

# **Waiting for the Barbarians Study Guide**

**Waiting for the Barbarians by John Maxwell Coetzee**

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# Plot Summary

A magistrate in charge of administering the law in a colonial town witnesses the torture of the invaded indigenous population. The colony or the place is unspecified. Most characters have no names, although the circumstances surrounding the events indicate that the colony is South Africa while the barbarians indicate the black population. The magistrate is of unspecified age although he refers to himself as approaching retirement. At first loyal and dutiful the magistrate becomes skeptical about the legal system he represents. He questions its effectiveness, but if he were to leave his successor could be more ruthless.

The magistrate is content with his life until the investigation to examine the alleged barbarian uprising occurs. Colonel Joll is sent to establish the extent of danger that the barbarians, who live behind the border may pose to the colony. He captures natives to extract information from them about any uprising. Colonel Joll's methods to obtain evidence is by torture. How effective such methods may be is questionable even for the magistrate.

The magistrate meets one of the victims of these interrogations, a young girl, on the street. She was abandoned by her people when they were released from prison. The magistrate, partly attracted to the girl and partly feeling responsible for the torture inflicted on her, offers her work in his house.

He examines her injuries, washes her, and takes care of her. Despite his good intentions towards her he becomes confused about his feelings for her. He is attracted to her and tries to inspire the same feelings in her. Their relationship lacks mutual understanding of each other. They often fail to communicate what they feel towards each other. Their confusion leads to frustration. The magistrate goes back to having sex with his previous casual partner. His frustration grows, however, both with himself and with the girl. He decides to take her back to her own people.

Upon his return the magistrate is imprisoned for the alleged conspiracy with barbarians, becoming the victim of the system he once represented himself. He is kept in prison without trial, tortured, and eventually released. After a mock-up execution he is set free, but not allowed to work he leads the life of a vagrant and a beggar.

The army sent to fight the barbarians is trapped and left to die in the desert without food and water. The remaining soldiers loot the town, leaving it exposed to attacks. Those who were to protect the town now engage in crime themselves. Even those in charge become corrupt, choosing the support of their soldiers over what is right.

The magistrate eventually regains his previous position. Together with the inhabitants he devises various means of protection, where they fake the presence of soldiers. Peace returns, but the magistrate has many regrets about the past, realizing his mistakes while feeling ashamed about the treatment of the barbarians. He realizes he is unable to provide a historical account of what happened. The reality of life on the



frontier is to live through seasons and cycles rather than events with beginnings and ends. A historical account would fail to express his admiration for the place he considers a paradise on earth.



# Chapter I

## Chapter I Summary

A magistrate in charge of administering the law in a colonial town witnesses the torture of the invaded indigenous population. The colony or place is unspecified. Most characters have no names, although the circumstances surrounding the events indicate that the colony is South Africa while the barbarians indicate the black population. The magistrate is of unspecified age although he refers to himself as approaching retirement. At first loyal and dutiful the magistrate becomes skeptical about the legal system he represents. He questions its effectiveness, but if he were to leave his successor could be more ruthless.

The magistrate shows the garrison to Colonel Joll, sent by The Third Bureau to investigate the rumors about a barbarian uprising. When they begin to talk about interrogation methods, Joll shares his views with him about the way he obtains the truth from the prisoners, involving various stages of torture gradually increasing in pain. The magistrate questions the effect of pain as a reliable method to elicit information that is true rather than what the torturer wants to hear.

A family of a boy, his mother, and grandfather are imprisoned on their way to town, claiming that they only wanted to see a doctor. The magistrate doubts that they can be of any threat to the colony, but Joll disagrees. The following day Joll tortures them during the interrogation. He kills the grandfather, who throws himself on his torturers when seeing his daughter tortured.

The magistrate visits the imprisoned family following the interrogation. He finds the boy asleep while the dead grandfather lying next to him with injuries that differ from those described in the report. He realizes the grandfather was tortured, but the evidence of it is hidden. He wants to distance himself from all this before his retirement. With the alleged barbarian uprising that leads to the strengthening of the garrison and investigations, he is unable to remain uninvolved.

The boy admits to theft of horses and arming by his clan during torture. The magistrate fetches a doctor for the boy, while Joll uses him to organize a raid on the barbarians. He brings back a group of prisoners, who turn out to be fishermen. They are placed in the barracks while the magistrate is puzzled over their capture. They have different customs and lack hygiene, creating various problems. The magistrate is distressed about incidents between the soldiers and the prisoners especially when one of the babies dies. He blames Colonel Joll for all the trouble although decides against informing the Bureau about it.

Joll brings more prisoners for torture. They scream at night keeping the magistrate awake. The fishermen are interrogated about the movements of horsemen and visiting strangers. Eventually he leaves his apartment when hearing cries until late at night. He



engages in any distraction including sleeping with women. His nightmares wake him up chasing his partners out of his bed.

The interrogations are carried out along the entire frontier, but the magistrate doubts that they can improve safety. When Joll departs the Magistrate tries to restore order. The prisoners are sick, wounded, and terrified. He is helpless when watching their misery. Unable to do anything he prefers that they were dead.

He doubts the methods of the Empire, their effectiveness, and its proclivity to cling to old ways. He feeds the prisoners and assures their recovery.

## Chapter I Analysis

The magistrate, sent to administer a remote post in the imperial colony most likely before the World War 2, wishes for a peaceful life. He resents torture inflicted on the barbarians, who are considered to be a threat, but in his view they pose no significant danger. He is not against interrogations, but he finds it hard to deal with torture inflicted on the barbarians hidden in reports. He struggles with pain and injustice inflicted by the Empire. His sensitivity makes him sympathetic towards the barbarians, who could do no more harm if they were simply released. The old rules and methods cannot be changed and mistakes are to be perpetuated. He regards law and order as assuring that the barbarians are cared for rather than annihilated.

