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Finding Freedom From Blindness

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Finding Freedom from Blindness

J. M. Coetzee's haunting book *Waiting for the Barbarians* tells the tale of a magistrate who works at the edge of an Empire. Nearby, barbarians live in the wilderness outside of his city; they are an unnamed, unsophisticated, and unquestionably barbaric people. Throughout the story, time after time, the barbarians are captured and tortured by the soldiers of the Empire for absolutely no reason. They are treated like animals. Their "civilized" captors are clearly the barbarians of the story. Throughout the book, the barbarians seek freedom from their master-slave relationship with the controlling Empire. In *Waiting for the Barbarians*, the motif of vision highlights elements of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's master-slave dialectic theory, which exposes a power struggle between various characters, ultimately revealing the humanity of all people.

At the very beginning of Coetzee's novel, an unusual focus on vision is distinguishable. In the first lines of the story, the magistrate notices the sunglasses that Colonel Joll—the cruel and domineering colonel—is wearing: "I have never seen anything like it: two little discs of glass suspended in front of his eyes in loops of wire. Is he blind? I could understand it if he wanted to hide blind eyes. But he is not blind. The discs are dark, they look opaque from the outside, but he can see through them" (Coetzee 1). Evidently, Colonel Joll's vision and outlook on life is different from the magistrate's, as his darkened eyesight is highlighted from the very beginning of the book. Throughout the story, Colonel Joll cruelly tortures a number of

barbarians; his view of his fellow human beings is clearly skewed. When the Colonel meets a barbarian child, the magistrate says that the child “has probably never seen anything like it before...I mean the eyeglasses. He must think you are a blind man” (3). Though Colonel Joll is a civilized man who can see perfectly well, the barbarian child notably sees him as a blind man. Joll's character exhibits elements of Hegel's theory; Hegel argues that people often engage in master-slave style relationships in which one person controls another. The master often feels powerful because he or she treats the slave figure as inhuman. Leitch writes, “Each individual would prefer to guarantee continued recognition from the other, while not extending that recognition in turn” (Leitch 538). However, in actuality, the master is the one who does not achieve selfhood. Hegel argues that the Master must recognize fellow beings in order to attain consciousness: “By obliterating the Slave's independence, the Master has removed the very ‘other’ that must be encountered to achieve selfhood” (538). Once the master figure learns to acknowledge the selfhood of others, he or she can achieve freedom, selfhood, and consciousness. In *Waiting for the Barbarians*, Colonel Joll can be seen as a master figure from Hegel's master-slave dialectic theory. He brutally tortures and kills barbarians, looking on them with “a curiosity so intense that [his] body is drained by it and only [his] eyes live, organs of a new and ravening appetite” (Coetzee 105). He is blinded to the reality of their humanity; his eyes can only see barbarians with a vicious, ravenous hunger. If he saw them as humans, he would achieve selfhood and a sense of freedom. However, he figuratively views them only through the darkened lenses of his sunglasses, never fully recognizing them as fellow beings; thus, he is trapped in a master-slave relationship. Not only are the barbarians entrapped and seeking freedom from Colonel Joll, but Joll himself is entrapped in a master-slave dialectic of his own making.

Colonel Joll also ruins the eyesight of a barbarian woman who is featured throughout the story of *Waiting for the Barbarians*. This young blind woman's relationship with the magistrate reveals a master-slave dialectic. The magistrate asserts his authority over her for many months, putting the blame on her and telling himself that "she submits [to him] because of her barbarian upbringing" (Coetzee 56). He finds himself attracted to this unnamed young woman. He repeatedly engages in sexual activity with her, and again and again, he finds himself confounded by his own attraction to her: "The erotic impulse, if that is what it has been, withers; with surprise I see myself clutched to this stolid girl, unable to remember what I ever desired in her, angry with myself for wanting and not wanting her" (Coetzee 33). Though the magistrate repeatedly feels a connection with the barbarian girl and finds her attractive, he cannot bring himself to admit and fully act on these feelings. He is too confused by the idea of her being her own self—an equal human being instead of a beastlike barbarian. Later, when the magistrate looks back on his relationship with her, he is still confused by his attraction to her: "Is it then the case that it is the whole woman I want, that my pleasure in her is spoiled until these marks on her are erased and she is restored to herself; or is it the case...that it is the marks on her which drew me to her?" (64). The magistrate wishes to believe that the marks on the barbarian girl are the reason he is deterred from her; in reality, her imperfections are what attracted him to her in the first place. Her distinction as a barbarian and as a blind woman who sees the world from a different perspective is what attracts him to her. The barbarian woman's magnetism puzzles and perplexes the magistrate. Instead of allowing her to be his equal, he asserts authority over her. In this way, he fills the role of the master figure in the master-slave dialectic because he fails to recognize the fact that a fellow human being is his equal.

