Waiting for the Barbarians

J. M. Coetzee

*Waiting for the Barbarians* is an allegorical novel about the war between the oppressor and the oppressed. The story is narrated in the first person by an unnamed character, who is most often referred to as the Magistrate. The Magistrate is a loyal servant to the Empire; he is in charge of administering the law in a small colonial settlement. He is skeptical of the effectiveness of the Empire, but chooses to ignore it in fear that worse things could happen. The Empire begins an investigation after hearing rumors that the barbarians—the indigenous people—may be planning an uprising. Colonel Joll of the Empire captures several barbarians and uses torture techniques to extract information, killing a few and releasing the others. The Magistrate sees one of the victims—a barbarian girl—on the streets. She was left behind by her own people because the torture left her partially blind and disfigured. The Magistrate, feeling both attracted to her and guilty about her situation, decides to take her home where he washes her and tries to take care of her injuries. The two struggle to communicate, and the Magistrate agrees to take her back to her land. When he returns home, he is arrested for deserting his post and allegedly conspiring with the barbarians. He is imprisoned and tortured, but eventually they release him. However, he is not allowed to work under the Empire, and is forced into a life as a beggar. The Empire’s poorly-planned campaign against the barbarians starts to show its cracks, and many soldiers start to flee the town. For a final time, the Magistrate attempts to confront Colonel Joll about his tactics, but is unable to when the colonel abandons the town. The Magistrate regains his position (due to an oversight), and he encourages for new means of protection for the remaining townspeople.

One of the most interesting details about *Waiting for the Barbarians* is the absence of some key narrative details: many characters don’t have names, the colony is unspecified, and the time period of the story is missing. The detail (or lack thereof) illustrates just how universal Coetzee wanted this story to be; it could happen in different places, at different times. The Magistrate represents how even ambivalence about imperialism can be destructive: even though he questioned if torture was useful, he didn’t say anything about it and let it continue. The torture was initially used to get answers, but instead caused more problems. For the tortured, they suffer from physical and mental damages. For the torturers, they will forever be held responsible. The passage where the Magistrate tries to clean the barbarian girl’s scars represents how both parties desperately need healing, but neither party was successfully treated. The act of torture appears to have different meanings. First, the act of torture does more than physical damage. It has stripped the barbarians of their cultural identity, their sense of community, and their humanity. Second, the act of torture is an unusual catalyst: the Magistrate had to have his body and spirit wholly broken for his character to become reinvigorated. Lastly, the act of torture illustrates the importance in voicing one’s opinion. Many of the tortured characters were people who were not allowed to express their opinions (i.e. women, civil servants), so it was vital in having someone who could stand up and defend them. Coetzee employs different literary motifs to illustrate the downfall of the Empire: blindness to emphasize that the Empire were unaware that they were the real problem, and sexual impotence to emphasize the Empire’s ineffective ability to handle the barbarians.