Waiting for the Barbarians

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF J. M. COETZEE

Coetzee's youth was spent mostly in Cape Town and Worcester, where he moved (at the age of eight) with his family. He attended the University of Cape Town, where he received bachelor degrees in both English and Mathematics. In 1962, Coetzee moved to London, where he worked for IBM as a computer programmer and gained a master's degree from the University of Cape Town for a thesis on the author Ford Madox Ford. Then, on a Fulbright scholarship, Coetzee went to the University of Texas at Austin in 1965, gaining his PhD in 1969 for a thesis on Samuel Beckett using computerized stylistic analysis. While Coetzee aspired to become a permanent resident of the United States, his participation in anti-Vietnam-War protests ultimately prevented this. He returned to South Africa in the early 70s, where he taught English literature at the University of Cape Town, acquiring various promotions up until his retirement in 2002, when he relocated to Australia. Coetzee has won numerous awards for his novels, including two Booker Prizes (for *Life & Times of Michael K* and *Disgrace*) and the Nobel Prize in Literature (in 2003). Coetzee was a vocal denouncer of apartheid in South Africa.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In 1976, five years before *Waiting for the Barbarians* was published, the Soweto Uprising occurred, marking a turning point in the history of South Africa and the anti-apartheid movement. During the Soweto Uprising, approximately fifteen-to-twenty thousand school children in the South-West Townships of South Africa (one region, among others in South Africa, where blacks were forcibly relocated by the South African government controlled by the apartheid-enforcing National Party) marched in protest of an educational policy mandating the use of Afrikaans (the language of the Dutch settlers in South Africa) in such regions of black segregation. The policy was problematic for a number of reasons, but especially for the difficulty it posed for the students' learning—the language was not commonly known by both students and teachers. While the protest began peacefully, police eventually opened fire on the students. At least 176 died the week after the riot, and, in the weeks that followed, protests occurred in 160 different black townships throughout the country. Ultimately, 14,000 students would go into exile and join a resistance movement (Umkontho we Sizwe, or "Spear of the Nation") against the South African government. In general, the 1970s in South Africa witnessed the rise of the Black Consciousness Movement, an ideological movement spawned by anti-apartheid thinkers and activists in reaction to the racist governance of the National Party. This movement emphasized the psychological and physical liberation of black people from the rampant oppression they faced on social, political, and economic levels—but especially the social. The anti-apartheid activist Steven Biko was a prominent leader in this movement, and his death is alluded to in the novel. Arrested by the South African government in 1977, he died within eighteen days of being detained. Like Colonel Joll's explanation for why the barbarian girl's father died during his interrogation, an officer in charge of Biko's arrest claimed that "there was a scuffle . . . Mr. Biko hit his head against a wall." But it was later revealed that Biko had suffered monstrously harsh torture. More generally, the government's fear of an "other" that it both oppresses and depicts as an existential threat as a way to assert its own control that is on display in Waiting for the Barbarians was also visible in apartheid South Africa. *Waiting for the Barbarians* can and should be read as dissecting the nature of such political structures, though the novel should not *only* be seen as such a criticism.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Novels such as Nadine Gordimer's *Burger's Daughter* and *July's People*, André Brink's *A Dry White Season*, and Alan Paton's *Cry, the Beloved Country* all center, in some way, around the historical development of apartheid in South Africa and/or its effects on people in South African society.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Waiting for the Barbarians
- **When Written:** The latter half of the 1970s
- **Where Written:** South Africa
- **When Published:** October 27, 1980
- **Literary Period:** The Anti-Apartheid Movement in Literature; Postmodernism
- **Genre:** Postmodern fiction, Contemporary novel
- **Setting:** The novel takes place in an unnamed, fictional country that in some ways resembles real-world South Africa and in others seems as if it is from Medieval or Roman times
- **Climax:** The climax arguably occurs when the magistrate, having escaped from his jail cell, disrupts Colonel Joll and his men's public torture of four barbarian prisoners. The magistrate confronts Joll directly, in front of nearly the entire fort's populace, and attempts to publicly accuse him of malice and inhumanity. However, he is unable to get his words out, and Joll and his goons severely beat the magistrate down, and then escort him back to his cell.

- **Antagonist:** Colonel Joll
- **Point of View:** First-person, from the magistrate's point of view

EXTRA CREDIT

Greek Inspiration. J.M. Coetzee named the novel after a poem with the same title, by the Greek poet Constantine P. Cavafy.

Opera. The American composer Philip Glass wrote an opera based on and named after *Waiting for the Barbarians*.

PLOT SUMMARY

The main protagonist of the novel is a nameless civil servant, who serves as magistrate to a frontier settlement owned by a nameless empire. The Empire, a vague colonialist regime, sets itself in opposition to the "barbarians," mysterious nomadic peoples who live in the wild lands bordering the Empire. The magistrate is looking forward to a quiet retirement, and hopes to live out his last years of service without anything too eventful happening—he spends his free time looking for ruins in the desert and trying to interpret pieces of pottery he finds. His life falls into disarray, however, when a Colonel Joll arrives at his fort.

There's been fear recently brewing in the Empire's capital that the "barbarians" are plotting a full-scale offensive, and Joll has been sent to investigate whether this is true. But his methods of investigation are brutal, and they deeply disturb the magistrate. Joll employs vicious torture tactics, which seem to force his victims into fabricating information that confirms his hypothesis, just in order to cease the pain. One such victim, a young barbarian girl, whose father died at the hands of Joll and his interrogation assistants, ends up playing a central role in the magistrate's life. After her release, he sees her begging on the streets of the fort; her ability to walk and to see have been greatly hindered by Joll's torture techniques.

The magistrate takes the girl in, hiring her as a cook and maid, but their relationship quickly moves from professional to sexual—from being motivated by the good will of the magistrate to more questionable intentions. Over time, the magistrate grows frustrated with the barbarian girl, finding her personality enigmatic and impenetrable. He begins to have anxiety over the meaning of his own sexuality. Eventually, he decides to take the girl back to her people. The magistrate then assembles a team of two other soldiers, several horses, and a stock of supplies, and heads out on a grueling journey into dangerous wintry storms in the desert. Upon returning, and having successfully returned the young girl to the mysterious "barbarians," the magistrate's life becomes especially complicated.

An officer (Mandel) has already replaced the magistrate's office, and the magistrate is taken into custody, being believed to have consorted with the barbarians. Mandel informs him that the Empire is planning a military campaign against the barbarians. The two soldiers who accompanied the magistrate, having witnessed from afar the magistrate's interactions with the barbarians in returning the girl, confirm this false accusation. The magistrate is imprisoned at the fort, and charges of treason are drawn up against him.

The magistrate, demanding a trial, is never given one, but he's nevertheless tortured, beaten, and starved; eventually, Mandel sets him free, no longer viewing the magistrate's keep as a justifiable expenditure. The magistrate then assumes a life of begging, and gradually regains the trust of the village people. Meanwhile, the soldiers, led by Joll to fight against the barbarians, are dying in the desert, their campaign failing, and those who remain at the frontier settlement begin to abuse their authority, ransacking the fort's shops and causing mayhem.

Eventually, Mandel and most of the soldiers return to the capital, and many of the fort's inhabitants follow. The magistrate regains his former position, and stability among the settlement returns. One day, a weary Colonel Joll returns to the settlement in a carriage, accompanied by several soldiers, but the villagers throw bricks at them. The magistrate tries to communicate with Joll, but he won't open the carriage. He and his company quickly leave.

The novel ends as the magistrate tries to write the history of the settlement, but he finds himself unable to. He's unable to reconcile the horror of the events which befell the settlement at the beginning of Joll's investigation with the beauty he attributes to the life of the town as a whole—a life whose scale he conceives as being beyond day-to-day historical events, but rather as bound up in the cyclical time of the constantly changing seasons.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

The Magistrate – A civil servant of the Empire who's looking forward to retiring soon, the magistrate is the narrator and protagonist (though his proper name is never revealed) of *Waiting for the Barbarians*. The magistrate's dream of living out his last years of service with relative ease and little disruption, however, is thwarted by the circulation of rumors in the Empire's capital about the nomads beyond the nation's frontier settlements. Believing these 'barbarians' to be plotting an assault on the frontier, the Empire's army has dispatched military officers to the frontier. When one such Colonel Joll arrives at the settlement under the magistrate's jurisdiction, the disappearance of quietude and stability in the magistrate's life begins. Disgusted by Joll's use of torture to interrogate the

barbarians he takes prisoner, the magistrate displays an empathy for the nomads unmet by virtually everyone around him. And, while his fellow servants of the Empire blindly and unquestioningly follow the orders of their authorities, the magistrate possesses a more critical and objective perspective of the Empire informed by his attention to history. The magistrate notes, for example, that every generation seems to have its own bout of hysteria about the barbarians—and indeed, based on his vague historical inquiries into local ruins, the magistrate wonders if there have been past Empires that rose and fell in a similar cycle. Consequently, he views Joll's campaign against the nomads as yet another renewal of this trend. The magistrate therefore has the makings of an outcast within him from the start of the novel, and his willingness to vocalize his dissent to the various executors of the Empire's military will ultimately solidifies him in that role. The magistrate's inner character is also shaped by a complicated relationship with his sexuality. His attraction to the barbarian girl baffles and frustrates him, as it makes him realize just how little control he has over his own sexual desire. The opacity of her personality infuriates him; he feels unable to get past her cold surface and have a deeper connection with her. The magistrate wants to uncover the untold history of her past—to understand and envision her before she was marked by the trauma of Joll's torture tactics—but he ultimately fails in excavating her psyche as deeply as he wishes. Further, the barbarian girl's **poor vision** (also ironically) makes the magistrate more self-conscious about his body, even though she can barely see it, and therefore his sexuality as a whole.

The Barbarian Girl – Captured (along with her father and several others) by Colonel Joll's men during the first days of their military campaign against the nomads, the nameless barbarian girl comes to play a central role in the magistrate's life. After undergoing the torture tactics of Joll's interrogation, the girl's vision is permanently impaired and her ankles brutally disfigured, while her father is killed. After the magistrate discovers her begging on the street, he takes her under his wing, employing her as a cook and maid. But the professional relationship quickly turns sexual, and the girl frustrates the magistrate with her elusive personality, characterized by a coldness which makes her seemingly impenetrable to any attempts at connecting with her. The barbarian girl therefore exposes a distance between herself and the magistrate, a distance which might be interpreted as representing the collision of two disparate cultures: that of the nomads and that of the Empire. The opacity of the girl's personality and the poor vision that plagues her eyes render her as a force which cannot be entirely comprehended—which cannot be assimilated to the magistrate's understanding in a totally coherent manner. She represents a radical difference from the magistrate's perception of the world. Ironically, even though she's **blind**, the girl makes the magistrate feel more exposed and visible, since he sees himself reflected in her eyes—not taken in and received. Further, the fact that she needs to look sideways in order to catch a glimpse of the magistrate symbolizes the fact that he and she, with different ways of perceiving or filtering the world resulting from their different cultural backgrounds, can never see eye-to-eye.

Colonel Joll – A colonel in the Empire's army, Joll visits the Empire's frontier settlements in order to interrogate any barbarians who have been taken prisoner, hoping to gain information about the barbarians' raiding plans. Joll—commandeering and overbearing in his authority, and brutal and apathetic in his torture tactics—embodies the opposite of the magistrate's character. Joll is fully convinced that the barbarians are plotting to attack and undermine the Empire, and he's willing to use any means necessary in order to acquire information about it. But Joll is so blindly and unquestioningly invested in his military campaign that he seems to only seek 'truth' from his torture victims that confirms his suspicions. Though he claims, in conversation with the magistrate, to be an expert in distinguishing what's true from false, purporting to be able to perceive the 'tone of truth' in his interrogation of victims, Joll seems to apply pain to his victims in such a way that they are forced to lie and tell him whatever he wants to hear. Uninterested in the real truth of the nomadic people, Joll is intoxicated by his own authority, and caught up in his unfounded evaluation of them as debase and barbaric. His blindness to the truth and horrifying inscrutability is also symbolized by his use of **sunglasses**.

Warrant Officer Mandel – A warrant officer for the Empire, Mandel is sent to replace the magistrate's position after the magistrate has been charged with treason (consorting with the barbarians). The magistrate describes Mandel as highly affected and self-conscious, and as putting great effort into expressing his authority in order to mask his more boyish and delicate sensibilities. Believing Mandel to hail from people of low social class, the magistrate thinks he's adopted such heady airs in order to cover up any traces of his less-than-regal upbringing. Mandel presides over the magistrate's imprisonment while Colonel Joll is at the front, and eventually releases him, finding the cost of imprisoning the magistrate to be no longer a justifiable expenditure.

The Girl at the Inn – The magistrate visits a "girl at the inn" (probably a prostitute) regularly, and even continues to visit her when he's involved with the barbarian girl. Though he's aware that she is probably feigning her enthusiasm and pleasure when they sleep together, he nonetheless finds their encounters fulfilling. While the barbarian girl behaves authentically around him, however distant and cold she may be, the magistrate seems to prefer the showiness and apparent (but probably exaggerated) tenderness of the girl at the inn's performance.

The Two Soldiers – Conscripted by the magistrate to accompany him on his expedition to deliver the barbarian girl back to her people, the two soldiers ultimately serve an integral

role in the magistrate's incrimination. When they return from the trip, they both make statements to Mandel accusing the magistrate of consorting with the barbarians.

The Barbarian Man – Captured along with his nephew, the barbarian boy, this nameless man is ultimately killed during his interrogation by Colonel Joll. When explaining the man's death, Joll says that his victim had grown violent during the (torture-filled) interrogation and, after a bit of a fight, hit his head fatally against a wall. Through this explanation, Coetzee perhaps satirizes the one offered by an officer who took part in killing/brutally torturing the anti-apartheid activist Steven Biko (see Background Information). The magistrate suspects that this man is the father of the barbarian girl.

The barbarian girl's father The father of the barbarian girl. He dies while being interrogated. When the magistrates investigates, he is told by guards that the barbarian girl's father went "berserk" and attacked Joll and his men, but the look on the guard's face makes the Magistrate think that the guard has been told not to talk about what happened.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Mai – Mai cooks at the inn located in the settlement under the magistrate's jurisdiction (before his arrest). When the magistrate is released from jail, assuming leadership of the fort again, he sleeps with her—the two having been sexually involved in the past.

The Guide – To lead his expedition to return the barbarian girl to her people, the magistrate hires a hunter and horseman as a guide, since he's familiar with the vast stretch of land between the magistrate's settlement and the mountains where the barbarians live.

The Warder – While the magistrate is imprisoned, he's supervised by a warder who brings him his breakfast and releases him every two days for an hour of exercise.

The Barbarian Boy – A boy captured along with his uncle, the barbarian man, at the start of the book. After his uncle is killed, the boy is tortured by Colonel Joll and then taken along with Joll to act as a "guide."

The Little Boy – While the magistrate is imprisoned, a little boy brings him his dinner every night, escorted by a guard. The boy, for a while, becomes one of the magistrate's only contact with other human beings—a daily interaction to which he looks forward.

The Doctor – The only doctor in the settlement, and not a very skilled one.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

THE EMPIRE AND FEAR OF THE OTHER

In *Waiting for the Barbarians*, the Empire is an abstract figurehead for imperial power at large. It is never even explicitly named, and therefore never associated with any nation in the real world, though we can infer that the Empire correlates in some ways to South Africa, Coetzee's homeland. The nomadic peoples ("barbarians"), then, partly symbolize the victims of colonialism and apartheid—or more specifically, the black population during apartheid-era South Africa.

The inhabitants of the Empire's frontier settlement (over which the magistrate presides) harbor an irrational fear and hatred of the barbarians, who inhabit the desert around them—a fear based not on any knowledge of or direct experience with the actual nomads themselves, but one that is fueled merely by superstition, ignorance, and military dogma. The novel shows how the soldiers and higher-ups (like Colonel Joll) of the Empire's army follow unquestioningly—and therefore blindly—their military orders, as they are convinced that the barbarians, as a monolithic whole, are a fundamentally evil, debased people who clearly stand against the Empire. In the eyes of the soldiers, the barbarians have become so demonized that they appear to inherently deserve being tortured and murdered. And the civilians of the magistrate's settlement share the soldiers' hatred of the barbarians as well: though they will sometimes trade with nomads they deem to be peaceful, they consider them to be lazy, thoughtless, and unclean drunkards who, in comparison to the "civility" of the Empire's people, occupy a subhuman status of existence.

The barbarians, therefore, are '*othered*' by the Empire. The Empire associates the barbarians with all kinds of debasing qualities that ultimately render them and their culture as fundamentally alien, foreign and incomprehensibly different. The barbarians, cast as an Other—or a force which shares no common source of humanity or identity with the Empire's citizens—become a scourge to be eradicated from the scope of the Empire's expansion and existence.

During the South African apartheid, black citizens were expelled from the main, white-dominated region of the country to outlying provinces. Coetzee's framing of the barbarians as having always been outsiders to the Empire, therefore, can be read as an ironic commentary on the South African government's treatment of the black populace it expelled—treating its black citizens as if they never belonged. Dutch (and British) rule, the real "Empire," implanted its white settlers in Africa, and the eventual apartheid-enforcing government of South Africa went on to usurp people of color—people with indigenous African roots—from their own

native territory to specifically-black outlying districts. The novel therefore endeavors to show how the relationship between its foreign imperial power (the Empire) and indigenous community (the barbarians) plays out, from the point of view of someone within the world of the Empire—the magistrate, whose view is unique, since he opposes to the military policies of his nation and sympathizes with the nomads.

The sensibility and reason of the magistrate, however, prove to be no match for the Empire's drive for imperial conquest—the drive to conquer the barbarians' territory and eradicate or enslave them—since the civilians of the Empire have such an engrained, inbred hatred of the barbarians. The novel therefore shows how fear of the Other can breed in the minds of a whole nation's citizens, and fuel their government's entire military conquest in a way that blinds them from the atrocities it involves. Convinced that they are combatting a subhuman evil, the people of the Empire feel an entitlement to the violence they enact and the territory they try to claim with it (even if that territory is only the "protection" of the Empire's present borders). Through exploring the dynamic between the barbarians and the Empire, the novel therefore explores a situation resembling the actual historical case of apartheid, whose white enforcers felt superior to the black populace, and therefore entitled to politically and economically regulate, dominate, and ultimately deteriorate the growth and welfare of the territories to which black citizens were expelled.

TORTURE, INHUMANITY, AND CIVILITY

Colonel Joll's acts of torture represent the inhumanity and incivility in the supposedly "civilized" Empire's mode of conduct. In this way, the torture that goes on at the magistrate's settlement highlights the hypocrisy of the Empire's claimed possession of civility and advanced culture in contrast to the "barbarians." Coetzee's novel seems to be highly invested in demonstrating this hypocrisy—that, behind the seemingly clean and moral surface of civilization, there can lurk an obscenely inhumane and violent series of practices which fundamentally contradict the mere image of civilized culture.

Torture, in the novel, stops at no ends to achieve whatever information the interrogator—Colonel Joll—desires from the tortured. Joll mentions how his interrogation method always involves torture—how he always brings his victims to a breaking point, where the truth is supposedly revealed. The willingness to pursue such ends demonstrates not only the inhumanity of Joll's torture, and torture at large, but also how the victim of such torture is, from the get-go, seen merely as a means to an end—as a subhuman (or an inhuman) object to which no application of pain is too great, or too immoral. The novel makes poignant and clear the evil and inhumanity involved in torture.

Shocked by the unflinching ease, and seeming joy with which Joll conducts his torture sessions, the magistrate wonders whether there's secretly some reservoir of remorse and trauma in Joll's mind. The magistrate wonders how both he and Mandel (who tortures the magistrate after Joll departs on his campaign) can commit gruesome acts of torture and seamlessly return to everyday life to "break bread with other men." The magistrate wonders: mustn't they have a ritual of cleansing or purification they perform to wash the taint of their violent deeds off their conscience, so that they can return to find joy and humor in normal human affairs, unhindered by pangs of guilt? If Joll and Mandel felt no need to perform such a ritual, it would seem as if they truly were sinister, unrepentant monsters.

Ultimately, Joll's use of torture proves to be ineffective, even though he consistently uses it to gather information from and about the barbarians. Joll designs and comes up with his own hypotheses about what his victims know and have the capacity to reveal. Therefore, his victims suffer even when they might be innocent—when they don't have the information imagined by Joll. Coetzee never portrays any one of the acts of torture in the novel as "successful," or as mustering up key information about the activity of the barbarians. Even the barbarian boy whom Joll tortures with countless superficial stab wounds, and who ultimately serves as a guide for Joll's company as they search for the barbarians, gets cast by the magistrate as an unreliable guide since he will only provide information—any information, even if false—just in order to avoid more torture.

The novel therefore demonstrates the arbitrary nature of torture-led interrogations by highlighting how the imagined information sought by Joll and company, if not initially extracted, pushes the victim of torture to the brink of desperately conceding anything desired by the torturer. *Waiting for the Barbarians*, staging an eye-opening encounter with the horrors of torture, fundamentally criticizes its practice from both a moral and a "practical" (in terms of efficacy) point of view.

SEXUALITY, ANXIETY, AND OLD AGE

The magistrate's sexuality is riddled with quandaries. The barbarian girl, whom he takes in and begins an odd sexual relationship with, represents to him something that he cannot fully know—something that is alien, and which his understanding can't penetrate. He therefore becomes unsure of himself and his own sexuality, because he cannot understand why he desires the girl. In this way, even the magistrate isn't immune to "exoticizing" the barbarians in some respect, for he perceives the girl to be entirely alien, something he can't assimilate to the logic of his own sexual desire. Unable to reconcile the elusiveness of the barbarian girl's sexuality with his own, the magistrate's sexuality is therefore made incomplete in a way he's never experienced.

The magistrate eventually concludes—a good while after he's returned the barbarian girl to her people—that the main reason why he could never fully connect with and understand the girl is that he was trying to uncover a part of her that was lost after Joll tortured her: the way her body looked, and the way her mind viewed the world, before. Faced with the bleak cruelty of the girl's scarred body, the magistrate is obsessed with recovering something he cannot get—the pure, untold history of the girl's past. The girl has changed, and therefore so has the way she identifies/does not identify with the formative years of her past.

Doubtful about his sexuality as a whole, the magistrate also sometimes finds the degree to which he fantasizes about and desires sex to be reprehensible for his age. He has a very active sexual life, and his imagination frequently revolves around thinking about sex. For instance, he has a **recurring dream** throughout the novel where he strives towards the mysterious figure of a girl (sometimes the barbarian girl) and longs to capture her in his embrace—that is, to assimilate her to his own sexual identity and understanding, to make her mysteriousness more coherent. But despite its active nature, the magistrate's sexual imagination is also full of doubt. He wonders what the barbarian girl could possibly see in his old, husky body, and finds consolation in the fact that she probably can't make out its contours since she's nearly **blind**.

Further, sometime after he's begun seeing the barbarian girl intimately, the magistrate resumes seeing a girl at the inn (perhaps a prostitute) who was his mistress before he became acquainted with the barbarian girl. Relieved to be with a sexual companion who reacts to him in ways he understands and finds enjoyable, the magistrate enjoys an escape from the indecipherable detachedness of the barbarian girl. Even though the magistrate knows that the girl at the inn is probably just pretending to be exceptionally pleased and enthusiastic when she sees him, he prefers her artificial performance to the blunt, less censored, and seemingly alien reactions of the barbarian girl. This suggests that the distance between him and the barbarian girl leaves him with a gap, with an opening he can't close by uniting his body with hers, and which he feels impelled to fill with thoughts and explanations.

The magistrate's sexuality is therefore challenged: he realizes that his own sexual drives elude him, that he can't quite define them, since they've mysteriously propelled him towards someone he simply cannot understand his attraction for. The novel thus uses the magistrate's sexuality as a venue to express how the exotification or alienation characteristic of the Empire's treatment of the barbarians can take place on subtle, psychological levels—on levels seemingly less concrete than, and removed from, those of military action and political commerce. Coetzee also seems to explore the magistrate's sexual life partly as a way of portraying the psychology of an older man when it comes to thinking about his sexual identity.

TRUTH, POWER, AND RECORDED REPUTATION

Two of the magistrate's highest priorities in the novel are to write the true history of his settlement and to have his own history, his own recorded reputation, written truthfully. He wants to go down in history with the integrity of his action—as a defender of the barbarians against Colonel Joll's corruption—preserved, and not erased with a narrative which, complicit in that corruption, would cast the magistrate as evil. The magistrate's sense of truth is therefore at war with that of Joll and company in upholding his reputation, since his reputation depends on which of these "truths" is told. In this sense, the novel exposes how contingent something like "truth" is on those who have the power to tell it. Though, in terms of the actual truth, the magistrate seems to be a real force of good in the history of the Empire as opposed to Joll, being in a position stripped of official power means that the magistrate's reputation is at stake. What might end up as the "true" history of the settlement could be written with a hand sympathetic to the likes of Joll and those who were complicit with the Empire's corruption during the magistrate's life. Eventually, during his captivity, the magistrate views martyrdom as the only way of counteracting the power around him; if he is willing to die for his principles, then perhaps he will be viewed in history as virtuous and ultimately the true upholder of the good.