The magistrate is unable to establish any meaningful communication with Colonel Joll. They seem to communicate on different levels. Joll has to fulfill his mission. His interests concern only those matters that uphold his own position. He disregards local customs no matter how much more efficient they can be without even considering damage made through reckless killing and devastation of his army to the local wildlife. He is unconcerned about the amount of animals killed that could not be consumed and had to rot away. Even when his methods are ineffective he refuses to accept other views, as they can question his authority.



# Chapter II

## Chapter II Summary

The magistrate discovers a blind girl begging on the street for money on a cold winter day. Due to her injured ankles she carries sticks with her to be able to walk. He gives her money, being concerned about her health as well as attracted by her beauty. When she disappears for a while he inquires about her. He approaches her when seeing her back on the street, offering her cleaning work at his house as she is not allowed to ask for money in town, especially that winter is coming.

When he brings her to his house she feels unworthy of the work he offers her and leaves. He finds her back on the street begging and brings her to his house again. While he washes her and bandages her ankles, he inquires about her injuries. At first she refuses to say anything, and he finally falls asleep lying next to her. She remains in the house, doing laundry and cleaning.

The magistrate washes and bathes her every day. He is confused about what he wants from her, finding her distant and unresponsive to his demonstrations of affection. She seems to agree to daily bathing rituals, but he always falls asleep at the end of it. He finds her communicating facts and not nuances as he is. She seems to have a more simple way of expression than he has.

He questions whether he is really attracted to her or whether he feels guilty about her torture. All he knows about her is that she is the daughter of the man who died during the interrogation. None of the soldiers know anything more about her or her interrogation.

The barbarians stay away during winter months dealing with cold. They are not interested in fighting the Empire or trade they used to engage in until they started drinking, creating trouble for the people in town as well as for themselves. The magistrate thinks that they became corrupted and dependent because of the influence of civilization that led to the loss of their virtues. He opposes and detests such influence. Meanwhile, rumors spread that the barbarians may threaten the Empire. Various measures are undertaken in anticipation of their attacks, such as raids and vigilance. The magistrate is less concerned about them, getting busy with his old hobbies involving cataloging, reading, collating maps, and antelope hunting. He is also busy trying to seduce the girl he hired. She finally reveals how she was injured during her interrogation when her torturers brought hot, fork-like tools close to her eyes. She had nothing to tell them, and they decided not to burn her eyes entirely. Since then she was able to see through the edges around the blur in the middle of her eyes. Her ankles were also broken, but eventually healed.

The magistrate becomes frustrated with the bathing ritual that makes him tired without bringing results. They seem to misunderstand each other about what they want. She



admits that she stays with him because she has nowhere else to go. He starts visiting another girl with whom he previously had a casual sex affair. After a while he also feels less attracted to his maid, questioning again his motives behind keeping her in his house. When she eventually shows that she is willing to have sex with him, he finds himself indifferent. He begins to think that maybe he is driven by guilt about her torture and Joll's depravities rather than feelings.

Despite his visits to another girl for sex, his relationship with his maid remains the same—distant and indifferent. His frustration with the situation drives him even further away from her. He separates their beds and resumes his social life. He has disagreements with the military while new conscripts arrive to replace the deserted soldiers, who froze to death some distance away.

The magistrate is concerned about the future of town exposed to danger through the attacks on the barbarians, who are not allowed to move freely with their stock. They are also humiliated when they come to trade as people in town consider them different. The magistrate thinks these differences are only in their table manners and quality of life. He thinks they also differ in their tolerance for death and slovenliness, but admires them.

## Chapter II Analysis

The magistrate finds himself attracted to a girl begging on the street for money who has been tortured and whose father died during torture. He is unsure whether his help is inspired by his pity or because he is attracted to her. When he brings her home matters complicate even further when he is unsure what to do with her. He wants to make her want him. His tactics have no effect on her until he decides to take her back to her people, creating a more friendly atmosphere during their trip. The magistrate who is in control of the garrison is out of control with his feelings. He struggles to make any sense of his desires, although he realizes that his care makes the girl oblivious and passive. Such passivity becomes troublesome even for him, as she simply has no other place to go. He questions his feelings for her over and over again, blaming the environment, and the Empire.

During winter soldiers become victims of their vices. They drink, smoke, and engage in idleness. Their lives become corrupted, corrupting those around them, including the barbarians. Such civilization is unwanted, but only the magistrate opposes it, resenting its damaging effect that it has on those that are vulnerable. The devastation that such civilization has on wildlife is catastrophic, leaving only waste, disregarding any costs of securing the position of the Empire. In the end though no one is safe.

The magistrate unveils mood swings and uncertainty about his own proclivities while being at odds with his own desires.





# Chapter III

## Chapter III Summary

When winter ends, the season for animal trapping begins. The magistrate frustrated with the relationship between him and the girl decides that it is best to take her back to her people. He wants to notify the Bureau about his trip, justifying its purpose as an attempt to restore good relationships with the barbarians. After writing a letter he decides against sending it. Without informing anyone about his trip, he takes four soldiers with him, the girl, and heads for the mountains.

They travel south towards the desert and then the valleys, where the nomads winter and usually follow the old dead river-bed. To shorten their trip they choose a different route never previously attempted. Even though winter has passed, the wind blowing through the ice makes breathing difficult. They carry firewood and try to conserve food and water.

As they advance, they continue experiencing tough winter conditions with dust entering their clothing and baggage. They are forced to save water, consuming only little amounts. The terrain becomes desolate along the dry lake.

Once they leave the lake conditions improve although they have to kill one of their horses that refuses to rise. The girl becomes more open, conversing freely with the soldiers. The magistrate discovers through these conversations that she is witty, finding her much more appealing. Unexpectedly, he becomes more sexually attracted to her. He finally has sex with her, although he still questions why does he really want her.

