

REVIEW OF WAITING FOR THE BARBARIANS

By

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Waiting for the Barbarians by J. M. Coetzee, first published in 1980 and republished in Penguin Books in 2003, has received almost unanimous acclaim for its story. The story has even been transposed into an opera by minimalist composer Philip Glass. Minimalism is the key that opens the story for it adheres entirely to the reactions and thoughts of an unnamed narrator. At the beginning of the novel the narrator is a Magistrate in an unnamed town on the frontier of what is called an Empire. He encounters a Colonel Joll, head of a secret service, who has been sent to this remote region to wage war against nomadic people who are called Barbarians. Nowhere in the story is there a reference to the racial characteristics of the barbarians or to their civilized counterparts. The title "Waiting for the Barbarians" is taken from a line from the Greek poet Constantine P. Cavafy. The narrator calls himself an old man and spends almost all of his leisure time thinking of sex with girls. At one point, he declares he will reach the stage where boys will serve as well. The narrator's desire is to "enter" a young woman, which apparently would not be difficult to do because, as a Magistrate, he can have almost any woman he wants if his uncooperative libido will enable him to do so. The 156-page story can be read in two sittings. Its main theme, as the narrator sees it, is the difference between Barbarism and Civilization, which, is a major theme in Classic Greek drama and in philosophy. Related to this theme is a searing description of man's cruelty to man.

It may be that critics will be able to label the story as an example of social realism psychopathic fantasy, or allegorical symbolism. While it has tenuous similarities to novels about the inadequacies of States and Statesmen in the writings of Gogol (See *Dead Souls*), it has a broader range than Gogol, who was chiefly interested in showing society's absurdities. Perhaps readers can find similarities to writers, such as *1984* by George Orwell, who was very much concerned with the misuses of power, or to *The Master and Margarita* by Mikahil Bulgakov, who was concerned with exposing the subterfuges and hypocrisies of life in a Police State. Minimalism creeps in because Coetzee treats his subject in algebraic terms: x equals y , and so forth. We know there is going to be a contrast between Urban or settled in one-place society, with all the rules and laws that this entails, and the life of wandering savages who had everything to themselves before urban people intruded. In this sense the story repeats the story of enslavement and misery that more advanced technological societies were able to impose on simpler more closely-related-to-nature people. It foretells the course of dog-eat-dog history from the ancient days of Sumer to the contemporary days of Iraq and Afghanistan.

While Coetzee appears to favor the Barbarians, who are peaceful people who have been provoked into retaliation, history does not bear out the analogy. The Roman Empire was sacked by invading Barbarians, who did not want to be left alone. The plight of native peoples in North and South American, who were nearly exterminated by Civilized Europeans, is a closer comparison. Because, as Coetzee envisions them, Barbarians were itinerant people in a desert land, a linkage to the Sub-Saharan regions of Africa is

possible. Perhaps, Coetzee meant to excoriate Colonialism though he does not say so. He does criticize Imperialism and this form of over lordship is close enough to Colonialism to make the comparison viable.

The strong point of the story is Coetzee's ability in few works to sketch the character of a scene and to establish its mood. His descriptions are so vivid they leave little to the reader's imagination.

What is most distressing in the story is the account of man's ingenuity in devising methods of torture. Colonel Joll and his aide Mandel are especially adept at this. Their chief victims are a splinter group of Barbarians who have fallen into their hands and the narrator. One of the most striking of the victims of the Secret Service is a young girl who loses her sight and becomes a cripple as a result of the tortures she endured. This part of the story gets melodramatic as the aging narrator finds this girl begging in the streets and installs her in his home and bed. He spends much of his time massaging and oiling the unfortunate waif and kissing her feet. Whether Coetzee intended it or not, this wayward side of the narrator's character is not especially admirable. While the Irish Poet William Butler Yeats shared a similar obsession, I don't think psychologists would find the narrator's pining "universal," a word that critics have used to describe the lasting relevance of the story.

The narrator thinks often of a dream in which he comes across a girl playing in the snow whose face is mysteriously blank. This vision crops up several times in the story and becomes, as in Wagner's operas, a leitmotif. Symbolically, the girl may represent the eternal feminine or the allure of forever fleeting never-to-be grasped pleasures. Critics will probably make more of the evanescent dream than this, but, after all, we must concentrate on a narrator who may not fully understand the workings of his subconscious.