The novel's consideration of truth also figures into Joll's philosophy about interrogation. Joll claims to be capable of perceiving the "tone of truth" in his victims—he believes the truth is extracted when a victim is brought to a breaking point caused by an intolerable level of pain, and they have no choice but to divulge whatever secrets they may be withholding. This sense of "truth," however, is flawed. Joll presupposes that such "truth" is always there in his victims—that they might have some secret information they're withholding about any invasion plans being engineered by barbarian leaders. He demonstrates that he cares more about whether a victim's admissions conform to his own ideas about the truth than finding the real truth, which would involve keeping his own preconceptions open and not closing his hypotheses off from contradicting evidence. The kind of truth which Joll believes in is what leads him to harm his victims. Convinced of the surety of his cause despite lacking any empirical evidence for it, he feels entitled to mutilate his victims in pursuit of a truth that's entirely in his head. Joll's philosophy of truth gives him a sense of *power* that justifies his violence.

Joll's sense of entitlement to a "truth" inside his victims, and his belief in an ability to perceive it in its purity despite his own biases, slowly become a fixation of the magistrate's own way of thinking. The magistrate, in grappling with his desire to excavate the untold history of the barbarian girl—to recover a sense of life that was seemingly lost after she suffered Joll's

interrogation tactics—starts to feel infected by Joll's philosophy of truth. The magistrate, trying to see something deeper behind the surface of the girl, feels as if he's begun to read the objects and people in his environment as if they were "tea leaves," as if they held, deep down, some secret prophetic truth to which he was entitled. Starting to see things as having a hidden depth behind their surface, the magistrate displays Joll's own belief in having unadulterated access to an absolute truth.

However, whereas Joll seems obsessed with bending his victim's minds to his own will—to only accessing a truth which he anticipates and has hypothesized—the magistrate's curiosity around ancient ruins and relics shows that he has a deep desire to get to know something beyond him. Whereas the army-men around him demonstrate a fundamental hostility towards people (the barbarians) they do not know, the magistrate wants to uncover the history of something unfamiliar. This isn't to say such a desire is always virtuous—it's precisely this desire which complicated the magistrate's relationship with the barbarian girl, who ultimately proves to be not nearly as exotic and unfamiliar as the magistrate initially thought. It's the magistrate's very assessment of her as an Other which drives him to possess her in a way that mirrors Joll's sense of entitlement.

The novel therefore seems to complicate conventional conceptions of "truth." It shows that truth is largely in the hands of the powerful, and that it might be manufactured by the powerful in order to justify their own crimes and acts of evil. Further, Coetzee shows how the desire to uncover the truth of other people is actually a violent process—that, in seeking the truth of the barbarian girl, the magistrate has already *othered* her in an alienating way that drives him to possess her. The magistrate does not preserve her status as an Other in order to show her empathy and respect for her differences, but rather to preserve the possibility that she hides a fundamentally stable, absolute truth that will explain his ambivalent attraction to her.

HISTORY AND TIME

The magistrate displays a belief in a register of time and history beyond that of mere human events—beyond the details of human history that get recorded on a linear timeline of past-to-present-to-future. He says that, when he really contemplates the history of his settlement, he thinks that its deeper meaning lies in a greater cycle of nature, of the recycling of the seasons, and not in historical recordings of its material growth and various conquests. In line with this higher perspective of cyclicality, the magistrate's observation that every generation has its own "barbarian scare" implies that he sees history—at the level of human events—as fundamentally repetitive. And, if we put his belief in a higher cycle of history together with this observation, we can read the magistrate as believing that human history follows a self-repeating pattern that issues from the non-human cycle of nature itself.

With this belief in a pattern to history, the magistrate therefore seems to view his life and the world it encounters as not merely an isolated, free-floating phenomenon, but as connected to and flowing out of a time that preceded it. This grants the magistrate a perspective on human society that's more nuanced and beyond the narrow view of soldiers at his settlement, who follow blindly, in the here-and-now, the orders of their military commanders, engaging uncritically in a campaign of fear, hatred, and persecution against the barbarians.

Coetzee's work therefore seems to hint that this higher perspective of history is more ethical than a narrower view unconcerned with how the past relates to the present. The magistrate himself speaks against this latter view, which he attributes to the "new men of Empire" such as Joll and Mandel. Whereas they are concerned only with forging "fresh starts" and acting out what they see as the history of the (only) Empire, the magistrate feels compelled to tarry with the past wrongdoings of the Empire (and potential past Empires) and the suffering of its former victims. To try and forget or repress the memory of the Empire's less-than-humane past is an act of censorship, and renews corruption by severing it from its consequences in the past. Further, this concern with fresh starts and new beginnings is characteristic of the linear time which the magistrate attributes to human history, and which he ultimately describes as the "submerged mind of Empire." The Empire's goal of expansion and self-preservation operates on a timeline heading from a beginning to an end, and this structure is so engrained in all of the Empire's activities that it's something of a submerged mind, or unconscious process undergirding its every act.

The magistrate therefore views perceiving time as cyclic to be superior to perceiving it as linear. And, at one point in the novel, he even implies that cyclical time is a more natural way of perceiving the world than through the linear lens of human history—which filters the ongoing process of life into discrete starts and finishes—by saying that children are born uncorrupted by such a lens (and indeed, this view of time seems to revolve around "nature" in general in the magistrate's mind—the migrations of birds, the change of seasons, etc.). Further, he seems to think that it would be possible to, or he at least dreams of, engineer a society that's organized in such a way as to facilitate a way of viewing time and its own history cyclically. The novel therefore explores the possibility of such a view as being fundamental to human nature, but corrupted by economies and national identities which only persist insofar as time is viewed as passing from a beginning to an end.

INDEPENDENCE, DUTY, AND BETRAYAL

The magistrate actively pursues not only his own, independent view of justice—of what counts as a truly good and fair treatment of the nomadic people, despite his legal duty to the Empire's military campaign—but also his own, basic approach to life. In other words, the magistrate doesn't let his duty interfere with his own decisions about his life. While the military men around him take this to be a defect of his character, it ultimately proves to be a virtue.

Perhaps one of the magistrate's boldest moves in the entire novel is the letter he writes to a governmental higher-up explicitly stating that he plans to leave his post and deliver the barbarian girl back to her people. This admission automatically sets him up for suspicion: why is he involved with a nomadic woman, and furthermore, what makes him think he has the authority to make contact with the enemy, the barbarians, without permission? Yet the magistrate prioritizes the completion of his own agenda rather than that which corresponds to the duty binding him to the Empire's military campaign. He does not kowtow to any authoritarian dogma over-and-above his own conscience, as evidenced by his continual willingness to protest and challenge the military officers around him.

In contrast to the magistrate, those who are purportedly on the side of the Empire's military campaign, and therefore its "othering" of the barbarians—the soldiers who are compliant with their assigned duty—are not independent in their thinking, as they follow their duty outside of their own conscience. These members of the Empire do not raise any suspicion. Unlike the magistrate's independence from his duty, they perfectly adhere to theirs before anything else. Yet this not only causes the soldiers to commit the evil of the Empire's racist military enterprise, it also causes them to commit evils *against* the Empire—to break the laws of the Empire's order, and commit evils from the perspective of the Empire's law itself. For example, after Colonel Joll has been out on the frontier with his expedition group for a while, the soldiers who remain back at the settlement—not kept in order by Mandel—start to pillage the very town they are supposed to watch after. They steal from shopkeepers and vandalize property—they go against their own people, the very people whom their duty tells them to protect.

Therefore, while the magistrate is independent from his duty and thus a cause for suspicion, he, in the long run, ultimately does good to his people (after he is freed from prison, he reassumes his role as leader of the settlement after Mandel and the majority of soldiers return to the capital). On the contrary, those who gave up their independence entirely in the service of their duty to the Empire ultimately snap and turn against the real *people* of the Empire, expressing their long-repressed autonomy through crimes against their own fellow citizens. Ironically, in the end, those who were the most obedient and the least independent merited the most suspicion. Whereas the soldiers turned against their own people, the magistrate took up a responsibility to oversee his constituents and guide their settlement. *Waiting for the Barbarians* seems to suggest, therefore, that too much obedience can actually inspire a destructive reaction against one's supposed cause.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE MAGISTRATE'S DREAM

Throughout the novel, the magistrate has a recurring dream in which he approaches a group of children building a castle out of snow. As he gets closer, the children around the castle slowly disperse, while one hooded child remains in the center. After the magistrate begins seeing the barbarian girl intimately, the hooded child sometimes takes on her form, other times taking on the form of a monstrous, wraith-like entity. Whenever he faces the form presented to him, he falls into a spell of either absolute elation or confusing despair. Though the dream has several manifestations throughout the book, its structure is consistent. The dream reveals how the magistrate is plagued by an ambivalent desire for an ambiguous object, exploring more broadly the relationship between civilized humanity and monstrousness.

The magistrate's search, on one thematic level, is an insignia of his complicated sexuality—a complexity provoked by the barbarian girl's enigmatic, opaque personality—as well as his (unrequited) desire to uncover the past of the barbarian girl, to find a deeper, more profound history in the past when her body was not yet marked by Joll's torture. This search also speaks to how the magistrate's sexual conflict expresses a broader tension between civility and monstrousness. Though perhaps the most 'civilized' person in town—if we think of true civility as being opposed to the evils of Joll, even though his tactics are thought by many to preserve civilization against the barbarians—the magistrate ironically faces a remarkably uncivilized psychological problem. At once desiring and loving the barbarian girl somewhat innocently, the magistrate also has the urge to possess her. It's this surging, possessive drive, propped up by an ambiguous sexual desire for the girl, that forces the magistrate to confront his sexuality as something which seems at once a part of him yet also alien, like a monstrousness stemming from within him but which he nevertheless can't control. The magistrate's conflict therefore points to how civility is always shadowed by its opposite—by monstrousness or 'barbarism.' While civility wants to tame

barbarism, while it wants to assimilate into itself the barbarism it has cast as an Other, civility's clash with barbarism reveals that what it perceives as 'barbaric' stems from itself, and that civility cannot count itself as closed-off and self-containing. It is enmeshed with its Other.

Further, we can read the snow castle in the dream as a symbol of the Empire or civilization itself. When seen as a snow castle, as a transient structure that could be blown away at any instant by the wind, the seeming longevity and enduring fortitude of the Empire is cast as an illusion. The preservation of civilization is not guaranteed—an idea furthered by the magistrate's archeological explorations, which suggest that past Empires have risen and fallen. Additionally, in one of the magistrate's experiences of the dream, the barbarian girl builds an elaborate model of the settlement with mittens on, amazing the magistrate. We can read this as dream-code for the magistrate coming to understand that, even though she hails from the barbarians, the girl has as equal a capacity for high artisanal, 'civilized' craftsmanship as anyone from the Empire.

BLINDNESS AND JOLL'S SUNGLASSES

The idea of blindness is expressed both by Colonel Joll's sunglasses and the barbarian girl's damaged eyes. In the case of Colonel Joll, his sunglasses ironically suggest his willingness to put blinders up to the truth—the reality of the Empire's corruption and the harmlessness of the nomadic people. Though he claims to seek the truth and to have special abilities in obtaining it, his use of torture largely manufactures the responses of his interrogation victims such that they ultimately agree with his own hypotheses and preconceptions. Joll is, therefore, fundamentally blind to the truth, and willfully so.

In the case of the barbarian girl, whose (partial) blindness was caused by Joll's torture tactics, her lack of sight actually illuminates the truth of the magistrate's somewhat perverted way of relating to her. The opacity of her eyes—eyes which cannot fully take the magistrate in—reflect back to the magistrate his own desire, the truth of his own sexuality. Unable to recognize and register it, the girl's blindness makes the magistrate aware of part of his sexuality which heretofore has gone undiscovered: the fact that it stems wholly from within him, but is itself an eerily foreign, monstrous force that controls him. The girl's blindness therefore reveals the magistrate's own blindness.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Penguin Books edition of *Waiting for the Barbarians* published in 2010.

Chapter 1 Quotes

"Looking at him I wonder how he felt the very first time: did he, invited as an apprentice to twist the pincers or turn the screw or whatever it is they do, shudder even a little to know that at that instant he was trespassing into the forbidden? I find myself wondering too whether he has a private ritual of purification, carried out behind closed doors, to enable him to return and break bread with other men."

Related Characters: The Magistrate (speaker), Colonel Joll

Related Themes:

Page Number: 13

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs after the magistrate tells Colonel Joll (who, after staying at the magistrate's settlement for several days, is preparing to embark with his company on a military campaign against the barbarians) that he shouldn't rely on the boy he tortured as an able guide.

Repulsed by Joll's torture tactics, the magistrate can't help but wonder if, behind Joll's stoic demeanor and unflinching sense of ease after doling out merciless amounts of pain, there's a hidden a reservoir of humanity within Joll that secretly mourns the evils of torture. Mustn't Joll, the magistrate speculates, have—the first time he tortured someone—at least shuddered in the slightest? Did he acknowledge that he "was trespassing into the forbidden"—that he was crossing into a territory of cruelty outside the bounds of all humane decorum? Or, further, how could Joll not frequently repent for his mutilations—mustn't he have a purifying ritual in order to pass from the hellish hours of his profession to the light of everyday human society? Unable to understand how such gruesome deeds could garner no remorse in a human being, the magistrate feels compelled to question Joll's emotional relationship with his interrogation practices.

"The space about us here is merely space, no meaner or grander than the space above the shacks and tenements and temples and offices of the capital. Space is space, life is life, everywhere the same. But as for me, sustained by the toil of others, lacking civilized vices with which to fill my leisure, I pamper my melancholy and try to find in the vacuousness of the desert a special historical poignancy. Vain, idle, misguided! How fortunate that no one sees me!"

Related Characters: The Magistrate (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 18

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs while the magistrate lingers among some of the ruins he likes to excavate; Joll and his men have recently departed on their expedition at this point in the plot.

Here, the magistrate expresses embarrassment at the seriousness and intellectual severity with which he pursues his quest to discover a secretly profound, but hidden and not yet known, historical richness to the desert around him. Even going so far as to sacrifice his reason in order to wager the existence of ghosts in the ruins he explores, the magistrate seems deeply invested in uncovering a connection with the past that will give a surge of intrigue to the present in which he lives. Trying to find "a special historical poignancy" to the frontier, which lacks the metropolitan glamour of the capital, the magistrate ultimately seems to feel shameful and "vain" for trying to unearth and excavate, in the external, physical world, what's only a product of his imagination—a product of his nostalgia for a non-existent past he's invented just as a way to "pamper" his own "melancholy." Unable to realize, or admit to himself with any satisfaction, that the space—the atmosphere of life on the frontier—is ultimately made of the same physical substance proliferating life in the capital, the magistrate sees his life at the settlement as somehow innately predisposed to being inferior and passive in comparison to the intrigue and activity of the Empire's central urban hub.

Yet the magistrate is fully aware of this mental habit of his—he's aware of why he busies himself with his excavation hobby even to the point of imaginary, delusional excess. The magistrate knows that space is just space, and that the life he lives in the settlement has just as equal a possibility of vivacity and intrigue as that of the capital. Later in the novel, he even displays a belief in a register of time and historical unfolding that transcends the order of human society, such as the way humans like himself break up space by conceiving of it as having different parts with fundamentally different qualities—the way humans define the boundaries of their identities and social worlds by perceiving differences between themselves and others. Ultimately, the Empire's "othering" of the barbarians exemplifies this way of perceiving space and meaning.

> "... [I]t is the knowledge of how contingent my unease is, how dependent on a baby that wails beneath my window one day and does not wail the next, that brings the worst shame to me, the greatest indifference to annihilation. I know somewhat too much; and from this knowledge, once one has been infected, there seems to be no recovering. I ought never to have taken my lantern to see what was going on in the hut by the granary. On the other hand, there was no way, once I had picked up the lantern, for me to put it down again. The knot loops in upon itself; I cannot find the end."

Related Characters: The Magistrate (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 23

Explanation and Analysis

Colonel Joll has just made his first return to the settlement since departing on his military campaign, and the magistrate, irritated by Joll's presence, begins to think about how much his life has changed since the colonel's first arrival in town.

Here, the magistrate shows the unavoidable vulnerability he feels to the emotions taking over his mind—his overwhelming feelings in response to the brutality behind Joll's interrogation tactics. The magistrate, unable to put his sense of horror and repulsion at the actions of Joll and his assistants in the background of his mind, cannot recover from the emotional instability and severe sensitivity it entails. Durably installed in his daily life, this "infection" of knowledge about Joll's evils renders even the mere cries of a captured barbarian baby traumatic enough to sink his temperament into total "indifference to annihilation." Though the magistrate says that he regrets having ever ventured forth to investigate the torture scene at the granary, he seems to imply that, deep down in his mind, he felt irrevocably compelled to discover the truth of Joll's actions. Therefore, "the knot loops upon itself"—the knot of the magistrate's own self-knowledge is endlessly undone and reformed. Infected by a knowledge of Joll's techniques, the magistrate cannot definitively determine whether he'd rather be blissfully ignorant or woefully informed like he's become. This new knowledge of the terrors of torture, therefore, has made his own self-knowledge—his old, more complete sense of self—loop endlessly upon itself in utter indecision.

"It would be best if this obscure chapter in the history of the world were terminated at once, if these ugly people were obliterated from the face of the earth and we swore to make a new start, to run an empire in which there would be no more injustice, no more pain. It would cost little to march them out into the desert . . . to have them dig, with their last strength, a pit large enough for all of them to lie in (or even dig it for them!), and, leaving them buried there forever and forever, to come back to the walled town full of new intentions, new resolutions."

Related Characters: The Magistrate (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 27

Explanation and Analysis

Colonel Joll has just ceased his interrogations of the barbarian prisoners he'd taken, and re-departed the settlement to continue his campaign.

Here, the magistrate's characteristic empathy and compassion for the barbarians takes an unusually dark turn. However, instead of wishing to kill the barbarian prisoners out of sheer racist malice, the magistrate seems just to want to "put them out of their misery" and eliminate from the face of the earth the marks of torture indelibly etched on their bodies by the gruesome actions of Joll. For the prisoners' suffering is a monument to, a reminder of, "this obscure chapter in the history of the world"—the obscure chapter when the evils of Joll and company proliferated and blossomed. But the absence of racism in the magistrate's fantasy about burying the prisoners alive doesn't make it any more virtuous. It's seems (at least until the clarification he offers in the next quote) like a selfish dream motivated by his desire to restore normalcy and tranquility to the frontier—an ideal atmosphere which the "ugly" victims of torture taint through their sheer existence. To wipe them away would wipe away any physical markers of the Empire's evils, and create a space where "a new start," one rid of injustice and cruelty, could be forged.

"But that will not be my way. The new men of Empire are the ones who believe in fresh starts, new chapters, clean pages; I struggle on with the old story, hoping that before it is finished it will reveal to me why it was that I thought it worth the trouble. Thus it is that, administration of law and order in these parts having today passed back to me, I order that the prisoners be fed, that the doctor be called in to do what he can, that the barracks return to being a barracks, that arrangements be made to restore the prisoners to their former lives as soon as possible, as far as possible."

Related Characters: The Magistrate (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 27

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs immediately after the last one; Joll has finished interrogating his prisoners and left the settlement to rejoin his expedition.

The magistrate is disavowing his recent fantasy about burying the barbarian prisoners in order to forge a fresh start—an Empire unmarked by any physical reminders of its past evils. For building new starts by erasing the past—by tidying and cleaning up the past through a repressive censorship—is not the magistrate's style. The magistrate struggles on with the old story and tarries with the pain of the past in order to realize, whenever it ends and times change, and the evil behind such pain is rectified through justice, what made the struggle worthwhile in the first place. When society returns to being good and just, he hopes that the new life it affords him will make him realize—will make him palpably understand—what about life it was that made him keep going.

Chapter 2 Quotes

"But more often in the very act of caressing her I am overcome with sleep as if polelaxed, fall into oblivion sprawled upon her body, and wake an hour or two later dizzy, confused, thirsty. These dreamless spells are like death to me, or enchantment, black, outside time."

Related Characters: The Magistrate (speaker), The Barbarian Girl

Related Themes:

Page Number: 35

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs during one of the magistrate's massaging rituals with the barbarian girl; this takes place shortly after Joll has left the settlement to rejoin his expedition, after interrogating the barbarian prisoners.

Here we begin to see the conflicts arising around the magistrate's relationship with the barbarian girl in a concrete form. Perhaps what's most significant about this passage is the magistrate's ambiguous association of death, and a simultaneous "enchantment" characterized by blackness and timelessness, to his experience of these sexualized spells. The magistrate's entrance into these spells, these lulls of "oblivion" brought about by his sexualized massaging ritual with the girl, mark for him an exit from all ordinary experience. It's as if the magistrate falls asleep while retaining the most minimal degree of consciousness necessary to have self-awareness, such that he goes into the deepest depths of his sleeping mind while still a tiny bit awake.

The magistrate therefore enters a mental state that is totally *other* to his ordinary experience. It's significant that this state is triggered by his encounters with the barbarian girl. It speaks to the fact that the magistrate, through his sexualization of the barbarian girl—through his turning the caretaking of her injuries into a less than strictly medical enterprise—is beginning to enter a relationship with her where she's somehow *othered*, or made into a figure that he finds himself unable or unwilling to identify with in a way that suggests the presence of empathy. Though this conflict is still in its initial stages at this point in the book, and its relation to the barbarian girl not yet explicit, this moment—where the magistrate notes this radically altered state of experience—signals that there's something very peculiar about how his engagement with her affects him psychologically.

"It always pained me in the old days to see these people fall victim to the guile of shopkeepers, exchanging their goods for trinkets, lying drunk in the gutter, and confirming thereby the settlers' litany of prejudice: that barbarians are lazy, immoral, filthy, stupid. Where civilization entailed the corruption of barbarian virtues and the creation of a dependent people, I decided, I was opposed to civilization; and upon this resolution I based the conduct of my administration. (I say this who now keeps a barbarian girl for my bed!)"

Related Characters: The Magistrate (speaker), The Barbarian Girl

Related Themes:

Page Number: 43

Explanation and Analysis

Joll has recently left the settlement to rejoin his expedition after torturing the barbarian prisoners he'd captured, and the magistrate has just noted that winter is settling in.

This passage reveals the sense of compassion which the magistrate has for the barbarians, and his willingness to criticize "civilization" when it only means corruption and prejudice. The magistrate isn't unquestioningly devoted to the Empire, and is capable of seeing past the glittering surface of civility and observing its underlying evils. Further, he's willing to forge his administration around opposing those evils—a political move which, on his part, is a risk to his own status, since those in power around him are involved in upholding such evils. The magistrate's ability to see how the barbarians get cast as "lazy, immoral, filthy, and stupid" highlights his insights into the settlers' racism, how they con the barbarians they trade with only to then blame them for how it impacts their lives. And yet at the same time the magistrate acknowledges his hypocrisy, for he himself "keeps a barbarian girl in his bed," dehumanizing and "othering" her in his own way.

"Is this how her torturers felt hunting their secret, whatever they thought it was? For the first time I feel a dry pity for them: how natural a mistake to believe that you can burn or tear or hack your way into the secret body of the other. The girl lies in my bed, but there is no good reason why it should be a bed. I behave in some ways like a lover—but I might equally well tie her to a chair and beat her, it would be no less intimate."

Related Characters: The Magistrate (speaker), The Barbarian Girl

Related Themes:

Page Number: 49

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs after the magistrate, having just paid a visit to the girl at the inn, returns to his apartment to rejoin the sleeping barbarian girl.

Here, the magistrate unearths a parallel between how he

treats the barbarian girl and the way he thinks her torturers viewed her. It's as if, through applying various techniques of torture to gain entry "into the secret body of the other"—into some hidden truth the girl was withholding about potential barbarian invasion plans—that the torturers were engaging in a process no less intimate than the magistrate's own way of relating to and sexualizing the girl. Frustrated and disappointed by the girl's constant elusiveness, by her enigmatic nature which refuses to yield to his sexual expectations, the magistrate feels a "dry pity" for the torturers' belief that they could enter the girl's mind absolutely. For he, like the torturers, engages in a similarly futile quest to enter and unravel the mind of the girl—to achieve a state of perfect understanding where the girl's strange nature can be explained, and even manipulated in a way to conform with his desires.

In this way, the magistrate displays a violence analogous to that of the girl's torturers. Though disguised as the proceedings of romantic and sexual desire, the magistrate's relationship with the girl is one characterized by a violent, narcissistic drive to break open her lackluster outer personality and unveil a more desirable cluster of animate passions within. As such, the magistrate thinks that beating the girl would be no less intimate than wooing her, since both are essentially brutal.

❝ "It is I who am seducing myself, out of vanity, into these meanings and correspondences. What depravity is it that is creeping upon me? I search for secrets and answers, no matter how bizarre, like an old woman reading tea-leaves. There is nothing to link me with torturers, people who sit waiting like beetles in dark cellars. How can I believe that a bed is anything but a bed, a woman's body anything but a site of joy? I must assert my distance from Colonel Joll! I will not suffer for his crimes!"

Related Characters: The Magistrate (speaker), Colonel Joll, The Barbarian Girl

Related Themes:

Page Number: 50

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs shortly after the last one; the magistrate has returned to his apartment from a visit to the girl at the inn, rejoining the barbarian girl in bed.

The magistrate is beginning to feel like Joll's merciless sense of entitlement and belief in having unadulterated access to the minds of his torture victims has infected his own mind. This brutish way of approaching the world—of standing before the world as if its people held hidden truths and secrets which one was owed and could ascertain with the right method and rigor—is the "depravity" the magistrate is wary has befallen him. For the magistrate now finds himself reading into the external world as if it were a "tea-leaf" possessing a secret, prophetic truth. But how, the magistrate questions here, could he possibly believe there to be some hidden, self-involved meaning behind the surface of things—how could a bed be something more profound than itself, or the body of the barbarian girl a haven of concealed, deeper truths, and not merely a zone of sexual pleasure? Thus, the magistrate feels compelled to assert his distance from Joll in order to "not suffer for his crimes"—to not suffer from the criminal, evil ways he views his relationship to things external to and different from him.

