



# Illness Narratives in *Life and Times of Michael K*

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## Abstract

J M Coetzee, the South African writer, has won the Nobel Prize in literature, the Booker Prize and many other important international awards. He has published many novels, such as *Foe* and *Disgrace*, which are well-known in the contemporary literary world. His works have also been gradually translated and studied in China since he won the Nobel Prize in 2003. The publication of *Life and Times of Michael K* has attracted great attention to him in the literary world. The novel is set in South Africa, with a desolate war scene after the outbreak of the civil war. It tells the story of Michael K and his mother (Anna K)'s humble life struggling in a society full of war, army and apartheid, but they were eager to find an oasis of life. Michael K, a man born with a hare-lip, on his way of chasing freedom, fell into misery not only for his mental and physical illness but also for the social unrest and ideological chaos. This thesis attempts to analyse Anna K and Michael K's indomitable struggle against dilemma during the war times in *Life and Times of Michael K* in terms of Arthur Frank's illness narrative theory, in all, hoping to find out Coetzee's humanitarian care for mankind in this novel. Firstly, by drawing on Arthur W. Frank's analysis of illness narrative, the thesis will identify some patterns and tendencies in Michael K's self-perceptions that are common in illness narrative. These similarities indicate that Michael K's silent resistance is his powerful response to the apartheid society manipulated by the oppressive class. K was a representative of the oppressed class and his fight was also the symbol of other disadvantaged people's struggle. By describing the life and times of Michael K, Coetzee expressed his humanitarian concern for all oppressed people.

## Subject Areas

Culture, Literature

## Keywords

*Life and Times of Michael K*, Michael K, Hare-Lip, Mental Disorder, Silent Struggle, Illness Narrative, Humanitarian Care

## 1. Introduction

John Maxwell Coetzee, the first writer who has won the Booker Prize for two times, is an outstanding novelist, literary critic, translator and a university professor of South Africa. In 2003, he was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature, ranking fifth in Africa and third in South Africa. Coetzee began writing fiction in 1969. His first book, *Dusklands*, was published in South Africa in 1974. *In the Heart of the Country* (1977) won South Africa's principal literary award, the CNA Prize, and was published in Britain and the USA. *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980) received international notice.

Coetzee's reputation was confirmed by *Life & Times of Michael K* (1983), which helped him win his first Booker Prize. The 1980s witnessed South Africa's social unrest and ideological chaos [1]. It was without doubt that racial discrimination under the apartheid policy was the most critical factor in social unrest. During that time, uprisings, strikes, wars and boycotts constituted the main political activities in South Africa [2]. *Life & Times of Michael K* was created under such political and social circumstances.

As the title of the novel telling, it tells the story of Michael K, a man born with a hare-hip in a society under apartheid policy. K and his mother (Anna K) decided to go back to Prince Albert for living, which was the birthplace of Anna K. However, under the social unrest and ideological chaos, they were stopped on the way by the crucial military forces for several times due to the lack of the pass, which failed to be applied for the government's inefficiency. Anna K died on the way for her long-term illness, leaving Michael K to confront the world alone. In the countryside, K was in fear of the unknown and loneliness. In the camp, he had to combat the inhumane treatment. Those pressures made him harbour some pathological features, like lethargy and fatigue. K's revolt was both his resistance towards oppression and his fight to physical and mental illness.

This thesis attempts to analyse Anna K and Michael K's indomitable struggle against sufferings during the unrest times from the perspective of Arthur Frank's illness narrative theory. In all, it hopes to reveal people's common dilemmas during wartime and criticize the lack of humanistic concern. This thesis consists of an introduction, a main body of five parts and a conclusion. The introduction introduces the author, writing background, main plot of the novel and the layout of this thesis. Part 1 of the main body is literature review. Part 2 introduces Arthur Frank's illness narrative and its branches, which include restitution narrative, chaos narrative and quest narrative. Part 3 will present analyses of Anna K and Michael K's sufferings from chaos narrative perspective and reveal the common misery of the oppressed class at that time. Analyses of K's indomitable struggle from a quest narrative perspective and his hero image will be described in part 4. Part 5 offers the conclusion.