After eight days of travel there is little food left. They are forced to get off their horses to reduce the weight the animals have to carry, and walk alongside them. Eventually the horses can feed again as they approach some grassy hills. Towards the end of the trip the magistrate is finally satisfied with sex he has with the girl.

Just before they reach the mountains they experience a fierce storm full of snow, rain, ice, sand, and grit. They lose one of their tents in the wind and never recover it again.

On the tenth day they encounter some indigenous people on their horses riding in front of them. Every time they get closer they find that the barbarians move faster, getting away from them or just matching their speed. While the barbarians are in front of them they at the same time lead them and follow them. The girl gets her period and is unable to hide it. They all become uncomfortable also due to their superstitious beliefs about bad luck associated with menstruation. To dispel any bad omen they perform a purification ceremony. The group in front of them gets so close that they finally meet.

The magistrate wants the girl to make her own decision about joining the group or going back to the settlement with him although he wants her now to stay with him. He communicates his intentions to her before she starts talking to them. When the girl asks



him why he wants her back he is unable to provide a straight answer. She doesn't like the settlement and decides to stay with her own people.

He offers them silver in exchange for one of their horses, but they refuse. Upon seeing the girl for the last time he tries to distance himself from her to forget her again questioning his attraction for her.

On their way back one of the soldiers injures his foot. The separation between him and the rest of the men grows after they realized the purpose of their trip. He avoids sleeping with them in the same tent. They lose yet another horse that has to be slaughtered.

When they approach the settlement they are met by a group of soldiers. At first they appear to be a welcoming party, but as they escort them to the gates they turn out to be the army.

## Chapter III Analysis

Frustrated by the lack of success with seducing the tortured girl, the magistrate yields to the allure of spring, deciding to venture into the unknown and deliver the girl to her family. It is the journey that changes his life as he suffers from harsh weather conditions in an equally harsh environment. When he manages to surpass all the difficulties, he is arrested under suspicion of colluding with the barbarians.

His resolve to execute what seems to be only a short trip turns into a hardening experience. Not only does he face dangerous storms but also realizes that now his sexual life with his girlfriend would be completely satisfying. Only it is too late to reverse the damage that the girl already experienced. She has no wish to return to the place that deprived her of everything she had, her family, her freedom, and her ability to live an independent life.

While he tries to escape the disappointment of their failed relationship he experiences more frustration due to the unexpected improvement in their attitude towards each other. He is still unable to express his feelings towards her, but she is stimulating enough for him to engage in sex. He also becomes impressed with her social skills as she responds to his jovial soldiers, showing her wit and humor. Challenges mount until he returns, facing his most difficult challenge of being accused of treason.



# Chapter 4

## Chapter 4 Summary

Upon arrival, the magistrate meets a warrant officer from the Third Bureau, who accuses him of conspiring with the enemy. When the magistrate accuses the army of triggering conflicts, being itself the enemy rather than the barbarians he becomes imprisoned. In his solitude he analyzes the events of the last few weeks. More prison cells are built for the barbarians tortured in front of their relatives. Unable to defend themselves, they are vulnerable and deprived of their humanity. He analyzes his feelings for the native girl who stayed with him, questioning his pity for her. She became less of a human being during her torture, turning into a creature who believes in nothing, only awaiting her end.

The fire is set to assure protection clearing the river banks. It destroys wildlife, creating more opportunities for the desert to advance. He finds out that the charges against him involve account irregularities, a relationship with a street woman, as well as making a trip to inform the barbarians about the campaign against them. He remains silent about these accusations, demanding a proper court hearing to defend himself.

Back in his cell, he analyzes his conversation with the officer, who seems to be equally capable of crime as well as fulfilling his duties. He suffers adversely the humiliation of his imprisonment, finding it hard to get used to simple food while deprived of any spare clothing. His lack of activities encourages endless analyzing. He hears that the troops left to fight the barbarians.

A few days later he manages to open one of the barrack windows and escapes. He hides in the room of one of the girls he used to have sex with, getting under her bed. He falls asleep waiting for her. When she finally turns up in her apartment she is with a man, and they immediately end up in bed having sex. He endures all this under her bed until they fall asleep. Unnoticed he leaves her apartment, proceeding towards the north gate unrecognized by the soldier standing there, who tells him that a few men got sick and returned from the expedition against the barbarians. After getting through the gate he notices the ruined crops, realizing that he won't be able to survive there.

When he returns to his cell his ward warns him that he should remain silent about his escape. The magistrate demands food, threatening that he may join the barbarians next time. The troops return with the natives who have their cheeks and wrists wired. The magistrate watches it at first, but unable to bear it, leaves. He changes his mind, grabs a bucket of water, and returns pushing through the crowd. As the guards tighten the wires they make the prisoners kneel. Colonel Joll approaches the prisoners, rubbing the dust into their backs in the shape of the word enemy. The soldiers start hitting them with canes until the charcoal mixes with sweat and blood, making the signs disappear. The prisoners lie down on the ground under torture. One of the soldiers hands his cane to a girl in the crowd, and other soldiers follow this example. People overtake the flogging



until Colonel Joll grabs a hammer to crush the prisoners' feet. When the magistrate shouts in protest a soldier hits him in the face breaking his cheek bone. He receives this punishment with a smile because he knows that his skills as a speaker are poor. All he wanted to say is that it is worse to damage one's feet than to kill. The consequences of his protest, involving the barbarians freely entering the settlement, would be more severe than becoming a martyr.

He returns to his cell with a broken nose, cheekbone, and swollen eye. Without any treatment, he endures spasms of pain. He can't eat, trying to walk, sing or count only to survive one night at a time. In the morning he cries from exhaustion, then lies in his bed.

Finally he is brought to his own office and meets Colonel Joll, who shows him a string of poplar wood slips with some script written on them. Joll wants to know the meaning of the script. The magistrate makes up the content, unfamiliar with the writing himself. He presents various possible meanings although he thinks the script itself is meaningless. The Colonel abandons his inquiries about the writing and starts complaining about his behavior as a magistrate. When the magistrate demands trial, he is told that only the Bureau handles the law, and he won't be tried because of his popularity in town, although he is going to be relieved of his duties instead. The magistrate would have to consider performing his duties with caution as martyrdom is quickly forgotten in outback places.

