

The Politics of Irony against Dehumanization in Coetzee's Novel, *Waiting for the Barbarians*

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3126/ljll.v5i1.93057>

Article History

Received: September 24, 2025

Revised: December 27, 2025

Accepted: March 7, 2026

Abstract

This paper has examined the role of irony in Coetzee's post-modern novel, Waiting for the Barbarians as the primary data, focusing on its role in critiquing the dehumanizing aspects of colonial apartheid South Africa during the 1970s and 1980s. Employing the qualitative literary analysis methods and discursive research design, the study has used irony as a political tool to expose and challenge the oppressive and exploitative nature of the apartheid regime from the perspective of its marginalized victims. Based on interpretivist approach and drawing on the theory of the politics of irony, the analysis demonstrates how Coetzee foregrounds the suffering and predicament of Black South Africans to denounce torture, violence, and systemic injustice. The novel thus calls for a transformation in the way people perceive and treat one another, urging a more humanistic view of humanity. The paper concluded that through the character of the white colonial agent and narrator, who ultimately sides with the subalterns, the narrative enacts a politics of irony that powerfully critiques the cruelty and brutality of apartheid while advocating for the rights, dignity, equality, and inclusion of the marginalized.

Keywords: Apartheid, barbarian, dehumanization, irony, torture

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Introduction

This research explores political irony in the postmodern novel, *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980) by postcolonial South African author J. M. Coetzee. The study applies Linda Hutcheon's (1994) theoretical framework of the politics of irony to analyze how Coetzee critiques the ideological system of dehumanization embedded in apartheid South Africa. The central premise is that Coetzee deploys irony as a political instrument, highlighting the exploitation and marginalization enacted by the colonial regime through a narrative that subtly but powerfully sides with the oppressed.

Irony is traditionally understood as a rhetorical device where the intended meaning contrasts with the literal expression. However, confining irony to this narrow definition is problematic. As Davies (2007) argues, "While an ironic trope must convey something that vividly contrasts with what is literally meant by the words, this need not be the 'opposite' of the latter" (p. 378). Thus, irony carries multiple possible meanings, similar to poetic expression. It often functions through mimicry or parody and requires a knowledgeable and attuned audience to interpret it effectively. Misinterpretation is common when readers lack the cultural or contextual awareness necessary to decode the ironic intent. Jonathan Swift's (1729) *A Modest Proposal* illustrates this risk of misinterpretation. Though Swift intended to satirize British policies toward the Irish by ironically suggesting that impoverished Irish families sell their children as food, many readers took the text literally, condemning Swift's apparent cruelty. As Davies (2007) notes, "Irony aims to express fairly unspecific attitudes than to communicate particular beliefs" (p. 379). Therefore, readers must appreciate the multiplicity of meaning and recognize that the author's objective is often corrective rather than misleading.

In the South African context, racial segregation and white supremacy predated the formal institution of apartheid. In 1910, political representation was reserved exclusively for whites, and the 1913 'Land Act' restricted Black land ownership to only 13% of the country (Davis,

2008). These discriminatory policies led to the formation of the African National Congress (ANC), which aimed to resist the injustice. Following the formalization of apartheid in the 1950s, the ANC declared, "South Africa belongs to all who live in it, black and white," challenging white minority rule. In response, the government banned Black political organizations and intensified repression.

During the 1960s and 1970s, apartheid policy further evolved into a system of territorial separation under which Black South Africans were relegated to "Bantustans." Growing resistance, labor strikes, and regional anti-colonial victories forced the South African government to implement limited reforms in the 1980s. These included legal recognition of Black labor unions and some political concessions. However, Black Africans, constituting 75% of the population, remained excluded from political representation under the 1984 constitution (Davis, 2008). Mounting internal unrest and international pressure eventually led to the dismantling of apartheid. In 1990, President F. W. de Klerk declared its formal end and released ANC leader Nelson Mandela from prison, initiating a new political era.

Critical responses to *Waiting for the Barbarians* vary. Bernard Levin, writing in *The Sunday Times*, contends, "Mr. Coetzee sees the heart of the darkness in all societies and gradually it becomes clear that he is not dealing in politics at all, but inquiring into the nature of the beast that lurks within each of us" (*The Sunday Times*, n.d.). While Levin universalizes Coetzee's message, the political context of apartheid cannot be dismissed, especially given the novel's setting and thematic content.