## 2. Part One: Literature Review

*Life & Times of Michael K*, one of J. M. Coetzee's most controversial novels, has

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provoked strong feelings and an intense debate among scholars at home and abroad.

### 2.1. Illness-Themed Research on *Life and Times of Michael K* at Home and Abroad

There is a variety of research about illness on *Life and Times of Michael K*. Particularly, most of those research focus on two aspects: the specific performance of illness—disability and trauma theory.

Trauma is manifested as both psychological and physical illnesses. Scholars abroad mainly dwelt on K's disability, a concrete physical illness symptom of trauma. Sikorska's allegorical reading of *Life and Times of Michael K* revealed that K, being disabled, was a representative of the nation's hitherto distorted political regime. He was "an everyman, the universal human being" [3]. Also, in line with Sikorska, K's hare-lip and slow wit were read as allegories of South Africa's deformed political system by Ayobami Kehinde. In addition, he had a further study to examine the inharmonious relation between K (the dialects of "self") and the able-bodied people (the dialects of "other") around him in the novel [4]. Domestic scholars not only analyzed the concrete presentation, like hare-lip and slow-mindedness of K's illness, but also they further applied the trauma theory as a plot to reveal the theme of self-healing or humanitarianism. Sheng and Shi believed that Coetzee wrote about the traumatic experiences of K and the white medical officer in charge of the camp in two different ways, explicit and implicit, demonstrating the survival difficulties of the colonized and the colonizers who struggled in the abyss of physical and mental suffering during the war years in South Africa [5]. Similarly, by focusing on the meaning of cultural trauma behind hare-lip, which was K's specific illness symptom, Liu revealed the conflicts and contradictions of cultural identity and Coetzee's humanistic care [6].

### 2.2. Research Gap

Some scholars presented their views in terms of trauma theory, and others revealed political conditions or analyzed South African history by analyzing K's hare-lip and mental illness. Despite the fact that those previous research all had something to do with illness, they were not research referring to illness narrative theory because they concerned more about trauma theory. Compared with illness narrative theory, trauma theory more emphasizes on mental and psychological aspects, thereby focusing on the psychological trauma and other abstract themes, like cultural trauma, national trauma and historical trauma. But the existent research shows that the illness theory covers a wider range of research category, which includes not only the mental illness that the trauma theory concerns, but also consists of the physical illness [7]. In *Life and Times of Michael K*, K not only had a born hare-lip but also showcased some mental illness symptoms like hallucination, nausea, insomnia and nightmares. Moreover, K was a representative of the oppressed class. Therefore, there are a lot of facts concerning illness narrative could be put into research in this novel.

### 3. Part Two: Theoretical Guidance

The research of illness narrative commenced in the early 1980s, when people at that time had a growing attention to health and fear towards diseases (like AIDS). After 1990s, illness narrative drew a widespread attention of western scholars and gradually forged into diversified research methods, and now it is one of the main forms of modernist literature narrative. Illness narrative is the account and depiction relevant to illness in the literature. There is a wide range of research into *Life and Times of Michael K*, but there is almost no research from the perspective of illness narrative. Therefore, in this book, there is great research value from the perspective of illness narratives.

#### 3.1. Illness Narrative in the Domain of Literature

Illness in the literature is not equivalent to the disease in the medical circle. In the domain of literature, illness description is the carrier of social civilization as well as culture. For instance, Yu Anqi analyzed a lot of illness descriptions in *The Last Gift* from Arthur W Frank's illness narrative theory, revealing the common dilemma and criticizing the lack of social responsibility [8]. Likewise, in terms of illness narrative, Wu Meiyang made research on the causes that leading to Quentin's death in *The Sound and the Fury*, presenting the tragedy root of the American southern wane well-known families [9].