The Colonel views the barbarians as organized unlike the magistrate, who thinks he is creating enemies from the prisoners while being the enemy himself. He accuses Joll of stirring up the war through encouraging martyrdom. Joll responds calling him "the One Just Man" (Coetze, p. 125). The magistrate refuses to relate the interaction he had with the barbarians, and is taken back to his cell.

After a couple of days he is taken to the yard, where he is forced to run and jump through the rope. Another day the soldiers force him to climb the ladder with a bag slipped over his head and his hands tied at the back. They put a rope around his head and tighten it. When he finally admits that nothing had passed between him and the barbarians they tighten the rope. They then hang him by the wrists tied at the back, pull above the ground, and swing back and forth.

## Chapter 4 Analysis

This chapter that is also the longest chapter in the book is devoted mostly to the imprisonment and torture of the magistrate after he comes back from his trip to the mountains. Based on the false evidence from the soldiers, who accompanied him on this trip, he is accused of conspiring with the barbarians against the Empire. Deep insight he regards himself opposed to the Empire. He feels freed from the bond that forces him to accept crime and torture. This freedom gives him permission to treat women in any way that is suitable, subject to his whims. It made no difference to him whether they were treated like slaves, daughters or concubines, rejected, or be all of it at the same time. He felt no responsibility towards them except for pity or desire. The



life he has been leading would render no accountability for his actions. In a place with no morals there was also no enforcement or recognition of what is right and wrong. In his view it is the Empire that is the enemy causing chaos and destruction. His imprisonment gives him an opportunity to dissociate himself from any responsibility or shame he feels for the lack of such responsibility on the part of the Empire. It is his turn now to undergo torture, as he is now regarded as the enemy of Empire.

His isolation imposes memories of all those subjected to pain. Their death is still reverberating among the walls. He becomes aware of the extent of the suffering when the girl he fell in love with was tortured in front of her father, who was unable to protect her. He can relate to their ordeal and to the loss of their humanity. He realizes that he will also undergo a similar transformation, turning into a creature deprived of any emotions.

The magistrate soon recognizes that he has already become a machine and a beast. His interrogator climbs to the top destroying everything on the way even if it requires crime. The analysis of his torturers shows that in fact the barbarians are not enemies, but those who serve the empire. Their behavior can be more barbarian than those, who are accused of barbarian traits.

The magistrate suffers various humiliations through the lack of clean clothes and inability to clean his cell. Before his imprisonment he was subject to injustice, but now he is only a collection of bones and an accumulation of meat and blood in the state of imprisonment.



# Chapter 5

## Chapter 5 Summary

The barbarians arrive before dark, stealing clothing, food, and anything of use, inspiring fear that turns into paranoia. The rumors that the barbarians arm against their invaders spread, encouraging angst and conflicts. Drunkenness spreads among the soldiers.

The magistrate is released from prison without any means of survival. He is forced to live on the street. The barbarians hide while their huts are destroyed. They reappear in other places, being cheated when they try to trade with fish. Policeman Mandel wants the magistrate to work. When he responds that he is still awaiting his trial, he learns that there are no records of him. The magistrate is at odds with Mandel, who seems to be unaffected by his torture of other people. When he asks Mandel how he can eat and get on with life after tormenting people, he hits him in the chest. The magistrate survives because of some few remaining friends that feed him. Otherwise he lives from meal to meal he obtains anywhere he can, including the women he used to know.

The rumors spread that the expedition has been wiped out or sent to defend the country. Some settlers leave, abandoning everything behind. The soldiers control the town, being regarded as the only protection against the barbarians. Winter makes surviving tougher. The barbarians hide in the mountains and wait for the soldiers to go away.

The magistrate is mindful of the Empire's power to condone ravaging of cities, allowing for rape, destruction, and death. Its power is also derived from victory when pain is inflicted on the tracked down enemy.

At nights he is still haunted by the memory of his lost love, dreaming of kissing the girl. He has misgivings about her regretting his failure to understand her.

He wants to leave the settlement, gets through the gate, and reaches the lakeside. He notices the soldiers with a dog searching the empty huts that belong to the fishermen living nearby and then destroying them. As one soldier tries to lift the roof of one of the huts, the magistrate tries to explain to them that people who live there hide from the barbarians in the reed. The soldiers continue destroying the huts despite his attempts to stop them. Even when one of is injured other soldiers only laugh.

He thinks that law creates opportunities for both justice and injustice as his previously conducted cases indicate, such as when convicting a man for running away to join his family. He is doubtful about his ability to instill justice when exercising his judicial duties. He feels responsible for enforcing such laws, although prefers to bear the burden himself rather than leaving it to someone more ruthless.

Two barbarian men on horses arrive bringing a dead man on a horse, attached to a wooden framework in his saddle. The view creates panic in town. Further fear is



inspired when the rumors spread about some barbarians camping a few miles away from town. People barricade the gates themselves as the army seems to have perished. The fishermen also fear for their lives. Mandel announces a partial withdrawal of the army although some forces are to stay behind. A new offensive will be undertaken in spring. During his speech some of his men return with stolen goods, including hens and cocks that are immediately placed into the oven. Helpless bystanders watch the outcomes of looting without protest.

The soldiers depart with Mandel taking carts, sheep, women, and children. He watches soldiers raping mothers in front of their children. Some families leave through the gates that are left open.

The magistrate visits his previously rented apartment. His artifacts, clothes are missing, but the stuffy smell remains. He lies down in his bed worried that he may sense the presence of the previous tenant there, but then he falls asleep. If any barbarian attack was to occur now he would be unable to defend himself.

