

## Temporality, Place and Autobiography in J.M. Coetzee's 'Summertime'

**Authors :** Barbara Janari

**Abstract :** In this paper it is argued that the effect of the disjunctive temporality in *Summertime* (the third of J.M. Coetzee's fictionalised memoirs) is two-fold: firstly, it reflects the memoir's ambivalent, contradictory representations of place in order to emphasize the fractured sense of self growing up in South Africa during apartheid entailed for Coetzee. Secondly, it reconceives the autobiographical discourse as one that foregrounds the inherent fictionality of all texts. The memoir's narrative is filtered through intricate textual strategies that disrupt the chronological movement of the narrative, evoking the labyrinthine ways in which the past and present intersect and interpenetrate each other. It is framed by entries from Coetzee's Notebooks: it opens with entries that cover the years 1972-1975, and ends with a number of undated fragments from his Notebooks. Most of the entries include a short 'memo' at the end, added between 1999 and 2000. While the memos follow the Notebook entries in the text, they are separated by decades. Between the Notebook entries is a series of interviews conducted by Vincent, the text's putative biographer, between 2007 and 2008, based on recollections from five people who had known Coetzee in the 1970s - a key period in John's life as it marks both his return to South Africa after a failed emigration attempt to America, and the beginning of his writing career, with the publication of *Dusklands* in 1974. The relationship between the memoir's various parts is a key feature of Coetzee's representation of place in *Summertime*, which is constructed as a composite one in which the principle of reflexive referencing has to be adopted. In other words, readers have to suspend individual references temporarily until the relationships between the parts have been connected to each other. In order to apprehend meaning in the text, the disparate narrative elements have to first be tied together. In this text, then, the experience of time as ordered and chronological is ruptured. Instead, the memoir's themes and patterns become apparent most clearly through reflexive referencing, by which relationships between disparate sections of the text are linked. The image of the fictional John that emerges from the text is a composite of this John and the author, J.M. Coetzee, and is one which embodies Coetzee's often fraught relationship with his home country, South Africa.

**Keywords :** autobiography, place, reflexive referencing, temporality

**Conference Title :** ICELL 2025 : International Conference on English Language and Literature

**Conference Location :** Mykonos, Greece

**Conference Dates :** July 15-16, 2025