

Waiting For the Barbarians: Chapter 3

"I am taking you back to your people, or as near as I can..."

Frustrated by his failed attempts to understand the barbarian girl, the magistrate decides to return the girl to her family and people. He organises a small party of men and ventures into the desert wilderness. The journey is hard and the group suffer from the winter weather and the harsh environment. Nevertheless, after many days of travel, they encounter an indigenous group and the girl decides to leave with them. The return journey is not much better and even when the magistrate finally gets home, he discovers a regiment of men under the command of the Third Bureau have arrived at the fort. His office has been requisitioned and he is summarily arrested under suspicion of collusion with the enemy.

What the magistrate thought was only going to be a short trip had become a hardening experience. Not only did he face deadly storms and desert mirages, but he also realised the gap that exists between himself and the common men of the town. More importantly, he also realised the missed opportunities of the past few weeks and months. He laments that he did not spend time learning the indigenous language from the girl and, now she has had sex with him, he thinks that his life might have been satisfying after all. But it is too late to reverse the damage the girl has already experienced. She has no wish to stay with him in the settlement with the people who killed her grandfather, tortured her and turned her into a beggar.

Knowledge Check

Try to answer these questions from memory:

1. Who is the magistrate supposed to inform about his journey into the desert?

- (a) His soldiers.
- (b) The barbarian girl.
- (c) The bureau.
- (d) His family.

2. What else does the magistrate hope to achieve by the journey into the desert?

- (a) Improve relationships with the local people.
- (b) Scout out the surrounding landscape.
- (c) Have a short holiday from his duties.
- (d) Gather information about barbarian movements.

3. How many men accompany the magistrate and the girl on the journey?

- (a) Two.
- (b) Three.
- (c) Four.
- (d) Ten.

4. The group begin by travelling towards the...

- (a) Caves.
- (b) Desert.
- (c) Plains.
- (d) Mountain.

5. Which of the following do the group not carry with them?

- (a) Firewood.
- (b) Salted meat.
- (c) Dried fruit.
- (d) Water.

6. What do the men think is associated with bad luck?

- (a) The girl's blindness.
- (b) Omens in the weather.
- (c) Menstruation.
- (d) The loss of a tent.

7. After how many days do they encounter the nomads?

- (a) Seven.
- (b) Eight.
- (c) Nine.
- (d) Ten.

8. What does one of the nomads take from the magistrate?

- (a) A bar of silver.
- (b) A bar of gold.
- (c) His horse.
- (d) A trinket.

Understanding and Interpretation

Skim and scan to find the necessary information to answer these questions, which require more thought:

1. The magistrate is often seen writing letters or documents (although sometimes he does not send them or doesn't know what to write). Find an example in this chapter. What is the significance of the magistrate's association with letters?
2. Examine the relationship between the magistrate and the ordinary soldiers under his command. How would you describe this relationship? Do you think the narrator is completely aware of how he is viewed by other people in the settlement?
3. How does the barbarian girl's character change and develop over the course of this chapter?
4. How does the relationship between the barbarian girl and the magistrate develop over the course of this chapter?
5. What is notable about the encounter with the barbarians in the desert? How are they described? How does the group interact with them? Is the interaction successful?
6. How does chapter 3 end? Would you call the journey into the desert a success? Why / why not?

Discussion Point: menstruation and superstition

During chapter 3 the barbarian girl gets her period and begins to menstruate. The group feels they need to do a purification ceremony in order to get rid of the bad luck associated with a woman menstruating.

What do you think of the men in the group concerning this purification ceremony? Do you believe in good and bad luck? Would you be more likely to fall prey to superstition on a dangerous journey like the one they are on? What does this superstition tell you about equality between men and women?

(While being superstitious about menstruation might seem anachronistic, you might like to research this further. Menstruation taboos have not disappeared in today's world and the consequences can be severe for women and girls in societies where menstruation is still seen as a sign of bad luck.)

Novel Study: *symbolic journeys*

Almost as soon as the group set out on their journey, hardships begin to take their toll on the men of the empire. The journey becomes rough and the magistrate is made to feel his age. The wind is constant and the gusts filled with sand bite abrasively. By the fourth day of the journey the men have entered a desolate, frozen landscape. Horses and men fall through the ice and a horse has to be killed.



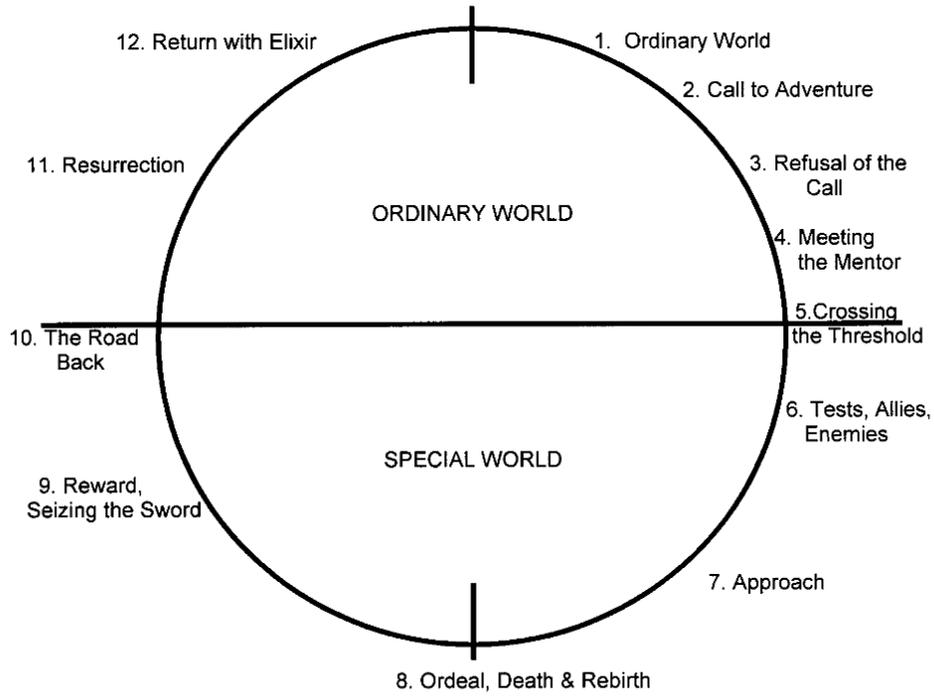
While South Africa, the home country of writer J.M.Coetzee, may not easily associate with snow and ice, snowfall is not as rare as you might think, as you can see from this image.