Interestingly, the magistrate frequently calls the young barbarian woman blind. However, she is not blind at all. When the magistrate first meets her, he says, ““They tell me you are blind,”” and she replies, ““I can see,’ ...Her eyes move from my face and settle somewhere behind me to my right” (Coetzee 26). Though she is repeatedly dismissed as a blind woman, she claims to have sight. Coetzee writes this section in such a way that even the reader is convinced of her blindness, just as the magistrate is. There seems to be no doubt that she is completely blind, but she very clearly states that she is not. Later in the story, the magistrate sits close to her and ponders her blindness: “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 I am, only a blur, a blank? I pass my hand slowly in front of her face, watching her pupils. I cannot discern any movement. She does not blink. But she smiles: ‘Why do you do that? Do you think I cannot see?’” (31). Evidently, the barbarian woman can see. She appears to be blind, but she apparently has some kind of sight; the magistrate simply does not understand her perspective. Similarly, Hegel believes that master figures fail to acknowledge the humanness and selfhood of slave figures. In *Waiting for the Barbarians*, the magistrate is unable to see that the barbarian woman is his equal. Though he has normal vision, he is metaphorically blind. He is incapable of seeing other people clearly; his view of them is skewed by his society. The barbarian woman sees the world differently, but she can still see. Her perspective is completely different from that of the magistrate because she values the lives of barbarians. The magistrate controls the barbarian girl because he believes that she is inferior to him; however, this very belief actually reveals his lack of authority and selfhood. According to Hegel’s theory, the barbarian girl is the one who has achieved selfhood, since she acknowledges all human beings as equals who can see the world just as well as she can. Leitch writes, “Only if [a person is] willing to acknowledge that the other

is also a self, who has a need and a right to be a being-for-self, can [he or she] satisfactorily establish [his or her] own selfhood” (Leitch 538). When the magistrate sets her free and allows her to go back to her kin, he acknowledges her as a self who has a culture and a family of her own. This recognition of her humanity gives the magistrate an identity and a sense of self.

Near the end of the story, the magistrate chooses to rebel against the Empire. As he confronts a cruel young soldier who looks “through those clear eyes as an actor looks from behind a mask,” he defies the Empire that he has always supported (Coetzee 77). He calls this young man a “new barbarian” because he finally sees that those who view themselves as superior to others are the real barbarians (78). As a master figure, he has finally achieved selfhood by acknowledging the humanness and value of all people. His feelings of freedom and joy are evident: “I am a free man. Who would not smile? But what a dangerous joy! It should not be so easy to attain salvation” (78). By standing against the Empire and defending the barbarians, the magistrate has finally achieved the selfhood that Hegel speaks of in his master-slave dialectic theory. The magistrate now sees the world with clear, unprejudiced vision. The Empire’s soldiers imprison the magistrate because of his rebellion against them. In his jail cell each day, he is overwhelmed by the light that floods through a tiny hole in the wall: “There is no window, only a hole high on the wall. But after a day or two my eyes have adjusted to the gloom. I have to shield myself against the light when, morning and evening, the door is flung open and I am fed” (79). The magistrate’s eyes adjust to the light, and he is able to see clearly. Similarly, throughout the story, the magistrate’s eyes adjust to the truth, allowing him to see barbarians as his equals. Though the Empire beats and tortures him for his rebellion, the magistrate is content because he has achieved selfhood and found his identity.

At the end of J. M. Coetzee's beautiful and profound novel *Waiting for the Barbarians*, readers are left with an understanding that the magistrate is still on a journey of learning and discovering himself. Coetzee expresses this once again with the motif of vision; the magistrate says, "There has been something staring me in the face, and still I do not see it" (Coetzee 155). Though he "presses on along a road that may lead nowhere," he continues his journey of attaining selfhood because he has learned that acknowledging the humanity of all people is the most valuable pursuit in life (156). Though the journey is difficult, and the barbaric soldiers are cruel, the magistrate still chooses to seek for freedom from the dialectic of masters and slaves. He seeks to free those who are considered inferior; now he acknowledges the fact that all human beings are equal. Just as Hegel argues that master figures are the ones who are truly blind, the magistrate fights to defend the slave figures who are not actually blind barbarians at all—they are human beings.

Works Cited

Coetzee, John. *Waiting for the Barbarians*. Penguin Books, 1980.

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