❝ "I wish that these barbarians would rise up and teach us a lesson, so that we would learn to respect them. We think of the country here as ours, part of our Empire—our outpost, our settlement, our market centre. But these people, these barbarians don't think of it like that at all. 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 a wall around our town, but they still think of us as visitors, transients."

Related Characters: The Magistrate (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 58

Explanation and Analysis

The magistrate has invited the officer of a detachment of new conscripts to his settlement to dinner at the inn, and says this to him as they converse after their meal. The officer has just mentioned that there's a rumor going around about the Empire launching a general offensive against the barbarians in the spring, and this perturbs the magistrate.

Here, the magistrate asserts his compassion for the barbarians as people who are as equally human as the Empire's citizens, and who deserve the same possibilities for experiencing and preserving welfare and prosperity in their lives. But the magistrate does not just propose that the barbarians are equals—he goes a step further by

condemning the Empire's sense of superiority and entitlement, and insists that its people are mere outsiders in the desert, which, he emphasizes, is more truly the home and dominion of the barbarians. The willingness to so boldly profess his wish that the barbarians rise up and teach the Empire a lesson testifies to the devotion with which the magistrate upholds his moral convictions.

This passage also shows how the magistrate sees the barbarians as adhering to a more cyclical, "eternal" view of time than the Empire does—and this is partly why the magistrate idealizes and empathizes with the barbarians so much.

> "I have hitherto liked to think that she cannot fail to see me as a man in the grip of a passion, however perverted and obscure that passion may be, that in the bated silences which make up so much of our intercourse she cannot but feel my gaze pressing in upon her with the weight of a body. I prefer not to dwell on the possibility that what a barbarian upbringing teaches a girl may be not to accommodate a man's every whim, including the whim of neglect, but to see sexual passion, whether in horse or goat or man or woman, as a simple fact of life with the clearest of means and the clearest of ends; so that the confused actions of an aging foreigner who picks her up off the streets and installs her in his apartment so that he can now kiss her feet, now browbeat her, now anoint her with exotic oils, now ignore her, now sleep in her arms all night, now moodily sleep apart, may seem nothing but evidences of impotence, indecisiveness, alienation from his own desires."

Related Characters: The Magistrate (speaker), The Barbarian Girl

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 63-4

Explanation and Analysis

The magistrate has recently persuaded the officer he dined with not long ago to send out a party of men to retrieve the corpses of two soldiers who deserted his party. After saying that he wrote home to the soldier's families informing them of their loss, the magistrate's narration shifts to another massaging ritual with the girl.

The tension ushered into the magistrate's sexuality by the barbarian girl's enigmatic personality comes to a pinnacle here. The magistrate has liked to think that the tumult and confusion of his passion for the girl was hidden from her injured eyes; he's considered her to be fully visible, susceptible to his every investigation, and therefore capable of being fully comprehended and understood, despite her ongoing elusiveness. At the same time, while he's considered himself as looking upon her from this privileged view, he's thought her to have no such special access to his own body and mind—he's thought of her as a body which is only looked upon, but doesn't look back. This habit of viewing the barbarian girl's blindness, however, is buckling under a new doubt: that the girl, in fact, can see the confusion and weakness of the magistrate—that she can sense, through his actions, his "impotence" and "alienation."

This doubt, therefore, marks a pivotal moment in the magistrate's psychology. Instead of viewing himself as something completely whole, distinct from, and inaccessible to the girl, yet still capable of accessing the hidden depths of her personality for his own enjoyment and intellection, the magistrate at this moment finds what once was his sense of wholeness fractured and de-completed in a new way, by a troubling prospect: that the girl has more access to his mind, more wit to observe his motivations, than he previously thought.

At this moment, the girl ceases to have the status of a frustrating Other who ceaselessly resists what the magistrate thinks to be his piercing power of comprehension. Instead, she becomes something even more frustrating: an Other who still cannot be comprehended, but who herself comprehends the magistrate almost entirely, and has much more access into his psychology than he has heretofore liked to imagine.

Chapter 3 Quotes

> "... it has not escaped me that in bed in the dark the marks her torturers have left upon her, the twisted feet, the half-blind eyes, are easily forgotten. Is it then the case that it is the woman I want, that my pleasure in her is spoiled until these marks on her are erased and she is restored to herself; or is it the case (I am not stupid, let me say these things) that it is the marks on her which drew me to her but which, to my disappointment, I find, do not go deep enough? Too much or too little: is it she I want or the traces of a history her body bears?"

Related Characters: The Magistrate (speaker), The Barbarian Girl

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 73

Explanation and Analysis

The magistrate has embarked on his trip to return the barbarian girl to her people, and this quote occurs in the early morning of the eighth day. The magistrate sleeps in the same tent with the girl, and they've just had sexual intercourse.

Here, as the magistrate continues to grapple with his inability to dig beneath the surface the barbarian girl—his failure to discover a hidden vitality within her—he wonders whether he's seeking a depth within her that's concealed by the marks of her torture, or a depth within the marks of torture themselves. Was he truly attracted to *her* in the first place, or rather to her scars? The ultimate question, perhaps, is whether the magistrate has dehumanized the girl to the extent that he's merely using her to uncover "the traces of a history her body bears." If the latter is the case, then the magistrate's earlier worries about becoming infected with Joll's tendency to approach his victims as if they bore a "truth" he was looking for were legitimate.

In approaching the girl's marks as if they bear a deeper history, the magistrate not only reflects Joll's obsession with the truth, but also the magistrate's own earlier claim to tarry with the pain of the past, and not merely sweep it under the rug of history in order to form a "new" Empire supposedly divorced from its past. In remaining fixated on the girl's wounds, the magistrate reflects this prior vow to keep the past in the view of the presented, but in a perverted form. Whereas the magistrate's philosophy about remembering the past is divested of personal interest, the magistrate's desire to uncover the girl's particular past marks his desire to possess her and assimilate her enigmatic nature to his own understanding.

Chapter 4 Quotes

❝ "I am aware of the source of my elation: my alliance with the guardians of the Empire is over, I have set myself in opposition, the bond is broken, I am a free man. Who would not smile? But what a dangerous joy! It should not be so easy to attain salvation. And is there any principle behind my opposition? Have I not simply been provoked into a reaction by the sight of one of the new barbarians usurping my desk and pawing my papers? As for this liberty which I am in the process of throwing away, what value does it have to me? Have I truly enjoyed the unbounded freedom of this past year in which more than ever before my life has been mine to make up as I go along?"

Related Characters: The Magistrate (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 91

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs shortly after the magistrate, having returned to the settlement from delivering the barbarian girl to her people, is arrested by Mandel on the charge of consorting with the barbarians.

Freed from his allegiance with the "guardians of the Empire," the magistrate is overwhelmed with glee. Finally, the pressure to conform his own moral outlook to the anti-barbarian perspective fueling the Empire's military campaign has been lifted. An extraordinary weight taken off his shoulders, the magistrate can now express himself freely; and even though the magistrate's daring dissent towards the Empire has landed him in prison, the sheer freedom of being openly defiant and not coerced into social conformity is enough to outweigh the freedom lost with imprisonment. For, as the magistrate says, the liberty he possessed as a "free man" brought him no distinct joy.

That the magistrate calls Mandel a "new barbarian" is significant—it shows how, in the magistrate's mind, the Empire's military officials (such as Mandel) have usurped the position of the barbarians in his old worldview, in his mind prior to his arrest. Now that his allegiance with the Empire's military officials has been severed, the magistrate is able to view them as a real foe—he can view the military as they view the barbarians.

❝ "I stare all day at the empty walls, unable to believe that the imprint of all the pain and degradation they have enclosed will not materialize under an intent enough gaze; or shut my eyes, trying to attune my hearing to that infinitely faint level at which the cries of all who suffered here must still beat from wall to wall. I pray for the day when these walls will be levelled and the unquiet echoes can finally take wing; though it is hard to ignore the sound of brick being laid on brick so nearby."

Related Characters: The Magistrate (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 92

Explanation and Analysis

This passage occurs soon after the magistrate is arrested by Mandel after returning from his trip to return the barbarian girl to her people. The walls of his prison cell, he says, will not reveal the suffering they've contained in the past, no matter how hard he stares at them. Nor will the space around him emit the cries of past prisoners, however hard he tries to meditate. Here, therefore, we see another instance of the magistrate trying to connect to the tragedies of past histories, as well as read into the surface of external objects—like the walls around him—some profound meaning that remains as a trace of the past. Further, the magistrate's prayer that the walls eventually be destroyed such that the "unquiet echoes" of the past will be freed and no longer contained reflects his fantasy, earlier in the novel, about burying Joll's barbarian prisoners alive.

Whereas now, in his cell, the magistrate wants to let the suffering contained by the prison to be let into the boundless expanse of space outside, before, when he fantasized about burying the prisoners, he considered the possibility of erasing their pain from the face of the earth in order to grant the Empire a fresh start—a future unhindered by any reminders of its former evils. Though the two desires don't exactly parallel one another, and though he attributes the latter to the likes of Joll, both nonetheless share the magistrate's fixation with the idea of eliminating barriers so as to let dammed-up potentials be set free. Whereas the magistrate wants to let the pain and suffering of the past rush freely into the atmosphere, so that it's no longer repressed by history and society, the Empire wants to eliminate the memory of the past entirely.

❝ "Nevertheless, I should never have allowed the gates of the town to be opened to people who assert that there are higher considerations than those of decency. They exposed her father to her naked and made him quiver with pain; they hurt her and he could not stop them (on a day I spent occupied with the ledgers in my office). Thereafter she was no longer fully human, sister to all of us. Certain sympathies died, certain movements of the heart became no longer possible to her. I, too, if I live long enough in this cell with its ghosts not only of the father and the daughter but of the man who even by lamplight did not remove the black discs from his eyes and the subordinate whose work it was to keep the brazier fed, will be touched with the contagion and turned into a creature that believes in nothing."

Related Characters: The Magistrate (speaker), Colonel Joll, The barbarian girl's father, The Barbarian Girl

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 94

Explanation and Analysis

This important quote occurs after the magistrate has been arrested (by Mandel) upon returning from his trip to return the barbarian girl to her people. In his cell, he's ruminating about the girl. Finally, the magistrate is coming to terms with the enigmatically stoic nature of the barbarian girl's personality—her lack of animated emotion and her seemingly depthless surface, devoid of passion. As he now begins to attribute her distant persona to the effects of being tortured, the magistrate comes to think: how could the girl be otherwise? Losing her humanity after the trauma of torture, she came to lose "certain movements of the heart." What, then, might become of the magistrate himself? Under the dehumanizing strain of imprisonment, the magistrate fears that he, too, might soon devolve into the blankness which shrouded the girl's life. He, too, might be infected by the mad actions of Joll's men and be "turned into a creature," not a 'human' per se, but a "creature that believes in nothing."

❝ "For me, at this moment, striding away from the crowd, what has become important above all is that I should neither be contaminated by the atrocity that is about to be committed nor poison myself with impotent hatred of its perpetrators. I cannot save the prisoners, therefore let me save myself. Let it at the very least be said, if it ever comes to be said, if there is ever anyone in some remote future interested to know the way we lived, that in this farthest outpost of the Empire of light there existed one man who in his heart was not a barbarian."

Related Characters: The Magistrate (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 120

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs as the magistrate, who's escaped from his cell, looks upon the barbarian prisoners who Joll and his men have brought back from their expedition, and who are being lined up in front of the whole settlement to be publicly beaten.

Faced with the horrific possibility of witnessing the brutal mutilation of Joll's prisoners, the magistrate, for once, decides that he should turn his face away from suffering: that he should resist being both traumatized by the violence itself and overwhelmed with hatred of its perpetrators. Whereas the magistrate has previously defended the virtues of facing suffering directly, he's always referred to the suffering of the past, saying that one should struggle and tarry with its memory rather than try to erase it in order to forge a "fresh start."

Here, however, the magistrate is faced with an imminent possibility of suffering, with a future pain—with the public display of anti-barbarian torture that is moments away. Though the magistrate ultimately stays and watches the violence unfold, the fact that he initially opts to turn from it suggests either that he's become so unbearably dismayed by his imprisonment and the anti-barbarian society around him that he simply couldn't stand the added distress of witnessing such an atrocity, or that he values struggling with and examining past suffering more than seeing it repeat itself in a future instance, or both.

Further, this passage also reveals the magistrate's desire to go down in history with the reputation of being a good man among the otherwise evil populace of the Empire. Later, this desire intensifies into an aspiration for martyrdom.

Chapter 5 Quotes

❝ "I am not unaware of what such daydreams signify, dreams of becoming an unthinking savage, of taking the cold road back to the capital, of groping my way out to the ruins in the desert, of returning to the confinement of my cell, of seeking out the barbarians and offering myself to them to use as they wish. Without exception they are dreams of ends: dreams not of how to live but of how to die. And everyone, I know, in that walled town . . . is similarly preoccupied."

Related Characters: The Magistrate (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 153

Explanation and Analysis

The magistrate has been released from imprisonment, and it's been months since Joll's expeditionary force has departed—yet there's been no news of them at all. This quote occurs as the magistrate, after a leisurely stroll, wades into the lake near the village of the fisher-folk.

Once again, the magistrate's preoccupation with the linear, beginning-to-end structure of time characteristic of the Empire's society, and its conflict with the cyclical time of the seasons and natural world at large, comes to the fore here. This passage is significant because it shows how even though the magistrate is thinking about such possible escapes from life under the Empire as "groping [his] way out to the ruins in the desert" and "seeking out the barbarians" to offer himself to them, the linear patter of start-to-finish still plagues his way of thinking. The pattern has inscribed itself as such a deep level of his psychological processes that it's become the very structure of his thought itself—it therefore seems inescapable. Even though he's become an outsider to the Empire's society, he still thinks like everyone "in that walled town," who are "similarly preoccupied" with "dreams of ends."

❝ "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 Empire! Empire has created the time of history. Empire has located its existence not in the smooth recurrent spinning time of the cycle of the season but in the jagged time of rise and fall, of beginning and end, of catastrophe. Empire dooms itself to live in history and plot against history. One thought alone preoccupies the submerged mind of Empire: how not to end, how not to die, how to prolong its era."

Related Characters: The Magistrate (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 153-4

Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs shortly after the last one. The magistrate has been released from imprisonment, and it's been three months since Joll's expeditionary force departed. After a leisurely walk, the magistrate is wading in the lake near the village of the fisher-folk.

Here, the magistrate distinguishes between two orders of time: the cyclical time of the season, and the linear time of human history, which rises and falls and is caught going from one pole to another—from beginning to end. Members of the Empire like the magistrate, he claims, are unable to experience the cyclical register of time, for the Empire's way of plotting against history has tainted their perception of time. Instead of organizing itself according to cyclical structures which mirror the seasons, the Empire organizes its society according to survival: "how not to end, how not to

die, how to prolong its era." Therefore, the Empire "dooms itself to live in history and plot against history," since it lives in a linear mode of time that naturally proceeds from beginning to end, yet simultaneously endeavors to prevent that natural procession, and forever forestall the arrival of the end. This meditation by the magistrate gives a sense that the "submerged mind of Empire" is profoundly alienated from the natural order of the world.

❝ "To the last we will have learned nothing. In all of us, deep down, there seems to be something granite and unteachable. No one truly believes, despite the hysteria in the streets, that the world of tranquil certainties we were born into is about to be extinguished. No one can accept that an imperial army has been annihilated by men with bows and arrows and rusty old guns who live in tents and never wash and cannot read or write. And who am I to jeer at life-giving illusions? Is there any better way to pass these last days than in dreaming of a savior with a sword who will scatter the enemy hosts and forgive us the errors that have been committed by others in our name and grant us a second chance to build our earthly paradise?"

Related Characters: The Magistrate (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 165

Explanation and Analysis

During what are thought to be the last days at the settlement in anticipation of a barbarian invasion, after having regained his leadership of the town, the magistrate notes that none of the remaining townspeople truly believe that the end is near. "The world of tranquil certainties" in which they have grown up, it appears, is too hard to give up; ultimately, the remaining settlers are incapable of being disillusioned about the supposedly insurmountable strength of their Empire and the safety they've always considered guaranteed. They cannot possibly accept that the primitive barbarians have defeated the military sophistication of the Empire's army.

However, the magistrate says, how can one not endure these final days without such "life-giving illusions?" The belief in a savior who will defeat the barbarians and wash away the sins of the Empire's army is almost a necessary delusion for survival. We might read this moment as the first time in the novel, therefore, that the magistrate forgoes his criticism of forging "fresh starts"—the mentality characteristic of the "new men of Empire," and the Empire's tendency to live in a linear register of time always proceeding from start to finish. Yet the magistrate asks for a savior who will forgive him and other dissenters like him for the misdeeds of people such as Joll—in this case, then, we might read the magistrate as not so much asking for a "fresh start," but rather a chance to merely fix the wrongdoings of the past. In this way, the magistrate is still consistent with his previously stated beliefs.

Chapter 6 Quotes

❝ "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."

Related Characters: The Magistrate (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 180

Explanation and Analysis

These are the last two sentences of the book, which the magistrate speaks after noting that winter is on its way again. His settlement (over which he's regained leadership) is mostly deserted, and those who remain fear an imminent barbarian invasion. The magistrate then passes a scene similar to that which he's often dreamed about—children building a castle in the snow—but he cannot find any meaning in this encounter, and so leaves it feeling "stupid" and continues on his way.

That the magistrate continues to press on along a road that guarantees no destination—that he forges on surviving without any indication of what his future will look like—indicates that the linear, start-to-finish, historical time characteristic of life in the Empire is fading from his perception of the world. The cyclical time he once romanticized—the time of the seasons, of the natural world indifferent to the aims and ends of human affairs—is now sweeping him up in the uncertainty of utter aimlessness. Though the magistrate puts this way of viewing the world on a pedestal—as something superior to linearity, and which still flourishes in the untarnished, uncivilized minds of children (and perhaps barbarians), and is as natural, so he says, as the relationship which fish have with water—he seems to have always thought of this cyclical way of living as something which humans themselves should celebrate through the way they organize their society. This way of

perceiving the world, he thinks, should be expressed through human action.

Now, however, with the society around him crumbling and the threat of an imminent barbarian invasion, the prospect of one day creating an ideal society uncorrupted by the Empire's lust for expansion and self-preservation (the preservation of its identity's rigid contours as cut-off from and separate the barbarians) and more attuned to the ambiguous fluidity of a heterogenous, cyclical world, has dimmed. Though he's left with a sense of the cyclical time he once idolized, it's now only a force of destruction. With no stable social world around him to cultivate and celebrate cyclicality through its culture and organization, the magistrate is left alone with the destructive shadows of what once was a wondrous force.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1

Waiting for the Barbarians opens onto a conversation between the magistrate and Colonel Joll; the magistrate narrates, beginning the novel with a comment on Joll's sunglasses—he's never seen anything like them, and wonders if Joll is **blind**. The two, meeting at an inn located in the settlement of the magistrate's jurisdiction, drink from a flask. The magistrate notes that Joll doesn't discuss why he's been sent to the settlement—he just knows that Joll has arrived from the capital of the Empire under "emergency powers."

The magistrate establishes the connection between blindness and Joll's sunglasses the instant he meets him, setting up what, in retrospect, turns out to be an ironic premonition. Joll's glasses both symbolize an impenetrability—the magistrate cannot look into his eyes and "read" him, though he can see the magistrate's eyes—as well as a filtration of the world around him, such that he manipulates what appears to him as true, like he does whenever he interrogates a prisoner. Note also the "emergency powers," a vague phrase that will allow the Empire's agents to justify even their most inhumane actions.

Joll describes a hunt he participated in, and killing a "mountain" of animals. The magistrate discusses hunting and fishing in the settlement, emphasizing the cycle of the seasons and migrations of birds. Joll retires early, and the magistrate says that he's told the staff at the inn of Joll's important status as a member of the Third Bureau, "the most important division of the Civil Guard nowadays." The magistrate leaves the inn, opting to sleep outside on a mat; he wakes up before dawn, and makes note of the beautiful star-speckled sky, adding that he hasn't seen the Empire's capital city since he was a young man.

The magistrate's decision to alert the staff of the inn that they're hosting an important guest suggests that he feels a certain pressure to ensure Joll forms a good impression of his settlement. Further, the magistrate's focus on the cycle of the seasons reflects his preoccupation with cyclical time and a closeness to nature. The fact that he hasn't been to the capital since his youth suggests that he's willfully refrained from returning.

The magistrate's narration then cuts to another conversation with Joll. They are in a hut next to the settlement's granary; two prisoners are being held there. The magistrate explains to Joll that they don't have any facilities for prisoners, since there is little crime in the village and punishments are usually issued in the form of fines or mandatory labor. The magistrate tells Joll that the prisoners were picked up a few days ago, after a raid which occurred about twenty miles away. He adds that raids are unusual, since the nomads usually stay away from the Empire's forts. The prisoners, he says, claim to have been uninvolved in the raid, and he offers to help Joll with their language if he desires to speak with them, adding: "perhaps they are telling the truth."

The magistrate takes special caution to inform Joll that crime is rare in the village—to convey to Joll that the settlement has a certain quality of innocence and peace. He seems to be worried that Joll will make a bigger deal than necessary out of the prisoner's arrests, and perhaps conclude that the barbarians are a perpetual problem. Further, that the magistrate vouches for the prisoners by suggesting they could be telling the truth demonstrates the magistrate's hesitation towards assuming they're guilty—a hesitance Joll doesn't express at all.

The prisoners are a young boy and his uncle. Going up to the barbarian boy, the magistrate says "we want to talk to you," but the boy does not respond. A guard then chimes in, accusing the boy of pretending to not understand. Having noticed that the boy's face is bruised and swollen, the magistrate asks who beat him, but the guard denies any involvement, claiming that the boy "was like that when he came." The magistrate then asks the boy, directly, who beat him, but again gets no response—though he notes that the boy stares over his shoulder at Colonel Joll. Trying to explain why the boy is staring, the magistrate tells Joll that the boy has probably never seen sunglasses before, and must think Joll is a **blind** man. He smiles, but notes that Joll doesn't smile back—it seems that, in front of prisoners, one must maintain a certain demeanor.

When the boy stares at Joll after the magistrate asks who beat him, we can infer that Joll is the perpetrator. The guard's response to the magistrate—that the boy was bruised and beaten when he came—therefore suggests that he feels pressure not to squeal on Joll, who must have ordered the guard not to say anything. Joll's sense of brooding intimidation comes to the fore in this scene, as we see how he's starting to manipulate the magistrate's very own guards. Further, the magistrate's suggestion that the boy must think Joll is a blind man holds an unintentional irony—that Joll truly is blind to the humanity of the barbarians.

The magistrate then turns to the barbarian man, and explains why he's been arrested. He explains that Joll visits all the forts on the frontier, his job being to "find out the truth." But the man replies that he and his nephew are innocent; they know nothing about thieving, he says, and were simply on their way to the magistrate's fort in order to see the doctor, when they were stopped "for nothing." The boy, he adds, has a sore that will not heal. The barbarian boy then shows everyone a sore on his arm, and the magistrate leaves, walking back with Joll to the inn.

The magistrate's introduction of Joll as someone employed to "find out the truth" implies that he is still going along with Joll at this point—that he still believes Joll works to honestly and justly deal with the prisoners to find out whether they are innocent or not. The boy and the uncle also seem wholly innocent in this scene, based on the boy's sore and the uncle's explanation. This will not matter to Joll, though.

The magistrate tells Joll that they haven't taken any prisoners in a very long time, and explains that the "so-called banditry" of the nomads (referred to as "barbarians") isn't really that severe: they usually just steal a few sheep or take a pack-animal from a train. He adds that sometimes his men raid the bandits in return, but ultimately he expresses an empathetic understanding of them as "destitute tribespeople" who, living along the river, become accustomed to their unique was a life.

The magistrate takes special care here to again reinforce the rarity of there being prisoners at his settlement, perhaps as a final plea to get Joll to not take the matter too seriously. More significantly, the magistrate downplays the occasional crimes of the barbarians, citing their banditry as a way of life, which in turn boldly downplays the authority of the Empire to act against the barbarians.

The magistrate then once again suggests that the barbarian man, the older prisoner, was telling the truth earlier, saying that it's unlikely that they would have been brought along on a raiding party. The magistrate notes that he's becoming conscious of the fact that he's pleading for their innocence, and asks Joll what use, even if the prisoners are lying, they would be to him. Joll, the magistrate notes with irritation, is prone to providing cryptic silences; all Joll says is that he ought to question them later that evening, regardless of their possible innocence. The magistrate offers to help Joll with the prisoners' language, but the Colonel tells him that the magistrate will find it "tedious"—there are "set procedures" he performs.

While the magistrate has been subtly pleading for the prisoners' innocence all along, what's perhaps most significant here is his question to Joll about what use the prisoners would be even if they were lying and guilty, for this shows that the magistrate personally wouldn't care if they were. This hints at the magistrate's heightened concern for the well-being of the prisoners, instead of the law's mandates, suggesting that the magistrate has sympathy for the barbarian's way of life because he acknowledges that it naturally clashes with the Empire.

The magistrate's narration then shifts to a point after Joll's interrogation. He notes that, despite peoples' claims to having heard screaming coming from the granary (where Joll questioned the prisoners), he heard nothing, even though his ears were "tuned to the pitch of human pain" the entire evening. The magistrate then says that, when he saw Joll again, he asked him how he knows when someone is telling him the truth. Joll replies that after a certain amount of lying and being tortured, "a certain tone enters the voice of a man who is telling the truth." The magistrate says, from his conversation with the Colonel, he takes away the philosophy that "pain is truth; all else is subject to doubt."

Joll's confidence in his ability to perceive a "tone of truth" in the voices of his victims comes across as exceedingly arrogant and exudes a sense of entitlement, as if he had the privileged right to cause people pain in the pursuit of what he thinks to be the truth. The magistrate's understanding of Joll's philosophy further shows that the driving force behind Joll's sense of power and rightful authority in inflicting torture is a fundamental belief that only pain reveals the truth.

The magistrate quotes the report that Colonel Joll gave him regarding the interrogation. With robotic formality and brevity, Joll announces that, as the interrogation proceeded with the barbarian man, contradictions showed up in his testimony, and when confronted with them, the prisoner became violent, attacking the investigative officer. The prisoner was knocked fatally against a wall, and Joll adds that attempts to revive him failed.

The brutish and gruesome nature of Joll's deeds shockingly contrasts with the conciseness and formal tone of his letter. He does not mention his employment of torture tactics at all, but frames the interrogation as if he had simply had a conversation with the prisoner who was angered solely by Joll's speech. We can infer that Joll and his men murdered the prisoner.

The magistrate then says he summoned the guard present at the interrogation to make a statement, since it's required by law. The guard's comments confirm Joll's account about the barbarian man's attack on the investigative officer, and the magistrate asks the guard if Joll told him what to say in his statement—the guard says yes, and the magistrate asks if the prisoner's hands were tied. The guard says yes to this as well, but instantly corrects himself, denying that the prisoner was bound.

Once again the brooding intimidation of Joll comes to the fore, as he's even manipulated the magistrate's own men into keeping his acts in the interrogation room a secret. The guard is noticeably censoring himself under the pressure of being accused by Joll—doing his duty, even when it's clearly immoral—as demonstrated when he corrects his initial affirmation of the magistrate's question.

After dismissing the guard, the magistrate visits the granary, where the barbarian boy is still being held. He notices that the body of the boy's uncle is wrapped up in a sack in the corner, and he asks the guard on duty who told him to leave the body in the room. The guard replies that Colonel Joll ordered him to leave it there, and that Joll had also told the boy to sleep with the man (his corpse) to keep him warm. Further, the guard says that Joll pretended that he was going to sew the boy into the sack with the barbarian man's corpse.

This guard's testimony further reveals the grotesque, dehumanizing brutality of Joll's actions in the interrogation room. Joll's command that the boy sleep with the dead corpse of his uncle, and threat to sew him up in the body bag, demonstrate that Joll is motivated by other things than the simple pursuit of justice. Joll finds traumatizing, debasing, and defiling the barbarian prisoners to be a spectacle.

The magistrate and the guard then carry the corpse out of the granary into the yard, where the magistrate cuts open the sack holding the body. He notices that the barbarian man's teeth were all broken, and one of his eyes had been taken from its socket. The magistrate then returns to the boy in the granary, and informs him that he will be interrogated by Joll as well; he advises the boy to tell the truth, as this will prevent him from being harmed—and encourages him that, even if pain is delivered to him, he shouldn't lose heart.

That the magistrate takes the time to inform the boy about what's going to happen, and gives him advice about how to avoid physical harm—and to not lose heart if he can't—demonstrates his fundamental opposition to Joll's practices. On the side of the prisoner, the magistrate communicates with the boy as if counseling him for the evils about to befall him. Unlike Joll, the magistrate displays empathy to the boy—and yet the magistrate also takes no real action to oppose Joll.

The magistrate then says that he never wanted to become embroiled in such an ugly situation—he just wanted to serve out his days on an uneventful frontier, waiting for retirement. He adds that when he dies, all he hopes to achieve is an obituary comprised of three lines of small print in the Imperial gazette.

Joll's presence at the settlement has thwarted the ease which the magistrate had hoped would accompany his later years. His humble aspiration for a small obituary will later morph into a grander desire for martyrdom due to Joll's actions.

The magistrate, however, says that ever since stories began to circulate from the capital about "unrest among the barbarians" last year, the quiet and uneventful life he desired became complicated. But the magistrate claims to have seen nothing in such tales of unrest—that the barbarians had attacked merchants on trade routes, or clashed with border guards, among other things—since he "observed that once in every generation, without fail, there is an episode of hysteria about the barbarians." He adds that "these dreams are of the consequence of too much ease."

The magistrate's insight into the history of the Empire enables him to make connections between the past and the future, such that a pattern is revealed. In this way, his preoccupation with a cyclical dimension of time comes to the surface here, as he's able to see how the supposedly 'linear' history of the Empire actually resembles a circular, self-repeating pattern.

The magistrate then notes that, in the capital, the primary concern was that the northern and western tribes of barbarians were uniting; he says that, in response, the Empire sent reinforcements to the frontier. The magistrate, disappointed that the Empire is caught in another bout of barbarian-hysteria, says that his "easy years" have come to an end. He then remarks that he wished he had simply handed over the two prisoners (the barbarian boy and the barbarian man) to Colonel Joll, and, instead of sticking around and tip-toeing around Joll, that he had left the fort on a hunting trip for several days, only to return to Joll's report ignorant of what happened, putting his seal on the report without reading it or, if he skimmed it, not knowing the sinister reality behind the "investigations" it cites. But, he concludes, he did not take a vacation, and, hearing noises (the boy screaming) coming from the granary, he decides to go and see for himself what was going on.

At the end of this first chapter the magistrate will claim that it's important to struggle with and keep in mind the past, even if its history is unpleasant—instead of forgetting and attempting to forge a "fresh start" divorced from the world which preceded it—but here, the magistrate's wish that he had never been privy to Joll's activities seems to contradict his commitment to not censoring one's knowledge of history. This seems to be the conflict he's dealing with here: to willfully seek out knowledge of a bothersome present, or reserve such energy for uncovering the troubles of a distant past? This conflict will evolve throughout the novel.

The magistrate's narration shifts to an account of a dream-—later on we realize that this sequence of images is, in fact, a **recurring dream** of his. In it, he says that he walks across the main square of his fort, and notices a group of children building a snow castle which they've crowned with a red flag. He says that he's aware of his eerie countenance—his largeness and shadowiness—as he approaches the children, who move to the side as he gets close. Yet one child (perhaps not even a child, he says, as she's older than the others) remains working on the castle, with her hooded back turned to him, undisturbed by his presence. As he stands behind her and watches, she never turns; he adds that he's unable to imagine her face uncovered by her hood.

This first iteration of the magistrate's recurring dream sets up the fundamental conflict that will be central to all versions that follow, despite their variations in content. The magistrate's sense of having a shadowy countenance suggests that he perceives a certain monstrousness to his intentions in approaching the children. This monstrousness, along with his desire but inability to imagine the face of the figure behind the veil of her hood, will later resemble the conflict the magistrate confronts in wanting to possess the barbarian girl and uncover a deeper part of her persona from her opaque surface.

The magistrate's narration then shifts to his arrival at the granary; he's decided to investigate what was happening to the barbarian boy since he could no longer ignore the screaming coming from within. The magistrate examines the boy, noticing that his belly and groins are "pocked with little scabs and bruises and cuts," and he asks the guard what his interrogators did to him. The guard replies that Joll (and presumably another interrogator) took a small knife and made shallow punctures in the boy's skin, turning the knife, like a key, left and right inside the flesh.

This scene reveals another one of Joll's sickeningly brutal acts of mutilation, just one more in a series that is far from over. Coetzee's description of the injuries are gut-wrenching, as they convey an innocent child's body left in the ruins of his former life, shattered by Joll's violence. Here, we see what the madness of Joll's philosophy about pain and truth can make him feel entitled to commit.

The magistrate then wakes the barbarian boy up, and tells him that he's been having a bad dream. The magistrate says that he's been informed of the boy's confession—that he and the old man, along with other's from his clan, have stolen sheep and horses, and that the men from his clan are arming themselves in preparation for a war against the Empire. He then asks the boy if he's telling the truth—if he understands what such a confession will mean: that soldiers of the Empire will ride out against and kill his kinsmen. The boy, however, doesn't respond; the magistrate shakes him and slaps his cheek, but it's "like slapping dead flesh," he says.

The magistrate again consults with the barbarian boy in private, behind Joll's back, demonstrating his concern and empathy. Knowing that Joll only measures truth by suffering, and that such a method only leads his victims to concoct whatever information he's seeking in order to stop the application of unbearable pain, the magistrate wants to confirm that the boy hasn't just made his story up to appease Joll, and to inform him of the consequences of his confession.

The magistrate then says that he called in the only doctor at the fort to tend to the barbarian boy; the doctor puts "ointment on the hundred little scabs," and says that, within a week, he'll be able to walk. However, Colonel Joll, the magistrate adds, is impatient, as he wants to quickly launch a raid on the barbarians and take more prisoners, using the boy as a guide. Joll asks the magistrate to release thirty soldiers (out of forty) from his garrison to the campaign, and to supply horses. But the magistrate tries to dissuade him, arguing that, while he doesn't mean any disrespect, Joll is unfit to embark on such a campaign: he's not a professional soldier, and is unfamiliar with the territory. Further, since the boy is terrified of Joll, he will be a poor guide, saying things only to please Joll and avoid more torture. In addition, the magistrate says that the boy is simply unfit for travel. The magistrate concludes that the barbarians, having lived in the desert their whole lives, will easily outmaneuver Joll's company.

The magistrate's willingness to confront Joll about his unfitness for the expedition, even though he goes about it with a reserved professionalism, shows that he's now fundamentally opposed to the colonel's agenda at large. The magistrate also now sees through what he once viewed as the eminence and skill of those who hail from the Third Bureau, and finds Joll fundamentally incompetent as a leader. The magistrate also hints at the flaw in Joll's philosophy about the relationship between pain and truth but pointing out that the boy will only say things in the interest of avoiding further torture at Joll's hands, pointing to the fact that Joll's use of pain manufactures appeasement, not truth.

While Joll hears the magistrate out, the magistrate thinks that the Colonel is leading him on a little, and suspects that his dissenting advice will be noted down by Joll later, with a mention that the magistrate is "unsound." Joll ultimately rejects the magistrate's concerns, saying that he has "a commission to fulfill," and that he "can only judge when [his] work is completed."

In the face of Joll's Bureau-issued authority, the magistrate's opinions, however sane, are insignificant scraps—and his suspicion of being labeled "unsound" highlights the fact that, no matter how much the magistrate is in the right, his sense of what's most sensible or just will always be viewed as hysterical or reactionary if it contrasts with Joll's.

The magistrate notes that Colonel Joll and his company of soldiers begin to make preparations for their trip, and says that he again approached Joll—this time attempting to see just what, exactly, Joll intends to achieve with his campaign. The Colonel responds that he will not commit himself to any single course beforehand, but assures the magistrate that, "broadly speaking," he will locate the nomads' camp and "proceed further as the situation dictates."

Joll's supposed restraint here in refraining from adopting any single course ironically contrasts with the way he approaches torture, where Joll assumes that pain equals the truth, and that his victims are guilty and withholding answers to the questions he's designed beforehand. Because Joll's expedition is informed by the 'truth' sought through the agenda of his interrogations, it's already based upon a single course from the start.

The magistrate notes that, since Joll's second day at his fort, he's been too upset by Joll's presence to be anything more than obligatorily cordial to him. He says that he wonders if the Colonel has a "private ritual of purification" which he performs after every time he tortures someone, "to enable him to return and break bread with other men." Or, the magistrate proposes, "has the Bureau created new men who can pass without disquiet between the unclean and the clean?"

How, the magistrate wonders, can Joll commit such atrocious acts against his torture victims and then return to the normal affairs of everyday experience without being weighed down by a traumatic remorse and disgust? Mustn't Joll feel the need to somehow wash his scenes of torture away from his conscience? The magistrate's interest in this kind of "purification ritual" will crop up again later as well.

The magistrate says that, later that night, he **dreams** of a body lying on its back, with "a wealth of pubic hair glistening . . . across the belly, up the loins, and down like an arrow into the furrow of the legs." He says that when he tries to brush the hair with his hand, the body writhes, and he realizes that what he thought was hair is actually a dense heap of bees.

This version of the magistrate's reoccurring dream might be read as an experience of horror at perceiving the body of another to be alien and frightening—a kind of subconscious translation of some of the novel's themes of "othering," inhumanity, and sexuality.

The magistrate then says that his last act of courtesy to Colonel Joll is to ride out with him and his company of soldiers for a certain distance. He describes the company of men as hungover and unenthused, and notes that the prisoner—the barbarian boy Joll tortured and is using as a guide—looks still very much pained by his wounds. As the magistrate rides back alone to the fort, he says that he's relieved to be back in a world he knows and understands.

The departure of Joll signifies for the magistrate the return of his old, familiar world—a settlement returned to peace and no longer smothered by the corrupt military interests of the capital. Put another way, this perceived return to "normal" also means a reversion to a cyclical view of time after the interruption of a violently linear kind of "history."

As the magistrate is returning to the fort, he passes a cluster of sand dunes in the distance, and remarks about how such dunes cover the ruins of houses that date back to times "before the western provinces were annexed and the fort was built." He says that he enjoys excavating the ruins, adding that he sometimes sentences offenders of petty crimes to dig at the dunes, or even hires casual labor with his own money. The magistrate then mentions that he's discovered pieces of wood and pottery "slips" (a ceramic technique) painted with a peculiar script in the ruins, and that he's bent on deciphering the language; he goes on something of a rant about his obsession with determining how the slips are all related. Are they some sort of mathematical puzzle that, when cracked, reveals a map of the barbarians' land in ancient times?

The magistrate's fascination with ruins which pre-date the establishment of the Empire's western provinces and his own settlement reflects his (later developed) philosophy around history and the past—that he prefers to struggle and tarry with the past instead of trying to forget and repress it in order to forge a new start or take a wholly linear view of history. The magistrate sees at once a miracle and a suffering in the past—he sees the possibility of a truth waiting to be deciphered in the slips, but, when looking to the past, he also sees the self-repeating pattern of the barbarians suffering at the hands of the Empire (or past "barbarians" suffering at the hands of past versions of the "Empire").

The magistrate then describes how, one evening, heeding the rumors of children, he went out to the ruins at the hour when, supposedly, ghosts awaken. He says that after waiting for an hour, he had no luck, and gave up trying to observe the paranormal. The magistrate adds that, as he left the ruins, he felt ridiculous—he suddenly became embarrassingly aware of how he tries to fill the boring emptiness of the desert with a "special historical poignancy."

The magistrate's desire to uncover a profound history in the desolate environment around him leads him to such extremes as believing in the supernatural. This fantasy element of the magistrate's interest in history suggests that it largely serves as a distraction from what he more viscerally feels to be a lack of meaning in the world around him, instead of an avenue for purely intellectual research.

The magistrate's narration then shifts to the fourth day after Colonel Joll's campaign has departed, and he says that the first of his prisoners have arrived. Infuriated at their detainment, the magistrate questions the leading soldier—how can he explain the arrest of "fishing people" (those who live near the settlement but are not considered "barbarians")? But the officer simply hands the magistrate a letter from Joll, asking the magistrate to "hold these and succeeding detainees incommunicado for my return." After calling Joll ridiculous in front of the soldiers, the magistrate reluctantly orders the barracks guards to bring the prisoners into the courtyard. Further, when he asks the men why Joll wanted the prisoners brought back to his fort—why he couldn't ask him his questions out on the field—a soldier responds that none of them could speak their language.

The soldier's response—that the prisoners were sent back to the magistrate's settlement because of a communication issue—comes across as odd. Why, if no one on the expeditionary force can speak the barbarians' language, including Joll, would sending them back to the settlement help? Joll didn't employ a special translator at the settlement before, and even denied the magistrate's offer to help with translation. It seems that Joll's main priority is the imprisonment and torture of any inhabitants of the frontier, including the fishing people, in order to assert the Empire's power and dominance.

After a couple of days pass, the magistrate notes that the prisoners "seem to forget they ever had another home," as they are "seduced" by the free and ample supply of food. He describes their habits as "frank and filthy," as they've turned one corner of the yard into a latrine where both men and women unabashedly do their business out in the open. He adds that there are no children in the group except a mother's baby and a little boy, and says that he hopes that there were other children who escaped from the soldiers. Further, the magistrate says that he hopes that, when the prisoners return home, the history of their captors becomes part of their peoples' oral history, but he also hopes that their memories of the town—with its laid back way of life and exotic food—don't lure them back, since he doesn't want a "race of beggars" on his hands.

The magistrate's support of the barbarians continues to be evidenced here, with his claim that he hopes the history of their captors will become part of their oral history. The magistrate explicitly avows that the barbarians never forget the cruelty of the Empire—that the ugliness of the Empire might therefore always have a place in history, since it will always be remembered. This reflects the magistrate's belief that, unlike the attempts of men like Joll to forge "fresh starts," the past should always be kept at hand, even when it harms the image of the Empire.

The magistrate notes that after a few days of the "barbarians'" captivity, he and the guards begin to lose sympathy for them, annoyed by the filth and smell of the space they occupy, as well as the noise they make arguing and coughing. He adds that a rumor starts to circulate that they are diseased, and will infect the town. Finally fed up, the magistrate writes a letter to the Third Bureau denouncing Colonel Joll, but rips it up.

Even though the magistrate has a lot of compassion for the barbarians, he still is irritated by the lack of hygiene which plagues them for reasons out of their control. The barbarians' inability to maintain proper hygiene is the fault of their captors', yet the townspeople's racism leads them to frame their unsanitary state as an infection they innately possess as barbarians.

Then, in the middle of the night, Colonel Joll returns. The magistrate looks upon Joll's company of men with dread: they've brought back a group of prisoners roped together by the neck. Dismayed, the magistrate returns to his room, and again expresses his irritation at the noises coming from the prison yard below. He says that he feels old and tired, and that all he wants to do is sleep—but he adds that sleep is no longer rejuvenating for him. It's rather "an oblivion, a nightly brush with annihilation." Living in his apartment at the barracks, he concludes, has been bad for him—he should have decided to live in the magistrate's villa, located on the quietest street in town. This would have enabled him to avoid the irritations and miseries of the prisoners. But, he adds, he now knows too much: he's been irreparably infected with the knowledge of the barbarians' plight and the army's involvement in it.

The magistrate's conflict between his conviction that the truth of history should be tarried with and his disappointment in the disappearance of innocence, tranquility, and ease in his life at the settlement reappears. Having lost the ideal, peaceful atmosphere that he always imagined would pervade his later years of service to the Empire, he regrets having put himself in a position of being privy to the suffering of Joll's prisoners. In this way Coetzee subtly criticizes the magistrate—he sees the inhumanity of the Empire's actions, but doesn't yet take direct action to fight these wrongs in a way that truly inconveniences himself. Instead, he just wishes he could return to his life of blissful ignorance.

After Colonel Joll takes a day to rest, he begins his interrogations. The magistrate mentions that, though he once thought Joll lazy, he now sees that the Colonel is tireless in his "quest for the truth." The magistrate notes that the interrogations began in the morning, and were still going on when he returned after dark. Everybody, including the little boy, is questioned, and the magistrate says that, as he sits in his rooms trying to read, he strains his ears "to hear or not to hear sounds of violence." Finally, at midnight, the interrogations stop.

It seems that the magistrate's initial doubts about Joll's commitment to his interrogation techniques—his belief that people like Joll must have some sort of ritual of purification they perform after inflicting torture—don't reflect the gruesome truth of Joll's psychology. Joll is able to torture his prisoners from morning to midnight, without having to take a break. It's as if Joll lives for this, and sees nothing "inhuman" about it.

The magistrate then says that the joy has gone from his life. He spends the day "playing with lists and numbers, stretching petty tasks to fill the hours." After dinner at the inn, reluctant to go home, he goes upstairs to a section where a group of prostitutes works. He sleeps with one girl in particular, and when he wakes up, he finds her lying on the floor. When he asks her why she's sleeping there, she tells him that he was tossing in his sleep, and that he told her to go away. She tells the magistrate not to worry about it, and he says that he'd like to sleep in the room with her again the next day. He mentions how it occurs to him that, no matter what he says to her, the girl at the inn will hear it with sympathy and kindness.

Having been infected with "too much knowledge" about the evil of Joll and the suffering of the barbarian prisoners, the magistrate can no longer return to the (ignorant) joy which this knowledge has destroyed. Only sexual release, it seems, can provide a bout of relief from the anxiety that's flooded his life, and the girl at the inn's kindness—even though it's probably an act—provides an escape into a momentary antidote of delight, even if it's a fantasy.

The magistrate's narration then goes directly to the next night with the girl at the inn, and he says that he awakes to find her on the floor again. She laughs at his worried reaction, and tells him that he pushed her out of bed with his hands and feet, asking him not to get upset, since "we cannot help our dreams or what we do in our sleep." The magistrate then says that he's known the girl for a year, sometimes visiting her twice a week, adding that he feels a "quiet affection for her which is perhaps the best that can be hoped for between an aging man and a girl of twenty." He tries to remember what nightmare makes him push her away, but he can't recall anything.

Even though the girl at the inn provides the magistrate with a superficial form of escape—with her sense of delight and enthusiasm in sleeping with him, which is most likely an act—the presence of nightmares, two nights in a row now, suggests that the anxiety which has overtaken his daytime life still haunts him during these nighttime trysts (as well as his anxiety about his own aging). That the magistrate pushes the girl off the bed during his nightmares perhaps symbolizes his uncertainty around whether resorting to such nightly fantasies is an unethical attempt to escape the truth.

The magistrate describes a meeting he has with Joll in his office back at the barracks. Wearing his "**dark eyeshades**" indoors, Joll tells the magistrate that he's leaving, that he's completed his "inquiries" for now. Wanting to dig into Joll a bit, the magistrate sarcastically (but in a passably sincere tone) asks him if his inquiries among the barbarians have been as successful as he had hoped. When Joll answers affirmatively, the magistrate presses further, asking if he can say whether "we have anything to fear? Can we rest securely at night?" The magistrate notes a slight smile form on Joll's lips, and, without responding, the Colonel bows and leaves.

The magistrate's contempt for Joll continues to surface here, as he subtly condescends to the colonel, pushing against his intimidating presence. Joll's insistence on wearing his sunglasses indoors further emphasizes his desire to remain inscrutable to others, and his need to filter the reality of his impact on the environment around him—his commitment to pursuing the "darkness" of his agenda above anything else, even if it distorts the truth.

The first thing the magistrate does after Joll's departure is to release the prisoners back into the yard. When he opens the door to the hall where they've been kept, he's overwhelmed by an influx of foul odors, and he shouts at the guards to start cleaning. He mentions that, as the prisoners emerge into the daylight, they **shield their eyes**, and one woman in particular has to be helped—though she is young, she constantly shakes like an elderly person. Further, he says that it'd be best if this "obscure chapter in the history of the world" could be erased from the face of the earth. He fantasizes about marching the prisoners out into the desert to bury them (alive, presumably), in order to erase their memory and gain a fresh start. But that won't be his way, he says, since he—unlike the "new men of Empire"—struggles with the past, hoping that, before its story is finished, it will reveal to him why he took the trouble to endure it—why it was worth it in the first place. He orders that the prisoners be fed and that the doctor attend to them.

Here the magistrate officially announces his philosophy, going against men like Joll, that the past should be struggled with, and the truth of its story exposed in full. Further, that the prisoners shield their eyes when they enter the daylight subtly references the recurring theme of blindness. Whereas Joll blocks the light out—and, metaphorically, lives in the darkness of his deeds—the prisoners, having been sucked into Joll's dark world, emerge to the day as newly-made strangers to the light. The barbarian girl especially has been estranged from the light by Joll—her new, literal blindness, in a way, is an effect of the blinders Joll puts up to the truth of the world around him. The prisoners' struggle to enter the daylight of their world post-torture reflects the magistrate's own encounter with his life newly disfigured by Joll.

CHAPTER 2

The magistrate notices that a barbarian woman is in the town begging; after giving her a coin, he tells her that it's too cold and late to be outdoors. Noticing that she's not there the next day, the magistrate asks the gatekeeper where the woman came from, and he replies that she was one of the barbarians Joll brought in, but she was left behind the others. Further, he says that she's **blind**. Several days later, after seeing the woman walking across the town square with two sticks as crutches, the magistrate gives an order that she be brought to him. When she arrives at the magistrate's room at the barracks, he tells her that he knows she's blind and who she is—but she claims to be able to see. The magistrate notes that she doesn't quite look him in the eye. When he tells her to look at him, she says that she *is*: "This is how I look."

The magistrate's initial encounter with the barbarian girl seems to be more motivated by his desire to prevent his settlement from becoming a haven for beggars than by any sense of charity. Despite knowing that the girl is a victim of Joll's, the magistrate first acts as if the girl is herself responsible for being on the streets. Here, the magistrate's earlier fantasy about burying the barbarian prisoners in order to erase their testament to the Empire's cruelty from history reappears, and is expressed in his desire to rid her from public sight. This conflicts with his compassion for the barbarians as well as his commitment to not covering up the truth.

The magistrate then tells the barbarian woman that they don't allow vagrants in the town, and that, with winter approaching, she must either have somewhere to live or go back to her people. He then offers her work cleaning and doing laundry, but she tells the magistrate that he doesn't want someone like her, trying to tell him something herself by making a gesture he doesn't understand (gripping her forefinger and twisting it). She asks to go, and he helps her down the stairs.

The barbarian girl's bizarre gesture might be read as a response to what she perceives as an offer for prostitution by the magistrate. As we later learn, she has already been sleeping with several soldiers in order to make money. Alternately, it might reference the torture she suffered under Joll.

After a day passes, the magistrate finds the barbarian girl (he no longer calls her a woman) again and tells her to come with him. He brings her to his room in the barracks, and tells her about the fort's vagrancy ordinances, sick at himself for doing so. The magistrate then asks her to show him her feet, so he can see what Joll and his interrogation assistants did to her. After she unwraps both feet, she reveals that both of her ankles were broken; she says that they've healed and are no longer painful. The magistrate then begins to wash her feet, which quickly turns into a massage. As he caresses the girl's feet, the magistrate slips into a kind of trance, saying that he loses himself in the rhythm of the massaging, becoming unaware of the girl and divorced from a sense of being in the present moment. Shortly after the magistrate finishes drying the girl's feet, he stretches out on the carpet and quickly falls asleep. When he wakes up, the girl is gone.

Despite the magistrate's sense of disgust at informing the barbarian girl of the fort's vagrancy ordinances, he nevertheless goes through with it. Furthermore, based on what he's said in the past about feeling sorry for the barbarians on the street—since they usually end up there because the town's merchants cheat them—it seems like this way of treating the barbarian girl is out of character for the magistrate. This instance could be read as a symptom of Joll's influence—perhaps the magistrate now feels that he has to adhere to the official, technical mandates of the law, whereas before he interpreted and applied them more loosely. The magistrate's odd trance suggests that there's something peculiarly soothing, and perhaps sexually pleasant, about massaging the girl—yet this also becomes a strange sort of ritual, a kind of "othering" and fetishizing of the seemingly impenetrable surface of the girl.


The magistrate's narration shifts to presumably the next day; he watches the barbarian girl eat, still unconvinced that she can **see**. The girl explains that, while she can't see out of the center of her eyes, she can see when she looks sideways. When the magistrate asks what Joll and his men did to her, she shrugs and doesn't respond. He continues to watch her eat.

The barbarian girl's need to look sideways in order to see symbolizes the effects of Joll's torture—that she'll never be able to see the world again the same way—but also the way her sense of sight differs from Joll's. Whereas he looks head-on at the world as if presented with a straightforward, discernible truth, she looks at a fragmented world with an opaque center.


The magistrate describes another instance of washing the barbarian girl's feet. This time, the encounter is more sexual: he runs his hands up and down her legs, and, when he's finished, lays besides her (head-to-foot) in his bed, falling asleep with her legs folded together in his arms. This time, when he wakes up, the girl is still lying there.

The sexual tinges to the first massage become more pronounced this time, and the magistrate's motivation for taking the girl in now seem even less guided by charity. Here, an aspect of the magistrate's personality that contradicts his usual sense of civility appears: a confused and uncontrollable sexuality.

The magistrate's narration then shifts to yet another washing and massage, this time referring to the procedure as a "ritual." The process is now explicitly sexualized. He washes not only the barbarian girl's feet, but now her legs, buttocks, belly, breasts, and neck. He then rubs her with oil, and again loses himself in the rhythm of his rubbing. The magistrate adds that he has no desire to have sex with her, and that it's been a week since any words have passed between them. He says that, because of the girl's **poor vision**, he can undress before her without embarrassment, baring the body of which he's not proud. One night during another one of his rituals, when massaging her temples he notices a "greyish puckering" in the corner of one of her eyes resembling a caterpillar. She tells him "that is where they touched me." The magistrate then states that it's becoming clear that he won't be able to let go of the girl until he deciphers the marks on her body.

Though the magistrate's sexuality has already played a role in the novel during his visits to the girl at the inn, the sexual drive he presents here feels distinctly more visceral, uncontrolled, and confused, suggesting the surfacing of a heretofore unexplored side of his personality. As we see later, this side of his personality will bloom into the conflict he encounters with his sexuality—a conflict which exposes how, despite the magistrate's sense of civility, there's a monstrousness in his behavior that resonates with the way Joll views the barbarians. The magistrate's fascination with the marks on the girl's body reflects his desire to struggle with the past until its history and "truth" is revealed and becomes accessible.

The magistrate says that he's hired the barbarian girl as a scullery-maid in the kitchen, and mentions that their relationship is no secret in the town. Then, at another time when he's caressing her, he suddenly wonders why he's "clutched to this stolid girl," and can't remember what he ever wanted from her, "angry with myself for wanting and not wanting her." He says that he tries to recall an image of her as she used to be, but he can't remember noticing her among the prisoners Joll detained. His first image of her is still "the kneeling beggar-girl." Further, the magistrate says that he hasn't had sex with the girl—that his desire hasn't adopted that direction. He adds that, when he looks upon his and her naked bodies, he can't believe he ever imagined the "human form as a flower radiating out from a kernel in the loins." Rather, he's repulsed by their "gaseous" and "centerless" bodies.

The ambivalence which constitutes the magistrate's conflict with his own sexual drives comes to a new pinnacle here. Wanting and not wanting the girl, the magistrate's sexuality is starting to assert itself as an alien force. Further, his desire to dredge up an image of the girl before she was tortured resonates with his desire to struggle with and uncover the history of the past, which appears here in the form of an obsession. It's as if the "centerlessness" of the girl's marred vision has come into a metaphorical clash with the magistrate's desire to uncover the whole truth of the past.

The magistrate says that he interviewed the guards who were on duty when the prisoners were interrogated (to find out what happened to the barbarian girl), but they each say the same thing: they barely spoke to the prisoners, and they weren't allowed to enter the interrogation room. Then, after noting that winter is approaching and mentioning that it's been two months since Colonel Joll's visit, the magistrate says that he interviewed the guards again, asking them to tell him exactly what they saw. He asks them if they know what happened to the prisoner who died while being interrogated (referring to the barbarian girl's father, not the uncle of the boy at the beginning of the novel), and one of them replies that they heard he went "berserk" and started attacking Joll and his men, and further, that he was questioned longer than anyone else. The magistrate observes that the guard's face is strange, and infers that he's been told not to talk.

Even though Colonel Joll hasn't been at the settlement for two months, his brooding sense of intimidation (especially as a representative of the faceless and seemingly all-powerful Empire) still lingers and affects how the magistrate's own men relate with and talk to him. Thus the magistrate's life remains divorced from its past ease and uneventful innocence. The guard's "strange face" might be a way of quietly signaling to the magistrate that he's telling lies fabricated by Joll; read this way, the guard can be interpreted as still fundamentally in allegiance with the magistrate, but nevertheless fearful of Joll despite his absence from the settlement.

The guard adds that, after the interrogation, the barbarian prisoner wouldn't eat anything; he says that the man's daughter was with him, and that she tried to make him eat. The magistrate then asks what happened to the man's daughter, acknowledging that it's no secret that the barbarian girl has been staying with him. But the guard insists he doesn't know anything, nervously adding that he thinks she was beaten; ultimately, he admits that he knew the girl's feet were broken, but didn't find out about her **blindness** until a while afterwards. The other guard doesn't add anything, and the magistrate tells the one who spoke that he needn't be afraid for doing so.

The magistrate's guards continue to display a fear of Joll despite his two-month-long absence from the fort. This power-play adds another dimension to the theme of blindness. Taking the guards under the sway of his own authority, Joll has tried to instill a certain blindness (the blindness of duty) in the magistrate—to create a barrier between him and the truth of his torture practices. Further, that the guard didn't know of the girl's blindness until after the act shows how Joll has tried to balance keeping both the guards and the magistrate uninformed.

That night, the magistrate experiences his **recurring dream**. In it, he once again approaches the hooded child building a snow castle, as the other children step aside or vanish in the air. This time, he circles around the child, who still pays no attention to him, until he can see under the hood. But the face he sees is "blank, featureless; it is the face of an embryo or a tiny whale," it's not a proper face at all, but rather "another part of the human body that bulges under the skin." Further, it's white, "the snow itself." He holds out a coin.

The blank and indistinct face that appears to the magistrate can be read as the dream's way of translating and expressing his sense that the barbarian girl is "stolid" and depthless, without any animated sense of personality, and yet at the same time an inscrutable and impenetrable surface that he cannot interpret at all.

The magistrate's narration shifts, and he discusses how winter has arrived. He says that the soldiers on patrol in the town have the option to quit their jobs at the barracks and live in the town, since there's so little for them to do. He adds that there have been no barbarian visitors this year, whereas they used to visit the settlement in order to trade their goods. Further, the magistrate says that he's been spending time in his "old recreations," reading classic literature, working on his maps of the nomad region, and sending out parties of diggers to the dunes where he excavates the ruins.

The arrival of winter has seemingly signaled attempts by the magistrate to return to his old way of life. The snow in the magistrate's dream takes on the form of winter as a whole here, as if the arrival of winter has covered over the chaos Joll's presence stirred into life at the settlement. This effect of winter therefore reflects the cyclical time of the rotating seasons, which the magistrate thinks is on a different register than that of human history.

The magistrate then mentions how, one morning hunting, he came across a waterbuck, "a ram with heavy curved horns." He says that, right as he's about to shoot the buck, it turns its head and stares at him. The magistrate, upon meeting the eyes of the buck, describes that he feels suspended in time. After this encounter with the buck—who runs off unharmed—the magistrate describes the scene to the barbarian girl. She's unable to empathize with the situation, however. While the magistrate tries to explain that, facing the buck, he'd "had the feeling of not before living my own life on my own terms," the barbarian girl doesn't understand, and thinks that, if the magistrate truly wanted to shoot the buck, he would have. The magistrate eventually says that, because the barbarian girl prefers facts—"pragmatic dicta"—over the "fancy, questions, speculations" characteristic of his thought, the two are a poor match.

The magistrate's encounter with the buck is unique because of the power which its gaze commands. Once the magistrate meets the staring face of the ram, it seems to become equally alive, no longer a mere animal to be shot unthinkingly. The power of buck's gaze stops the magistrate in his tracks and suspends him in time. It's as if the buck, at that moment, loses its status as an Other and becomes something immensely personal and present to the magistrate. His drive to hunt then drops away and feels like an alien force, like he hadn't been directing his life on his "own terms." This alien drive to hunt mirrors his sexual lust for the girl, though she never captivates him in an instant of empathy like the ram.

The magistrate awkwardly decides to interrogate the barbarian girl about why she's with him, but she only says that there's nowhere else for her to go. The magistrate even asks her why he himself wants her, and she unsatisfyingly replies that it's because he wants to talk all the time. Detouring from this turn of conversation, the girl decides to finally inform the magistrate about how Joll and his torture assistants **blinded** her. She says that the men held her eyelids open and threatened to prick her eyes with a fork that they'd heated over burning coals. She says that when they asked her questions, she had nothing to tell them, and so they burned her eyes. When the magistrate asks her what she feels towards her torturers, she ends the conversation, saying that she's tired of talking.

The magistrate's quest to unravel the history of the girl's scars advances, as she finally describes how she was blinded. Yet though the magistrate gets factual information about the girl's blinding, he still wants to know about her own psychological reaction to the event. The magistrate's prying, therefore, seems less motivated by impersonal facts, but rather by a desire to prove that the girl has an inner, animated world of human feeling and vulnerability that hasn't been destroyed by Joll. It's as if he wants to prove that no event in the present could erase the past—which is what he feels Joll's presence did to his old lifestyle.

The magistrate describes how he's grown weary of his attachment to the ritual of massaging the barbarian girl. He says that, one night after he's gone through the ritual and the girl's fallen asleep, he pays a visit to the girl at the inn. Even though he's fully aware that she feigns to be enthusiastic and especially pleased to see him, he says he nonetheless finds it "a pleasure to be lied to so flatteringly." Further, whereas the barbarian girl's body is "closed, ponderous," and "beyond comprehension," the magistrate says that he's able to lose himself fully in the girl at the inn's body.

Even though the enthusiasm of the girl at the inn is likely an act, the magistrate prefers her flattery to the walled-off, unanimated personality of the barbarian girl. Whereas he feels unable to become entirely connected with, or lost within, the body of the barbarian girl, the girl at the inn does not appear as such an Other to the magistrate. The magistrate doesn't yet seem to recognize that his own way of thinking about the girl actively frames her as an inaccessible Other.

After sleeping with the girl at the inn, the magistrate goes back to his apartment at the barracks. Returning to bed with the barbarian girl, he mentions that, as opposed to the girl at the inn, he can't say anything certain about the barbarian girl—that "there is no link I can define between her womanhood and my desire." He says that his erotic desire for her only manifests in indirect ways, such as his massaging and probing about her body without engaging in actual sexual intercourse. He then remarks that it's as if the girl has no interior, and that he searches across her surface in an attempt to gain entry; he wonders if her torturers felt the same way. Ultimately, the magistrate says that he's bewildered about his sexuality in relation to the barbarian girl.

Here, the magistrate makes a very significant connection: his manner of searching for an entry into some hidden recess upon the surface of the barbarian girl is perhaps analogous to the way her torturers treated her. Did not Joll view her body as something to be tested, with the application of pain, until she was willing to concede some secret she'd been withholding? Further, that the magistrate finds it frustrating that he can't say anything certain about the barbarian girl testifies to the failure of his quest to unearth the truth of her history, untainted by her scars.

The magistrate begins to visit the girl at the inn regularly. During the days, when he fantasizes about her, he reminisces about the sexual life of his youth, and how his promiscuity waned with age, finding that he "needed women less frequently." Further, he says that during the sexual act he would sometimes feel as if he were losing his way, "like a storyteller losing the thread of his story."

Here, the magistrate reveals how his sexual drive has changed with age—and this change harks back to his philosophy about struggling with the past. Earlier, the magistrate said that he prefers to "struggle with the old story" and unearth its whole meaning, but it seems that his sexuality sometimes becomes unhinged from the "story" driving his lust.

The magistrate adds that he's visited the girl at the inn three nights in a row, and says that, when he comes back on the fourth night, he has an internal mental fit about the barbarian girl. He still cannot understand what he ever saw in her—what about her could have possibly attracted him. He tries to recall the first time he saw her—when she was led into the barracks by Joll's soldiers—but he's unable to. Frustrated out of his wits, the magistrate shouts in his sleep, and the girl shakes him awake. Yet he's unable to recall the dream that provoked his shouting. Further, he tries to summon up the image of the barbarian girl's father, so that he might envision her beside him, when they were imprisoned by Joll's men. Though he succeeds in envisioning the girl's father, he still fails to remember seeing the girl.

The magistrate is still entangled in his attempts to both understand why he's attracted to the barbarian girl and to find something in her history—a lost personality—that will justify and give spark to his desire. His desire to recall the first time when he saw her—to recall the truth of her before she was tainted by the interrogation practices of Joll—reflects his obsession with the "old story" of the past. Further, the fact that the magistrate has nightmares both during his visits to the girl at the inn and his stays with the barbarian girl suggests that neither encounter provides adequate relief from his troubles.

The magistrate then notes that a group of new conscripts has arrived at his settlement from the capital of the Empire. The magistrate invites the officer in charge, along with two of his colleagues, to dine with him at the inn. The conversation, however—while it goes smoothly at first—ultimately turns sour. When the officer mentions that there's a rumor going around the Empire's military brigade headquarters about launching an offensive against the barbarians—to push them away from the frontier and back into the mountains—the magistrate expresses disdain for the way the Empire conceives of and treats the barbarians. He says that the barbarians would never let themselves "be bottled up in the mountains," since it's their way of life to "migrate between the lowlands and uplands every year."

The magistrate's willingness to express his disagreement with the Empire's treatment of the barbarians openly to the officer is a new act of defiance which speaks to the strength of his convictions. Such disagreement with someone who's integral to the Empire's military operations is bound to garner disrepute and whittle away at his reputation among those in power. The magistrate, however, seems bolder in the face of authority now, and is more willing to avow the barbarians' way of life as something with its own integrity regardless of its difference from life in the Empire's society.

The magistrate continues to defend the barbarians—though he thinks he'd better stop, he can't help but provoke the officer further. The magistrate speaks of the injustice of the Empire's recent raids on the barbarians, and of the unfair and demeaning manner in which the barbarians are treated whenever they visit the settlement in order to trade. Further, he denounces how the Empire holds contempt for the barbarians based on petty matters such as "differences in tables manners" and "variations in the structure of the eyelid." Most controversially, he adds that he wishes that the barbarians would "rise up and teach us [the Empire] a lesson," and condemns the Empire's way of viewing the land as theirs, whereas the barbarians see the people of the Empire as visitors in their territory.

The magistrate seems to be finally unleashing all of his pent-up rage at the Empire's anti-barbarian military enterprise. What's most bold is his explicitly anti-Empire wish that the barbarians would counteract the Empire militarily and succeed, teaching them a "lesson." The magistrate's defense of the barbarians' territory as their proper home, and as a foreign land in which the Empire is nothing but a collection of outsiders, further condemns the way the Empire "others" the barbarians in order to stake a claim to their own identity—to their own sense of belonging in the region as mere settlers.

The conversation ends on a bitter note, and the magistrate shifts to another account of his **recurring dream**. This time, as he approaches the hooded child, his sight of her is blocked by a "curtain of falling snow," and the snow-laden ground slows his approach. The magistrate notices that the girl—now the barbarian girl—is building an intricate snow castle of the entire settlement, despite having her mittens on. There are no people in the settlement, though, and when the magistrate tries to tell her to populate her fort he realizes that a sheet of ice is covering his own mouth. She turns around to look him in the face, and though he expects to be disappointed with her visage—that it will present "like an internal organ not meant to live in the light"—he's surprised by the degree of vivacity displayed in her features. He says to himself: "So this is what it is to **see**!" and the girl "smiles kindly on my [the magistrate's] mumbling."

The dream's depiction of the snow castle as unpopulated might represent the magistrate's feeling that the town is no longer full of life—that, since Joll's arrival, the ease and vibrancy of the settlement's atmosphere has devolved into dread. Further, the magistrate's command that the girl populate the fort reflects his desire for her to re-animate his life again; but, his mouth sealed, the magistrate is unable to dictate such a purpose to the girl. Ironically, unlike his real life efforts to connect with the girl, the magistrate's (vocal) severance from her in the dream lets the animated vivacity he longs to see in her appear upon her surface, since she can't be told to redirect it to the fort—the magistrate's life—itself.

The magistrate then notes that the **recurring dream** has firmly taken root in the life of his sleep—it's now a nightly event. He says that every time he approaches the barbarian girl, it's reconfirmed that she's building a town "empty of life." The magistrate also asks the girl about the period after her imprisonment—when she remained and lived in the town under his jurisdiction. She implies that she had to resort to prostitution in order to survive, and the magistrate realizes that some of the soldiers he works with probably slept with the girl.

That the barbarian girl continues to build a town devoid of life in the magistrate's dream suggests that he views the social atmosphere of his settlement as lacking a certain intensity or vivacity stolen by Joll. Yet this lack of animation is precisely what he perceives in the barbarian girl. It's as if the girl's ability, in the dream, to build—to give life to—something without life represents the ambivalence the magistrate sees in her persona.

The magistrate gets news of the fate of two soldiers who deserted Joll's company—they froze to death in a rough shelter about thirty miles east of the settlement. The magistrate insists on giving them a proper burial, believing that it will inspire morale among the troops, since it will quell any doubts they may have about ever being forgotten themselves.

Whereas Joll would leave the two corpses to rot without a proper burial, the magistrate insists that even deserters deserve to be buried. This can be read as a subtle gesture by the magistrate supporting dissent from Joll—that, if troops stick together, no one will lose any honor.

After the two corpses are retrieved and buried, the magistrate's narration shifts to another moment of intimate massaging with the barbarian girl. This time, the girl asks the magistrate if he'd like to do something else—something more explicitly sexual—other than just the usual ritual of rubbing and massaging. Uninterested, however, the magistrate tells her "another time." When the girl begins to fondle him, he pushes her away, and she tells him that she knows he visits "other girls." But the magistrate just makes a gesture for her to be quiet. Offended, the girl starts to sob. The magistrate tries to comfort her, feeling sorry for her and empathizing with the humiliation she must feel, but ultimately tells her that it's best that they stop being physically intimate. He says that he starts to sleep in a cot in the parlor, and the girl adapts to the new relationship and routine without complaint. Further, he says that though he sees her as very ordinary, he understands that she may have ways of finding him incredibly ordinary too.

Finally, right when the girl displays a sense of animation and vivacity in openly expressing her desire to have sex with the magistrate—just when she finally feels comfortable and involved enough to initiate such a request—the magistrate turns her away. It's as if the unfolding of the magistrate and the girl's desire have operated on two distinct timelines, and the magistrate has failed to be sympathetic to this. Further, the magistrate's acknowledgement that the girl might find him to be as equally ordinary as he finds her suggests that he's finally begun to stop othering her—that he's begun to see her as someone as equally perceptive as himself. Yet when he does this, it's too late; it damages, but doesn't reinforce, his relation with her.

CHAPTER 3

The magistrate notes that spring is on its way, and says that he's decided to take the barbarian girl back to her people. He writes a document to the provincial governor saying that, "To repair some of the damage wrought by the forays of the Third Bureau, and to restore some of the goodwill that previously existed," he is going to pay the barbarians a brief visit. He says that he also has a second document to write, but cannot figure out what it is—a memoir, confession, or a thirty-year history of the frontier? He ultimately gives up trying to write it, and gathers three men to assist him on his journey: two young soldiers and an older hunter and horseman as a guide. They depart on the third of March.

The magistrate, done with trying to unravel some secret within the barbarian girl that might prop-up his own sexual desire and identity, has decided to return her to her people. His note to the provincial governor, however, comes across as having a different mission: correcting the wrongs which the Empire has committed against the barbarian people. Seeming to have no reservations about sending such a letter, it appears that the magistrate has become so anti-Empire that he doesn't care how rebellious his dissent will be perceived by high officials. The magistrate's attempt to write a history of the settlement also becomes an important motif, as in his mind this "history" becomes a muddle of personal memories and confessions, the cycle of seasons and nature, and the linear events of the Empire's actions.

The magistrate says that the group eats well on the first leg of the trip, but that's about the only good thing he mentions. The journey quickly becomes rough, and the magistrate says that the physical intensity of the trip makes him realize how aged his body is. The wind is constant, and gusts of sand bite at everyone's skin and interfere with eating. The barbarian girl, however, doesn't complain, and seems used to the conditions of desert travel. On the fourth day, the group enters more desolate territory; crossing a frozen lake, the guide and a horse fall through the surface and have to be pulled out. The band leaves the lake floor behind on the fifth day.

Though the magistrate imagined that his trip would be routinely easy, it seems that he might have miscalculated. Why, indeed, didn't he wait to begin after winter had passed? It seems as if the magistrate's venture into the depth of winter represents, subliminally, his desire to enter the foreign, alien environment of a world governed by the seasons, and not the governmental power of the Empire. It's as if the magistrate has purposefully put himself in a position of danger in order to escape the peril of his Joll-infected life.

On the seventh day, after the group has made a difficult crossing over a patch of sand dunes, they come upon the bed of an old lagoon. The men dig into the soil and find good water. At night, the magistrate notes that the barbarian girl is at ease conversing with the other men, who make their first gesture of friendship to her by inviting her to watch them bake bread. The magistrate says that he's "surprised by her fluency, her quickness, her self-possession," and even catches himself "in a flush of pride," thinking: "she is not just the old man's slut, she is a witty, attractive young woman." He says that, if he had known how to talk with her this way before, perhaps they would have warmed up to each other.

The magistrate is surprised by the charisma suddenly displayed by the barbarian girl—she never displayed this kind of social ease and animation with him. Interestingly, the sheer fact that she's capable of being so at-ease socially with the other members of the crew is enough to re-arouse the magistrate's interest in her. It's as if the magistrate cares more about the girl's ability to appease certain standards of sociability than her ability to strictly satisfy him as an individual.

Later, when the magistrate and the barbarian girl are in their tent asleep, the magistrate wakes up to find the girl fondling him, and they have intercourse. When the magistrate awakens, he is deeply troubled—alarmed by having united with the barbarian girl after a hiatus of five months, he wonders what brought about his sudden willingness to have sex with her. He notes that it hasn't escaped him that, in bed in the dark, the disfigurements on her body—caused by her torturers—are easily forgotten. He therefore gathers that it's the "whole woman I want, that my pleasure in her is spoiled" until the marks of her torture "are erased and she is restored to herself." He then asks: "is it she I want or the traces of a history her body bears?" He sighs, embraces the girl, and falls asleep. The group rests on the eighth day.

Here, the magistrate's conflicts revolving around his sexuality and his philosophy of history—that one should tarry with the past in order to fully unravel its stories—merge. The magistrate, by wondering if his delight in the barbarian girl is "spoiled" by her scars, imagines an ideal past in which she was whole and untarnished by Joll's interrogation practices. But her scars' blockage of his access to such a pure past raises the question: does he want the girl for who she is, *or for his own fantasy about who she* was? *This conflict resonates with the nature of Joll's supposed quest for truth in his torture victims—he searches for a confirmation of his own precepts, not the real truth.*

The group gets on its way the next day, and the guide tells the magistrate that they are probably one or two days away from seeing the mountains—the territory of the barbarians—and then another day from reaching them, though it's hard to say. At night, the magistrate wakes up and senses that something is deeply wrong—but it's just that he's surprised to find that the wind has ceased. He, the barbarian girl, and the men from the other tent all meet outside and watch snowflakes descend—"the last snow of the year," the magistrate proclaims. When he and the girl return to the tent, they make love again, "but halfway through" the magistrate loses his "touch with her, and the act peters out vacantly."

That the magistrate's "act peters out vacantly" halfway through having sexual intercourse with the girl resembles his earlier description of his tendency, at his age, to "feel like a storyteller losing his story" after he's commenced fornication. This petering-out on the magistrate's part reflects his failure to uncover the full story of the girl's past—again, here his conflicts around sexuality and history: losing connection with the girl during sex resembles a fading-out ideal about her past which, however fanciful, still spurs his very attraction to her. Sex never realizes this ideal.

The magistrate awakens to hear a voice calling to him. It's one of the men—bad weather is on the way. Seeing a "gigantic black wave" on the horizon, the group hurries to disassemble their tents and secure the horses. Rapidly, the storm is upon them, and the magistrate and barbarian girl's tent is taken by the storm. Then, for five hours, the group huddles behind the horses and firewood they've piled, being pelted with "snow, ice, rain, sand, grit." The storm lets up midday.

Why the magistrate has elected to embark on such a long journey before the arrival of spring is odd—he's put himself and his companions in danger. The brooding ominousness of the storm also suggests an element of foreshadowing: that a difficult series of trials may be about to befall the magistrate's life—trials associated with his decision to take this trip.

On the tenth day, the guide believes he sees the mountains they're seeking, but the specks he points to are, the magistrate says, actually three barbarian men on horseback. He concludes, therefore, that the group is nearly there. He further notices that they never seem to get closer to the barbarians—he wonders if the barbarians are ignoring them, or if they're even there at all: maybe they are a "trick of the light." Eventually, the magistrate tells the group that there's no point in chasing the barbarians, and he decides to ride out alone towards them, but his horse, low on energy, can't "raise more than a shambling trot," and the magistrate gives up.

The magistrate's speculation about whether the barbarians are a trick of the light can be read as an ironic comment by Coetzee, particularly regarding Joll. The question hints at the possibility that the barbarians as a whole are only an imagined bogeyman of the Empire, or a mirage only perceivable in the broad daylight, and which the magistrate couldn't see if he were wearing sunglasses (like Joll). It's as if Joll is chasing after people he thinks are real, but whom he only sees in his mind, since his sunglasses block them, and who in reality do not appear the way he imagines them.

Several uneventful days pass, as the group slowly advances towards the barbarians, trying to conserve the strength of their horses. The magistrate again decides to ride out alone to the men on the horizon. Now there are not only three of them, but as many as twelve, he gathers. Still, however, they vanish before the magistrate can get too close, and, returning to his group, he says they must simply ignore the barbarians. The magistrate then mentions that the barbarian girl has begun her period, and—believing in a superstition that "a woman's flux is bad luck"—the other men want the girl away from the horses and from their food. She keeps to herself, and the magistrate performs a cleansing ritual every morning, after sleeping with her, in order to appease the men.

Even though the men are members of the Empire's purportedly civilized society, they nonetheless house superstitions about women's bodies that are stereotypically associated with the supposedly "primitive," "uncivilized" nomad people or "barbarians." The fact that the men require the magistrate to perform a cleansing ritual seems absurd in comparison to the absence of such a ritual in Joll's profession (as the magistrate imagines, at least), since the gruesomeness of his acts vastly outweighs the impurity attributable to a natural, bodily process.

Finally the magistrate says that they've reached the foothills of the mountains. He and his companions finally understand that, while the barbarians are following them, they're also leading them. Eventually the group comes upon the barbarians; the magistrate approaches them while the other members of his party stay behind. One of the barbarian horsemen points an ancient musket at the magistrate's chest; he then puts his hands up and retreats.

The magistrate's bold willingness to approach the barbarians alone demonstrates his belief that they are people who will deal with outsiders diplomatically—that they aren't naturally violent and won't simply kill him on sight. This sense of ease in dealing with the barbarians certainly is not common among the Empire's agents.

The magistrate tells the barbarian girl that he'll help her up the slope to the horsemen, and asks her to speak with them, and decide whether she wants to join them or return to the settlement. When they make it up the slope, the magistrate asks the girl to tell the horsemen why they've come, and to tell her story—the truth. The girl smiles a bit, and asks if he really wants her to tell them the truth. The magistrate says, "What else is there to tell?" Then, a little desperately, he says to her that he wishes for her to return with him to the settlement—that this is what he truly wants—but of her own choice. The girl, however, says: "No. I do not want to go back to that place."

The girl's question seems witheringly ironic, in that telling the "truth" about what the Empire has done to her might lead the barbarians to actually become antagonistic, fulfilling their role as the Empire's bogeyman. The magistrate's question ("What else is there to tell?") also bears a subtle irony in that it reflects Joll's philosophy about extracting the truth from his torture victims, since he believes that, when experiencing great pain, people reach a point when they can only tell the truth—that it's forced out from them. Further, in this climactic moment the magistrate seems to realize that he has real feelings for the girl, and he wants her to reciprocate them willingly—but she seemingly does not, or else the magistrate's connection to the Empire makes his offer impossible to accept.

The barbarian girl tells the magistrate that the horsemen would like to take the girl's horse, but the magistrate says that—considering the weak condition of his horses—he'd rather buy horses off the barbarians instead, with silver. He then gives the girl a bar of silver, and asks her to show it to the men and tell them he'll pay one bar per horse. However, the leader of the horsemen simply takes the bar, and the girl relays to the magistrate that the leader considered it to be payment for *not* taking the girl's horse. Finally, the girl and the magistrate say goodbye and part ways.

The leader's way of handling his exchange with the magistrate suggests that the barbarians are highly contemptuous of the Empire as a whole. The girl's decision to return to her people, having rejected the magistrate's invitation, reflects her desire to put her painful past at the settlement behind her and her willingness to totally reject the purported "comforts" of civilization, which never existed for her.

As the magistrate and his group start to head back to the settlement, he notes that spring has come, and realizes that it would have been safer to have started the journey now than before, though he doesn't believe himself to be wrong for taking the risks. He says he knows, however, that the other men blame him, and are also probably infuriated because they've realized that "they were not part of an embassy to the barbarians . . . but simply an escort for a woman."

This observation by the magistrate—that his men are started to look down upon him—marks the beginning of the magistrate's downward spiral into becoming an outsider to his people. However, his belief that they perceive the trip to have been a mere escort for the girl proves incorrect, as we later learn that they actually accuse him of colluding with the barbarians.

As the group retraces their route, one of the two soldiers contracts an infection on his foot, and the magistrate scolds him for not changing his footcloths daily. A quiet tension grows between the magistrate and the men—he says he keeps to himself, and notes that the men talk in low voices and become quiet whenever he's within hearing range. Then, as the group gets closer to home, the magistrate says he finds the face of the barbarian girl "hardening over in [his] memory, becoming opaque, impermeable, as though secreting a shell over itself." He says that all he wants to do now is to live out his life with ease in a familiar world, and die in his own bed, "followed to the grave by old friends."

The magistrate's memory of the girl's face is becoming a sort of souvenir of the past—an image marking her face's vague traces, but which can't convey the full depth and detail of his experience of her. This opacity to her memory resembles how the magistrate always saw her—as hiding a depth in need of extraction. Now, a gloss atop the clarity of her actual form, this opacity introduces an obstacle to the magistrate's conviction for uncovering and preserving the truth of the past, making it apparent that this conviction is not perfectly achievable since human memory naturally distorts what it stores.

When the group finally returns to the settlement, the magistrate is surprised by the way they're greeted by the fort's guards. The horsemen who trot out towards them don't gallop in excitement, and aren't followed by any running children—instead, they surround the magistrate and his company, and their eyes are "stony." They don't answer any of the magistrate's questions, and they march him and the others back like prisoners into the settlement. When they enter, the magistrate notices that the army has arrived, and "the promised campaign against the barbarians is underway."

The magistrate's note to the provincial governor must have incriminated him right from the get-go, so his surprise at his less than hospitable welcome seems a bit naïve. It's clear that the magistrate, though understanding how the fear around him functions and is formed, is nonetheless out of touch with the culture of racism and xenophobia around him—any concerted effort to contact the barbarians would seem to inevitably result in punishment in such a society.

CHAPTER 4

The fourth chapter begins as the magistrate describes a man (Officer Mandel) sitting at his desk in the office behind the courtroom—a man donning one of the Third Bureau's uniforms. The man is searching through his various records, and ignores the magistrate when he asks him if there's something in particular he's looking for, or if he could speak to Colonel Joll. Eventually, the man accuses the magistrate of "treasonously consorting with the enemy," and the magistrate is arrested. Oddly, however, this is a source of elation for the magistrate, who is overjoyed at the thought of having his allegiance with the Empire severed. Then, as he is escorted to his cell, the magistrate runs into the three men who helped him on his expedition, and tells them not to be anxious about being hurt or arrested, since they were only following his orders.

The magistrate's delight at being arrested demonstrates how fundamentally severed he feels from the military and social aims of the Empire as a whole—it's therefore as if imprisonment promises to grant him a new identity, on a new way of relating to society. Instead of having to feign allegiance to the Empire and continue to strain under the compulsion to censor his actual thoughts, the magistrate can now simply express his utter disdain for the Empire unabashedly. At the same time, the magistrate seemingly imagines himself as a kind of martyr for justice, and so feels that his arrest affirms the righteousness of his actions.

The magistrate describes his living conditions in captivity: he's fed the same rations as the soldiers, and every second day he's allowed to wash and exercise for an hour, when a crowd of people always gather to see the "spectacle of the fall of the once mighty." At night, his cell is assaulted by cockroaches—one night he's "awoken by the feather-light tread of one crossing [his] throat." It only takes two days of living in solitude for the magistrate to proclaim that "man was not made to live alone"—his own speech begins to feel strange to him, he says, and this newly "bestial life" is making him into a "beast." Still, he says, it's when his mind is turned in on himself that he turns his attention to others—to those who were imprisoned and tortured by Joll, like the barbarian girl and her murdered father. No wonder her father grew detached and hopeless and wanted to die after his interrogation, the magistrate thinks, since he'd been utterly humiliated in front of his daughter.

It hasn't taken very long for the magistrate's initial elation at being arrested to fade and devolve into weariness—the actual suffering involved in being hated and martyred isn't so glamorous as history might portray it. The discomforting conditions of his imprisonment threaten to erode his sense of humanity and turn him into a bestial shadow of his formerly civilized manner of living—essentially making him a "barbarian" that the Empire can then condemn and "other." Cut off from human interaction, the magistrate's own voice—his own internal narration—begins to feel like it's foreign to his own mind.

The magistrate then says that, by offering the barbarian girl protection, he was, in a way, taking over the role of her father. He says that, while he considers this to be a noble action of his, he regrets having ever allowed Joll's men to enter his settlement. He further remarks about the girl, saying that—upon witnessing the brutalized, naked form of her father at the hands of Joll and company—she "was no longer fully human, sister to all of us. Certain sympathies died, certain movements of the heart became no longer possible to her."

Here, the magistrate finally arrives at an understanding of the barbarian girl—not an uncovering of some secret, hidden depth to her, but an understanding about why her "surface" appeared to him the way it did. Turning his thoughts away from his own currently alienated sense of self, the magistrate puts himself in the position of the Other for once, focusing on the girl as if she didn't *have some miraculous secret to be unearthed.*

The magistrate then remarks that, even though the guards have been ordered not to discuss anything with him, it's nonetheless easy to put together a coherent narrative based on the bits of chatter he overhears during his exercise and washing hours. He's also observed that the army has started a fire on the riverbanks to the northwest in order to clear any brush that could potentially aid the barbarians in concealing themselves from the watchtowers of the settlement. The magistrate is repulsed at the army's lack of sensibility for the fertile soil which will be destroyed in the fire's path.

Though the magistrate's morale has declined as a prisoner, he still remains vigilant about the Empire's actions against the barbarians. Instead of giving up entirely and distracting himself with thoughts of a dream world, the magistrate takes care to eavesdrop on the soldiers in order to piece together the military campaign's progress. This commitment to his cause is the beginning of his eventual flirtation with being a real martyr.

The magistrate's narrative then shifts—he's back in his office, which has been cleared of all his things. Mandel enters, and reads him the charges imputed to him by two of the men who served him on his expedition to the barbarians. He's accused of forming a bond with a streetwoman (the barbarian girl) to the "detriment of his official duties," and who had a "demoralizing effect on the prestige of imperial administration" since she had worked as a prostitute among the soldiers. Further, he's accused of hastily preparing for the journey and putting his travel companions' lives at risks, and, most importantly, of having "long consultations" with the barbarians and exchanging gifts with them. The magistrate, however, asserts that he will defend himself in a court of law. Mandel just waves his hand in disregard, and says that the magistrate will have a chance to reply.

Though the magistrate committed no such treasonous act of communication with the barbarians, because those who've accused him are in a position of higher power, the truth of his innocence has no chance of being accepted. The magistrate is presumed to be guilty until proven innocent, not the other way around. Further, Mandel has the power to utterly prevent the magistrate from having a voice—from offering his own account of the truth. The power of men like Mandel, and the Empire as a whole, is therefore maintained precisely through the restriction of dissenting points of view. Those in power dictate what is truth, and what is recorded as history.

Escorted back to his cell, the magistrate's narration then revolves around the humiliations he faces as a prisoner—he's denied requests for clean clothes, and the "monotonous regimen of soup and porridge and pie" makes defecating an agony. Further, he wonders what freedom has been left to him, and concludes "the freedom to eat or go hungry; to keep my silence or gabble to myself or beat the door or scream." He also describes a little boy—the cook's grandson—who brings him his meal every day, very animatedly. Their brief interactions comprise the majority of his newly vacant social life. The magistrate asks the boy if the soldiers have come back, and he says no.

The magistrate continues to suffer a sense of devolving into something bestial and inhuman at the hands of those who guard him. His once especially civilized life and engagement in intellectual pursuits has regressed into a grotesque existence characterized by the most basal, visceral bodily concerns and uncontrollable pangs of rage and despair in his mind. The only relief from his deprived interior world is a brief, daily encounter with someone a fraction of his age.

The magistrate continues to contemplate the barbarian girl—he can no longer remember exactly what she looks like. When he tries to recall her image, the only memory that springs to the surface is of his oily hands sliding over her body. He then has his **recurring dream** once more. This time, the girl is alone and unaccompanied by any children, and she's not occupied with building a snow castle. The magistrate approaches her and asks her "where does it hurt?" She then "awkwardly" touches her ankles, and the magistrate kneels and unwraps the bandages around her feet, revealing two "disembodied, monstrous . . . stranded fish, two huge potatoes." The magistrate then enters the barracks yard, which is "as endless as the desert," with "no hope of reaching the other side"—the girl being "the only key" he has to the "labyrinth." The magistrate also says that there are versions of the dream where the girl changes form—changes shape, size, and sex.

The magistrate can only remember the barbarian girl through the image of his oil-covered hands slipping across the surface of her body, metaphorically reflecting his difficulty in penetrating past her surface into something deeper and more profound. Further, the lack of children and a snow castle in the dream reflects his mind's newfound focus on the barbarian girl for how she actually appeared to him on the surface—a focus unaccompanied by other distractions. The magistrate's later reflection on the endlessness of the barracks yard, and the impossibility of reaching the other side, also reflects his inability to breach the surface of the girl into a depth on the other side.

The magistrate says that "the texture of the days" are "as dull as porridge." The intricate flow of events in the external world have lost all interest in comparison to the visceral pangs of hunger and physical functions which define his solitary existence. The magistrate describes one morning when he asks the warder if he could wash his clothes in order to make himself decent for the Colonel—apparently he's going to appear before Joll soon. The warder reluctantly leads the magistrate into the kitchen in order to let him fetch a bucket of hot water, and as the magistrate is acquiring the water, some soap and a rag, he stealthily grabs a cellar key laying out that he secretly knows also unlocks the door to his cell.

This shift from the magistrate's focus on the external world to solely his immediate, bodily needs will become a preoccupation that plagues him for his entire imprisonment. In a way, this kind of immediate attention to the here-and-now of the body resonates with the cyclical time which the magistrate attributes to the rotation of the seasons—yet, while he tends to romanticize this concept of time elsewhere in the novel, his experience of cyclicality in jail is far from anything wondrous.

Later that night, the magistrate escapes from his cell. He goes to an upper room in the barracks, one next to his old apartment, which is now locked. Three men are asleep in the room. Looking out through a window onto the town square, he expects to see "campfires, lines of tethered horses and stacked arms, rows of tents," but is surprised that there's nothing to see except a single person and perhaps two tents—and he wonders whether the expeditionary force is simply not yet back or whether he's viewing what remains of it, though he dismisses the latter as a possibility. One of the men sleeping in the room grips the magistrate's hand and says that he's thirsty. The magistrate, unrecognized by him, agrees to fetch him water if he'll promise to keep quiet. After helping to support the man while he drinks his water—he's ill—the magistrate slips out through the window.

The magistrate's bold willingness to escape from his cell demonstrates that he has very little regard for those who are in charge of guarding and enforcing his imprisonment. It's as if the magistrate still feels that he possesses his own sense of authority, even though his stature as magistrate and governmental powers may have been stripped from him. The magistrate's sense of ease about escaping from his cell suggests that he has a certain confidence in himself as someone unlawfully persecuted by a corrupt power—or a sense of the ineptitude of the corrupt power itself.

After dropping less than gracefully from the window onto the ground and landing behind a row of bushes, the magistrate lies there for at least an hour, he says, when he could be trying to escape. Finally, he begins to crawl along the wall and makes his way to the back of the inn. There, beneath a wooden stairway, there's an inlet where wood is stored and where cats loiter when there's rain. He crawls into an old bag underneath the stairs, which "smells of urine" and "is certainly full of fleas," but all he cares about at the moment is the pain in his back caused by his fall from the window.

The magistrate's willingness to rest on the ground for so long, when he could be trying to escape, demonstrates just how truly exhausted he is from his imprisonment, and how his immediate bodily needs overtake his entire attention. Further, his willingness to crawl and remain in the urine-soaked and flea-infested bag symbolizes his decent from civility to bestiality.

Awaking later to the sound of footsteps on the stairway, the magistrate, undiscovered, makes his way to the room of the girl at the inn. There, he smells the comforting fragrance of her clothes, and decides to hide under her bed. He fantasizes about joining the rest of the town later in the evening—of dressing and crossing the square to his office, nodding to his friends and neighbors, and carrying on as if nothing had happened. However, the magistrate quickly checks his fantasizing with a bout of realistic thinking—as he lies under the bed, he's a hunted man. But "Why me?," he wonders, and he imagines himself being given a hasty, unfair trial, and being dragged from the courtroom to the executioner. Though the magistrate says that he's not afraid of death, he says that he shrinks from "the shame of dying . . . stupid and befuddled."

The sense that the magistrate has totally lost every connection to his former way of life and ended up in a radically new situation beset with filth and inhumane degradation comes full circle here. The magistrate, imagining that he has regained his old status and that he might freely walk about the town, realizes that all of that former ease and merriment is but a memory, a vestige of a lost past. It seems that what worries him the most is not dying itself, but of dying in such a way that he appears to be overpowered by the demeaning authorities of the Empire, and not as a kind of noble martyr.

The girl at the inn enters the room, and the magistrate contemplates revealing himself and asking her to hide him until nightfall, when he'd plan to escape the town and head down to the lakeside—but he decides against this. He goes undiscovered, worried mostly about his stench giving him away. Lying there, he reminisces about the first time he was escorted to his cell, and how he felt like a "sane man sure of the rightness" of his cause, but now—after two months living with cockroaches and no one to talk to except a ghost in his dreams—he's not as confident in himself.

His mental stability having fallen into disarray ever since his imprisonment, the magistrate no longer possesses his old sense of confidence and righteousness in pursuing his anti-Empire agenda. Further, it seems that being in total isolation is most responsible for this shift in confidence. Even though the magistrate's points of view were never exactly popular among those around him, the sheer fact that he had access to regular social interaction nonetheless provided him with a sense of individuality and social power.

The magistrate also longs for sexual contact with a woman's body, and wonders how he could ever be perceived as doing right when the whole town is against his escapade with the barbarian girl and would be infuriated with him if, seen as a result of his communication with the barbarians, any soldiers were killed. He also knows that his interrogators would not cease in their application of pain regardless of his truth-telling, because of their philosophy that "the last truth is told only in the last extremity." Lastly, he realizes that his escape plan is futile—he'd starve within a week outside the settlement.

The magistrate has hit rock bottom—it seems that his prospects of being perceived as a just man, and not a treacherous criminal, are next to nothing. Those in power have assumed that his communications with the barbarians were treasonous, and their torture tactics will inevitably make the magistrate yield to whatever accusations they make of him. The magistrate's fate is entirely controlled by the powerful, who control what is and what isn't "true."

The girl at the inn and a young man enter the room—he tells her that she shouldn't put up with the way the soldiers are treating her, since she's not a slave, but she tells him that he doesn't understand. Suddenly, they begin to make love—on the bed under which the magistrate is hiding. The magistrate, repulsed, plugs his ears. He actually groans to himself, though they do not hear him. After they fall asleep, he slips out from underneath the bed, and tiptoes out of the room and down to the kitchen. There, an old woman cook spots him, but the magistrate simply raises a hand and smiles, and the startled woman seems to ignore him.

This ridiculous circumstance—having to hide under a bed in which two people are making love, just in order to avoid being discovered by Mandel's men—highlights the chaotic nature of the magistrate's life after being arrested. The novel continues to throw the magistrate into circumstances that are less and less proper or indicative of civility—yet, at the same time, the magistrate is arguably the most virtuous and "civilized" person in town.

The magistrate exits the kitchen and tries to leave the settlement through the north gate, but it's closed and barred. He therefore climbs the stairway of the watchtower. Looking out over the landscape, he wonders to himself if he's been locked away for two months or ten years—the landscape has totally changed. The magistrate is then noticed by a nearby sentry—a watchtower guard—who doesn't recognize him and tells him to get down, since the watchtower is off limits to civilians. The magistrate proceeds to ask him several questions, like where everyone he used to know is, and what happened out in the fields. He apologizes for asking such questions, but explains that he's had a fever, having been totally confined to bed. The sentry explains that the barbarians cut away part of an embankment one night, and consequently flooded the fields—he adds that the crop is entirely ruined, and is too late to replant. The magistrate asks him when he expects the main expeditionary force to be back, and the guard says "soon, it must be soon."

The magistrate's comment that he's unsure whether he's been imprisoned for two months or two years will be reflected by his later statement that his time in jail was something like a void into which he disappeared. This sense of getting "out" of time resonates with the magistrate's concept of cyclical time as something which is beyond the linear sequencing of normal human perception. It's as if the very bestial state into which he's descended has taken him onto another plane of existence—as if being so dehumanized in jail has brought him away from the sense of having a personal biography, and into the larger cycles of nature. The fact that the magistrate is unrecognized also suggests that his former, civilized appearance has radically changed.


Having been completely unrecognized by the guard, the magistrate leaves him and climbs down the watchtower steps, and exits the settlement. Looking at the fields, he notes how nothing is left standing—the farmers have already started stacking the dead crops for burning. The magistrate then comes upon one of his old excavation sites—it's been largely undone by the wind. He says that he could probably stay there, and no one would bother looking for him. After falling asleep, the magistrate emerges to a red evening sun, and decides to return to the settlement, since he'll die out in the desert, and asks, "why should I do my enemy's work for them?" For, "if they want to spill my blood," he says, "let them at least bear the guilt of it."

The magistrate's assertion that he'd rather have his enemies—the "new men of Empire"—kill him than die by himself out in the desert reveals how he's beginning to assign a newly political meaning to his body: he thinks that, if he's executed, his spilt blood will have some hindering effect on his killers. Stripped of all other resources to effect political change at the settlement, his execution is all that remains—and it would be a waste to squander it on dying by himself. This moment shows another step in the magistrate's evolution towards desiring martyrdom.


Returning to the gate of the barracks yard, the magistrate yells to be let back in. His warder comes up to him, and commands that he be quiet; upon depositing the magistrate in his cell, he tells him to say nothing about escaping, or else he'll make the magistrate's life an absolute misery. Trying to build something of a rapport with the desperate warder, the magistrate responds that he has nothing to worry about—his lips are sealed, for he knows "what it is like to be frightened."

This scene is significant for exposing how the warder thinks about his duty—it's as if he feels no personal, moral obligation to jail the magistrate, but is simply following orders from his higher-ups. This suggests that it's really the men of the Bureau, like Mandel and Joll, who hold the convictions which the magistrate opposes, and that their soldiers are cogs in the Bureau's machine—so long as they remain dutiful and don't express any qualms, like the magistrate has.

Later that night, Joll's expedition force returns, and the magistrate decides to give into temptation and leave his cell to check out all the hubbub and commotion he hears in the town square. The whole town—"thousands of ecstatic souls"—he says, are gathered in celebratory welcome. After a succession of soldiers enter through the main gateway, he says that there's a line of barbarians, tied neck to neck, being led into the fort by a trooper. The town is in awe. The magistrate notes that the barbarians all seem to be holding an odd posture—they all hold their hands up to their cheeks as if suffering from a toothache, but he realizes that each of them have a metal wire running through their hands and cheeks. He recalls being told by a soldier that this forces the prisoner to "think of nothing but how to keep very still." The magistrate's heart grows sick, and he wishes he never left his cell.

The way the barbarians are linked together is yet another instance of brutal torture that at once shows how Joll's men have dehumanized the barbarians in their minds, as well as how inhumane and monstrous the men of the army can be behind their veil of civility. That the settlement is a mass of "ecstatic souls" suggests just how much of a spectacle Joll's military campaign has become for the townspeople—it seems as if the settlers aren't just relieved for the return of their loved ones from the atrocities of war, but are elated at the triumph of the glorious power of the distant Empire.

The magistrate then catches sight of Colonel Joll. Feeling like he's going to be sick, the magistrate fetches a bucket of water from the prison yard, and, returning to the crowd, forges his way to the front. The barbarians are led to the town square, where four of them (out of twelve total) are forced to kneel on the ground. They are all attached to a pole by a cord running through the loops of wire in each of their mouths, such that their faces touch the pole. Then Joll, standing over each prisoner, rubs the word ENEMY on their backs with charcoal, and the soldiers commence beating them, the goal being to erase the word, which fades when mixed with sweat and blood. After the soldiers grow tired, they offer their canes to the members of the crowd, and a little girl, pushed forward by her friends, accepts a cane and hits one of the prisoner's rear ends. The crowd gives her a "roar of applause." The magistrate looks on at the absurdity, repulsed.

The sense that the expeditionary force's return is a spectacle to the numbed and brainwashed minds of the townspeople amplifies, as the celebration verges on mass hysteria. That the soldiers offer their canes to the crowd highlights how the anti-barbarian campaign is not viewed as strictly a formal, official military operation, but rather a mob's frenzy in which the ordinary citizen is invited to participate in committing torture and violence. The fact that a little girl is applauded for participating further exemplifies how ubiquitous and engrained the anti-barbarian ideology has become—even children are expected to adopt it.

The magistrate sees Colonel Joll holding up a four-pound hammer, displaying it to the audience—and they trade glances. In a climactic moment, the magistrate—mortified by the sight of the hammer—shouts "No!" Facing Joll, who's no more than five paces away, the magistrate points his finger at him and shouts "You! You are depraving these people!" But Joll and one of his men beat the magistrate down. Though the magistrate valiantly withstands the pain of his beating and tries to muster up a public speech accusing Joll of inhumanity, his words fail him as he's pelted by blows, and he hysterically asks himself just what, exactly, it is that he stands for "besides an archaic code of gentlemanly behavior towards captured foes." Ultimately, the magistrate thinks that it's "easier to be beaten and made a martyr," to be killed in the name of justice than to argue for the barbarians' cause, when the Empire has already irreparably tarnished the settlement's relationship with the nomads. With a broken nose and perhaps a cheekbone, the magistrate is eventually carried off to his cell.

Here the magistrate's gradual mental progression towards the prospect of becoming a kind of martyr comes to a pinnacle. In the middle of being beaten by Joll, again the magistrate considers his body to have a political significance: it can be "killed in the name of justice," and this may very well be his last resort for combatting Joll's regime, since he has no other resources, and the settlement's relationship with the barbarians is forever fractured by the military campaign. In order to defend his convictions and inscribe them in history as evidence that a resistance to Joll's regime existed, the magistrate is willing to utterly lay his body on the line, and suffer pain paralleling that which Joll doles out to the barbarians.

In his cell, the magistrate writhes about and weeps in pain, awaking eventually in the afternoon of the next day to find that his pain "lost its strangeness," and that "soon, perhaps, it will be as much part of me as breathing." He then has another **dream** of the barbarian girl; she's once again kneeling before the snow castle with her back to the magistrate, and when he approaches her, she turns to him. The magistrate realizes that it's not a castle she's been building, but a clay oven. She hands the magistrate a "shapeless lump" at which he looks "unwillingly;" and, shaking his head, he's unable to clear his **vision**. The girl, he notes, is dressed beautifully, and he remarks about her beautiful eyes and teeth. Finally, he realizes that the formless lump she'd held out to him is an artfully baked loaf of fresh bread. Opening his arms to embrace her, he awakens to the stinging of tears on his wounded cheek.

The barbarian girl starts to seem more attractive now in the magistrate's dream-memories of her, and here she offers kindness and nourishment to the hated and starving man—a kind of wish fulfillment dream that still fits into the pattern of his usual dreams. In his present miserable state his past relationship with the barbarian girl, strange and distant though it was, now seems like a happy memory.

The magistrate then describes a scene in his old office. Joll sits behind his desk, and Officer Mandel—though the magistrate still does not yet know his name—stands by with a notepad. Joll asks the magistrate to explain the wooden "slips" he's collected (from the ruins the magistrate was previously excavating), which the Colonel found in a chest in his room, and which are painted with a peculiar script. Joll tells the magistrate that he needs to explain what the messages say and who the other parties were who used them for communication.

Joll and Mandel assume that the slips the magistrate has acquired from his excavation projects are messages comprising secret correspondences between him and the barbarians. Once again Joll and the Empire assume a "truth" before they are presented with any kind of evidence or fact, and it can be assumed that nothing the magistrate says will convince them to adjust this truth.

The magistrate doesn't really know what any of the characters on the slips mean, even though he's studied the structure of the language for some time, isolating over 450 characters. Instead, he makes up some translations of various slips, saying things that vaguely reflect the gruesome effects of Joll's torture. He translates a couple of the slips as ancient letters to a barbarian whose brother has been captured by soldiers: the barbarian writing the letter says he found the person's brother's corpse sewn up in a sack, with his eyes sewn shut and his ankles broken.

The magistrate's "translation" of the pottery slips is a crucial moment in the text, as he has no idea what the truth of the ancient text is, but creates his own truth—and a historical truth at that—which also contradicts Joll's fixed idea of what the "truth" is. Furthermore, the magistrate's translation is a not-so-subtle critique of Joll himself, while also adding to the idea that history tends to repeat itself in large cycles. As the magistrate has mused before, there may have been past Empires who oppressed and "othered" past barbarians.

Unamused by the magistrate's translations, Joll asks him what he envisions of his future at the post, since he's disgraced himself. But the magistrate just demands to be prosecuted in a formal trial so that he can defend himself, and the Colonel implies that the magistrate is delusional—that he'd never stand a chance at trial, and his belief that the Bureau won't bring him to trial because he's too popular of a figure in the town is totally fantastical. Joll says that he decided that he just wanted to relieve the magistrate of his duties and release him from custody, but that his mind has changed, since the magistrate seems bent on being a martyr—the "One Just Man"—to the detriment of the Empire's cause. Joll ends the interview and tells Mandel that the magistrate is now his responsibility.

The magistrate's desire to become a martyr and have his reputation recorded as the "one just man" standing against the evil Empire is apparently quite obvious to Joll, and Joll's withering dismissal of him makes the magistrate's aspirations suddenly seem both clichéd and futile. Those in power will write the history, and the magistrate is essentially alone, even in his own town—he will not be in control of how he is remembered, and so even if he is killed for "justice" he may not be remembered as a martyr at all. Joll clearly considers the magistrate as hardly a threat, and so doesn't even give him the satisfaction of antagonizing him further, but simply sends him away.

The magistrate is back in his cell. He lies "in the reek of old vomit obsessed with the thought of water," since he's had nothing to drink for two days. He mentions that Officer Mandel and his assistant force-fed him pints of salt water down a pipe pushed down his esophagus—and this makes him realize that, while he anticipated them to cause him varying degrees of pain, and that he would have to come to realize just "how much pain a plump comfortable old man would be able to endure" in the name of his principles, the effects of the salt water tactic were quite different. Instead of dealing in pain, this tactic made him realize "what it meant to live in a body, as a body" which can only support higher principles of justice insofar as it is healthy and nourished, and which soon forgets its higher order when visceral, physical matters come to the forefront. He also says that, while he thought that his torturers had a grand, elaborate system of "pain and deprivation" they were applying to him, really, they weren't that methodical about it—torturing the magistrate wasn't the center of their universe.

The magistrate continues to descend into a more dehumanized, bestial state. Mandel's torture tactics amplify this, as they necessarily inflict pain as much as debilitate basic bodily function and health—and furthermore make the magistrate feel unimportant, as if his torture is not even a priority for Mandel, and he is not considered an enemy worth much consideration at all. Dehydrated by the salt-water, the magistrate is forced to feel the tension of his body's reaction—he's forced to feel the limits, the contours, of his body in ways he's never had to before. It's this encounter with the limits of his body that makes the magistrate learn just what it means to live as a body—a body whose immediate, physical concerns ultimately overshadow any higher forms of intellect or morality, such as the magistrate's anti-Empire convictions.

The magistrate then mentions a scene in the prison yard—he's naked, an audience is gathered, and Mandel demands that he run, hitting the magistrate's rear end with a cane whenever he slows down. Out of shape and weak, the magistrate quickly runs out of breath, but Mandel continues to prod him. Other times, the magistrate is forced to do tricks, such as jumping back and forth over a rope. Further, the magistrate says that he "smell[s] of shit," not being permitted to wash himself. He flicks flies away from the sore on his check as if it were an automatic reflex. The magistrate wonders if there will be a time when, during these games Mandel makes him play, he will just collapse and ask to be killed rather than persist in going on.

The magistrate's once prominent sense of high civility, intellectual vigor, and moral virtue continue to devolve into a more and more bestial state, as the magistrate is debased and defiled by his imprisonment. Finally, it seems as if the magistrate is reaching the limit of his tolerance. Though before he had insisted on pursuing his convictions and defiance of the Empire for as long as possible until he was killed, it seems as if the intensity (and also the weary mundanity) of Mandel's torture tactics are causing the magistrate to lose sight of pursuing martyrdom.

The magistrate says that, one day, Mandel and his assistant throw open his cell door and hand him a woman's calico smock, telling him to put it on or otherwise go naked. He dons the smock, his wrists are tied behind his back, and the two men escort him out to the yard—Mandel tells him that his "time has come." Mandel and his men make like they're going to hang the magistrate—though he thinks that this is only a trick to mess with him—and a crowd forms. When asked if he has any final words, the magistrate just says that he's trying very hard to understand how Mandel feels about him, and why; instead of addressing the people directly, he'd rather hear some words from Mandel—why does he devote himself to his work, and what does he feel towards the magistrate, whom he has so concertedly tried to hurt?

Like the barbarian prisoners who were tortured in the town square upon the return of Joll's expeditionary force, the magistrate has become a spectacle for the settlers—a scapegoat for the anxiety they feel about the barbarians. Even though the magistrate has a hunch that Mandel and his assistants are just trying to fool him, it's interesting that he still doesn't use his chance to say some "final words" in order to condemn the wrongdoings of the Empire, but rather questions why Mandel works so pointedly to cause him harm and break his spirit. It seems that the magistrate truly wants to uncover the psychology behind such cruelty as Mandel's.

Still hoping that the men are just playing, but terrified nonetheless, the magistrate says that he wants people to know that "nothing passed between [him]self and the barbarians concerning military matters. It was a private affair." He wanted to return the barbarian girl to her people—with no other agenda. He further says that he believes that no one deserves to die, and that he wants to live like every man does. As he tries to balance himself on the ladder he's precariously perched upon, his mind flashes back to the leader of the barbarian horsemen who pointed a gun at him when he was returning the barbarian girl. He sees the scene with the most impeccable detail: "every hair of the horse's man, every wrinkle of the old man's face, every rock and furrow of the hillside."

The magistrate's flashback is significant for what its sense of clarity implies thematically. It's as if the magistrate's constant desire to uncover the truth of the past or remember a memory in the clearest detail suddenly happens automatically, proving that such perfect recollections can't be chosen consciously, but are rather caused by the unconscious association of two related events—in this case: two brushes with death. While the magistrate's desire to remember clearly involves thinking about an "end" result, this flashback happens automatically with no conscious, linear intention.

The magistrate then returns to consciousness of the present moment—his feet touch the ground, "though they are numb to all feeling," and he stretches out upon the ground. But he's abruptly pulled to his feet, and Mandel tells him that he is going to show him "another form of flying." He takes the rope off of the magistrate's neck and, knotting it around the cord that ties his wrists behind his back, asks his assistants to pull the magistrate up. The magistrate then thinks that, if he's acrobatic enough to be able to swing one of his feet up and hook it around the rope suspending him, he'll be able to hang upside down without his shoulder muscles being torn by his arms swinging up over his head—but he's unable to do this, and he suffers a "terrible tearing in [his] shoulders as though whole sheets of muscle are giving way." Someone gives him a push, and as he shouts in agony, someone says "he is calling to his barbarian friends," and "that is barbarian language." They laugh at him.

This scene shows perhaps the pinnacle of the magistrate's mistreatment at the hands of Mandel. Again, the monstrous nature of torture reveals the inhumanity and brutishness of the purportedly civil people who commit it, like Mandel. The magistrate's body continues to suffer on account of his commitment to opposing the Empire's campaign, but at this point it seems doubtful whether his pursuit of martyrdom is actually effective at all. Rather than being a political tool, it seems more like a waste of his body and whatever remains of his mental welfare, considering the fact that he's now seen to be just as evil as the barbarians, as evidenced by the accusation that they're his "friends." It's also telling that the screams of a tortured victim are considered "barbarian language"—suggesting that the "barbarians" could be anyone the Empire chooses to define itself against, and thus oppress and murder.

CHAPTER 5

The fifth chapter begins with the magistrate describing the hysterical gossip about the barbarians which has overtaken the fort. The barbarians, people say, have dug a tunnel under the walls of the fort, and the townsfolk are convinced that they're always prowling about waiting to murder, rape, steal, and pillage. Further, a little girl in the town was apparently raped by a barbarian—recognized as a barbarian because of his ugliness. The magistrate adds that it's been a long time since the second expeditionary force rode out against the barbarians. He says that, among the small group of soldiers left behind, there is a level of alcohol consumption and disrespect towards the townspeople which he's never witnessed before. The soldiers will go into shops and take what they want without paying. And, while Mandel promises to take charge of and enforce order among his soldiers (since he's in charge while Joll's away) he fails to ultimately act.

The brutish incivility among the purportedly civilized members of the Empire's army continues to be exposed as they pillage the very people they're supposed to be protecting, all while Mandel allows it to happen. Ironically, instead of being terrified of the soldiers who are mostly involved in causing them harm (and inflicting all the "savagery" the barbarians are accused of), the townspeople prefer to spend their time worrying about myths of barbarians sneaking into their town. This just provides yet another example of how the settler's anti-barbarian ideology prevents them from accurately assessing the flawed state of their very own society.

The magistrate says that he lives in a corner of the barracks yard, more disgraced than ever, having "lost his last vestige of authority the day he spent hanging from a tree in a woman's underclothes," and who had to lick up his food for a week, having lost the use of his hands. He says that there's also been an influx of refugees to the town—fisherfolk from outlying settlements along the river. While at first the townsfolk were sympathetic to them, after several occurrences (their building of thatched shelters along the wall of the town square, their thieving children and sheep-killing dogs) feelings towards them have changed.

This is perhaps the lowest point of bestial disgrace which the magistrate reaches in the novel, marking his transformation from a respected civil authority to a tortured, debased prisoner who is forced to eat like a dog. Further, the townspeople's ultimate lack of sympathy towards the fisherfolk suggests that they will eventually begin to lump them in the same category as the barbarians they despise, as we see later in the novel.

One day, the magistrate says, Mandel approaches him in the yard and says that the expenditures to keep him as a prisoner cannot go on forever. When asked when he's going to start working for his keep, the magistrate responds by saying that, as a prisoner awaiting trial, he's not required to work. Mandel, however, says that the magistrate is not a prisoner, and that he's free to go as he pleases. As the magistrate goes to leave, he asks Mandel, "how do you find it possible to eat afterwards, after you have been [torturing] people?" Mandel tries to evade the question, but the magistrate persists, trying to insist that he doesn't mean it to be sarcastic, but that, as a fellow civil devotee to the law, he wants to try and understand how someone like Mandel could bear to perform his duty and stand to live. Mandel is incredibly angered, and calls the magistrate a bastard, telling him to "go and die somewhere."

Here, the magistrate obviously strikes a nerve with Mandel, as the magistrate once again speculates about the necessity for people like him and Joll to perform rituals of cleansing after they torture their victims. It seems as if the magistrate is actually being sincere with his question, and not sarcastic, yet his willingness to ask it after just having been released by Mandel is still just as bold. Once again, the magistrate seems unconcerned with raising Mandel's temper, which very well could get the magistrate rearrested, demonstrating his fundamental concern with trying to get at the truth of things—this time the psychology of the torturer.

The magistrate says that, with his new freedom, he cannot hide from anyone—he's constantly on view in the town square. Gradually, he adds, the townsfolk start to soften up to him, and realize that "the old magistrate has taken his knocks and come through." As he's walking the streets one day, the magistrate encounters Mai, "the quartermaster's plump wife," and she invites him in for tea and biscuits. She sympathizes with all the hardships he's gone through, and mentions that there was never such commotion when he was in charge as there is now. As the magistrate rambles about how he became a fool in love over the barbarian girl—that it was simply common sense to return her to her family—she "listens to these half-truths, nodding, watching me like a hawk."

The magistrate's conversation with Mai suggests that the magistrate's reputation has not been too damaged by the men in power—Mandel and Joll's charge of treason against the magistrate, despite the power they have to manufacture their own narratives of truth, hasn't tarnished the magistrate's ability to be reintegrated with society. Further, his comments about "half-truths" implies that he feels the need to censor his story a bit in order to paint a more innocent (or at least coherent) picture of himself.

The magistrate says that he now sings (begs) for his keep, and can usually get the maids from the barracks to feed him leftovers from the soldier's dinners. In the mornings, he'll visit Mai at the inn as she cooks, just to "breathe in all the good smells." She tells him that many people have left the town, afraid of the barbarian threat, and that it's becoming a rougher road to travel each day—if you want to leave—with the approach of winter. The magistrate tells Mai that, he realizes, "I disappeared and then reappeared, and in between was not part of the world."

The magistrate's comment about disappearing and reappearing testifies to just how great a disconnection he feels between his life pre- and post-imprisonment. It's as if his own personal history—as a free human being integrated in society—was ruptured by a void where he became less than human, and therefore no longer a part of the narrative tract of his normal life.

The magistrate is rather forthright about his sexuality with Mai, saying how in prison he only thought about food—not women. He even mentions the girl at the inn, wondering why he is confessing all this, but then he realizes that when he first encountered his tormentors, his philosophy was "let everything be said," and that this is having an influence on the way he speaks now. Further, the magistrate's narration goes on about how food is the thing he craves the most, and how he can use his powers of flattery to get special meals. He says that he wants to be fat again—"fatter than ever before."

That the magistrate feels compelled to confess his most intimately personal details to Mai, and cites his tormentors as the cause of this compulsion, shows how torture has perhaps permanently changed his psychology. Whereas, when he formerly held office, he had to uphold a certain level of civilized decorum as a civil servant, his dehumanization at the hands of Mandel has eroded that layer of his personality.

The magistrate says that it's been almost three months since the second expeditionary force departed—and there's been no news about its progress. Instead, he says horrible rumors abound about its possible failures. Every week, a "convoy of the prudent" leave the town to head east towards the capital, supposedly to "visit relatives till things settle down again." Soon after the families leave their houses, the fort's soldiers loot and vandalize them. Also, those who are perceived to be preparing to leave the town are subject to public insult and robbery. The magistrate says that the soldiers "tyrannize" the town, having held a torch-lit meeting at the center of the settlement condemning those who wish to leave, and the slogan "WE STAY" has become popular among those who consider themselves to be faithful. He also mentions that he was present during the night of the meeting, and says that it turned into a march that ended up setting a house on fire. He concludes that Mandel has utterly lost control of the garrison—he was nowhere in sight during the march.

The magistrate's settlement is falling into utter shambles—the purported civility and reason of the Empire's society is fracturing into social disorder and a frenzied barbarism beneath, as the town divides into those who are either faithful or unfaithful to the settlement itself. The townspeople are exposed as being not at all united by a higher devotion to the Empire as a nation or bastion of civilization, but as torn and separated to the extent that the "faithful" commit crimes against those who wish to leave. Further, Mandel's lack of control over the troops either attests to his lack of leadership prowess in comparison to the magistrate, or perhaps that he's on the side of his tyrannical soldiers.

The magistrate, continuing to discuss the soldiers' new sense of power, mentions that they are fawned-upon by the citizens, who host a weekly levy in order to fund a feast for them. The more the soldiers are pampered, he says, the less reliable they become. The magistrate then discusses walking from town to the lakeside. He says that he's deeply familiar with this road—he's walked it by night ever since he was a child—and has no desire to leave the settlement, like the many families who have. "How," he says, "can I believe that the night is full of the flitting shadows of the barbarians?"

The magistrate still expresses no fear of the barbarians, as evidenced by his willingness to remain at the settlement and to walk along the road at night—it may also be that he knows the real threat to his safety would be the soldiers of the Empire, not the barbarians (who perhaps aren't even present). Even though the citizens are being cheated and tyrannized by the soldiers, they nonetheless cater to their every whim, fearing them less than the phantom barbarian threat.

Continuing down the road, the magistrate eventually begins to wade into an expanse of marshland, and fantasizes about joining the fisherfolk as a member of their village, having a romantic conception of their lifestyle. As he wades further into the water, the magistrate realizes that his daydreaming about becoming a fisherman represents the very mode of thinking engrained in the minds of adult citizens of the Empire: "dreams of ends . . . not of how to live but of how to die." Children, he says, never doubt that the trees they play under are everlasting, or the prospect of one day growing to be as strong and/or fertile as their parents—they never doubt that there is a continuity to life, or that their hopes for the future are guaranteed, and almost ordained by nature itself. They live in a kind of time that the Empire bars its adult citizens from living out. The Empire has "made it impossible for us to live in time like fish in water, like birds in air, like children," the magistrate says.

One of the most important scenes in the novel, the magistrate meditates here most clearly on his conception of two distinct dimensions of time—the cyclical time of the seasons, and the linear time of human history (particularly that of civilizations like the Empire). The magistrate attributes the tendency to think in terms of cyclic time to a natural, pre-adolescent state which gets distorted in adulthood by a form of linear thinking, a way of thinking that's caught up in beginnings and ends, not the "everlasting." Instead of being surrounded by a world that's steeped in time in every direction, such that there's no sense of a beginning or end, adults in the Empire come to see the world as sequenced on a line from past to future.

The Empire, the magistrate continues, lives its existence out in the "jagged time of rise and fall." Concerned with starting and ending things, with success and catastrophe, and not in the "smooth recurrent spinning time" of the seasons, the Empire ruthlessly plots to maintain and reproduce itself—and not to give itself up to the flux of the moment. The magistrate says that he is infected by this virus of thought, propagated by the Empire, no less than Colonel Joll is. Even though their priorities in life are drastically different, they are nonetheless equally subject to thinking about time in terms of beginning and end.

Even though Joll is significantly less moral than the magistrate, it seems that the magistrate is saying here that everyone in the Empire who grows old enough eventually gets corrupted by the distorted way of thinking which structures its plot of preservation and reproduction. It's as if there's something inherently evil about this way of thinking, in how it reorders the world to repress its natural state—every member of the Empire therefore automatically props up the evil structure which preserves its existence through the very way they think.

The magistrate, finding his way back to dry land, falls asleep. Later he wakes up and makes his way down the road to the fisherman's camp, when a dog starts barking. Suddenly, the "night bursts out in a clamour of barking, shouts of alarm, screams." Fearful that he has startled the entire town, he tries to shout out "It is nothing!" but isn't heard. Someone runs past him, and a woman whom the magistrate says he "knows at once" pummels into him, but she gets away from his grasp and runs past him. Then the sound of trumpets comes, and the magistrate slowly makes his way into the camp, and enters a hut.

Even the fishing camp villagers, who barely resemble the settlers at the frontier and who were furthermore shunned by them, have bought into the settlement's barbarian frenzy, and descend into havoc at the slightest bark of a dog. Even though the possibility of a barbarian invasion is real, this scene just shows how the settlement has dragged the fishing people into its own mess—how, through its fear of the barbarians, it's spread it to the surrounding regions.

In the hut, the magistrate says that he would like to fall asleep, but his impact with the girl has unsettled him. He is wary that he will follow, in the morning, his sexual urges to investigate who, in fact, the girl—a woman or child, he says—ran into him, in order to "build upon her . . . an even more ridiculous erotic adventure." Thus the magistrate says that, even for men of his age, there's no cap on one's foolishness. He says that the only excuse men of his age and erotic nature have is that "we leave no mark of our own on the girls who pass through our hands"—that those they engage sexually can "shrug off" whatever they offer. He continues with this theme, wondering if, when he would engage in his massaging rituals with the barbarian girl, all he really wanted to do was "engrave" himself on her in a very deep manner, and if, indeed, his inability to do so was what caused him the anxiety he felt.

This is an incredibly pivotal moment in the magistrate's narration, where for the first time since his imprisonment, he gains more insight into his relationship with the barbarian girl. Whereas with most women he sleeps with he feels no urge to leave any mark of himself on them—which is the only way he can justify engaging them at his age—with the barbarian girl, there was perhaps a rarer impulse to inscribe himself upon her, to make her persona in some way conform to the imprint of, and reflect back, his very own. Though before the magistrate always accused himself of trying to unearth the meaning of the girl's scars, perhaps he was rather trying to 'scar' her with something of himself.

Continuing on his tangent about the barbarian girl, the magistrate says that she will be forever marked "for life as the property of a stranger," and that no one will ever engage her with the same sexual pity with which he did. He thinks that if she had only spoken up and told the magistrate that, if he wanted to learn how to torture her, he should simply ask his "friend with the **black eyes**," Joll—and if he "had been in a position to understand her," he "might have saved [him]self from a year of confused and futile gestures of expiation."

Though it's marked with a certain cruelty towards the barbarian girl, the magistrate achieves here the fullest sense of understanding and closure about their relationship thus far. Whereas before, he was troubled with himself for emulating Joll's probing quest for truth in his approach to the girl, now the magistrate thinks that, though he wasn't in a position to understand the girl, she could have nevertheless been more communicative with him.