#### 3.2. Arthur W. Frank's Illness Narrative Theory

In *The Wounded Storyteller: Body, Illness, and Ethics*, during the period of being ill, the stories of the patients are told in three narrative types, which include the restitution narrative, the chaos narrative and the quest narrative. According to Arthur Frank, in any illness, all three narrative types are told, alternatively and repeatedly. And one moment in an illness, one type may guide the story; as the illness progresses, the story becomes told through other narratives [10]. Patients showcase unique characteristics in these three narratives, but they are all the embodiment of the social expectation and personal effort, which aim to help regain the patients' lost voice, thus returning to health.

Frank stated that among these three narrative types, the restitution narrative is the most common one, which embodies a disruptive event, the search for restoration and ultimate restitution [10]. Specifically, in the restitution narrative, the patients have the tendency, implicitly or explicitly, to express their hopes to heal from illness or escape from distraction. Anyone who is sick wants to be healthy again. Moreover, contemporary culture treats health as the normal condition that people ought to have restored. Thus, the ill person's own desire for restitution is compounded by the expectation that other people want to hear restitution stories. Some metaphoric phrases like "as good as new" are the core of the restitution narrative [10]. Expression like this is a reflexive informer of what the patients' stories should be about health.

The chaos narrative is the opposite of the restitution narrative. If the restitution

narrative promises possibilities of outdistancing or outwitting suffering, the chaos narrative tells how easily any of us could be sucked under and the plot of it imagines life never getting better [10]. In a chaotic narrative, stories told by the patients are chaotic for two reasons, the absence of the narrative sequence and constant life negative possibilities that anyone fears to hear [10]. The lack of any coherent narrative sequence is an initial reason why chaos stories are hard to hear, thereby making the teller's story improper and incomprehensible. But more significantly, not only is not the chaos story heard to be appropriate, but the teller is not living a "proper" life, since in life as in story, one event is expected to lead to another. Chaos negates that expectation [10]. During the actual chaos the body (the teller) is muted into silence because the body can do nothing but just be a silent witness to the disruption [11] because it is inevitable that some contingencies are far from being accepted.

The quest narrative affords the ill person a voice as the teller of her own story, because only in quest stories does the teller have a story to tell. Restitution stories are about the triumph of social expectations and chaos stories remain the sufferer's own story, but the suffering is too great for a story to be told. By contrast, quest stories meet suffering head-on; they accept illness and seek to use it. Illness is the occasion of a journey that becomes a quest. What is requested for may never be wholly clear, but the quest is defined by the ill person's belief that something is to be gained through experience [10]. Specifically, in quest narrative, the protagonist has accepted contingency and the possibility of future disruptions. The disruption is a journey with protagonist coming back to life and bearing out the symbols of pain and telling the story to others.

#### **4. Part Three: Misery: Chaos Narrative in *Life and Times of Michael K***

##### **4.1. Anna K' s Chaos Narrative**

In chaos narrative, Michael K's mother, Anna K manifested herself as being anguished and hopeless. As an old woman with an unsightly illness in time of war, Anna K witnessed how snobbish the world could be. She had suffered from gross swelling of legs, arms and belly. Then even in the hospital, with the care of nurses, she was also unable to walk and barely able to breathe. On the way back to Prince Albert, her condition got worse. Unfortunately, she died of her illness on the half way. Anna K suffered both physically and mentally. The unreliable goodwill of Buhrmann and the dutifulness of a dull son were her happiness as well as misery. Even on the way back to Price Albert, her birthplace, she did not expect anymore.

Furthermore, his mother had lost all appetite for travel to far places. She complained of pains in her chest and sat stiff and sullen in the box under the plastic apron K pinned across her to keep out the worst of the rain.

Being seriously ill, she was in chaos and did not have words at that point to articulate the chaos, but only witnessed the silent fading of the body due to illness.

In chaos narrative, its plot imagines life never getting better, and it tells how easily any of us could be sucked under outdistancing or outwitting suffering [10]. Just like Anna K, she could do nothing but just witnessed the unfolding of chaos in the body-self. During the actual chaos, the body is muted into silence because the body could do nothing but just be a silent witness to the disruption.