Similarly, Boletsi (2007) responds to critiques that Coetzee's works are apolitical by arguing, "Coetzee's novels have often been accused of being apolitical and not addressing explicitly the historical situation in South Africa. However, the kind of novel he describes here is not ahistorical" (p. 82). In this view, Coetzee's impartial narrative style does not negate its historical significance; rather, it presents apartheid's atrocities in a more complex and nuanced fictional form.

Gregory O'Dea (2000) highlights Coetzee's interrogation of boundaries: "In Coetzee's novel, borders are defined and attacked, questioned and crossed, made to stand for what is within and what is without. Borders are the demarcation of a fatal dichotomy that has guided all of human history: the differentiation of US and THEM" (p. 6). In apartheid South Africa, these borders, literal and symbolic were instrumental in sustaining systems of exclusion and domination. The novel critiques this process, revealing the prejudice that constructs and enforces otherness, and calls attention to the urgent need for humanistic re-evaluation.

This research seeks to explore the question: How and why does irony serve as a pivotal element in transforming the white magistrate into an advocate for Black victims? The significance of the study lies in its emphasis on the importance of upholding the human rights of marginalized groups. It challenges dehumanization by examining the South African context through the lens of irony, an aspect that has not been thoroughly addressed or interpreted in the same way within existing literature.

Research Methods

This study has employed the qualitative research methods, utilizing a closed discursive analytical design. The research is centered on the conceptual framework of political irony, drawing on key theoretical perspectives and terminology relevant to the field. The analysis relies extensively on secondary sources to develop and support the central thesis. The research gives sustained attention to systemic dehumanization as mediated through political irony in literary texts by analyzing Coetzee's novel, *Waiting for the Barbarian* as a primary text.

For analytical purpose, the study is primarily guided by Linda Hutcheon's theory of irony, particularly as articulated in her book, *Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony* (1994). Hutcheon moves beyond traditional notions of irony as mere rhetorical opposition and situates it within a broader political and cultural context, which is central to this

study's interpretive lens. Her theory of irony views irony as a complex, context-dependent interaction between speaker, text, and audience. This theory emphasizes that irony involves saying one thing while meaning another, but its meaning is shaped by cultural, social, and political contexts. For Hutcheon, irony is not fixed; it's a risky, double-edged tool that can challenge or reinforce power, depending on who uses it and how it's interpreted.

The data analysis procedure has moved forward by depicting the torture and authority, representation of the subaltern or colonized other and narrative's moral ambiguity and ethical stance which aims not to generalize findings, but rather to engage deeply with existing scholarship and to offer a critical synthesis that highlights the nuanced intersections between irony, politics, and dehumanization in literature. The secondary data were collected from academic books, peer-reviewed journal articles, theoretical and philosophical texts and more. Systematic literature review, thematic sourcing, note-taking, coding, and textual extraction of key arguments, theories, or concepts were data collection methods. Thematic and textual were the other data analysis methods.

Results and Discussion

Politics of Irony in the Novel

J. M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980) presents a harrowing portrait of oppression, torture, and dehumanization that metaphorically reflects the historical realities of apartheid-era South Africa. The novel explores systemic brutality and psychological trauma, conveyed through a deeply symbolic and politically charged narrative. Through the use of politics irony, Coetzee critiques the ideological apparatus of empire, particularly the false dichotomy between so-called "civilization" and "barbarism."

The setting of the novel begins describing a nameless town on the frontier of an unnamed empire, serves as a symbolic space that abstracts but still resonates with the geopolitical landscape of South Africa under

apartheid. The absence of specific racial or national identifiers renders the narrative universal, yet its moral and political implications remain rooted in a historical critique of colonial power structures. The narrator, a magistrate of the outpost, is introduced early in the novel observing a strange sight: "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?" (p. 4). This opening line signals a confrontation with distorted vision, both literally and metaphorically, hinting at the broader theme of moral blindness within imperial ideology.