The reader would be entitled to question the magistrate's judgment in setting out on this journey during winter; why not wait a few weeks until spring has properly started? However, the journey is not just a physical journey, but a symbolic journey as well. Journeys are a common type of literary motif in which a character journeys from the **ordinary world** to a **special world**. While the ordinary world may provide safety and comfort, the knowledge and experience a character needs can only

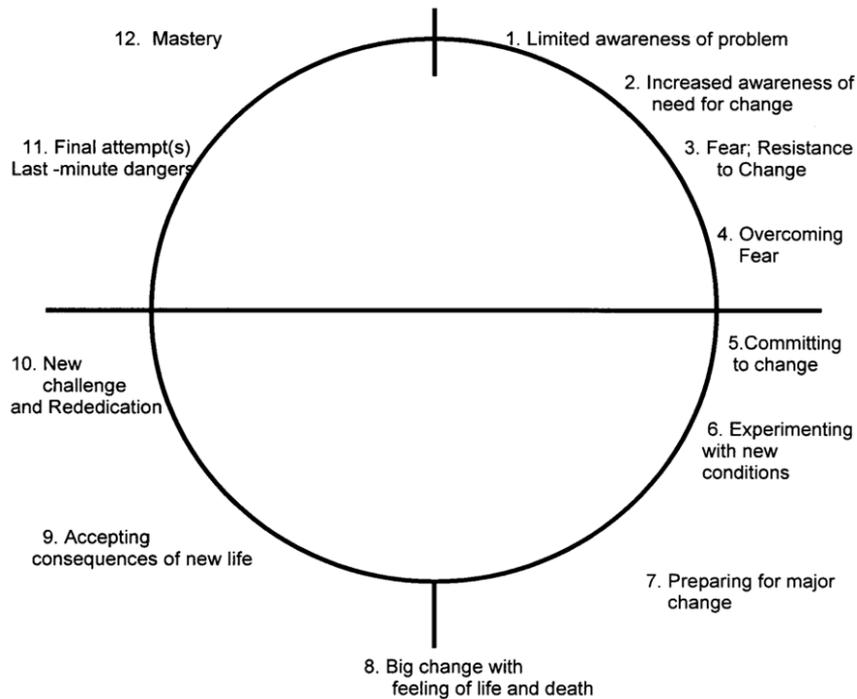
be found in the 'special' world. In this novel, there is a marked difference between the fort settlement governed by the rules of the empire, and the desert landscape which is ruled entirely by the seasons. Additionally, the magistrate has spent the last days and weeks searching in vain for something in the body and scars of the barbarian girl. His journey into the desert **symbolizes** the next stage of this search. Perhaps the magistrate is purposefully putting himself into this dangerous environment as a way of getting away from Joll and getting closer to the barbarian girl.

These two diagrams, representing Joseph Campbell's theory of the *Hero's Journey* (also known as the *monomyth*) demonstrate how the physical journey of character through a novel is also a symbolic or 'inner' journey of discovery:

THE HERO'S JOURNEY



THE HERO'S INNER JOURNEY



Activity

Draw a map of the fort settlement and the surrounding desert into which the magistrate journeys. Include places of interest and sites of importance on your map. Annotate your map with notes and quotations demonstrating the physical and symbolic importance of the magistrate's journey. (You might like to incorporate elements of Joseph Campbell's 'hero's journey' and 'hero's inner journey' onto your map.)

Quotation Bank

If you only remember three lines, remember these...

<p><i>Is it she I want, or the traces of a history her body bears? (p70)</i></p>	<p>The magistrate remains confused about his sexual desire for the barbarian girl. In this chapter, they finally have sex, but even this consummation does not resolve the magistrate's doubts. The phrase 'traces of history' refers to the scars on her body, but this metaphorical description suggests he sees her like the items he excavates from the ruins outside the town; she is a puzzle to be solved rather than a person he might like to know.</p>
<p><i>The arrival of the waterfowl confirms the earlier signs... spring is on its way. (p62)</i></p>	<p>Chapter 3 opens with a passage of description which reveals the magistrate's understanding of the surrounding landscape. He is attuned to the natural rhythms of the world around him and can see the 'signs' in the natural world that refer to the seasons, wild animals, farming, hunting and harvesting. In this way, the magistrate contrasts with all the other empire characters, such as Colonel Joll, who has no knowledge of the area and no understanding of or respect for nature.</p>
<p><i>Are they reflections of us, is this a trick of the light? (p74)</i></p>	
<p><i>Based on your own reading of Chapter 3 and / or your classroom discussion, add one more memorable line to this table, and provide another analysis comment:</i></p>	