

Waiting For the Barbarians: Chapters 5 and 6

“But we live in a world of laws... There is nothing we can do about that... All we can do is uphold the laws without allowing the memory of justice to fade...”

The town becomes more anxious about the upcoming barbarian attack; the army who people thought might protect the town have yet to return from their campaign. Little do the townspeople know that the army has been defeated – not by the barbarians but by their own tactics. The nomads simply led the army into the desert where they starved or froze to death. The remaining soldiers and citizens find it hard to believe that such primitive people, armed only with bows, could defeat the educated officers of the empire. The ripple effect of fear is evident in the town as Mandel – in the absence of Colonel Joll – has lost control of his own soldiers. The men who are supposed to enforce the law instead loot the town. They feel no obligation towards their duties and the town is left exposed and unable to defend itself.

In the absence of any effective leadership, the magistrate resumes his old duties, takes up his old hobbies, and even sparks up a romance with one of his old sexual partners. However, his desire to live out his ‘easy years’ has been spoiled by feelings of responsibility for the torture and deaths of the local people. The brutality of the empire is laid bare in these chapters; he discovers mass graves, witnesses the destruction of innocent fishermen’s huts, and realises the law of the empire is powerless. By the end of the novel, it is evident that those who were supposed to protect civilization from barbarian savages have become barbarian themselves. If there even were any barbarians, they don’t need to attack the town because it is set on a course towards its own self-destruction.

Knowledge Check

Try to answer these questions from memory:

1. How does news of the imminent barbarian invasion spread?

- (a) Pamphlets.
- (b) Letters.
- (c) Proclamations.
- (d) Rumours.

2. Which behaviour spreads among the soldiers in the town?

- (a) Sickness.
- (b) Drunkenness.
- (c) Desertion.
- (d) Gambling.

3. What position was Mandel promoted from?

- (a) General.
- (b) Colonel.
- (c) Captain.
- (d) Policeman.

4. When the magistrate tells Mandel he is awaiting trial, he learns there are no:

- (a) Records.
- (b) Witnesses.
- (c) Lawyers.
- (d) Judges.

5. What slogan is graffitied on the walls of the town?

- (a) No surrender.
- (b) We stay.
- (c) Death to traitors.
- (d) Victory.

6. What does the magistrate advise people to grow so they can survive the next winter?

- (a) Nuts.
- (b) Lettuce.
- (c) Corn.
- (d) Root vegetables.

7. What medicine does the magistrate use to combat his impotence?

- (a) Ashes.
- (b) Ginger.
- (c) Milkroot.
- (d) Herbal tea.

8. What is placed atop the town walls to simulate defending soldiers?

- (a) Swords.
- (b) Flags.
- (c) Shields.
- (d) Helmets.

Understanding and Interpretation

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

1. Describe the way fear and paranoia spread during these chapters:
2. The magistrate questions Mandel about the torture he has inflicted in the novel. What does he ask? What is Mandel's response? Do you believe Mandel was unaffected by the torture he committed?
3. Colonel Joll makes one more appearance towards the end of the novel. What does he do or say? What role does Joll play in your understanding of the functions of the empire?
4. What evidence of the empire's barbarism is seen and uncovered in these two chapters?
5. What does the magistrate learn about the barbarian girl who he came to love? How does this knowledge affect him?
6. What are the magistrate's thoughts about his life and duties at the end of the novel?

Important Theme: *law and justice*

When the novel began, the magistrate believed that law and justice was the empire's ultimate responsibility and a way of bringing civilisation to a savage world. His life as a magistrate involved him for many years in the justice system and, while he sometimes felt '*the uneasy shame*' (p152) of sentencing men who found themselves subject to the laws of the empire, he always believed that he could act as a bulwark against gross injustice. When he thought about resigning he comforted himself with the notion that '*someone else will be appointed to bear the shame of office and nothing will have changed.*' So he continued in his duties, even while he harboured thoughts about the questionable version of justice demanded by the empire's laws.

However, witnessing the brutality of Joll's application of torture changes his perception of justice. He sees how, for people like Joll, there is no need to be fair and just with a 'barbarian.' Such people can be tortured and murdered without trial. At first, turning a blind eye to these injustices was easier for the magistrate than opposing them. But, after his own imprisonment on trumped-up charges, he felt free of the burden of shame and was able to stare cruelty and injustice squarely in the face. He even found the strength to publicly utter protest against Joll and the methods of the Third Bureau, at which point he is called the '*only just man*' and his stance is ridiculed and belittled.

The magistrate learns that justice is not universal. Justice under the empire provides no protection, even to its own servants, and no one is safe from the cruelty of men like Joll. Eventually, the soldiers and defenders of the empire turn into criminals and are free to loot and rape the citizens they are supposed to protect. The law is no protection, as men of power and position can ignore the word of law when it suits them. For example, on page 137 Mandel admits to the magistrate: '*How can you be a prisoner when there are no records of you?*' In chapter 6, Joll and Mandel ignore the raping of an innocent woman that occurs directly in front of them. It is clear that, when the law does not uphold the empire's intentions, or is inconvenient to men like Joll, it can be bypassed, corrupted or ignored.