It turns out that the army has been defeated when led by the barbarians into a desert. Despite this defeat many were unable to accept that men with bows, who don't know how to read or write managed to claim the victory over those more educated. He wishes for a second chance to repair the damage made if time could be reversed.

## Chapter 5 Analysis

The army is unable to protect the town, as it is fighting the war with the barbarians in the desert. No one knows that the army has already been annihilated not by the barbarians themselves but by their tactics. They simply led the army into the desert and disappeared. The army starved to death or froze to death. The soldiers find it difficult to comprehend that people without education, using bows as weapons were able to defeat them.

The rest of the soldiers are looting the town taking as much as they can. Mandel, in charge of the army in the absence of Colonel Joll, has lost control. Those who are to enforce the law become criminals themselves, as soldiers ultimately loot the entire town. They feel no responsibility for leaving the town exposed to the enemy that was fought against so hard.

The law that was to uphold the values of society has turned it into a victim, unable to provide justice. The law failed through those who were to enforce it. The power of the law that was to be greater than individuals encouraged injustice. The magistrate himself has difficulties in dealing with it, as he is ashamed of the injustice caused. The law as a product of the Empire unveils powerlessness because the Empire is only concerned with the survival of its own power. It pursues its enemies in deserts through people such as Colonel Joll, who never hesitate about murder or torture in the name of his sovereign. Crime justified leads to further crime, creating enemies. It is evident that those who were to win the barbarians have become the barbarians themselves,

victimizing then its own people to perpetuate crime. The barbarians don't need to attack the town because it is on a course towards its own self-destruction.





# Chapter 6

## Chapter 6 Summary

People in town as well as the fishermen nearby live in fear of barbarian attacks. The magistrate advises everybody to grow root vegetables that can survive winter while new wells are being built. Children gather shallows that are smoked and packed. Helmets placed alongside the rampart simulate the presence of soldiers. Children, who pass by every now and then move them as if the soldiers also moved. With three men guarding the town, the magistrate assumes the leadership in town along with legal administration. No one wants to gather wood after the fishermen claim to have seen the barbarians nearby.

Colonel Joll arrives in a carriage with several men to get food and horses. They only find empty stables. The magistrate is unable to maintain his calm seeing Joll, who only stares at him. Joll leaves as people throw stones at his carriage. The magistrate learns that no one knows what happened to the soldiers who were unable to stay together. The barbarians lured the army into the desert cutting the horses loose on the way, and vanished leaving the soldiers freezing in the mountains and starving in the desert.

Men who dig wells find children's bones behind the barracks in a place that appears to be a grave. More bones on top of each other are also found buried nearby. The magistrate recovers, finding himself interested in sex again. Despite his attempts to combat erection by using milkroot, as advised by the only herbalist in town who avoided burglary, his sexual tension remains. After following his advice he soon finds himself looking for a girl he previously visited, Mai. She is helping her mother while taking care of her babies. As they spend a couple of nights together they recall the girl who stayed in his house. Mai tells him that the girl never knew what he expected of her and was never able to understand him. Unhappy with the relationship between them she often cried. He decides that it is best not to dwell on the past as he is not going to see her unless she would come along with the barbarians. Mai expresses concern about living in fear for her and her child's life. In the end the magistrate thinks that visiting Mai was a mistake, deciding to sleep alone from now on. He misses her only for a while.

He resumes his previous hobbies, such as collecting stones or decipherment of ancient writing on poplar slips. If he were to write a record of the imperial post it would involve living through seasons and nature rather than a recollection of events. He is ashamed of the impact that the Empire had on the barbarian population and the land he considers to be a paradise on earth. Only when the barbarians realize they are unable to live without the skills of white men, perhaps then they can be won. In the meantime he intends to go on living, even though his journey may be pointless.



## Chapter 6 Analysis

The news about the army that vanished as the result of barbarian tactics has spread. Those that remain in town try to protect themselves from the barbarians. The Magistrate is in charge of administration of town again, discovering mass graves of children. He renews his old friendships and sexual partners, who are all affected by the situation the town faces without defense against the barbarians. Although it is pointless to worry about something that may or may not come, there is concern about the future of children. In this way, the remaining inhabitants, such as women and children have become victims rather than invaders, living in fear of what is to become of such population.

His desire to live in a place he considered to a paradise is mixed with feelings of responsibility for the deaths of the barbarians. They were forced to be endure everything that the Empire imposed on its subjects. All efforts to civilize and win them failed. The one last device to make them part of white civilization is if they are made to enjoy its skills and inventions.

# Characters

## Magistrate

The magistrate is a civil servant and the narrator of the events that occurred during the time when he was in charge of administration of a frontier, colonial town. He represents law while also trying to provide an account of what happened during his administration. He finds himself unable to relate everything that he experienced in a place he considers to be a paradise on earth. His experiences are part of coming to terms with his aging and sexuality. When the two cultures clash he feels more comfortable to stand on the opposite side of white civilization that can lead to depravity and mindless torture. He feels shame for those who persecute indigenous people because they consider them enemies although they create such enemies through the politics of the Empire. As he states, we are all subject to law that is greater than us. Ironically, he falls victim to the system of justice that fails to deliver him the right to a trial. He experiences a mock execution and lawlessness. He becomes the very victim of the legal system, turning into a beast and machine. He is reduced in his humanity and limited to basic wants, such as becoming fat.

He analyzes his understanding of law and justice. He feels the burden of injustice that the legal system imposes, trying to repair some of the damages. Once he accidentally becomes the enemy himself he feels liberated from the responsibility towards the system. As part of his responsibility for the corruption of the system he tries to care for a barbarian girl but instead he perpetuates the torture. He tries to understand her to be able to have a relationship with her, but fails. Without this understanding he is unable to form the bond. Even rituals he acknowledges and adheres to fail to create such bond, as his daily ritual of washing her does little to create intimacy or repair. He adheres to rituals though due to their meaning of protection. Even though he can be indecisive he firmly stands for what he believes to the extent that Colonel Joll calls him "One Just Man."