Midway in the story the narrator undergoes a moral crisis. It seems he has all along had reservations about his role as a functionary of a society he considers unjust. His misgivings are reinforced by his interactions with Colonel Joll, who is an opportunist and an unthinking martinet. (Think General George Custer.) The Barbarian girl provides the mechanism through which the narrator challenges the authorities and finds, for himself, a form of spiritual liberation. He returns the girl to her nomadic people after an excruciating journey through deserts and mountains that may be the best stylistic section of the story. Here is an example.

The terrain is more desolate than anything we have yet seen. Nothing grows on this salty lake-floor, which in places buckles and pushes up in jagged crystalline hexagons a foot wide. There are dangers too, crossing an unusually smooth patch the front horse suddenly plunges through the crust and sinks chest-deep in foul green slime, the man who leads it standing a moment dumbstruck on thin air before he too splashes in. We struggle to haul them out, the salt crust splintering under the hooves of the flailing horse, the hole widening, a brackish stench everywhere. We have not left the lake behind, we now realize it stretches beneath us here, sometimes under a cover many feet deep, sometimes

under a mere parchment of brittle salt. How long since the sun last shone on these dead waters? We light a fire on firmer ground to warm the shivering man and dry his clothes.:

Because of his act of defiance, the narrator is thrown into prison. Here Coetzee has an opportunity to invent a series of sadistic tortures that may or may not have been practiced in his native South Africa, but were and are certainly practiced in other parts of the world . . . China, Iran, North Korea, etc. The tortures appear to be the prerogative of the Civilized people. To a more learned reader, Coetzee appears to be stacking the deck. (For the other side read *Lonesome Dove* by Larry McMurtry.) At any rate it is a terrible experience. Having inner strength the narrator is able to withstand most of these tortures and, even has time, for what appears to be a misplaced comic interlude after he obtains the key to his prison and to almost everything else in the fortress compound. He even hides under a bed while one of his ingénue fascinations makes love to a young man above him, with considerably more passion than the old man narrator is able to muster.

Finally after a skillfully rendered mock execution, the narrator is released from his jail cell and allowed to roam about the unnamed village at will. There is confusion here for while the narrator is supposedly a physical and mental wreck he shows on occasion astonishing resilience. Inept Colonel Joll is defeated by the clever Barbarians who adopt a strategy of luring him into a desert where the greater part of his troops perish. The same strategy had been used earlier against the narrator during his journey to free his blind and, on his part, chaste companion .

The story concludes when the military abandon the village to the Barbarians who are at its outskirts. The narrator is temporarily restored to a position of authority in the defenseless and desolate town. Readers are left to guess what the Barbarians will do to the narrator and the town's few remaining inhabitants. Ironically, Coetzee thinks the town's people will corrupt the Barbarians and that will be the end of the noble savage. (How the philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau would be displeased.)

In the last section Coetzee recalls the leitmotif that has echoed throughout the story:

The wind had dropped, and now the snowflakes came floating down, the first fall of the year, flecking the roof tiles with white. All morning, I stand at my window watching the snow fall. When I cross the barracks yard it is already inches deep and my footsteps crunch with an eerie lightness.

In the middle of the square there are children at play building a snowman. Anxious not to alarm them, but inexplicably joyful, I approach them across the snow.

They are not alarmed, they are too busy to cast me a glance. They have completed the great round body, now they are rolling a ball for the head.

“Someone fetch things for the mouth and nose and eyes,” says the child who is their leader.

It strikes me that the snowman will need arms too, but I do not want to interfere.

They settle the head on the shoulders and fill it out with pebbles for eyes, ears, nose and mouth. One of them crowns it with his cap.

It is not a bad snowman.

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 along on a road that may lead nowhere.

Waiting for the Barbarians deserves the praise that has been showered upon it. Telling descriptions and torture sequences stay in the mind. The narrator's sexual desires are somewhat at odds with his role as Suffering Servant and Savior God (Read *Prometheus Bound*). Legends, however, have been made from even weaker and less substantial sources.

August 19, 2009