

Waiting For the Barbarians: Chapter 2

"I search for secrets and answers, no matter how bizarre..."

Chapter 2 introduces the character of a young barbarian girl whose father died at the hands of Joll and his interrogators. After her release, the magistrate sees her begging on the streets of the fort settlement. Her feet have been broken and she has been partially blinded by her torture. Out of sympathy, the magistrate takes in the girl, hiring her as a cook and maid. Soon, though, their relationship changes into something more sexual and the magistrate begins to question his own motivations towards the girl. Confused by his own thoughts, the magistrate takes up an affair with a girl he used to visit in the town. Eventually, he realises his feelings about the barbarian girl are mixed up in his knowledge of her torture and mutilation.

Meanwhile, the harsh winter months mean the barbarians stay away from the settlement. Soldiers stationed at the fort become bored and turn to idle pastimes such as drinking. The magistrate contemplates trade between the empire's citizens and the barbarians and becomes angered when he thinks about how the outsiders are cheated and swindled despite the quality of their goods. New conscripts arrive and several men choose to desert; later their frozen corpses are recovered and buried. Over dinner with a newly arrived officer, the magistrate learns that rumours of a barbarian invasion are being taken seriously in the capital and a plan to attack them in the spring is being drawn up.

Knowledge Check

Try to answer these questions from memory:

1. What kind of work does the magistrate offer the blind girl in his household?

- (a) Cooking.
- (b) Cleaning.
- (c) Sewing.
- (d) Dog walking.

2. What does the magistrate do for the girl?

- (a) Nothing.
- (b) Washes and bandages her.
- (c) Gives her new clothes.
- (d) Gives her money.

3. What happens each time the girl refuses to talk about her injuries?

- (a) The girl falls asleep.
- (b) She begins to cry.
- (c) They are interrupted.
- (d) The magistrate falls asleep.

4. How does the girl first react during the bathing ritual?

- (a) Crassly.
- (b) Warmly.
- (c) Distantly.
- (d) Mutely.

5. What little animal symbolises the girl?

- (a) Fox.
- (b) Cat.
- (c) Stoat.
- (d) Hamster.

6. How does the magistrate feel about her torture?

- (a) Guilty.
- (b) Nervous.
- (c) Complacent.
- (d) Angry.

7. What barbarian product is prized by the settlers?

- (a) Porcelain.
- (b) Leather.
- (c) Stonework.
- (d) Candlewax.

8. What is a by-product of trade between the barbarians and the settlers?

- (a) Cultural exchange.
- (b) Wealth.
- (c) Drunkenness.
- (d) Violence.

9. What measures are undertaken in anticipation of barbarian attacks?

- (a) Watchtowers are built.
- (b) Signs are put up.
- (c) Pre-emptive raids.
- (d) No action is taken.

10. How does the magistrate rearrange their relationship at the end of the chapter?

- (a) He gives her a separate room.
- (b) He separates their beds.
- (c) He sends her away.
- (d) He spends more time at work.

Understanding and Interpretation

1. Having installed the barbarian girl as a servant in his household, the magistrate begins a bathing ritual that creates mixed signals between them. In what way does this ritual both bring them together and push them apart?
2. Describe the recurring dream suffered by the magistrate in chapter 2. What symbolic elements do you detect in this dream?
3. The magistrate attempts to learn more about the torture of the prisoners by asking the girl and the guards from the night in question, and later in the chapter more conscripts arrive. What does the attitude of various soldiers throughout this chapter reveal about the empire?
4. Why do you think the magistrate resumes his previous affair with the girl in town? Why does he not pursue sexual relations with the girl he is washing?
5. After reading the first two chapters, what do you think are the magistrate's objections to the ideals of the empire? How committed is he?

Important Theme: *colonialism vs indigeneity*

While the setting of the novel is an unspecified geographical place, Coetzee's novel was written and first printed during the apartheid era in South Africa. It depicts an allegorical empire with an imagined enemy living just within and on the fringes of its borders; the historical allusion to South Africa is unmistakable. The magistrate occupies a unique position in the story; he is a member of the empire, but he is willing to criticize and challenge the empire when he sees racism at work. He thinks about how the imperial settlers used to cheat and swindle the nomadic traders, plying them with alcohol and paying them with worthless 'trinkets,' conning the traders, then blaming them for the impact it had on their lives. From his point of view, the outcome of the interaction between nomads and settlers was not the creation of racism, but the confirmation of a prejudice the settlers already had fixed in their minds about the barbarians. Furthermore, the magistrate is moved by compassion to oppose the empire – a decision which will bring considerable risk to himself. On page 41 he says, "*where civilization entailed the corruption of barbarian virtues and the creation of a dependent people, I decided, I was opposed to civilization.*"

Nevertheless, through the magistrate's interaction with the blind girl, we see the forces of **colonialism** at work. As a representative of the barbarian people, the girl is in the magistrate's power. Her body can be seen as a **metaphor** for the conquered lands of the nomads. When the magistrate strips her naked, despite the gentleness of his actions, he is still exercising power over her. His fingers explore her body as if she was an unknown landscape. Her numerous injuries resemble the damage made to a conquered land. He treats her like a puzzle to be solved or a nut to crack and is frustrated by her refusal to give him the answers he desires. In a sense, he is the colonial power trying to dominate an indigenous people.