The empire dispatches Colonel Joll, a figure emblematic of authoritarian cruelty, to investigate and suppress a perceived threat from a nomadic people labeled "barbarians." The irony, however, lies in the fact that the true barbarism emerges not from these so-called outsiders, but from within the empire itself. As Head (1997) argues, "Joll presides over a regime of terror, involving interrogation and torture, and the directive to discover the 'truth' predetermined by the empire's ethos. This is the base imperial drive for self-assertion, satisfied by the subjugation of those who are identified as the barbarian other" (p. 49). His argument clearly suggests about how the imperial quest froth "truth" is a façade for enforcing dominance, with violence and torture used to assert control over the so-called "barbarian other", reveling the empire's oppressive and self-justifying ideology.

A critical moment of irony unfolds through the magistrate's shifting allegiance. Initially complicit in the empire's operations, he gradually becomes empathetic toward the oppressed "barbarians," particularly a tortured girl whom he tries to help. His internal transformation and eventual alienation from the colonial system underscore a self-reflective critique of imperial logic. In a dramatic reversal, the magistrate becomes a victim of the very regime he once served. This shift illustrates a central political irony: the so-called "civilized" empire reveals itself to be more savage than those it demonizes.

The novel's title, *Waiting for the Barbarians*, is taken from a poem by Greek poet Constantine P. Cavafy. The poem satirizes the grandiosity

and self-deception of imperial institutions awaiting an enemy that never arrives. According to Boletsi (2007), the disappearance of the barbarians in the poem alludes to real historical events, particularly the British Empire's brutal suppression of the Mahdist uprising in Sudan in 1898, which resulted in approximately 27,000 casualties among the Mahdists compared to only 43 British deaths (p. 83). Cavafy's poem, then, uses irony to expose the rhetorical violence of empire, an idea Coetzee echoes in his novel.

Maria Boletsi further interprets Coetzee's novel as a means to "historicize apartheid's anti-human actions" (p. 83), aligning with the tradition of politically engaged literature. The parallels between the imagined empire and apartheid South Africa are implicit but unmistakable. The term "barbarian," while never racially or ethnically defined in the novel, functions as a catch-all label for the marginalized, the colonized, and the feared "other." The imperial forces never directly confront the so-called barbarians, a narrative choice that underscores the fictional and constructed nature of the threat.

As Boletsi (2007) notes, "The expeditionary forces never seem to reach these people" (p. 85). The absence of actual barbarians renders the entire imperial campaign a farce, an allegory of paranoia, projection, and self-delusion. The empire's failure to encounter its enemies becomes a metaphor for how colonial regimes construct imaginary threats to justify oppression. Moreover, the language and cultural tools used by the empire are internalized means of domination, aimed at erasing indigenous identities rather than integrating them.

Coetzee's political irony lies in this profound inversion: the empire's justification for violence rests on an illusion, while its true enemy lies within its own structure, its fear, its aggression, and its moral corruption. In this sense, *Waiting for the Barbarians* becomes not only a critique of a specific regime but also a broader condemnation of the ideological mechanisms that allow empires to dehumanize and dominate under the guise of order and civilization.

In *Waiting for the Barbarians*, J. M. Coetzee explores political irony through the introspective journey of the novel's unnamed narrator, the magistrate of a frontier settlement. The magistrate's painful awakening, filled with ambiguity and inner conflict, reveals the violence and hypocrisy embedded in imperialism. This process begins when he attempts to "read" the body of a tortured barbarian girl, washing her crippled feet and body, not out of simple care but in a desperate search for meaning. Despite his physical proximity to her, he cannot understand her suffering, nor can she articulate her trauma. His failure to consummate sexual desire with her neither through domination nor intimacy further reflects his inability to reconcile his role as both oppressor and would-be savior.

Living with the girl, however, catalyzes the magistrate's recognition of the cruelty committed by the regime he serves. He sets off on a hazardous winter journey to return her to her people, a symbolic gesture of moral awakening. Upon his return, he is accused of "treasonously consorting with the enemy" and imprisoned (Coetzee, 1980, p. 77). Now cast as a traitor, the magistrate himself becomes a victim of imperial torture, physically humiliated by Colonel Joll's subordinates. Through this reversal, he finally envisions the barbarian girl as she might have been before her disfigurement, an act of restorative empathy born from shared suffering.

