

A NEVER-ENDING CYCLE: COETZEE AND INDOCTRINATION

EMILY KIKER

Though it may go unrealized, all countries indoctrinate their people. The Pledge of Allegiance, for example, is a form of indoctrination that schools use daily to force children to recite and pledge something they do not comprehend. Such indoctrination attempts to instill certain beliefs of the country beginning at a young age. Reciting the Pledge of Allegiance may not be a bad way of teaching children loyalty to their country; however, it does force children to recite something they cannot think about critically. Though the Pledge of Allegiance has not proven to be bad, not all indoctrination is harmless and most of it reveals itself to be anything but. John Maxwell Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* illustrates how indoctrination can lead to misery and persecution and the systematic unawareness that perpetuates it.

Narrated by an unnamed Magistrate, Coetzee's novel exposes the aftermath of colonization, bringing physical and psychological hardship not only to the natives, but also to the colonizers themselves. The Magistrate has lived on the unnamed native's land for a couple of decades, allowing him enough distance from the Empire to begin seeing the native's point of view. Joll, the Colonel from the Third Bureau, refuses to see the native's point of view and proves to be cruel and demeaning—something the Magistrate believes himself to be the opposite of. However, the Magistrate learns through his time with his native concubine that he resembles Joll. The Magistrate brings the native girl into his life to find answers within her. He realizes that his actions towards the girl are just as harmful as how Joll treats his prisoners. Attempting to differentiate himself from Joll's and his own sins, he takes the girl back to her family. When the Magistrate returns to the frontier, Joll and his right-hand man, Mandel, eagerly torture him for treason against the Empire. Eventually, the natives retaliate, sending new fear to the imperial guard. The garrison leave, not only worried about the natives, but also worried about the Empire's reaction to their

failure. By the end of the novel, the Magistrate no longer conforms to the violence and beliefs of the Empire, thus bringing a sense of morality to the character.

Waiting for the Barbarians leaves many questions, but also brings out the dangers of following a government's orders blindly. *Waiting for the Barbarians*, then, interrogates the mindset of the government. The Magistrate sees the acts of evil happening and searches for how those evil acts came to be—through thorough conditioning. Indoctrination allows for a set of beliefs for people to believe in, therefore giving people certain perceptions. Coetzee's novel shows how this can be dangerous. Ultimately *Waiting for the Barbarians* illustrates the Magistrate's confused moral compass as Coetzee reveals the hard process of realizing indoctrination and overcoming it by attempting to break the cycle of evil.

Robert Meister's *After Evil* discusses the evils of the past and its aftermath defining evil "as a time of cyclical violence that is past-or can be put in the past by defining the present as another time in which the evil is remembered rather than repeated" (25). Evil recurs, as it does in the repeated atrocities of colonialism in *Waiting for the Barbarians*. To understand the cycle of evil, Coetzee attempted to get into the mind of torturers like Joll and Mandel. However, the torturers' mind was a steppingstone to the real problem: the Empire.

The Empire has passed down its malicious acts for generations, yet the Magistrate seems to be the only one that distances himself from the imperial beliefs. The Magistrate constantly blocks out the bad things that happen around him as demonstrated when he leaves the prison and ignores what he hears: "Of the screaming which people afterwards claim to have heard from the granary, I hear nothing" (Coetzee 5). Other people hear what happens to the native prisoners, but the Magistrate mentally blocks it out because he cannot handle it. For the torturers, though, sunglasses signal that something was blinding the imperial minds from their guilty conscience over the violence they inflict. *Waiting for the Barbarians* begins with the Magistrate's interest in Joll's sunglasses; a tool that allows Joll to be unaware of his skewed view of the natives.

Jonathan Lear's "Waiting with Coetzee" discusses obliviousness by describing *Waiting for the Barbarians* as a dream-like state in which the Empire and the imperial guards wait in their paranoia of the natives. This state, Lear argues, "depends for its continued existence on not becoming fully aware of what it is" (Lear 10). Lear argues that, because of the paranoia the Empire feels towards the natives, they constantly wait for something to happen, causing the imperial soldiers to be unaware of what is really happening and of how their actions are sinful. As they wait for an attack by the natives, they torture captured prisoners, hoping to prevent the attack they so fear. Lear also argues that "sunglasses

hides the eyes of torturers” (Lear 4). The sunglasses, therefore, reveal that the imperial guards have shielded themselves from a guilty conscience, therefore allowing themselves to continue violent acts towards the natives. The mentality of the Empire proves to be of one mind, explaining why the Empire refuses to see their wrongs, trapping them in a continuous cycle.