#### **4.2. Michael K's Chaos Narrative**

During the period of chaos narrative, Michael K was aimless in life and self-abased for his illness. Michael K, a man born with a hare-lip in a society under apartheid policy, he was faced with abnormal attention from other people and under oppression of powerful class. Before the death of Anna K, Michael K was mainly tortured by his inborn illness. For his disfigurement and because his mind was not quick, Michael K was taken out of school after a short trial and committed to the protection of welfare institution. And due to his abnormal face, he did not have women friends. Under such circumstances, he felt a measure of solitariness, but he had no one to tell with. His chaos embodied as falling in silence. "he had been oppressed by the brilliant neon light that shone off the white tiles" and "he preferred the parks that with tall pine trees and dim agapanthus walks" [12]. After the death of Anna K, his illness and the injustice of the society were both obstacles. His chaos manifested as depression. When in the farm, long time solitude often made him lapse into gloominess, which was a kind of chaos in his mind. "Though he continued to sleep in the house he was not at ease there. Roaming from one empty room to another he felt as insubstantial as air" [12]. In the camp, he, at times, shivered and fell into delirious sleep. He was in depression, and it seemed he had lost all his strength. "A fly settled on his mouth. He waved it away. It circled and settled again. He yielded" [12]. Solitude in the farm made Michael K fall into silence and oppression in camp put him in depression. In Michael K's Chaos narrative, he manifested himself as being wordless, fatigued and sleepy. He wanted to live energetically, so he made efforts to escape starvation by catching sheep. But when he was alone and whenever he had a chance anywhere, he would fell into slumber, leaving the whole world behind. He was chaotic in expressing his feelings. People could do nothing when they are in chaos narrative but only watch his/her body fading into disruption, either in a hysteric or a listless way.

#### **4.3. Common Misery: The Symbolic Meaning of Chaos Narrative**

The chaos of Micheal K and Anna K were not just their individual issues, but the common misery facing all the oppressed people in South Africa at that time. They were in the apartheid society, representing the marginal group. Micheal K and Anna K's unfortunate life of being the disadvantaged represented the sufferings of other oppressed people, and their diseases were symbolized as the South Africa's distorted political and societal conditions.

The life of Micheal K and Anna K were specifications of the most marginalized people. Cape Town, a metropolis, offered the mother and her son only the trivial

wages and the cramped living area. Additionally, they were faced with not only severe poverty but also the insults at their personalities. Micheal K experienced exclusion from normal school, sheltering in the Huis Norenus as a child due to “his disfigurement and his [slow] mind” [12]. And in his adulthood, he frequently shifted jobs from gardener to night attendant at lavatories. He suffered disrespectful whispers because of his hare-lip and had no women friends “because of his face” [12]. As for Anna K, she had to tolerate not only others’ ignorance because of her identity being an old, disadvantaged woman in a war time, but also shouldered the same misery that bothered her son. This mother and her son were not the only victims of that time, but just manifested the miserable life of the vast majority of the oppressed people of South Africa at that time.

Specifically, the diseases of Anna K and Micheal K were representations of South Africa’s “hitherto deformed political regime” [3]. As an unprivileged and ill old woman, Anna K “had been suffering from gross swelling of the legs and arms” [12], which hindered her from walking and even breathing. As for Micheal K, he was presented as marked from birth by a hare-lip, which “impacts on his ability to speak” [4] and resulted in his bizarre appearance. Their illness symptoms were actually the redundancy and inefficiency of the political and societal systems. During the war time, the political and societal conditions were chaotic and decadent just like the mother and her son’s chaotic illness. Coetzee reflected his abhorrence of social and moral injustices by symbolizing individuals’ sufferings to the corrupt nation.