The empire's obsession with finding the elusive "barbarians" leads to the persecution of innocent civilians: fishermen, farmers, and others deemed threatening by association. Eventually, the mission fails, and the Third Bureau's forces abandon the frontier, undone not by resistance but by the futility of their pursuit. As Saunders (2008) states, this failure reflects how the empire's ideology collapses under its own contradictions, transforming "the empire's statement about itself into an uncertainty...a proposition inhabited by truth or by error" (p. 230). Ironically, it is the agents of empire who become the true barbarians through their actions.

The colonizers are blind to the irony of their role as invaders in a land they claim to civilize. They see themselves as rightful rulers, ignoring

their foreignness and disregarding the humanity of the native population. In depicting this violent delusion, Coetzee constructs a powerful political irony: the invaders fear the very dehumanization they enact.

Coetzee's novel reflects the devastating impact of apartheid South Africa, a regime that politically, socially, and economically marginalized the Black population. As Saunders (2008) points out, apartheid physically separated people by race and ethnicity, rendering Black South Africans "statutory foreigners in their native land" and stripping them of land, political rights, and dignity (p. 233). His highlights shows how apartheid institutionalized racial segregation to the extent that it alienated Black South Africans from their own country, both legally and socially. Similarly, Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) Report (1998) had mentioned:

African homelands were transformed into "dumping grounds," with over 3.5 million people forcibly displaced to maintain "white areas." The contrived geography of apartheid separated families, condemned many to daily travel of over 200 miles for work, and caused catastrophic social effects, including extreme poverty, starvation, and the highest rates of infant mortality in the country (TRC, p. 60).

Here, the irony lies in calling these areas "homelands" when they were, in reality, desolate dumping grounds created to exclude and exploit Black South Africans under the guise of self-governance.

Against this backdrop, Coetzee's novel implicitly calls for a transformation of the apartheid order. By illustrating the moral decay of empire and the shared humanity between colonizer and colonized, *Waiting for the Barbarians* envisions solidarity across racial lines. The novel's subtle critique operates through political irony, a necessity under the censorship of apartheid South Africa. Coetzee, writing as a white South African, carefully constructs a narrative that exposes the regime's injustices without making overt political declarations.

Linda Hutcheon's (1994) conception of irony is essential to interpreting Coetzee's method. She writes: "...irony's indirect meanings are born of rubbing the edge of the said against the plural edges of the unsaid, in such a way that sparks are certainly created for some viewers" (p. 171). Coetzee crafts a narrative that signals to discerning readers a deeper meaning beneath the surface, requiring them to interpret the "unsaid" history of the oppressed.

As Peter van der Veer (quoted in Urquhart, 2006) notes, the expression of violence by victims is often fragmented and incomplete. Victims lack the institutional history to voice their suffering fully, and their stories are easily co-opted or erased by the dominant political narrative. In this context, irony becomes a tool for resisting official history and restoring agency to those silenced. Coetzee's irony "falsifies the written/said history" and forces readers to confront the reality behind colonial narratives.

Despite his awakening, the magistrate is ultimately trapped in ambiguity. As a colonial agent, he is burdened by the very history he seeks to escape. He longs to live "outside the history that empire imposes on its subjects, even its lost subjects" (Coetzee, 1980, p. 206), yet remains alienated from both the empire and the native population. His failure to find a place among the barbarians, and his loss of legitimacy within the empire, underscore a final layer of irony, his identity is unanchored, leaving him in a moral and existential limbo.

Coetzee's choice of the magistrate, a white colonial official, as narrator is itself politically ironic. By allowing a representative of the empire to narrate the empire's own unraveling, Coetzee encourages introspection among white South Africans. The magistrate's perspective may prompt colonial agents like Colonel Joll to confront the futility of their mission and recognize the humanity of those they seek to oppress. This narrative technique exemplifies what Hutcheon (1994) describes as irony's reliance on context and positionality as: "Irony is a discursive strategy that depends on context and on the identity and position of both the ironist and the audience" (p. 187).

Through this layered use of political irony, *Waiting for the Barbarians* not only critiques the apartheid regime but also seeks to reimagine a more humane and inclusive social order. The novel challenges readers to question dominant narratives, reconsider historical truth, and empathize with the silenced voices of the oppressed.