He adopts a perception that the world moves through seasons and cycles rather than through beginnings and ends. Losing direction after being subjected to prison and poverty forces him to begin his life again.

## Colonel Joll

Colonel Joll is in charge of the army while being part of the Third Bureau, an intelligence agency. He is an expert in extracting evidence under torture. This knowledge is based on using pressure that indicates a certain tone of voice that has certain quality when telling the truth. Such knowledge can only be acquired through experience. He is ruthless and determined to do anything to fulfill his mission. Like others, he can equally engage in crime and serve Empire.



He has a pragmatic approach to time and history, that has to have some significant events to tell making societies subjects of history. If importance is missing there will be no tale to tell. His dark sunglasses that he is always wearing represent gazing. He is always watching. He is also cynical about virtues, calling the Magistrate 'One Just Man' as being the only man who would rebel. He is unable to stem away from the linear time of history. He denies the magistrate the right to be neither martyr nor historian as the magistrate neither dies or goes to trial. He dismisses his standing, reducing him to a creature interested only in the most basic necessities of life. He is concerned about his appearance and comfort, displaying lack of concern about his surroundings. His superficiality renders him mindless and unable to understand the barbarians, who have to be annihilated if that is what the Empire needs.

He is a proud man, who questions nothing, assuming and reinforcing the superiority of the Empire because it allows him superiority while engaging freely in torture.

## Girl

An unnamed barbarian girl, who has been tortured and partially blinded during the investigation led by Colonel Jo, is forced to beg on the street. She has only a limited description as having a fringe and olive skin. Due to her different background and heritage she represents different values. She is unable to understand the magistrate and his intentions. He views the way she relates to the world as concerned with facts rather than nuances. Her reasoning befuddles him, while she mystifies him. Her torture changes her making her suspicious and dependent on other people. She has a different approach to life, where she simply avoids things she doesn't like. When she becomes subjected to the magistrate's whims and changing behavior, she becomes at first passive because of her experiences. She detects his indecisiveness, as he is baffled about his attraction towards her. Her terror is in her inability to be independent while forced to accept the unknown. She represents the indigenous population that is largely unknown and hence arises curiosity. The magistrate is compelled to decipher her, questioning her about the way she was injured. She reveals these painful details gradually. She doesn't question him about his motives, only complaining about his treatment of her. As she is represented from the point of view of the narrator, who is the magistrate, only her outer characteristics are shown, such as her behavior, the color of her hair, the color of her skin, and her scars. These features are what attracts and fascinates the magistrate about her. As he is unable to understand her, he doesn't delve into her any deeper than beyond his pity for her. Her description is limited as is his perception of her. He formulates explanation that she is in a certain way incomplete after being tortured.

## Mandel

Mandel is a policeman in charge of the army during the absence of Colonel Joll. He also performs the duties of the guards. He has blue eyes and is more interested in taking



care of his uniform than people. When unable to exert control over the army he prefers to remain popular among his soldiers rather than do what is right.

He derives pleasure when humiliating those unable to defend themselves, torturing prisoners when exercising them. He hits them with a cane when they slow down during running. While getting the magistrate to run in the sun naked he also tortures him, hitting him if he slows down. He also gets the magistrate to skip through the rope until he is exhausted and can be punished. Another way to deliver misery to those imprisoned is keeping them dirty. Mandel enjoys torture with creativity, hanging the magistrate by his hands tied at the back. He is proud of his previous ability to poke his finger through a pumpkin.

He is serious about everything he does. If someone attempts to mock him he becomes furious. He also likes to engage torture to extract confessions even if there is no substantial evidence of any crime committed. He displays propensity to ridicule people by humiliating them in public.

## **Girl 2**

An unnamed local girl has become the magistrate's casual girlfriend. He has been seeing her twice a week for a year, but especially during the interrogations conducted by Colonel Joll near the magistrate's apartment. She often ends up sleeping on the floor, as the magistrate pushes her out of bed when having nightmares. He feels some affection for her, and even considered asking her to move in with him.

## **Mai**

Mai was the magistrate's lover before she married the second time. She has four children, although one of them died. Her current husband is a soldier who vanished along with the army. She used to be the magistrate's maid as well, and worked with the girl, who was tortured, and became his lover. Her oldest son was bringing the magistrate meals when he was in prison. She lives in fear of what is going to happen to the settlers and their children, taking it day by day.

## **Boy - grandson**

The boy is caught with his mother and her brother on the way to see a doctor and imprisoned. He has a puffy and bruised face with one eye swollen. During the interrogation his belly and groins are stabbed, leaving scabs, cuts, and bruises. He confesses to stealing sheep and horses, admitting also that his people are arming. Joll takes him with the army to show where his people live.



## Grandfather

The boy's grandfather has been caught near the town following a stock raid. He is interrogated and accused of stealing, but admits he knows nothing about it. He was taken to prison on his way to see a doctor along with his sister and her son suffering from a sore. He is killed during the interrogation for the apparent attack on one of the interrogation officers. The magistrate finds that he has broken teeth, crushed lips, and one eye missing.

## Warrant Officer

Warrant Officer is a man from the Third Bureau of the Civil Guard, who came to examine the magistrate's papers in his absence while the magistrate was in the mountains. He has blue eyes and regular white teeth. He accuses the magistrate of having dealings with the barbarians. He makes an impression of someone who has a few years experience of torturing people.

## Soldiers

Two soldiers travel with the magistrate to the mountains to take his girlfriend to her people. They struggle with difficult weather conditions, picking faint tracks, although they don't grumble, cook, and otherwise obey the magistrate. At first they are shy of the girl, but then they become friendly, displaying brotherly rivalry that turns into irritability when she is gone. One of the soldiers fails to obey the magistrate on their way back, neglecting to take care of his feet. As one foot gets inflamed, he has to ride most of his way back on his horse.



