

Study Questions – J.M. Coetzee, *Waiting for the Barbarians*

1. The novel opens with a question about sight. Why does the tension of seeing/not seeing return at various points in the novel?
2. What is the effect of using the title “Magistrate” without a name? “Empire” without a location?
3. What are the implications of the Magistrate’s washing the feet of the young woman he calls “the girl”? (30-31) What about the way he treats her more generally? (e.g. 31-41, 62-63) What does he want from her (and for her)?
4. Why is it important for the Magistrate to return “the girl” to her people? What are the effects of that decision?
5. How does the Magistrate describe himself? And what do those descriptions tell us about his role in the Empire? What types of struggles does he face?
6. What does the Magistrate hope to find in the ruins? What is his attitude toward the items he pulls out of the earth? And how does this connect later to his interactions with Joll (108-112)?
7. How does the Magistrate’s sexual desire connect to other aspects of his life? (41-46, 145-49)
8. What is the significance of his recurring dream, particularly the snow?
9. How does the novel portray the torturers Joll and Mandel? What does the novel not tell us about them?
10. What elements go into describing barbarians at various points in the book? Who is a barbarian? Does that change?
11. How does the novel treat questions of law and justice? How do power and individual action affect law and justice?