To draw an analogy between this statement and the context of the novel, the novelist's discursive strategy could be to renovate the false beliefs of the colonial agents toward the so-called barbarians. The context is the callous torture inflicted upon an armless and harmless ethnic group of South African people during the apartheid colonial period. The purpose of this irony is to refute the futility of the white colonizer through the voice of a white character in narration. Hutcheon observes that "...irony lies upon intention: lies are not usually intended to be interpreted or decoded as lies; on the contrary, ironies are really ironies when someone makes them happen" (p. 64). Coetzee narrates the events while leaving the responsibility of interpretation to the reader, inviting an ironic grasp of his intention. In the context of the novel, the intentionality of the ironist could be to instill in the oppressor a recognition of the supreme value of humanity, through the portrayal of South African life under apartheid.

Waiting for the Barbarians is directed against the dominant South African system and supports the advancement of the human rights of Black citizens. From the beginning of the novel, the narrator repeatedly uses the term "barbarian" in nearly the same manner as the imperial discourse does, referring to the natives both as colonial subjects and as invisible yet dangerous enemies. "The word runs like fire from neighbor to neighbor: 'Barbarians!'" (Coetzee, 1980, p. 138). This obsessive repetition by the narrator underscores how appropriation through repetition consolidates ideological power.

The language of apartheid is characterized by what Saunders (2008) terms a "fundamental dislocation of words from their objects," noting that the "South African government has perfected a specialized political vocabulary which, while saying one thing, means quite another"

(p. 232). This linguistic colonialism reinforces the othering of natives in their own land, thus constituting a gross violation of human rights. Numerous instances of state violence occur under the authority of Colonel Joll and Warrant Officer Mandel. One particularly harrowing example involves Mandel herding a group of nomadic barbarians into a public square, where they are brutally beaten. “Before inviting the crowd in attendance to join the soldiers in thrashing the prisoners, Mandel seizes a piece of charcoal to inscribe on their naked backs in bold letters the word ENEMY” (Coetzee, 1980, p. 141), one of the examples of severe brutality.

Referencing Giorgio Agamben’s theory of testimony, Stef Craps (2013) argues that Coetzee’s *Waiting for the Barbarians* undertakes a form of witnessing. On the one hand, the tortured barbarians resemble the *Muselmann*, the true witness who cannot speak their suffering. On the other hand, the narrator-protagonist occupies a position akin to that of a survivor like Primo Levi, bearing witness and offering testimony (p. 61). Just as the mutilated bodies of Holocaust victims bore silent testimony to Nazi atrocities, the crippled bodies of Coetzee’s barbarians wordlessly recount their own victimization. These victims are rendered voiceless, and their unspeakable pain becomes the ultimate form of testimony, an indictment of the colonial regime.

The nearly blinded barbarian girl, the battered fishermen, and even the magistrate himself, all serve as emblems of dehumanization, whose suffering was never officially historicized by the apartheid state. “My wrists are caught behind my back and tied. ‘The time has come, Magistrate,’ Mandel whispers in my ear. I am sure I can smell liquor on his breath” (Coetzee, 1980, p. 157). These scenes expose the bio-politics of the empire. Coetzee’s irony lies in his implicit defense of human dignity and his critique of the institutional apparatus that denies it. In doing so, he succeeds in bringing the hidden human agonies to light.

At the outset of the novel, the magistrate fixates on the behavior of Colonel Joll, who appears as both raider and mapmaker. The magistrate struggles to decipher the meaning behind Joll’s actions and attempts to

distinguish between the logic of empire and that of the so-called barbarians. After witnessing a torture session involving a boy and his father, he reflects:

Looking at him I wonder how he felt the very first time: did he, invited as an apprentice to twist the pincers or turn the screw or whatever it is they do, shudder even a little to know that at that instant he was trespassing into the forbidden? I find myself wondering too whether he has a private ritual of purification, carried out behind closed doors, to enable him to return and break bread with other men. Does he wash his hands very carefully, perhaps, or change all his clothes; or has Bureau created new men who can without disquiet move between the unclean and the clean? (Coetzee, 1980, p. 19)

This reflection reveals the magistrate's growing moral disorientation. He imagines Joll trespassing from "clean" to "unclean" territory, yet ironically it is Joll's actions that soil the supposed purity of the empire. While the empire claims to civilize, its agents commit acts of savagery. Thus violating the very human dignity they claim to uphold.