This indoctrination, then, is a product of perception—specifically a lack thereof—and it constitutes further evidence of the vitality of the blind eye to a system bent on perpetuating their control. Each set of players in the system must have their own perceptions, which can never be questioned. Because the natives have been colonized by the Empire, they rightly see the Empire as evil. Because the Empire views the natives as less than human, they refuse to see that they are committing acts of evil. However, viewing the natives as less than human does not take away their paranoia that the natives will attack. In “Writing Revolution: The Manuscript Revisions of J. M. Coetzee’s *Waiting for the Barbarians*,” David Attwell describes Paranoia as “the basic condition of the Empire in *Barbarians*” (Attwell 202). The Empire kills and tortures the natives to get the ‘truth’—the natives will attack the imperial guard. This truth the Empire pursues is nonexistent, however, because the natives have neither attacked nor even threatened to attack. The Empire took over the native’s land and thought that the natives would be angry and try to fight them off. So, for the years that the Empire has taken this land, it has been paranoid, passing that paranoia down to future generations, creating people like Joll and Mandel.

Feeling confused on where he stands with the Empire, the Magistrate begins his moral—but superficial—search through the native girl, thinking, “I feed her, shelter her, use her body, if that is what I am doing, in this foreign way. There used to be moments when she stiffened at certain intimacies; but now . . . She yields to everything” (Coetzee 35). Though he knows the girl is in agony, he continues to colonize her body. And he does so, even without being able to find incentives for his actions. Just as the Empire finds the land uninhabitable and disgusting, the Magistrate finds the native girl disgusting and sexually uninhabitable, yet makes his colonizing attempts, nonetheless.

Though the Magistrate colonizes the native girl, he does not think he colonizes like Joll. In “Torture and the Novel: J. M. Coetzee’s ‘Waiting for the Barbarians,’” Susan Van Zanten Gallagher argues that, when the Magistrate cleans the native girl, “[h]e seems to be trying to absolve himself of the guilt he feels for having allowed the torture to take place. But he is also attempting to penetrate her secret being, to find her deepest and most hidden feelings” (Gallagher 283). As Gallagher points out, the Magistrate has put himself into a contradictory situation: on the one hand, he wants to find redemption for his own sins by cleaning the girl and trying to understand her wounds but, on the other hand, he digs to find her inner most secrets by using surface level strategies, just as Joll does with his prisoners. The Magistrate claims to be

different from Joll, but he clearly colonizes the native girl like Joll colonizes the prisoners.

It is not until the Magistrate sees the girl's scars side by side with the results of his own harmful behavior that he realizes that his actions towards the native girl are just as harmful as the Empire's twisted practices. He takes her to her people and returns to the frontier, expecting a warm welcome from the garrison, but instead is arrested. Because of his changed perception of right and wrong, he knew taking the girl home was the right thing to do and therefore expected praise when he returned to the frontier. However, the imperial guards view his deed as consorting with the enemy. The Magistrate spends time in prison, where the guards treat him as barbarically as the native prisoners. He is treated like an animal and even begins to think like an animal: "I guzzle my food like a dog. A bestial life is turning me into a beast" (Coetzee 93). His new life revolves around mealtime and exercise, which, to the guards, makes him just as barbaric as the natives. He knows he no longer belongs with the Empire.

Instead of allowing the Magistrate to have a legal time to plead his case, his name was instead erased from all books because the imperial guards feared he would go down in history as a hero to the natives. So, the Magistrate must try to get people to see the wrong doings of the Empire now. When the imperial troops bring a group of natives into the frontier, he witnesses a child learning to beat a native and is rewarded for it:

A girl, giggling and hiding her face, is pushed forward by her friends. 'Go on, don't be afraid!' they urge her. A soldier puts a cane in her hand and leads her to the place. She stands confused, embarrassed, one hand still over her face...She lifts the cane, brings it down smartly on the prisoner's buttocks, drops it, and scuttles to safety to a roar of applause. There is a scramble for the canes...people press forward to take a turn or simply watch the beating from nearer (Coetzee 122).

The young girl is taught that the natives are to be beaten. She does not understand why but knows she will be rewarded and does as she is told with encouragement from others. Coetzee's portrayed cycle highlights how even a tool as simple as praise or the smallest action prompted by social pressure can cause widespread participation in a cycle of indoctrination; a cycle which continues because it is passed down to young ones who do not understand what is happening.

However, the Magistrate has begun to catch on and attempts to show others their wrongs. When Joll brings out a hammer to beat a native, the Magistrate shouts "Not with that...You would not use a hammer on a beast...We are the great miracle of creation! But from some blows this miraculous body cannot

repair itself...Look at these men...*Men!*" (Coetzee 123-124). But this appeal to get the garrison and the crowd to understand that they are treating these people as less than animals, when they are in fact men, is cut short by Joll, who beats the Magistrate before he can finish his speech. He cannot save the natives from the pain nor can he save the next generations of the Empire from themselves.

The Magistrate, however, still cannot comprehend the level of violence the imperial guards inflict. So he asks Mandel "How do you find it possible to eat afterwards, after you have been ... working with people? ... [O]ne would require priestly intervention, a ceremonial of cleansing some kind of purging of one's soul too" (Coetzee 145). The Magistrate cannot imagine dealing with what Mandel does every day. Gallagher believes these questions reflect Coetzee's interrogations: "Perhaps the Magistrate's failure represents the author's own failure, for by centering his novel in the narration of the Magistrate, Coetzee avoids having to depict the zone of the torturer" (Gallagher 283). While Gallagher believes that Coetzee uses the Magistrate as a way of avoiding finding those answers, he misses a key point: Coetzee and the Magistrate are not one, as Gallagher implies. Indoctrination lead Mandel to commit evil acts because of the Empire's perceived right. Mandel's view of the natives proves different than the Magistrates—Mandel's being that the natives are less than human and are the enemy, and the Magistrate's being that they are human and should be treated as such. The Magistrate does not get into the mind of the torturer because the novel is not about understanding the mind of the torturer—it is to illustrate how indoctrination continues its cycle. Because Mandel represents the Empire, the Magistrate's questions are directed at the Empire, not the torturer's mind.

