

**Essay Question: “Compare the ways in which two of the texts you have studied present physical weakness and how it affects the mind and self”**

From Plato’s allegory of hardened prisoners trapped in a gruelling cave, to Descartes’ conceptualisation of an all-powerful and all-deceiving evil demon manipulating our every thought, and even to Zhuang Zi’s dream that he was a butterfly, early philosophy considered the physical body which tethers our minds to the external world as distinct and inferior to the mental self. This is due to physical weakness, which refers to the inefficacy and limitation of the physical body, perhaps due to ageing, sickness, or the mind’s supposed superiority to the temporal physical body. This essay shall compare and contrast the presentations of physical weakness in Age of Iron and Ariel, exploring the similarities and differences in Coetzee’s and Plath’s treatment of the theme. Ironically, both Age of Iron and Ariel present physical weakness to be empowering for the self as it rejects the temporal physical body and seeks to be defined through other means, though the two texts differ in their response to the loss of agency the self undergoes. Both texts portray the experience of physical weakness as a downward spiral into social alienation, which is embraced by the persona in Ariel but vehemently resisted by Mrs Curren in Age of Iron. Ultimately, both texts depict the self to strive for transcendence beyond their physical forms, however, Plath portrays an uncertain resolution in solace in the mind, while Coetzee depicts a more certain path in writing past one’s physical death to sustain the self.

To begin with, both Plath and Coetzee present **physical weakness to be ironically empowering for the self**, as it **catalyses the pursuit of other self-definitions** in rejecting their fading physical bodies as an essential facticity. In Age of Iron, when Mrs Curren wrestles with physical weakness in the form of her cancer, she is shown to be admirably empowered in confronting her condition head-on in seeking to define herself by the happiness she brings to the other,

“Loving you, loving life, (ready to) forgive the living and take my leave without bitterness”. Mrs Curren’s periphrastic resolution to accept the harsh reality of her cancer is euphonically interwoven with liquid consonance in “loving”, “leaving” and “leave”, granting it a slow lilting rhythm, hence creating an atmosphere of saint-like solace and stoicism in the face of calamity. This calmness swells to fierce strength as “Something in (her) revolts at the lassitude, the letting go, the welcoming of dissolution” at the sight of the Vercueil, where the cumulative list of Vercueil’s act of lazing around is arranged with increasing accusatory intensity in “lassitude...letting go...welcoming”. This creates a harsh, critical and even horrified voice to Mrs Curren’s reaction to Vercueil’s laziness, hence exemplifying how the self is empowered to a frantic extent in the face of crippling physical weakness. Similarly, Plath’s persona is also bolstered by physical weakness, as she responds to the wounds of self-harm in ‘Cut’ from her callous perch in the mind with an eerie nonchalance, with an exclamation at the beginning of the poem emphatically declaring “What a thrill--”. Plath then employs synecdoche in commodifying the persona’s body, marvelling at the thumb in “the top quite gone // except for a sort of a hinge // Of skin, // a flap like a hat.” The irony in the dissonance between imagery of self-harm that engenders scathingly visceral verisimilitude, and the persona’s playful tone evident in the innocent diction and sing-song internal rhyme in “a flap like a hat” would disturb readers at the dark and eerie humour in the poem’s voice, illustrating to readers how the self feels detached and even empowered over physical pain, such that it could handle the horrors of self-harm with a cheerful and childish disposition that revels in its disengagement from the physical body as the indifferent mind. However, Age of Iron and Ariel diverge sharply in their **attitudes towards the diminishing agency** of the physical body. Mrs Curren is shown to be **empowered by the finitude** of her fading agency, and struggles valiantly to **maximise the potential** she can draw from its last dregs. Her frantic pursuit to actualise her self’s potential is evident in her thematically stark striving to define herself as a loving mother, as she justifies her charity to Vercueil in “To be full enough to give and to give from one’s fullness: what deeper urge is there? Out of their withered bodies even the old try to squeeze one last drop”. Coetzee’s use of chiasmus interweaves the concepts of “full”ness and “giving” to present them as deeply intertwined, emphasising to readers in an authoritative tone that it is intuitive for the