Although both Colonel Joll and the magistrate are colonial agents, they represent contrasting ideologies. Joll is rigid and brutal, whereas the magistrate demonstrates growing empathy. Yet he does not understand the language of the nomadic people, and the magistrate himself does not attempt to learn it until much later. His transformation is incomplete, and his earlier apathy signifies the limits of his decolonial impulse. Nonetheless, the magistrate becomes Coetzee's mouthpiece for voicing the suffering of the natives.

Yuan Yuan (2007) characterizes Joll as "the violent reader of the empire," who enforces meaning through torture, while the magistrate is "the impotent reader of the state," whose ironic and ambiguous readings destabilize his own authority (p. 76). None of the characters possesses the tools to decode native speech, and both resort to flawed methods,

violence and seduction, respectively. As Yuan observes, “The speech of the natives is forced into extreme. As a result, the speeches he compels from them are either ‘cryptic silence’ or ‘the screaming pain’” (p. 77). Joll rationalizes his method of coercion: “First get lies, you see this is what happens first lies, then pressure, more lies, then more pressure, then the break, then more pressure, then the truth. That is how you get truth” (Coetzee, 1980, p. 10). Joll’s belief that truth emerges through violence is tragically ironic, as his brutal methods only produce silence, pain, and deeper falsehoods.

In this colonial logic, violence becomes a state-sanctioned reading practice. As Yuan (2007) puts it, “waiting for the barbarians” also means waiting for the Other to emerge from the colonial subject—an ironic manifestation of the empire’s repressed desires (p. 77). Lance Olsen contends that the novel centers around the “absence of the barbarians,” which drives the narrative (as cited in Yuan, 2007, p. 78). However, Yuan argues that this “absence” is illusory, as barbarism resides not in the natives, but in the unconscious of the colonizers. Thus, “it is not the absence of the barbarian, but the presence of the barbarian in the colonial unconscious of the empire that moves the narrative and generates the tales of terror” (p. 78). The term “barbarian” becomes a self-reflective signifier, marking the empire’s own violent desires and imaginary constructs.

The magistrate repeatedly expresses his inability to act decisively, occupying a position of both authority and impotence. He neither openly supports the barbarians nor fully opposes the colonial power. This ambiguity interrogates his authority and complicates his ethical alignment. As he admits, “I lose myself in the rhythm of what I am doing. I lose awareness of the girl herself. There is a space of time which is blank to me: perhaps I am not even present” (Coetzee, 1980, p. 34). This moment underscores his restricted perspective and ironic limitations within the framework of empire.

The magistrate's uncertainty parallels the contradictory role of the colonial regime itself. As Zomara (1988) notes, "The magistrate is both the symbol of the empire and its victim." He is caught in a system he condemns but cannot escape. Albert Memmi, in *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, echoes this idea: "A colonizer who rejects colonialism does not find a solution for his anguish in revolt. If he does not eliminate himself as a colonizer, he resigns himself to a position of ambiguity" (cited in Yuan, 2007, p. 79). Thus, the magistrate becomes a metaphor for the fractured conscience of the empire, a figure suspended between complicity and resistance, power and paralysis, irony and failure.

Building on the interpretations mentioned above, it is useful to examine Coetzee's notion as depicted through the events narrated in the novel. Coetzee dramatizes the arbitrariness of law and human definitions of justice in a brief but dramatically intense and resounding manner. Under colonial rule, the law is either suspended or manipulated to favor the colonizers. The history of the progressive establishment of justice is inseparable and may be regarded as another name for the history of war and vengeance. For instance, Joll asks the magistrate to read wooden slips covered with foreign characters, which Joll claims contain information relevant to the alleged uprising of the barbarians. Upon examining one slip with a single character, the magistrate explains, "It is the barbarian character war, but it has other sense, too. It stands for vengeance, and, if you turn it upside down... it can be made to read justice. There is no knowing which sense is intended" (Coetzee, 1980, p.122). This illustrates that law and justice are interpreted from the perspective of those in power and serve their interests. Here, the colonel's interpretation is negative, while the magistrate appears loyal. Ironically, both are unfamiliar with the language used on the slips.

In this context, Michael Valdez Moses's (1993) analysis is relevant: "If we accept the magistrate's deconstruction of an entire set of significant distinctions between liberalism and authoritarianism, between the rule of law and rule of force, between Western self and non-Western Other, between torture and truth, between civilization and barbarism then

we must take an extremely dim view of the possibility of historical process, of the development of a genuinely humane society" (p.123). Moses's observation underscores the unsettling irony that dismantling the boundaries between justice and oppression challenges the very foundation of progress and the hope for a truly humane society.

