, cycles of violence, police brutality, and racial discrimination. One is directly affected by it, and the other is utterly repulsed by it, but both focus on the deleterious effects of racial conflict in South Africa and the United States of

America. Representing two different countries, generations, and genres, both are united in their outspoken criticism of the political and cultural forces that oppress black populations and perpetuate violence and hatred.

Word Count: 3984

Works Cited

BJ the Chicago Kid. "His Pain." *Pineapple Now-Laters*, M.A.F.E. MUSIC LLC, 2012.

Coetzee, J.M. *Age of Iron*. London: Penguin Books Ltd., 2010.

Hale, Andreas. "The Oral History of Kendrick Lamar's *To Pimp a Butterfly*." Medium: Cuepoint, www.medium.com/cuepoint/the-oral-history-of-kendrick-lamar-s-to-pimp-a-butterfly-622f725c3fde. Accessed 28 Sept 2017.

Kevito. "Kendrick Lamar Talks Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown in New *XXL Magazine* Issue." *Okayplayer*, www.okayplayer.com/news/kendrick-lamar-talks-trayvon-martin-michael-brown-in-new-xxl-magazine-issue.html. Accessed 9 Nov 2017.

Killakam. "South Africa's Influence On Kendrick Lamar's *To Pimp a Butterfly*." *OkayAfrica*, 11 Feb. 2016, www.okayafrica.com/kendrick-lamar-south-africa-to-pimp-a-butterfly/. Accessed 28 Sept 2017.

Lamar, Kendrick. "Sing About Me, I'm Dying of Thirst." *Good Kid M.A.A.D. City*, Interscope Records, 2012.

---. *To Pimp a Butterfly*, Interscope Records, 2015.

Morris, Jessie. "Kendrick Lamar Breaks Down the Making of *To Pimp a Butterfly*." *Complex*, 9 Feb 2016, www.complex.com/music/2016/02/kendrick-lamar-breaks-down-the-making-of-to-pimp-a-butterfly. Accessed 25 Sept 2017.

Platton, Adele. "Kendrick Lamar on 11 Grammy Nominations: 'I Want All Of Them.'" *Billboard*, 29 Dec 2015, www.billboard.com/articles/columns/hip-hop/6828127/kendrick-lamar-11-grammy-nominations-new-york-times. Accessed 23 Sept 2017.

Spanos, Brittant, and Sarah Grant. "Songs of Black Lives Matter: 22 New Protest Anthems." *Rolling Stone*, 13 Jul 2016, www.rollingstone.com/music/pictures/songs-of-black-lives-matter-22-new-protest-anthems-20160713/kendrick-lamar-alright-20160713. Accessed 13 Nov 2017.