## **5. Part Four Freedom: Quest Narrative in *Life and Times of Michael K***

### **5.1. Social Oppression**

Starting with the Netherlands and then England, South Africa was colonized for a long period of time. From 1814, England had colonized South Africa through various means such as colonialism and ecological imperialism [13]. Western white people were egocentric and treated other races in a condescending manner, excluding them from the category of human beings in the name of rationality [14]. Until 1980s, colonizers still used the apartheid system and racist ideologies to exploit and plunder the natural resources and indigenous people of the colonies. Many people bore severe consequences of economic and social deformities, finding it hard to improve their condition through education and encountering great difficulties in the labor market.

Micheal K was a black youth living in Cape Town. What he needed to face up with was not only the political and social dilemmas bothering all the non-white people, but also his inborn hare-lip and slow mind. In the unstable society, due to family instability, widespread poverty, injustice, insufficient education and unemployment, many black youths could only make crime as their mean of subsistence and violence their way of resisting apartheid. By contrast, K could do nothing but resist oppression in silence because of his inborn disability.

## 5.2. Michael K's Quest Narrative

In quest narrative, Micheal K became his own hero. O'Connell argued that K was a novelistic hero: "the symbol for man's personal freedom, personal identity and dignity." [15] No matter in the countryside farm or in the camp, Micheal K's perseverance and persistence embodied his successful quest for freedom and dignity even in the oppressed condition.

In the countryside farm, K survived from severe hunger and saved himself from depression caused by the long-term living pressure and inadequate socialization. In order to survive, K realized the goats must be "caught, killed, cut up and eaten" [12]. In severe hunger, he hunted the creatures. Even though he was extremely famished and exhausted, K still told to himself "I must be hard, [...], I must press through the end, I must not relent" [12]. In loneliness, he even thought that "abandoning himself to illness is a pleasure" [12], but he never ceased to save himself from such depression like by listening to doves or other natural voices, touching the warmth of sunlight through the shutters and experiencing strength of the earth with fingers dug into the soil.

In the camp, K resisted the injustice and oppression. The camp was namely a place accommodating those homeless people, but it actually forced the oppressed to exchange physical effort and dignity for simple food or other crude living materials. K stated clearly for multiple times that "I don't want to be in a camp, that's all" [12]. Beside some polices' inhumane control and fellows' cynicism, the most thorny issue facing K was his losing of freedom. Realizing the apparent resistance was inefficient, K started to resist in silence. With perseverance, he eventually seized the opportunity to escape from the camp. He could not believe he was really free, even though "he walked all night, felling no fatigue", [and] trembling sometimes with the thrill of being free [12]. Everything outside the camp seemed new and novel to him, he eventually got the freedom he deserved.

## 6. Part Five: Common Dilemma and Social Responsibility

After escaping from the camp, K did not come back to the countryside farm, but went back to Cape Town again. It was not his ideal place but he got freedom there at least. This return was not simply a return from the starting point back to the beginning, but a return of a new self. K experienced the true freedom in the countryside farm by hunting the goats or planting vegetation. He overcame the harassment of fear and oppression in the camp, requiring the power of living. Coetzee symbolized K's suffering to all the non-whites' misery, revealing the inhumane nature of apartheid and potentially appealing concern to those oppressed people. K became his own hero, and his pain carried Coetzee's concern for the oppressed people. Additionally, Coetzee shew hope of the non-whites' emancipation by presenting K's successful questing of freedom.

## 7. Conclusion

In the apartheid society, all the non-whites were under control and harassment.

As a black youth, K seemed to be more unfortunate due to his inborn disability. During the time when he was in Cape Town and Prince Alfred, he was chaotic because of his illness and the social pressure. In the camp, he gradually realized the only way to get freedom was to find a suitable way to resist the injustice and oppression. With times of failures and endeavour, he successfully managed to quest the freedom and emancipated himself. Disability brought double misery to K, but it also made him more clear that only the silent resistance could save him from chaos. It was Coetzee's belief that the oppressed should take actions in a wise and suitable way, only by this could they be more likely to emancipate themselves.

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### Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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