## Objects/Places

### The Empire

The Empire represent power that doesn't require that those who serve it love others but merely perform duties.

### Barbarian Tribes

According to rumors barbarian tribes have been arming and the Empire would have to employ measures to prevent war.

### Square

The square can be seen from the Magistrate's window. He can see prisoners arriving from there.

### Third Bureau

The Third Bureau is described as an unsleeping guardian of the Empire, being an investigative agency.

### The Inn

Colonel Joll stays at the inn, as it is the most comfortable place in town. When he sleeps there the staff has to tiptoe.

### The Lake

Birds that fly from the south circle around the lake near the marshes.

### Terminal lagoon

The expedition stumbles on the bed of an ancient terminal lagoon.

### Poplarwood

The abundance of poplarwood appears near the fire camp.

## **Foothils**

The Magistrate with soldiers reach the foothills near the bed of dry stream.

## **The Oasis**

The oasis is the town left by the Magistrate to deliver the girl to her family.





# Themes

## Terror of colonial paranoia

Unnamed victims, unknown enemies represent fearing the indigenous population that threatens security. Violence exerted upon the barbarians is always justified. It is what is unknown that is most frightening. The settlers are distressed experiencing nightmares about the barbarians, who come to rob, destroy, and rape. Initially devised as an attack on the South African Apartheid an unnamed place where characters have no names creates a sense of universalism, where civilization is created and motivated by fear. Its main purpose of defending the Empire is to create constant trauma when being exposed to the unknown, such as the barbarians, while being deprived of the ability to understand them.

The terror of fear imposes limitations on the lives of the settlers, reducing them to basic survival. People are too busy to assure their own safety, unable to engage in what would make them more human. Their fear of the barbarian attack paralyzes their lives, inducing nightmares, and creating unconfirmed stories of rape and danger. The barbarians are never found and they never come, but their imminent danger paralyzes the local minds.

Such terror eventually leads to the paranoia of oppression. Everybody becomes oppressed both the local population and the barbarians. The inability to deal with these fears leads to mistakes in judgment, and the entire army perishes when led into a trap. The situation worsens as terror spreads among the soldiers, who turn into looters, leaving those most vulnerable to themselves. Ultimately, devastation spreads until those, who are responsible for this flee.

## Justice

The magistrate considers justice and law as being above everybody else. His knowledge of justice is far from being superficial. It is easy to explain what justice is about although it is also easy for everybody else to assume that they know law and the way it enforces justice. During the time spent in the remote frontier town changes his perception on justice that becomes a way of exerting dominance. There is no need to be fair and just with a barbarian. These people can be tortured and killed without a trial. At first, bearing a false notion of justice is easier for the magistrate than saying no. He finally feels free when he is imprisoned, where he no longer has to bear the shame of witnessing the suffer of people and being unable to do anything about it. When he utters protest he is called to be the only just man. His stance is ridiculed; his persona belittled. To turn against the Empire equals deprivation from his humanity, turning into a machine and a beast only concerned about survival. Justice enforced by the Empire provides no protection to anyone as no one in the end is safe. Even the army turns into criminals engaging in looting those they are to protect. Justice lead to dehumanization and torture



of its own people, who can be falsely imprisoned without trial. The only justice that is left in the end is nature, its seasons, and cycles with lives depended on the earth and stars.

## Violence

Violence pervades throughout the book. Violence is used to deal with the barbarians. Their invasion is understood as a means of combat and retaliation. The barbarians have been invaded, hence they must retaliate. There is no alternative perception that the barbarians may want a different revenge and may not be interested in violence per se. For Colonel Joll, violence is a means to truth. Violence ultimately becomes truth.

Violence unravels fear that is present through the lack of understanding. It allows for ignorance and perpetual persecution so that the Empire may spread. Such violence unfolds certain blindness, where the inability to see spreads among people. In this way they are more susceptible to dictation. Violent campaigns instill fear while forcing the settlers to depend on protection. Ultimately it inspires rebellion.

The torture of the boy, his mother and his grandfather inspires questioning of this punishment. Violent interference in the lives of the barbarians leads to questions about justice and who is responsible for violence. The oppressor and the oppressed become engaged in violence against each other turning those around into participants.

The recognition of the connection between ignorance and violence unfolds when the local fishermen are captured and accused of being part of the rebellion. The magistrate is conditioned to obey, and is unable to confront injustice until he can know himself. Only when knowing himself he is able to judge and question violence.

When openly protesting against violence exerted on the barbarians, who are wired through their cheeks and bones, the magistrate begins to understand that everyone who witnesses or allows violence becomes responsible for it. In this way, he attains self-realization. Such violence becomes exposed as a fear producing instrument to control people in accordance with the politics of the Empire.



# Style

## Point of View

John Michael Coetzee is one of the most acclaimed South African authors, who won the Booker Prize as well as the Nobel Prize. He worked at first as a computer programmer after moving to South Africa from England. He studied linguistics at the University of Texas, and now teaches literature at the University of Cape in South Africa. Various perspectives used in this book involve also theoretical aspects with references to the post-colonial literary theory. Coetzee changes his tone depending on the mood, action, and situation of the story.

The narration is constructed in the present tense without names of places, people, and time. These constraints provide context that allows for universalism. The story is told from the point of view of the narrator. The style used is deliberate, deep, and bare. It is deprived of details in some parts while using a great many details in other parts. The main character is isolated from the rest of the world, and hence he speaks in a way that involves analysis and reflection. The main narrative voice is thoughtful yet deliberate. Both images of what occurred as well feelings experienced are analyzed. The changing mood of the story, where a quiet life is intertwined with the horror of war intensify with anger mixed with empathy. The clarity of the tone reverberates throughout, engaging with its tone of raw simplicity, being at other times full of nuances.