Mandel's fear of the Empire trumps his guilty conscience. He does not want to be deemed a traitor like the Magistrate. Fear of the Empire proves to be another reason the cycle continues, along with indoctrination. The soldiers, after people have begun to leave in fear, begin tyrannizing the town to "denounce 'cowards and traitors' and to affirm collective allegiance to the Empire. WE STAY has become the slogan of the faithful" (Coetzee 150). The soldiers enforce allegiance to the Empire by intimidation, just as they do with the natives. The citizens leaving proved to the Empire that it was losing its control, requiring the soldiers to colonize their own people.

The Magistrate, through watching the citizens of the Empire being colonized by their own government, realizes why the Empire has been able to continue with such evil acts:

Empire has created the time of history. Empire has located its existence not in the smooth recurrent spinning time of the cycle of the seasons 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 (Coetzee 153-154).

The Magistrate has finally put the pieces together to learn that the cyclical events of the Empire spring from its eternal victory. It will not stop because it manipulates history to its own glorification. The reason for violent acts stems from the Empire, which teaches its people to seek success for their country, no matter what, including treating the natives as less than human. These teachings are lies, lies that the Magistrate fell for but is slowly replacing with truths. Because the Magistrate did not take part in the violence with Joll and Mandel, he believed himself different, but it cannot hold: "I was the lie that Empire tells itself when times are easy . . . Thus I seduced myself, taking one of the many wrong turnings I have taken on a road that looks true but has delivered me into the heart of a labyrinth" (Coetzee 156). The Magistrate, unable to live comfortably atop a foundation of hideous compliance with such intolerable violence, has been layering feeble justification atop ill-fitting excuse beneath his feet until he, like the Empire, is standing on faltering pile of untruths, which then, with enough time, become the truths the Empire holds as self-evident. The Magistrate now sees this system for what it is.

However, when Joll returns with some soldiers to gather supplies before retreating to the Empire, the Magistrate notes that "The dark lenses are gone" (Coetzee 170). Continuing the metaphor, with the lenses no longer blocking Joll's vision, Joll has seen the truth about the Empire and no longer shields himself from his guilty conscience. The Magistrate wants to ensure that Joll knows who needs to take responsibility. Though Joll does not get out of the cart, the Magistrate mouths "The crime that is latent in us we must inflict on ourselves...Not on others" (Coetzee 170). As the Magistrate mouths these words, he points to himself and to Joll, clarifying that the people of the Empire, including themselves, are to blame. As the Magistrate mouths and points, he notices that Joll "watches my lips, his thin lips move in imitation" (Coetzee 170). Either Joll tries to understand what the Magistrate says by imitating the Magistrate, or he is still in disbelief at what he was blind to and is still trying to get the truth to sink in.

Emanuela Tegla, in *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Power: Unsettling Complicity, Complacency, and Confession*, points out that even though, Joll does not have sunglasses, "he is nevertheless behind the window of the carriage . . . mark[ing] a limit in the possibility of establishing a moral confrontation, of receiving a moral response" (Tegla 56-57). The glasses may be gone, but the dark glass clouding Joll's full vision displays a conscious placement of ignorance before his eyes. However, based on Joll's chaotic departure, it is abundantly clear that he fears the consequences of his failure with the Empire. Earlier, the Magistrate attempted to influence others by getting them to believe that the natives are human, and they should not be beaten the way they are. If

Joll does now indeed see that the perception the Empire has is wrong, the Magistrate would have taken a leap to possibly breaking the cycle of the evil acts the Empire enforces by showing Joll there is another way. It is unclear, and Coetzee does not help readers know which, but the sunglasses metaphor points to Joll being no longer blind to the Empire's lies. By pointing to himself and Joll, the Magistrate has officially put himself with Joll and the Empire, officially taking responsibility for his own sins.

Waiting for the Barbarians demonstrates the never-ending cycle of exploitation and violence perpetuated by the subtle and sanctimonious indoctrination a system and those within it will enforce, ignorant, willfully, or not, to its consequences. By establishing that the very perception of right and wrong can be twisted to hide one's own fault, Coetzee shows that any system, any government or group, could fall prey to the preservation of evil by failing to see through the lies they lay as their foundation. Therefore, Coetzee, through *Waiting for the Barbarians*, sympathizes with both colonized and colonizers to show the heartache of the natives but also the tortured minds of the imperial guards in order to show that indoctrination, as foreboding and obvious as it sounds when applied to the fate of others, can be taking place, or have already taken hold, in the very system one finds oneself in.

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