

# John maxwell coetzee's waiting for the barbarians, novel critique

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## **The “ Barbarians”**

Two of the foremost mechanisms inside the plot of *Waiting for the Barbarians* are the behavior and structure of The Empire and the “ barbarians”. The Empire, a vague colonialist regime, sets itself in opposition to the “ barbarians,” mysterious nomadic individuals who exist in the wild lands bordering The Empire. In *Waiting for the Barbarians* by J. M. Coetzee, for me, the “ barbarians” embody the habitual and ongoing flow of balance in nature and society. When the word barbarian comes to mind, the first two words that appear before me are savage and brute. After truly and deeply engaging in serious thought, I have come to a different overall consensus. Based on this book and my overall time spent on thinking about this, I now believe that embodying the word “ barbarian” means to be instinctual in action, crude in process, primitive in thought, coarse in society, and overall very unformal. The Empire represents power, structure, brute force, and fear.

The barbarians embody the constant flow of balance in and with nature and the human interaction with its surroundings. The world continues with or without human existence and for me this is what the barbarians understand; “ The jackal rips out the hare’s bowels, but the world rolls on.” (Coetzee 62). The barbarians in this novel embody the life outside the wealthy and well-kept, constantly working, learning, and balancing the relationship of human and nature interaction. This can most easily be observed here, “ Sleep is no longer a healing bath, a recuperation of vital forces, but an oblivion, a nightly brush with annihilation.” (Coetzee 148). From what I have picked up from

this novel, it seems as though the barbarians are the counter-part to that of the Empire, crude in process, primitive in thought, and very unformal. The barbarians are crude in process. I see this through their lack of technology to keep things efficient and, for me, crude in process is the lack of efficiency in refining a process or action. I also consider them as primitive in thought because they lack a formal grade-school education that would provide them with a vast range of intellectual reasoning instead of their very nature and ancestral based current knowledge.

Life for the barbarians has become deeper than just surviving; it has become a valiant effort to understand the deepest meaning of life in connection with nature. As the barbarian girl explains, " But more often in the very act of caressing her I am overcome with sleep as if poleaxed, 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." (Coetzee 36). I can find a connection between this and culture. When life is all about surviving, the study of life beyond death and culture is limited. When there is more free time however, there is more time to contemplate the life beyond death and culture.

In conclusion, the barbarians are the " rest of society" in coexistence with the wealthy and well-kept. The barbarians are crude in process, primitive in thought, instinctual in action, coarse in society, and overall very unformal. Life for the barbarians is more than just surviving; a valiant effort to understand the deepest meaning of life in connection with nature.