dying self to be altruistic and redefine itself by the happiness of those around it, so as to seize the meagre remains of its agency with an audacity underscored by the kinaesthetic imagery of “squeez(ing) one last drop” from “withered bodies” as the self faces the physical weakness of cancer and ageing. Moreover, Mrs Curren also states that “We bear children in order to be mothered by them”, which makes a paradoxical claim that subverts the mother-child power dynamic in a sure and certain tone, so as to blur the lines between mother and child to show that each depends on the other, hence expressing Mrs Curren’s child-like reliance on her daughter to derive meaning and efficacy from her fading life beyond its finitude. Conversely, Plath portrays a persona that is **empowered by the rejection and spurning of all agency** whatsoever and the freedom from expectations that come with it. This is seen in how the persona in ‘Tulips’ relishes in her powerlessness, “lying by (herself) quietly...learning peacefulness” that is affirmed with a litote stating “I am nobody; I have nothing to do with explosions”, that indirectly expresses her sense of detachment with a rejection of the extreme of “explosions” to emphasise the persona’s disillusioned submission of her agency to paralysis. The paradoxical nature of how “peace” is derived from inefficacy can be understood as a means to show how the helpless self can be empowered in embracing its entrapment, hence liberating itself from the harsh burden of responsibilities and expectations that would weigh heavy on it were it free to choose and act. As such, the two texts diverge in how the self finds empowerment in physical weakness. Coetzee presents a self that strives to actualise its potential from its diminishing agency, perhaps to challenge the need for the self to be distinct from society and show that caring for the other could be a means of preserving the self. Conversely, Plath presents a self that submits to inefficacy to find peace, possibly to demonstrate how the self in desperation can have its grip on the concrete world pried away.

Moreover, both Age of Iron and Ariel present the experience of physical weakness to be a **downward spiral into the alienation** of the self from society, as the dissolution of the physical body that tethers the self to the **concrete** external world **strains its relationship with the other**. In Age of Iron, physical weakness and ageing are used to convey Mrs Curren’s exasperation at the decline of the morals of her times that leads to her increasing separation from society

particularly when she is portrayed in weakened agony complaining “I want to go home. I am in pain, I am exhausted”. Here, Coetzee ironically toys with words to create a child-like tone in “I want to go home” depicting Mrs Curren’s old age and frailty to be a symbol of petulant weakness in contrast to the capable Mr Thabane, rather than an indication of wisdom and experience, hence striking sympathy in readers at how small and alienated Mrs Curren would feel as an elderly lady in the raging mob of Gugulethu. This physical weakness culminates distinctly in interpersonal weakness as she feels estranged and foreign to the people of Gugulethu, especially when she is pressured by Thabane and the crowd to condemn white violence, only to be stunned speechless and exclaim that she “would need a tongue of a god” to “find (her) own words, from myself”. The hyperbolic diction employed connotes the extreme alienation of the self from the other, as only divine intervention is said to be able to reconcile Mrs Curren’s internal conflict between truth and authenticity in her condemnation of White violence under the pressures of complicit guilt and Black retributive outrage-- the morals Mrs Curren grew up with are shown to have aged alongside her, hence she struggles to come to a judgement about an affair that was black-and-white to the people around her, alienating her from the society of Gugulethu. Similarly, Plath demonstrates how physical weakness worsens into alienation from society in “Paralytic” where the persona is described to be separated from her daughters who are encased in a photograph, “whisper(ing)...we’re your daughters”. The portrayal of the daughters as “whisper(ing)” creates a hushed distance between the persona and her family that is paralleled by the slow rhythmic pace of the short truncated lines, and the detached diction in Plath’s description of them as “girls” before “daughters” emphasises the alienation of the self from society due to her physical weakness that bound her in paralysis on the bed, exemplifying the downward spiral from physical to interpersonal weakness as the concrete world where the other resides glides into oblivion. However, the two texts differ in the self’s response to the gnawing pangs of alienation from physical weakness. In Age of Iron, the self is portrayed to **struggle** and challenge this alienation with its fading agency, **asserting itself** and its values in **motherly love** against the cold unfeeling shoulder of the other. In her attempt to connect with the indifferent John, who was separated from her by her age, Mrs Curren resolutely asserts her advice to John to “Be slow to judge” though he recoiled at her touch,