The balanced yet reflective perspective is pervaded by questioning motives and events. Within the world of the magistrate, Colonel Joll, and the girl we can experience permanence, sentiment, and the simplicity of nature.

## Setting

The setting is an unnamed colonial frontier town. The colony belongs to an unnamed Empire that can be any empire in the world, except for the new invention, the sunglasses worn by Colonel Joll, that indicates the time of the story. Such setting reminds various places but most likely refers to South Africa.

The town inhabited by the settlers is in constant fear of the barbarians, who threaten the town and the Empire although in reality they are peaceful. As there are no descriptive terms that would place these events at certain time and place, the setting becomes somewhat fantastic. The place is guarded by gates and walls, while the soldiers are to defend the town from the enemy. With no reference to the place or its surrounding, its outside borders and what is behind also become unrealistic. The setting is a post removed from reality with its attackers being also not so realistic especially that they never come.

The setting represents the conflict of two cultures that represent different values and different approaches to life. It is enmeshed in the psychology of the locals as well as



individuals. As we have little knowledge of the town itself that is surrounded by deserts it becomes less important. We are immediately immersed in the action that involves the interaction between the magistrate and Colonel Joll seen through the perspective of the magistrate, who is critical of Joll's superficiality, concerned about his appearance and comfort. This somewhat illusory place and surrounding correspond to equally illusory context, as we have no knowledge of the factors that caused the arrival of Colonel Joll, who also doesn't want to reveal them.

## Language and Meaning

Through figurative language Coetze achieves simplicity and effectiveness. The clarity of expression delivers the nuances of the story of simple life pervaded by the cruelty imposed through the invasion and persecution of indigenous people. Language employs no names or descriptions of places, tribes, or people involved. There are only few names, such as Colonel Joll, Mandel, and Mai used. The main character is described as the magistrate. Such language describes the events that occurred in a way that may pertain to various civilizations and various empires. The only indication of time are Colonel Joll's sunglasses that the magistrate has never seen before, hence, it is a new invention. Lack of names is avoided on purpose, as naming can be misleading. Those who are called barbarians seem to be less barbaric than those who call them so. Calling the barbarians enemies is a false accusation and injustice to those who turn out to be peaceful, engaging in fishing or hunting, but far from exerting the destructive influence of mindless killing of animals practiced by those who call themselves civilized.

Figurative language expresses meanings through connotations. A dead parrot that the Magistrate holds that has empty eyes represents the people of the town. Parrots repeat words. People in town are perceived also as perpetuating what occurred. Empty eyes signify the inability to distinguish bad from good. In the same way, Colonel Joll's dark sunglasses may represent the way he perceives the world. When the girl became partially blind she has also lost her ability to recognize wrong and became incomplete. The murkiness of the water represents lack of life in the empire deprived of stability and humanity.

The barbarians are not described because no one fully knows them, and it is for that reason that fear can be instigated; as the magistrate admits himself we fear most what we fail to know.

The choice of words employs clarity and straight representation, horror, allusiveness, and familiarity to express meaning.

Meaning is also conveyed through description that is incomplete, hence leaves a certain amount of mystery for interpretation. Ultimately meaning relates also to one's life as part of one's regime, where one questions what is in it that is in the end worth while living.

## Structure

The book is divided into six chapters containing separate episodes in the life of the magistrate in a remote frontier town. The first chapter is devoted to the arrival of Colonel Joll and his inspection of the town in anticipation of the imminent war with the barbarians. The second chapter describes the magistrate getting involved with a barbarian girl. In the third chapter the magistrate takes her back to her own people. The fourth chapter, being also the longest chapter, is devoted to the torture of the magistrate and his suffering after being accused of treason. Finally released, in the fifth chapter, the magistrate is deprived of everything, leading the life of a beggar. The army is defeated by the barbarians and withdraws from the town looting everything on the way. The sixth chapter describes the magistrate, who is allowed to regain his old position after all authorities leave the town, and who comes to terms with his experiences. Each chapter involves a change, similar to seasons and cycles, where certain transformations occur. From the safety of peaceful existence through love and torture we are brought back again to a quiet life, as if the magistrate was starting everything from the beginning, only with lessons learned.

Apart from the division into separate phases and episodes in the life of the magistrate, there is a structure throughout the story involving the manner of living in the colonial post. The routines also impose certain structure, as if everybody was in suspension, and everybody was waiting.



## Quotes

"The new men of Empire are the ones who believe in fresh starts, new chapters, clean pages; I struggle on with the old story, hoping that before it is finished it will reveal to me why it was that I thought it worth the trouble." p.24

"Where civilization entailed the corruption of barbarian virtues and the creation of a dependent people, I was opposed to civilization..." p. 41

"Will we live to regret this blood spent so lavishly on the sand?" p. 67

"Truly the world should belong to singers and dancers." p. 68

"Futile bitterness, idle melancholy, empty regrets." p. 68

"How can I accept that disaster has overtaken my life when the world continues to move so tranquilly through its cycles?" p. 102

"Truly, man was not made to live alone!" p. 87

"Somewhere, always, a child is being beaten." p. 88

"Empire has located its existence not in the smooth recurrent spinning time of the cycle of the seasons but in the jagged time of rise and fall, of beginning and end, of catastrophe." p. 146

"Empire dooms itself to live in history and plot against history." p. 146

"We are all subject to the law, which is greater than any of us." p. 152

"We all think we know." p. 152

"When some men suffer unjustly' I said to myself, 'it is the fate of those who witness their suffering to suffer the shame of it.'" p. 152

"I never wished it for the barbarians that they should have the history of Empire laid upon them." p. 169

## Topics for Discussion

How does the magistrate perceives the Empire?

What is the meaning of law and justice in the eyes of the magistrate?

When does the magistrate change his perception on law and justice?

Why does the Empire fail to institute justice?

What are the motives behind caring about the barbarian girl?

What is the purpose of failing to name most of the characters in the book?

What external and internal struggles does the magistrate experience?