Coetzee's purpose in writing the novel is to advocate for a genuinely humane society. However, those in power often resist transformation unless their injustices are exposed. Despite the oppressive context of apartheid-era South Africa, Coetzee makes a significant effort in this novel to challenge Western notions of supremacy, particularly the dichotomy of "the West and the rest," which frames non-Western peoples as barbaric or uncivilized (Said, 1978). In *Waiting for the Barbarians*, Colonel Joll disregards the cultural distinctions of the indigenous people, instead using torture to extract false confessions and reinforce their dehumanization as mere "bodies in pain" (Scarry, 1985). By doing so, he perpetuates the colonial myth that they pose a threat to civilization. In contrast, the magistrate embodies moral awakening, aligning himself with the oppressed and attempting to reform Joll. His critique of imperial ideology is evident when he declares:

It is the fault of Empire! 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. (Coetzee, 1980, p. 177)

Irony plays a significant role in literature, often serving as a vehicle for political critique. Political irony, broadly defined as a rhetorical device that highlights opposition or contrast within political discourse, functions dynamically in both literary and non-literary texts. This study focuses on how irony operates in literary texts to uncover sub-textual meanings, particularly those that challenge dominant power structures.

M.H. Abrams (2014) defines *dramatic irony* as a situation in which "the audience or reader shares with the author knowledge of present or future circumstances of which a character is ignorant; in that situation, the character unknowingly acts in a way that diverges from their intentions" (p. 99). This definition is particularly relevant to J.M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), especially in the portrayal of Colonel Joll. While Joll believes his brutal methods of subduing the so-called "barbarians" are justified, the reader recognizes his actions as cruel, inhumane, and a gross violation of human rights. The dramatic irony lies in the gap between Joll's self-perception as a civilizing force and the reader's awareness of his moral blindness.

Therefore, the function of irony in this context is to reveal hidden truths exposing the contradictions of empire and forcing the audience to confront the gap between rhetoric and reality. Through irony, Coetzee critiques the dehumanizing logic of colonialism, demonstrating how power distorts perception and perpetuates violence under the guise of order.

Conclusion

J.M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980) has exposed the dissonance between colonial rhetoric and reality, employing irony as a tool to unveil the political violence of apartheid-era South Africa. As a postmodern writer, Coetzee exploits irony's subversive potential, creating a textual world where contradictory signs coexist, not harmoniously, but to destabilize hierarchies of power. This aligns with Linda Hutcheon's (1994) radical conception of irony, which she describes as inherently evaluative, capable of provoking visceral reactions among interpreters while excluding those who fail to grasp its critique (p. 2). For Hutcheon, irony operates within fraught power dynamics, implicating issues of "exclusion and inclusion, intervention and evasion" (p. 2), particularly around race, class, and colonial domination.

In *Waiting for the Barbarians*, Coetzee dramatizes this theory through the empire's futile search for an external "barbarian" threat.

Colonel Joll, embodying colonial paranoia, manufactures evidence through torture, only to reveal the empire's true barbarism. The magistrate, a white colonial agent turned dissenter, narrates this irony, exposing the empire's self-defeating logic. As Hutcheon (1994) notes, "*Irony isn't irony until it is interpreted*" (p. 6); here, the reader becomes the essential interpreter, recognizing Joll's brutality as the real threat to civilization, not the silenced indigenous people.

Coetzee's choice of a white magistrate as the subalterns' advocate further intensifies the irony. By centering a complicit figure's awakening, he critiques the limits of colonial empathy while amplifying the voices of the marginalized. The novel's power lies in its unresolved tension: irony condemns the empire yet implicates its narrators, mirroring South Africa's fraught racial and historical reckonings. Ultimately, Coetzee weaponizes irony to force readers into complicity, demanding they confront the violence embedded in systems they might otherwise ignore.

Ethical Declaration

I hereby declare that the information, data and analysis and other sources incorporated in the article are true and authentic to my knowledge. I have been conscious about the ethical values as a researcher and I have tried to follow the norms that a researcher has to follow in a research work.

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