Activity

Create a chart in which you can collect details from the relationship between the magistrate and the blind girl. Include the following quotations from chapter 2 as a starting point, and search for more details and clues. The quotations in your chart should reveal the symbolism of the magistrate as a *colonizer* and the girl as a representative of a *colonized* people:

Magistrate (colonizer)	Barbarian Girl (indigenous)
<i>The distance between myself and her torturers, I realise, is negligible (p29)</i>	<i>She has the straight black eyebrows, glossy black hair of the barbarians (p27)</i>

Discussion Point: *where does responsibility lie?*

At the beginning of chapter 2, the magistrate seems to take pity on the blind girl and brings her into his home, giving her cleaning work and providing sanctuary. However, their relationship soon develops into a pseudo-sexual relationship and there is clearly an uncomfortable distance between them that cannot be bridged.

However, washing the girl allows the magistrate to reflect on his role in the 'torture' when he notices that his questions are also a type of 'interrogation'. As an extension of the empire, the magistrate shares some guilt for her capture and destruction of her way of life. Alleviating his own guilt is certainly one of the reasons he brought her in and provides for her. He seems to understand that his own inaction over the raiding and torture of indigenous communities is as inhumane as the actions themselves.

What do you think about this idea? Is the magistrate powerless to do anything to stop the brutality of Colonel Joll and those like him? Do his objections count for anything? Does he have a moral responsibility to act on his conscience? Where does fault, blame, and responsibility lie?

Novel Study: *motifs of blindness and sight*

In *Waiting for the Barbarians*, blind characters see; sighted characters are blind. The novel opened with an extended description of Colonel Joll's sunglasses, which come to **symbolise** his unwillingness to see the reality of the empire's corruption and the harmlessness of the nomadic people. More, although he claims to be seeking the truth, his method of torture almost guarantees that he will hear only lies, as his victims will say anything to escape the pain of interrogation. Often, they simply confirm his own prejudices by repeating back to him what they think he wants to hear. In the case of Colonel Joll, his sunglasses are an **ironic symbol** of his blindness.

In the case of the barbarian girl, the opposite is true. While she was partially blinded by Joll's torture tactics, her lack of physical sight does not inhibit her ability to see. On page 27 she says, "*I can see*" and on page 31 she repeats, "*Yes, I can see – How could I find my way if I didn't see?*" Furthermore, through his relationship with the blind girl, the magistrate comes to a deeper kind of understanding about himself. In fact, on page 47, the magistrate sees himself "*in the image of two black glassy insect eyes from which there comes no reciprocal gaze but only my doubled image cast back at me.*" Through his association with the blind girl, he develops a deeper kind of 'sight' allowing him to discover truths about himself, his desires, and the Empire he serves.

- How are the **motifs** of blindness, sight and other kinds of 'sightedness' developed throughout chapter 2?

Quotation Bank

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

<p><i>These dreamless spells are like death to me, or enchantment, black, outside of time.</i></p>	<p>This quotation reveals that the magistrate is not immune to Othering people who are different or who he cannot easily understand. During his bathing ritual he seeks answers from the blind girl; when she will not give him direct answers he tires and falls asleep. The language he uses to describe this is framed in language that is used to describe the feared outsider: <i>'black'</i> (where he is white), <i>'death'</i> (a thought which evokes fear) and <i>'enchantment'</i> (as if she is a witch with supernatural powers).</p>
<p><i>Is this how her torturers felt hunting their secret... I behave in some ways like a lover – but I might equally well tie her to a chair and beat her.</i></p>	<p>The magistrate makes an interesting comparison between his seduction of the blind girl and the torture inflicted upon her in the previous chapter. Where Joll was trying to dig out information about the barbarian invasion, the magistrate is trying to dig out her secrets too. In many ways, his seduction is as brutal as her interrogation, a comparison he is reluctant to make to himself. This juxtaposition implies that the abuse of power can take many forms, and even the best of intentions can be corrupted.</p>
<p><i>We have been here more than a hundred years, we have reclaimed land from the desert and built irrigation works and planted fields and built solid homes and put walls around our town, but they still think of us as visitors, transients.</i></p>	
<p><i>Based on your own reading of Chapter 2 and / or your classroom discussion, add one more memorable line to this table, and provide analysis comments for each:</i></p>	