alluding to lessons from “Thucydides” in an attempt to dissociate from herself and speak as the abstract voice of wisdom from history, to challenge John’s rejection of her as an old white woman. Conversely, the persona in Ariel **embraces** social alienation and relishes in the **rebellious individuality** it enjoys in being distinct from the other. This is seen in ‘Lady Lazarus’, where the persona scorns the “peanut-crunching crowd (that) shoves in to see her weakened form in “a big strip tease”. The spiteful tone of the poem ultimately swells into cackling victory, in “Out of the ash // I rise with my red hair // and eat men like air” which alludes the mythical symbol of a vengeful phoenix in rebirth in a grand and forceful voice, so as to demonstrate how the persona was embracing her distinct separation from the other to take on a vindictive and monstrous form, as she hyperbolises herself to be distinct and superior over the other in her individuality. As such, Age of Iron and Ariel both depict physical weakness as a downward spiral into social alienation, however, Coetzee shows Mrs Curren to struggle against this alienation to preserve her definition of herself as a mother, perhaps to show how such other-centred definitions could torment the self when it is not reciprocated, while Plath presents the self to embrace alienation and the individuality it affords, perhaps to show how the volatile spark of rebellion in non-conformity can possess the self that is tormented by others.

Finally, the two texts cohere in how they ultimately seek transcendence from their temporal concrete forms, through grounding their sense of self in definitions that lie beyond the greedy reaches of physical weakness, however, the resolutions the selves arrive at differ in the certainty of their liberation. In Ariel, the persona comes to an uncertain conclusion in the grounding of her sense of self in the abstract mind as a means to find individuality away from the responsibility of agency. This is evident how the transcendence of the self as the mind is left uncertain as a negative capability. Though poems such as *Paralytic* end with the self assured in its individuality as a “claw // of the magnolia, Drunk on its own scents, (that) Asks nothing of life” which connotes a sense of self-sufficiency its own rebellious and overpowering beauty, the flower motif is instead used as a threat which pulls the self back into external reality in ‘tulips’ as a “dozen red lead sinkers around my neck.”, demonstrating the volatility of the self’s attempt to transcend into the abstract beauties of the mind which could morph between friend and foe.

The striking visual imagery of red sinkers and the repeated plosive consonance of the “d” sound in “dozen red lead” would also denote forcefulness and vibrancy with which the persona is pulled back into physical reality by the tulips. This ambiguity of transcendence is ultimately underscored by the poem’s form of free verse in regular stanzas that would give readers the impression of a sense of regularity without conforming to the rules of rhyme and metre, to portray to readers the perpetual tension of self caught between structured reality and escapism into the abstract mind. Conversely, Coetzee presents the self to ultimately be certain in its transcendence over physical weakness and temporality in the form of writing as a means to pass on her perspectives and morals to the other. This is seen how Mrs Curren praises writing to be “truth and love together at last” in explaining that in writing “It is through my eyes that you (her daughter) see; the voice that speaks in your head is mine”. The self-reflexivity of the text as it comments on how the reader's interpretation is deeply intertwined with the writer’s view expresses how Mrs Curren seeks to preserve her self’s perspective past death from cancer, through writing to convey her self’s inner reflections as a coherent narrative. This metafictional comment would seem definite and sure to readers as it comments directly on the process of reading, breaking the fourth wall to connote that the self speaks from some higher plane of knowledge and certainty. As such, Age of Iron and Ariel both present the self to pursue transcendence beyond physical weakness. Plath offers an uncertain resolution trading one’s agency and responsibility for individuality in the abstract mind, perhaps as a means to show the volatility of residing in the mind and its potentialities without endearing choice or responsibility to demonstrate the dependence of the self on physical reality. Conversely, Coetzee shows the self to be certain in its resolution in the form of writing, perhaps as a way to show the power of writing as a form of motherhood in passing down perspectives of the self that would be otherwise buried in history.

All in all, Coetzee and Plath both explore the self’s response as it is made aware of its limitations in physical weakness, with the ultimate fork in the road being whether the self recedes into the mind away from the other as seen in Ariel, or submits itself completely to the other through writing and defining itself as an altruistic maternal figure. On one hand, the

escapism of Plath's persona seems tempting in the raw individuality and originality it affords, to "To be nobody but yourself...in a world which is doing its best, night and day, to make you everybody else" (E.E. Cummings), unfortunately, Ariel demonstrates how it eventually culminates in volatility and alienation without agency and responsibility. The self-narration of Mrs Curren through writing demonstrates that a yielding to the other in seeking to fulfil one's social role seems to be a promising alternative, however alienation the self undergoes as should its role grow irrelevant with changes in society seem debilitating. Therefore, it could be argued that we should regard the self as something that lies between our unique individuality and the influence of society, and a fully actualised self as one which knows how to strike a balance between the two forces, acknowledging that we are both the facticities of our social roles assigned by the other, and the potentialities of our autonomous and individual self.