Activity

Imagine that, after conducting an investigation into the events of the novel, you are a public prosecutor preparing a case against Colonel Joll for crimes and injustices committed during his command of the Third Bureau. Prepare a list of charges that you can bring to bear in your prosecution of Colonel Joll.

If you are able, stage a mock-trial where Colonel Joll is prosecuted for his crimes. Appoint a prosecutor, defence lawyer, judge and prepare witness statements. Members of your class can play different roles.



Novel Study: *perceptions of time*

The magistrate often ruminates on the past. His hobby is excavating the ruins of a lost empire buried outside the settlement walls. He seems to have a concept of time and history that is more developed than other characters in the novel. For example, when he contemplates the history of his settlement, he thinks that it is aligned with the cycle of nature, of the recycling of the seasons. He thinks about the migration of birds, the changing of the seasons and dreams of a society that is uncorrupted by economies and politics. He imagines that every generation has its own ‘*barbarian scare*’ and he sees all of history as fundamentally repetitive. In another example, the magistrate dreams of an intricate snow castle of the kind built by the empire being blown away by the wind. One interpretation of this dream is how transient the structures of empire really are when confronted with the cyclical forces of nature.

The magistrate’s perception of time as cyclical is different from that of other characters, especially Colonel Joll who is only concerned with following whatever cryptic orders he may have received from his superiors. The men under his command also blindly follow orders, engaging unthinkingly in acts of persecution against the barbarians. They are characterised as ‘*new men of Empire*’ (p13) and are concerned with ‘*fresh starts*’ and the goal of expanding the empire from humble beginnings to a glorious future. Therefore, they display a linear perception of time that never contemplates the past and therefore can never learn from the successes and failures of history.

Activity

Skim and scan the entire novel, including chapters 5 and 6. Can you find at least one piece of evidence in each chapter that indicates the magistrate’s broad, historical, or cyclical view of time (as compared to the narrow, linear, present-future view of time expressed by other characters).

Chapter	The Magistrate’s View of Time
1	<i>One evening I lingered among the ruins... I put my ear to the ground... Against my cheek I felt the patter of sand driving from nowhere to nowhere across the wastes... I sat watching the moon rise, opening my senses... what lay beneath my feet was not only sand, the dust of bones, flakes of rust, shards, ash.</i>
2	
3	

4	
5	
6	

Discussion Point: *dreams*

The last line of the novel is: *'This is not the scene I dreamed of. Like much else nowadays I leave it feeling stupid, like a man who lost his way long ago but presses on along a road that may lead nowhere.'* (p170)

Throughout the novel the magistrate has been plagued by strange dreams, such as the dream of the group of children building a castle in the snow. The dreams are recurring and highly symbolic; interpreting dreams can often lead to the interpretation of a subconscious or thematic conflict. In the case of *Waiting for the Barbarians*, this conflict is between the forces of civilisation, law and order the magistrate is supposed to represent and the forces of monstrous savagery he witnesses in the behaviour of the empire's servants and officers. In fact, the magistrate is not immune to feeling monstrous urges himself, especially in chapter 2 when he struggles with his desire to possess the barbarian girl he is meant to be protecting. Perhaps this struggle is played out in his dreams?

Discuss the dreams the magistrate suffers throughout the novel. What elements of these dreams represent the conflict between civilisation and savagery?

Note the ideas from your discussion here:

Quotation Bank

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

What has made it impossible for us to live in time like fish in water, like birds in air, like children? It is the fault of the Empire!

Here, the magistrate clearly distinguishes between two orders of time: the cyclical, natural time of seasons and the linear time of human history. Members of the empire cannot appreciate cyclical time, and therefore order their civilisation in opposition to nature. This can be seen in the attitude of Joll and his soldiers towards the natural world, which they hunt, burn, kill and destroy. The **pattern of three, hypophora** and **exclamation mark** forcefully express his innate opposition to this way of existing.

No one truly believes... that the world of tranquil certainties we were born into is about to be extinguished.

As the novel progresses the magistrate finds it easier to question the assumptions he once held about the empire. What he used to call his 'easy years' in the frontier settlement, he now refers to as 'a world of tranquil certainties'. On the same page he calls the civilised appearance of the empire a 'life-giving illusion.' These phrases increasingly demonstrate his belief that the appearance of civilisation is just a façade to cover up the violence of the empire's colonial expansion.

Three weeks ago a little girl was raped... Her friends claim a barbarian did it... They recognised him as a barbarian by his ugliness.

Based on your own reading of Chapters 5 and 6 and / or your classroom discussion, add two more memorable lines to this table, and provide analysis comments:

