

## The Problems of Morality and Justice in J. M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*

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### Abstract

In its explorations of *Waiting for the Barbarians*, this paper examines the novel's preoccupations with problems of morality and justice. To this end, this study employs Jacques Derrida's view of justice and Friedrich Nietzsche's perception of morality as a framework for understanding the portrayal of the problems of these concepts. This present paper also seeks to illustrate how the pursuit of justice and morality is futile and impossible in the novel. It also probes the extent to which the Magistrate is an accomplice in the wrongdoing of the Empire although he embarks upon a quixotic quest to restore a sense of justice and morality. This study throws light on how the Magistrate gets embroiled in a double bind between his position as a responsible official in the service of the Empire and his fervor for doing what is morally right.

**Key words:** Problems; Morality; Justice; The Magistrate; The Empire

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### INTRODUCTION

The fictional world of J.M. Coetzee is inherently Manichean, for it preponderantly addresses, like most postcolonial works, binary oppositions. In the case of

*Waiting for the Barbarians*, the conflicting injunctions are writ large in the novel's preoccupations with justice versus injustice and morality versus immorality. There is also another instance of binary opposition, namely that of civilization versus barbarism. The Empire depicts itself as the epitome of civilization while the barbarians are the antithesis of what the Empire stands for. However, this is not the issue that this paper seeks to address, conversely, this paper argues that the novel is replete with problems of morality and justice.

In what follows, it will be shown how the novel expresses those problems and how it draws the readers' attention to the impossible pursuit of a moral and just society and reminds the readers that justice is not as rudimentary as it appears to be on the surface level. At the same time, it will be demonstrated how the Magistrate tries to reconcile the dire exigency of justice and morality with the imperial Empire. Although one might argue that the novel deals with unsavory topics such as torture and violence, it still offers profound insights into the nature of civilization and how a seemingly prosperous civilization falls into decline. In this regard, the novel can be regarded as a scathing critique of civilizations that thrive on the act of colonization.

This paper employs a thematic analysis, a close-reading analysis, and an in-depth investigation of various passages. It does so with the aim of probing J. M. Coetzee's portrayal of the "moral dimension of [the Magistrate] plight" (Coetzee, 1980, p.93) and the moral plight of the Empire.

Therefore, this present paper focuses on the problems of morality and justice that are inherent in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, it also demystifies how the novel enunciates these problems. In the course of this analysis, I will briefly draw on Friedrich Nietzsche's idea of Morality and Jacques Derrida's understanding of the concept of justice as they correspond with what this paper seeks to demonstrate. My aim is also to show- with the intention

of doing justice to the work in question- how morality, for J.M. Coetzee, is the necessary starting point for a serious pursuit of justice.

## THE PROBLEMS OF JUSTICE IN THE NOVEL

"The struggle against injustice that does not culminate in sanctity culminates in bloody upheavals."  
Nicolás Gómez Dávila.

In considering the problems of justice in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, it is necessary to state at the outset that the novel persistently alludes to Derrida's perception of justice. That is to say, justice in the novel, as well as it is in Derrida's understanding, is an elusive and obscure concept. The elusiveness of justice thus depicted in the novel is writ large whenever the protagonist, the Magistrate, attempts to address the problem of justice. This is manifested in the magistrate's confrontation with Colonel Joll, as he tries to speak up against the injustice that is being perpetuated in the empire. However, he fails to deliver a speech as "words fail [him]", and the thought he wishes to express "eludes [him] like a wisp of smoke" (Coetzee, 1980, p.113). Moreover, another similar instance that shows how justice is an elusive concept in the novel is that of the barbarian girl. When the Magistrate asks the girl who was subject to the injustice and torture of the empire: "what did they do to you", "words elude [him]" again, and he struggles "to speak" (Coetzee, 1980, pp.35-36). Hence, justice eludes the magistrate in the same way it eludes the barbarians, by virtue of the fact that it is an elusive phenomenon. Therefore, it is in these scenes that we most distinctly witness how the novel expresses one of the problems of justice, which is its elusiveness.

As I indicated above, the novel is coterminous with Derrida's view of justice as an obscure and impossible experience. This is further manifested when the Magistrate points out in the second part of the novel that: "The workings of justice are often obscure" (Coetzee, 1980, p.133). In light of this, it is noteworthy to remark that after the Magistrate returns from his expedition to the barbarians and after he returns the barbarian girl to her people, which can be regarded as an act of justice, the Third Bureau charges and accuses him of "treasonously consorting with the enemy" (Coetzee, 1980, p.83). As this happens, the guards of the Third Bureau unjustly immure him in solitary confinement. Consequently, the Magistrate is subjected to inhumane treatment and "humiliations of imprisonment" (p.90), he then proceeds to remark that it is "intolerable that [he] should stay here" (p.103). After they leave him with no food and water, and after the laws are "suspended", they torture him in the worst possible ways: "The rope is now so tight that am strangled, speechless." (p.127). In this particular passage, we vividly witness how

the Magistrate's excursion to the barbarians ends with unfair imprisonment and brutal torture by the officials of the Third Bureau. In so doing, the novel highlights that the pursuit of justice is impossible and cannot be fully attained. I could argue that the magistrate's detention, despite his act of justice in returning the girl to her people -which is an act of "reparation" of justice and doing what "was right" (p.86) as he declares - suggests that justice is paradoxical and would never be fully attained. In this context, justice, in the novel, is coterminous with what Derrida describes as "an experience of the impossible" (Derrida, 1992, p.16).

The other problem that underlies justice in the novel is that torture is consistently regarded as a standard and natural constituent in the implementation of justice. In other words, the Empire does not only condone torture but also perceives it as a means of the realization of justice. It also perpetuates torture and adopts it as an innocuous process in its execution of justice. The magistrate seems to be the only character in the novel who realizes that torture, in the true sense of the word, is not as natural as it appears to be in the Empire. On the contrary, it is inherently nefarious. In contemplating the problems of justice in the Empire, the Magistrate reflects on torture as follows: "I have said the words *torture.. torturer* to myself, but they are strange words, and the more I repeat them the stranger they grow, till they lie like stones on my tongue." (Coetzee, 1980, p.125). Taking this quotation into consideration, I would argue that the Magistrate feels this way about torture because it is seen in the Empire as something compulsory and rudimentary. Therefore, as he ruminates on the idea of torture, a sense of revelation dawns upon him, illuminating the perplexing and sordid nature inherent in the seemingly innocuous yet "strange" act of torture. Furthermore, he contends that torture and beating imbue the Empire. This latter perpetually tortures and degrades the barbarians: "Somewhere, always, a child is being beaten. I think of the one who despite her age was still a child; who was brought in here and hurt before her father's eyes..." (Coetzee, 1980, p.86).

As the novel unfolds, the Magistrate reflects further on problems of justice in the Empire. He becomes tangled in an introspective examination of the injustice that is inflicted on the barbarians. As he fervently demands justice for the barbarians, his reflections come as follows:

Would I have dared to face the crowd to demand justice for these ridiculous barbarian prisoners with their backsides in the air? *Justice*: once that word is uttered, where will it end? Easier to shout *No!* Easier to be beaten and made a martyr: Easier to lay my head on a block than to defend the cause of justice for the barbarians: for where can that argument lead but to laying down our arms and opening the gates of the town to the people whose land we have raped? The old magistrate, defender of the rule of law, enemy in his own way of the State, assaulted and imprisoned, impregably virtuous, is not without his own twinges of doubt. (Coetzee, 1980, p.145)

This passage perfectly enunciates the problem of justice for the barbarians. The issue lies in the difficulty of defending the barbarians' right to justice because the Empire does not regard the barbarians as worthy of justice the same way the Magistrate does. This is evident when Colonel Joll refers to the Magistrate in the second part of the novel as "The One Just Man", he adds "you are simply a clown, a madman." (Coetzee, 1980, p.120). From this, we can infer that the Empire, like Colonel Joll, sees the Magistrate as a "madman" because he pursues what the Empire seeks to cast aside, namely justice. Accordingly, we deduce that he is caught in a double bind between his loyalty toward the Empire and his fervor for justice. Throughout the course of the novel, the Magistrate, one might argue, stands out as the only character who surmounts a pervasive feeling of inertia when it comes to changing this state of stagnant justice that befalls the Empire. He strives for an empire "in which there would be no more injustice, no more pain" (p.28).

In his struggle against injustice, the Magistrate realizes his own complicity in this state of disorder. For this reason, he comes to terms with the thought that no one in the Empire is exempt from injustice. Swanepoel expresses this idea, albeit with some nuance, as follows:

The Magistrate's considerations of justice also seem to suggest that he is aware that, should he demand justice and it materializes, he too deserves to be punished. His question, "[w]here will it end?" (124) points to his acknowledgment that, if justice was to be seriously pursued, most –if not all – people would be implicated and punished to some extent. (p.39)

Through the Magistrate's reflections on the nature of justice, J.M Coetzee implies that for the realization of justice to be fully fledged, there has to be a reconciliation between morality and the Empire. That is to say, for the pursuit of justice to become feasible, the pursuit of morality has to be the preliminary step undertaken by the Empire. In this context, morality is the precondition for the culmination and the attainment of justice.

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## THE PROBLEMS OF MORALITY IN THE NOVEL

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The novel's profound scrutiny of problematic themes encompasses not only the problems of justice but also extends to the realm of morality. Through its portrayal of the Magistrate's perpetual considerations, the novel raises the question: how can one, in this state of disarray, set out in pursuit of morality when it is such an evasive concept? To this end, the Magistrate sets off on a journey into the remote parts of the Empire to return the barbarian girl to her tribe. In doing so, the Magistrate is not only undertaking a sinister journey to restore the girl to her people, but he is also embarking upon a quixotic quest to restore that state of morality that has been lost and to overcome the amorality of the Empire. This excursion

to the barbarians shows how the Magistrate copes with the Empire's lack of not only justice but also morality. Consequently, his quest for the barbarians is anchored in his search for morality; he recognizes this lack of moral rectitude when he sets out to reinstate a sense of morality. His aim is to "repair some of the damage wrought by the forays of the Third Bureau" and to "restore some of the goodwill that previously existed.." (Coetzee, 1980, p.62). As we mentioned earlier, when the Magistrate returns from his quest, he gets detained by the Empire. It is through this imprisonment that we most vividly observe how "the empire of pain" (p.26), as the Magistrate describes it, repudiates and negates any moral endeavors; it tries to foist its own defective morality upon him. Hence, the Magistrate becomes a victim of flagrant immorality. If the Empire tries to obliterate any endeavors toward justice, it does the same with morality. All this sheds some light on one of the maladies of morality in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, which has to do with the Empire's negation and repudiation of a serious pursuit of morality.

The novel is relentless in its depiction of moral problems one of which is that of the Empire's moral transgression, which the magistrate realizes. As he begins to reflect on this moral transgression, he impugns the Empire's "contempt" for the barbarians and wishes that "these barbarians would rise up and teach us a lesson, so that we would learn to respect them". He also denounces the Empire's unsavory treatment of the barbarians as follows:

I will say nothing of the recent raids carried out on them, quite without justifi-cation, and followed by acts of wanton cruelty, since the security of Empire was at stake, or so I am told. It will take years to patch up the damage done in those few days...It is contempt for the barbarians, contempt which is shown by the meanest ostler or peasant farmer, that I as magistrate have had to contend with for twenty years. How do you eradicate contempt, especially when that contempt is founded on nothing more substantial than differences in table manners, variations in the structure of the eyelid? (Coetzee, 1980, pp.55-56).

The fact that the Magistrate speaks of "wanton cruelty" shows that morality is not only attenuated but also irreversibly trampled underfoot within the precincts of the Empire. It is replete with moral corruption. This can be extrapolated from the fact that the people of the town have seemingly abandoned every vestige of morality, and the problem that emerges is that no intervention is taken by them. This extends to the Magistrate as well although he persistently seeks intervention. Given his obvious ambivalence, it could be argued that the Magistrate can be perceived within the philosophical framework of what Friedrich Nietzsche, in his book *Unpublished Fragments*, points to as "moral hypocrisy" (p.23). At the very beginning of the novel, he stands out as a morally indifferent character, as the plot progresses, and just as his sexual interaction wavers between the woman at the

inn and the barbarian girl, he oscillates between morality and immorality. He is also torn apart between his sexual desires for the barbarian girl and his moral obligations towards her. Additionally, he does not realize that he is ensnared in a moral dilemma. Nevertheless, he senses his moral transgression, but he does not acknowledge it: "It is not that something is in the course of happening to me that happens to some men of a certain age, a downward progress from a lib-retainage to vengeful actions of impotent yearning. If a change in my moral being were occurring, I would feel it..." (Coetzee, 1980, p.48). It is ironic that the Magistrate expresses aporetic sentiments and twinges of qualms about the "moral change" that molds his being when, in fact, this change is true. His pious dissimulation and moral hypocrisy are in full swing as he has no moral scruples about having a sensual relationship with the blind, barbarian girl. Although the Magistrate does not acknowledge his moral hypocrisy, he does reveal his "indignation" at the immoral course that the Empire follows.

Furthermore, the Magistrate does not seem to question his own complicity with the immorality of the Empire. He reproaches the torture and the oppression that is inflicted on the barbarians by the regime but does nothing to stop it. He declares that "there is nothing to link [him] with tortures" (Coetzee, 1980, p.49). However, he is an accomplice in the wrongdoing of the Empire as he maintains that his intuitions "are clearly fallible". Susan VanZanten Gallagher provides a similar argument on whether the Magistrate can be regarded as an accomplice: "Those who passively allow torture and oppression to take place are just as much Barbarians as the tortures" (p.285).

Another major problem of morality in the novel is that there is no moral right or wrong in the Empire. Characters are bereft of any moral sense; thus, they are unable to decipher what is morally right or wrong. Their flagrant actions are not guided by moral and ethical codes. Rather, they are grounded on whims. The Magistrate dilates on this problem when everyone fails to grasp his moral quest of returning the girl to her people: "To me it was simply a matter of common sense to take her back to her family, but how could one make them understand that?" Ultimately, the Magistrate attributes all these moral problems to the Empire when he asks the question: "What has made it impossible for us to live in time like fish in water" he concludes that: "It is the fault of Empire" (Coetzee, 1980, pp.140-144). In this regard, it is significant to recall the passage in which the Magistrate articulates the novel's preoccupations with the complexity of morality in the regime:

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. By day it pursues its enemies. It is cunning and ruthless; it sends

its bloodhounds everywhere. By night it feeds on images of disaster: the sack of cities, the rape of populations, pyramids of bones, acres of desolation. A mad vision yet a virulent one. (Coetzee, 1980, p.177)

It is in this excerpt that we infer the extent to which the problems of morality are in full swing as the Magistrate grapples with the state's moral decadence and ventures a critique of its extinction of any moral principles. Thus, the Empire, in the Magistrate's words, is "sinking into darkness" because of its amorality, while he is, as he asserts at the end of the novel: a man who lost his way long but still presses and persists on a long and arduous quest that may lead nowhere and might be of no avail.

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## CONCLUSION

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*Waiting for the Barbarians*, as I have argued in this paper, is relentless in its portrayal of problems of morality and justice. Moral decadence permeates the Empire, both personally and collectively. It also exposes the Magistrate and the Empire's inability to seriously pursue moral and just ideals. Through this depiction of the Empire, J.M Coetzee scrupulously probes into the decline of morality and justice in colonial regimes. As I have suggested before, the Empire is mired in an acute humanitarian crisis; it delineates itself as a morally enhanced state whilst it is, in fact, devoid of any ethical and moral sense. Moreover, when the Magistrate takes on the mantle of restoring a sense of justice, the Empire annihilates those endeavors by imprisoning him.

J.M. Coetzee's depiction of morality and justice is congruent with Jacques Derrida's understanding of justice as an experience of the impossible and Friedrich Nietzsche's perception of morality. That is to say, the novel aligns with Nietzsche's idea of moral hypocrisy. It presents the Magistrate, as I have discussed, as a moral hypocrite, not only because of his "questionable desires" (Coetzee, 1980, p.78) but also because of his complicity in the immoral proprieties of the Empire. Although the novel does not depict him as morally degenerate as it does with Colonel Joll, he is nonetheless "the lie that the empire tells itself when times are easy" (p.180). Therefore, the Magistrate can be considered an accomplice just as much as Colonel Joll is, as they are: "two sides of imperial rule, no more no less." (p.142)

I have also argued that the pursuit of a moral and just society is, in a sense, impossible. The Magistrate's wish to live out his life with ease in "a familiar world" (p.80) shows the difficulty and therefore the futility of such a pursuit.

Ultimately, the fact that J.M. Coetzee chooses to remain reticent about the novel's setting makes all the events of the novel seem more universal. When J.M. Coetzee remains indefinite about the setting, he is doing so deliberately to generalize the overall message that he

wishes to convey. Additionally, the author does not make any historical references whatsoever even though some scholars regard the novel as an allegory of South Africa. Therefore, by being vague about the time and the setting, J.M. Coetzee makes the story relatable and accessible even to the most perfunctory readers.

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