Presumably falling asleep in the hut, the magistrate experiences yet again his **recurring dream**. He dreams that he's heading towards the barbarian girl in the same snow-laden town square. While he walks towards her at first, he starts to fly as the wind picks up. Yet as he swoops down towards her, he's afraid that she won't turn around to see him in time, and so he tries to yell out to her and warn her. Unable to pierce the wind with his sound, he comes upon her bracing himself for impact—but, at just the last moment, she turns and sees him. "For an instant," he says, "I have a **vision** of her face . . . glowing, healthy, smiling on me," just before the two make impact. The girl's head hits the magistrate right in the stomach, propelling him beyond her, but he says that the bump is "as faint as the stroke of a moth." He realizes that because the impact was so light, he needn't have been so anxious in the first place. When he tries to look back, all he can see is a wall of snow.

This version of the magistrate's dream reflects his previous thoughts on his desire to "engrave" himself upon the barbarian girl. While the magistrate's wind-powered flight might represent the intense momentum of his sexual drive towards her, compiled with his drive to uncover a hidden depth within her and leave a mark there, the fact that he's unable to warn her reflects his feeling of lacking control over his own sexuality. When she turns around, the hidden face (or depth) he's anticipated is eclipsed with her reality, as his expected impact becomes a soft brush. This shows how the magistrate's anxiety was truly the product of the face, the hidden depth, he invented for her. And the snow-wall shows his memory's inability to retain his first impression of her.

The magistrate awakes and his mouth is wet with kisses—a dog has been licking his face. He exits the hut and walks up to the northwest watchtower of the settlement, and then back down the road towards the lakeside again. He encounters a boy urinating in the middle of the path, who looks up at him, startled, and runs away to hide in the reeds. But the magistrate tells him that he can come out—there being nothing to be afraid of. Yet turning back to the fishing town, he notes that the gates are open, and sees heavily armed soldiers peeking into the huts of the fisherfolk. Apparently suspicious of the commotion that occurred the night before, the soldiers start to deface and wreck parts of the village. Trying to plead with them, the magistrate informs a man trying to destroy a thatched hut that *he* was the cause of the commotion—that he inadvertently scared the villagers while out on a walk, and that they don't deserve to be punished for fleeing down the river worried that the barbarians might be upon them.

The soldiers' behavior has become utterly belligerent, reckless, and abusive. Even worse than stealing from people at the settlement, their impulse to harm the huts of the innocent fishing people is just a pure, unthinking pleasure-drive for destruction. Not only were the refugees from the fishing village unwelcome in the settlement, now the very homes they returned to are being wrecked. It's as if the soldiers are so bored waiting for the return of Joll's group or "waiting for the barbarians" that they jump at the first opportunity to spring into action. Also, that the little boy runs from the magistrate suggests that he suspects he's a barbarian—which speaks to how much the magistrate's appearance has changed since the beginning of the novel.

The soldier and his fellows, however, do not heed the magistrate's words, and continue on their path of destruction. They snap the roof off a hut they've gathered around, and tell the magistrate to "fuck off" and "go and die somewhere." When the roof of the hut snaps up, a soldier who had climbed atop it falls through to the ground, and as his fellows look on in laughter, he complains: "Shit, shit, shit, shit, shit! It's not funny. I've hurt my fucking thumb! It's sore!" Belligerently, he accuses the fisherfolk of being savages, and says that the Empire should have "lined them up against a wall and shot them long ago—with their friends!" The soldier, ignoring the magistrate, storms off.

The fact that the soldiers feel no compulsion to obey the magistrate demonstrates how he's entirely in the shadow of his former authority, usurped by the "new men of Empire." Further, the soldier's reaction to his hurt thumb is humorously overexaggerated and infantile, which contrasts with the aggressive and brutish personas the soldiers have taken on. The soldier's casual mention of execution based solely on perceived "savagery" is also chilling, considering the free reign the soldiers are given in the town.

Standing back in the road, the magistrate waits for his anger to subside, and he recalls an instance from the days when he had jurisdiction over the main settlement. A boy who had been charged with stealing chickens and sentenced to three years of army service tried to desert his post after a month. Caught and brought before the magistrate, the boy said that he only wanted to be able to see his mother and sisters again, but the magistrate told him that, being "fallen creatures" who are wholly subject to the law, "we cannot do as we wish." At that time, the magistrate believed that every person had the capacity to know what was and was not just at every moment—that "all creatures come into the world bringing with them the memory of justice."

When the magistrate says that at one point he believed every person could discern at any instant what was and was not just, it implies that he no longer holds this view—that the soldiers and Joll and Mandel have changed his mind. Further, his old belief reflects his conception of the cyclic dimension of time, which he thinks children are born into but later pulled out of by adulthood. To be able to enter the world with a memory—of justice—and to see at every point in time what does and does not reflect that memory, would be to measure justice not in terms of a beginning or end, but to compare all instants of time to a primordial impression.

The magistrate says that he remembers feeling ill at ease on days where he would have to make such strict decisions, entertaining the idea that, though "some men suffer unjustly, it is the fate of those who witness their suffering to suffer the shame of it." He concludes that, while he had considered resigning from his post as magistrate multiple times, he always rejected doing so, knowing that someone else would just be vested with the "shame of office," therefore not really changing anything.

That the magistrate never went through with resigning from his post because the shame of office would simply be displaced onto someone else reflects his philosophy of how the dimension of cyclic time plays a role in the realm of human history—how history is a self-repeating pattern. Leaving office would not change the pattern of the "shame" of the office itself from repeating.

The magistrate says that two horsemen, less than a mile away, have been spotted crossing the bare fields towards the settlement. Though some of the townsfolk gather in celebration, something seems wrong. One of the horsemen, who's been riding shoulder to shoulder with the other, suddenly cuts off towards the lakeside. The remaining horseman, however, continues to gallop towards the settlement—and as he gets closer, the magistrate sees that he's dead (and he's been so for several days). He' a soldier of the Empire who's been fixed to wooden planks to keep him upright on the horse—a taunting trick by the barbarians. With no one else willing to perform the duty, the magistrate gathers the reigns of the errant horse and brings the dead soldier back to the settlement's gates.

This horrifying scene is the first tangible sign of the barbarians actually being near the settlement. Sending the dead soldier back to the town is haunting indicator that Joll's forces have perished, and that the Empire shouldn't dare to send any more for its own sake, since they'll always flounder on foreign territory. It seems unlikely that the barbarians would bother to attack the settlement at this point, which gives the title a hugely ironic tone. Throughout their campaign, the military created the sense of waiting for something that would never have bothered to come in the first place, and which probably never will.

The magistrate then says that this event confirms every premonition of danger among the townspeople, adding that "true panic overtakes the town." Some families, he says, shut themselves up in their houses, and the school has closed. Further, he mentions a rumor that a substantial group of barbarians has made camp only a few miles away from the burnt river-banks, and that an attack on the garrison is therefore inevitable and imminent. The magistrate comments: "the unthinkable has occurred: the army that marched forth so gaily three months ago will never return."

The magistrate's comment that "the unthinkable has occurred" highlights the irony and hypocrisy of the Empire's supposed prowess as an advanced, civilized society. The military campaign has utterly failed its mission—to rid the frontier of its native, "primitive," "barbaric" people, and the proud stature of the Empire as an able defender of its settlements will perhaps never be regained.

The magistrate begs the gatekeeper of the garrison to allow the fisherfolk back inside their establishment, since they're afraid for their lives. But the guard ignores him. Then, one night, as the magistrate is on his way back to the granary shed—where he sleeps—he encounters a line of horse-drawn carriages, packed with supplies, making way to pass out of the settlement. He notes that the townspeople "emerge from their houses and stand quietly by watching this evidently long-planned manoeuvre of withdrawal," and he asks to meet with Officer Mandel to interview him about what's going on, but the guard on watch at the courthouse brushes him off.

It appears that Mandel and his men have decided to betray the townspeople even more deeply. Despite their efforts to pamper the soldiers and provide them with luxurious feasts, the settlers have inspired no real sense of responsibility in the soldiers, who now reach a new level of hypocrisy after supporting the settlement's campaign "WE STAY." The Empire's military force has given up entirely on the citizens it was supposed to protect.

Returning from the courthouse to the town square, the magistrate finds Mandel reading a statement announcing the "temporary" withdrawal of the majority of soldiers stationed at the garrison—though a "caretaker force," he says, will be left behind. There is also going to be an overall ceasing of the Empire's campaign efforts on the frontier for the remainder of the winter. He says that he hopes he will return in the spring, when the army can "initiate a new offensive."

The formality of Mandel's statement is laughable against the backdrop of what he and his men are really doing: deserting the townspeople and leaving them to be killed or captured if the barbarians should actually invade the settlement. Behind the thin sheen of military honor and regality lurks total cowardice.

The magistrate notes that, as Mandel speaks, his men are clearly stocking their carriages with the fruits of their looting. While he says that none of the villagers dare to protest, he can nonetheless sense "currents of helpless anger" all around him. Later on, the soldiers commence their departure of the garrison, and a young man runs out towards the company with his arms waving, stirring unrest. Shots ring out—and the magistrate sees the cause of the "futile attack": a man grabbing at a woman in the very last cart. The square, afterwards, is dark and empty, and for the rest of the night, small family groups follow after the soldiers in a hurry, carrying heavy packs.

The magistrate's observance of Mandel's soldiers stocking their carriages with what they've stolen puts the icing on the cake of their hypocrisy and utter disdain for the welfare of the people it's their duty to protect. The image of the dark and empty square is a haunting monument to betrayal and desertion, which speaks powerfully to the kind of deception Coetzee portrays as central to the goals of the "new men of Empire."

The magistrate says that his old apartment stands open—it has been vacant for a while now, the air is musty, and all of his artifacts from the archeological sites have disappeared. Lying down on his mattress, he anticipates that some special uneasiness will befall him, but nothing comes: the room is just as recognizable and familiar as it's ever been. The magistrate then begins to think about the possibility of being invaded by the barbarians. While he's certainly convinced that the world is no sugarcoated illusion or dream, he still finds it hard to firmly believe in the prospect that the end is near—that the barbarians will sweep in and kill the inhabitants of the settlement. Ultimately he says that, if and however the citizens of the garrison die, the Empire will have learned nothing—for something "in all of us, deep down" is "granite and unteachable." For no one, he believes, actually thinks that "the world of tranquil certainties we were born into" is about to be annihilated.

The magistrate's belief that there is something inalterable and unmanipulable at the core of every person—a fundamental resistance to the idea that the familiar world of certainties in one's stable, everyday life could ever be taken away and erased—reflects his belief that children are born into the world with a sense of the everlasting, a sense of the cyclical time of nature and the seasons. Though he says this sense of permanence loses its miraculous aura of eternity as one ages in the Empire, this scene reveals that he must think that it nonetheless remains unconscious and "unteachable," and acts to stabilize our linear, past-to-future thinking, such that the future is always supposed as replicating certain essential features of past experience.

CHAPTER 6

The magistrate begins the last chapter by acknowledging that, sometimes, there are fresh hoofprints in the fields around the garrison which were not there the day before. Further, the fisherfolk refuse to go out to the lake before sunrise—and their catch is so meager that they can just barely get by. The magistrate also says that the town knows that their main irrigation pipe—the water-current of which is currently turned by a **blind** horse—could be cut at any time, and so they've already begun digging new wells. Also, since the school has been closed, the children are tasked with trawling the fingers of the lake for crustaceans. Basically, the settlement is preparing to protect themselves against what they sense to be an imminent disaster.

Anytime someone, even a horse, is blind in this novel, it's significant. The blindness of the horse symbolizes the uncertainty of the settlement's future—the horse, ambling forward towards something it cannot see, but nonetheless continuing to perform a function for the survival of the settlement, is an allegory for the settlers themselves. Not knowing about their future or their end, but only "waiting for the barbarians," the settlers almost return to the form of cyclical time which the Empire as a whole represses, and which the horse's circular path hints at.

That magistrate has once again taken the lead of the garrison. Mandel has only left the settlement with three soldiers, and so—in order to create the illusion of having a fully-manned garrison—the magistrate arranges for a row of helmets and spears to be set up along the northern rampart of the settlement, and he has a child move each helmet ever so slightly every half-hour. This, the village hopes, will fool the barbarians into thinking that the fort is still fully guarded.

It still is uncertain whether it's likely that the barbarians will actually attack or just leave the settlement alone. Ironically, the magistrate's decision to set up the row of helmets, which face the quite possibly empty frontier around them, is keyed into the kind of linear way of thinking he disdains—thinking concerned ends. Every time a helmet gets shifted, the end—the invasion of the settlement—is presupposed.

The magistrate then describes a visit by Colonel Joll. One night, at two o'clock in the morning, the magistrate awakes to a pounding at his door: a soldier asks him where the warrant officer—Mandel—is. But Mandel is no longer here, and the warrant officer relays this to Joll. The magistrate catches a glimpse of Joll through the carriage glass, but the Colonel closes and locks the door to his vehicle before the magistrate has a chance to speak with him. The magistrate taps on the glass of the carriage door, but Joll utterly ignores him. Finally, Joll's men brush the magistrate away from the carriage, and a stone strikes the roof of Joll's car, and then a second one, which nearly hits the magistrate himself. After an escort of the Colonel's comes running up to announce that there is nothing left for them to take—that all the horses were taken by Mandel's men—the magistrate tells him to stable their horses, come inside to the barracks, eat, and tell him their story of campaigning on the frontier.

The tables have certainly turned: whereas before, the magistrate was despised by the townspeople and injured by some of them, now they have even more contempt for Joll and his men, and try to injure them. Ironically, though Mandel tried to strip the magistrate of all his humanity and civility, and made him devolve into a nearly bestial state, and though Joll beat the magistrate down during his last visit, the magistrate has retained a sense of civility, reason, and decorum that far exceeds the two officers, since he's even willing to house and feed Joll despite their past conflicts and Joll's brutal acts.

The men, however—as the magistrate points out—are starved and exhausted, and barely pay any attention to him. The magistrate stares through the window and observes the silhouette of Joll. Though he feels an urge to "smash the glass, to reach in and drag the man out through the jagged hole, to feel his flesh catch and tear on the edges," he resists. Then, the magistrate notes that—as though Joll had sensed these murderous intentions—the Colonel slinks across the carriage seat and stares at him through the glass. The magistrate observes that Joll's **glasses** are gone.

Despite the civility of the magistrate's outward appearance, within him, a fiery lust for violent revenge ensues, highlighting the ironic fact which Coetzee exposes about the relationship between civility and "barbarism": they're always connected, since their individual meanings are mutually dependent. The disappearance of Joll's glasses symbolizes that he's been forced to see the truth of his weakness and flawed sense of certainty and entitlement. Furthermore, his eyes (and thus his own secret interior) are now exposed to others, as he has lost the protection of his power and arrogance.

After another brick hits Joll's carriage, thrown from townsfolk watching from above, an assistant of the Colonel's comes running up and shouts that they must get on their way. The magistrate, however, grips this assistant's arm and demands to know what happened on the frontier. Reluctantly, the man tells the magistrate that the expeditionary force is "gone. Scattered. All over the place." He says that he has no idea where they are—that they had to find their own way, since it was not possible to stick together. Still pursuing more information, the magistrate demands to know how, exactly, the barbarians were capable of exacting such a defeat upon Joll's forces. The sobbing man replies that his company froze in the mountains and went hungry in the desert, and that they had no idea the conditions would be as such. The barbarians, he says, lured Joll's forces on and on; uncatchable, the barbarians kept their distance and picked off Joll's troops one by one.

It seems that it's precisely Joll's sense of certainty and entitlement—his feeling certain that the barbarians would be no match for his expeditionary force, and his feeling that the Empire was entitled to the land, lives, bodies, and minds of the barbarians—that caused this tragic defeat. Further, Joll's assistant's description of the battle makes it sound like the barbarians effortlessly defeated Joll's troops—that they conveyed a combat prowess and knowledge of how to use the land militarily that far superseded the utter lack of strategy by Joll, who entered the desert with a child unfit to be a guide and said he'd figure out his military strategy when he arrived in the barbarians' territory.

After Joll's carriage and company leave, the magistrate's narration shifts, and he says that digging on one of the settlement's well-sites (the third) has stopped. He and the diggers he employs have a brief conversation. The diggers say that they are unable to dig where the magistrate directed, as they've found that they're on top of a grave full of randomly discarded and improperly buried corpses. The errant bones make digging very difficult, but more importantly suggest that a less than desirable quality of water will be extracted from the area. The magistrate climbs into the pit they've dug, and when he tries to dig further, he strikes bone himself. They agree that the digging must begin closer to the wall of the ruins.

The grave of improperly buried corpses eerily stings of being a place where Joll had his men dispose of torture victims he ended up murdering, but which the magistrate never knew about—prisoners either at his own or at other frontier settlements, or victims of past "Jolls" in past incarnations of the settlement. The fact that such bones would taint the water supply of the settlement is a haunting but ironic testament to the flaws inherent in the "new men of Empire's" desire to forge fresh starts wherein the past cannot be traced. Even the dead bodies of the desert show up in the very water that keeps the settlers alive.

The magistrate describes a dream where he's in the well-pit, digging again. He feels under the surface of the water, searching for bones, but his hand discovers part of a woven sack that's rotten and which crumbles in his hands. After next discovering a fork, the magistrate uncovers a dead parrot with empty eye sockets and sagging wings. Yet when he releases the dead bird, it falls through the surface of the water without any agitation—without a splash. He then thinks "poisoned water"—he must take caution not to drink where he's dropped the parrot. "I must not touch my right hand to my mouth," he says.

This dream differs from the magistrate's usual recurring dream, but echoes the feeling that the horror of past actions can never be totally erased. The magistrate continues to "dig" and seek to uncover truths, even if those truths of past atrocities "poison" the present.

The magistrate then says that he hasn't slept with a woman since he returned from his expedition to return the barbarian girl to her people. He tries to invoke memories of his massaging rituals—and, though he's successful in conjuring up vivid images, it ultimately brings no visceral, bodily satisfaction. Burdened by regular erections which he cannot relieve with actual sex, he visits the herbalist to get a remedy for his problem—he's given milkroot. Yet, though he devotedly takes his concoction daily, the magistrate still feels like he's not attending fully to the problem.

It's ironic that now, when the magistrate fantasizes about the barbarian girl and finds that he can imagine vibrant and detailed images, he gets no visceral satisfaction, when the very opposite was the case before: the barbarian girl lacked animation and excitement, but the magistrate found an intoxicatingly pleasure in their massaging ritual.

The magistrate therefore calls on Mai—the inn has closed down, since there were too few customers—to come help in the barracks kitchen. Mai, very thankful for the opportunity to work at the barracks (alongside her mother), tells the magistrate that she wishes there were something nice she could offer him. In response, the magistrate tells her that he wants her to follow him upstairs. Mai, not wanting to leave her baby alone in the kitchen, wraps it and brings it up to the magistrate's room. Settling the infant on some cushions in a corner, she undresses, and she and magistrate have sex.

Again, the less than civil side behind the otherwise highly civilized surface of the magistrate expresses itself through his sexuality. The magistrate rather boldly and disrespectfully uses Mai's offer as an inroad to satisfying his sexual needs, and Mai, being in a position of need, likely feels obligated to appease him. Still, Mai ultimately doesn't express bitterness or discontent at the situation, even though it ends quickly.

The magistrate and Mai discuss the barbarian girl. Mai says that she—and everyone else who knew the girl—liked the girl very much, since she never complained and always did what she was asked. The magistrate and Mai have intercourse again.

For the very reasons that the magistrate disliked the barbarian girl—that she was stolid, not vocal about her feelings, and passive—Mai did like her.

Later, Mai says that she doesn't want to think about the barbarians, since "life is too short to spend worrying about the future." Further, she tells the magistrate that she knows she doesn't please him during sex—she can always sense that he's "somewhere else." Mai then says that the barbarian girl told her the same thing about the magistrate—that he was always "somewhere else." Mai adds that the girl was incapable of understanding the magistrate, of knowing what he wanted from her. The magistrate is surprised to learn that Mai and the girl were so intimate, and Mai explains that she often visited the barracks' kitchen when the girl was working. She says that they would share with each other what was on their minds, and that sometimes the girl would cry and cry—that the magistrate made the girl very unhappy.

Mai's comment that life is too short to worry about the future reflects the magistrate's own distaste for the linear sense of time, concerned always with ends, which he attributes to the way the thoughts of the Empire's citizens are organized after a certain age. Also, the fact that both Mai and the barbarian girl have noted that the magistrate is always "somewhere else" whenever he's had sex with them ironically hints at the magistrate's inability to participate in sex without being concerned about its ending. Unable to be present during sex, the magistrate commits the very crime of thought he despises.

The magistrate says that this comment by Mai opens "a door through which a wind of utter desolations blows" upon him. He tells Mai that she doesn't understand—that there's a whole side of the story she doesn't know, since the barbarian girl could never have told her it since she didn't know it herself. The two are silent, but the magistrate eventually says that, perhaps, when the barbarians arrive at their settlement, the girl will be with them. But Mai says that she's terrified—that sometimes, when she imagines what might happen, she's stopped in her tracks by fear. The magistrate consoles her, assuring her that the barbarians will harm neither the children of the town nor anyone else, for that matter.

The magistrate continues to be haunted by his past relationship to the barbarian girl, which continues to remain frustrating and inscrutable to him. The magistrate's claim that there's a side of the story that Mai doesn't know at once suggests his continued attempt to connect to her and affirms the distance between them, which he tried so hard to close and thought was bridgeable—thinking that he could uncover a hidden depth within her. The magistrate continues to feel detached from the tangible sense of fear the other townspeople are living with.

The magistrate then says that Mai sleeps better downstairs in the kitchen—she likes to wake up near the fire and also to have her child with her in bed. It's also better if Mai's mother doesn't know where she stays her nights. The magistrate concludes that he, too, thought his relationship with her was a mistake, and says that he doesn't want to visit Mai again—though, for an evening or two, he "experience[s] a quiet, fickle sadness, before [he] begin[s] to forget."

The magistrate's relation with Mai, though nothing much more than sexual, was rather short-lived, which suggests that the magistrate, once again caught up in finding a specific end, a certain idea of sexual or emotional gratification—characteristic of the very linear thinking he disdains—was inevitably disappointed by Mai.

The magistrate then discusses how, in the evenings, as long as his ration of firewood lasts, he will occupy himself with his old hobbies, such as trying to decipher the language on the wooden slips. He says that it would be a noble gesture to the ancient inhabitants of the desert to write a history of his settlement—a history for which no one but the previous magistrate, himself, would be better qualified. However, whenever the magistrate sits down to write this history, he seems unable to write anything besides an account of the inhabitants' psychology and their love for their settlement—about how they "lived with nothing between [them] and the stars," and "would have made any concession, had [they] only known what, to go on living here," since it was "paradise on earth."

The magistrate's inability to write an accurate history of his settlement in favor of writing a vague and romantic portrait of the townspeople speaks to two important themes explored in the novel. First, the magistrate's less than diligent dedication to writing the fort's true history contradicts his philosophy about struggling with the past and recording a direct truth for posterity. Second, the fact that he favors writing about how the settlers supposedly had a pure connection with the universe or stars shows that he'd rather write about history from the cyclical view of nature and the seasons—from the rotating celestial sphere. He also clearly idealizes how the settlement was before the arrival of Joll and his men, subtly comparing this pre-Empire settlement to the idea of a child's purer sense of time and life itself.

The magistrate imagines that, perhaps at the end of winter, when either he and the rest of the settlement's inhabitants are either cold and starving or threatened by the presence of barbarians—perhaps then he will "abandon the locutions of a civil servant with literary ambitions" and actually start telling the truth of what happened. The magistrate then says how he thinks he wanted to live beyond, outside, of history—to live outside of the mode of perceiving time which the Empire forces onto its subjects. He says that he never wanted the barbarians to have the history of the Empire forced upon them. While he's lived through a lot in the past year, he doesn't understand it any more than a "babe in arms," and that, of all the people in the settlement, he's the one least fit to write the town's history.

Even though the magistrate seems to prefer entertaining his more literary and philosophical inclinations when trying to write the history of the settlement, he still intends to abandon his romanticism when the circumstances are right. Further, it's as if the magistrate's traumatic imprisonment and sensitivity to Joll's mistreatment of the barbarians have made him at once the most knowledgeable, but the least level-headed, potential writer of a history of the town.

The novel ends with the magistrate narrating a scene that resembles his **recurring dream**, only it actually is from real life. He crosses the barracks yard, which is inches deep in snow, and his "footsteps crunch with an eerie lightness." Children are playing in the center of the square, building a snowman, and the magistrate walks towards them. The children, unlike in the dream, are not alarmed, for they are too engrossed in building the snowman to pay the magistrate any attention. The magistrate notes that one of the children—the leader of the group—orders that someone gets objects for the snowman's mouth, nose, and eyes, and the magistrate says that "it strikes me that the snowman will need arms too, but I do not want to interfere." After the children have finished putting the snowman together, the magistrate says it's not bad. He concludes that this scene is not the one he dreamed of, and that—like a lot of things nowadays—he leaves it feeling "stupid, like a man who lost his way long ago but presses on along a road that may lead somewhere."

The magistrate's ending comment about feeling like he lost his way long ago, but that he nevertheless persists along a potentially destination-less path, implies that the he has begun to enter the kind of cyclical perception of time that he always dreamed about, but not quite—it's not the miraculous flux of endless time he's always romanticized. As symbolized by the discordance between the magistrate's dream and the real scene resembling it in the town square, the ends for which the magistrate has dreamed have never fully arrived. Most especially, his dream of a pure form of cyclical time is revealed to be one such idealized end that the reality of his new directionless-ness doesn't accurately reflect. Coetzee ends the novel with a typical sense of ambiguity, as the magistrate and the settlement move into a hazy future that may just be another repetition of the past. Many events have taken place, but we must wonder if anything has really been learned and if anything will really change.

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