



# Key Passage Analysis: J.M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*

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Nikolina Vasic

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One of the themes in J.M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*, which is also explored by Constantine Cavafy in his poem under the same title, is the question of imperial identity. This theme is evident in the passage in question, located very early on in Coetzee's allegorical novel. The magistrate, having discovered a tortured "barbarian woman," (Coetzee 27) begins an intimate relationship with her by caring for, and sexually washing and caressing, her body. In the midst of washing her, the magistrate discovers the "caterpillar" (33) in her eye and begins to question his identity in relation to this barbarian Other.

It is only after this pivotal discovery that the magistrate begins to identify and see himself in association with the barbarian other. In other words, while looking into her "blind gaze," (33) the magistrate is perplexed with the questions of his identity: "Am I to believe that gazing back at me she sees nothing – my feet perhaps, parts of the room, a hazy circle of light, but at the centre, where am I, only a blur, a blank?" (33) To start, he sees himself, his being, in the centre of her gaze, and he makes it clear that he is not talking about his physical self, "his feet"

or "the room," but rather his identity, the "centre," the answer to "where am I?"

Thus the identity of white Englishness and the imperial man, which the figure of the magistrate embodies, is not only in the centre of, but also in direct opposition to, the barbarian other, in this case, the woman. Furthermore, just like in Cavafy's poem ("And now, what's going to happen to us without barbarians?/ They were, those people, a kind of solution" Cavafy), the magistrate wants to know who he is, pointing to his need for a definition, one that evidently fits within the context of this woman's barbarian gaze.

Furthermore, in order to understand himself in relation to the barbarian other, the magistrate is concerned with the imperial need to define this Other. He says that "until the marks on this girl's body are deciphered and understood I cannot let go of her" (33). His need to "decipher" her body not only objectifies the woman by turning her body into a text that he must discover, but the masculine conquest over the female body is made evident. Significantly enough, this need to decipher her body comes directly after an incredible sexual tension between the two which suggests the sexual and masculine element of conquering a female, and feminized landscape. Finally, the woman is there not only to be "understood" but also to be defined and to stand in direct contrast to the imperial man, to be the yang to his yin, the "kind of solution" to his identity crisis.