Rhythm is the fundamental element of music; without its pulsing drive, a melody seems aimless, and harmony irrelevant. The beat of a drum awakens the primal within us, calling back ancestral memories and basic instincts. It can lead us to dance and to joy, but also, too often, to war. The war drums beat loudly in cycles throughout history. Many would argue they first became audible to our generation immediately following September 11th, 2001, and grew deafening with the buildup to our invasion of Iraq. Few would deny that with America's massive global economic and military influence, we have become an empire. Many would argue that we have been an imperial power for some time now. Even so, it is only recently that that recognition has entered the popular consciousness, and so only recently could we begin interpreting artistic analyses and criticisms of imperialism as they relate to our own nation. J.M. Coetzee’s *Waiting for the Barbarians* paints a disturbing picture of what it means to be a citizen and a proponent of empire, one as applicable to modern America as it was to apartheid South Africa at the time it was written. Coetzee has created a story of Justice versus Empire that applies to us all not just as imperial citizens, but as human beings as well.

The Magistrate is the novel's intellectual and its narrator, so the reader identifies with his position best of all; he acts as a countervailing moral force to the all-consuming drive of Empire. He has a strong commitment to the idea of "decency", a concept we can roughly equate with basic human rights. He shudders at the mistreatment of Colonel Joll's first round of prisoners, and completely loses his poise and self-control at the sight of the hammer that Joll intends to use on the captured barbarian men. For an imperial official, the Magistrate is remarkably progressive; when the river people are first brought into the outpost for interrogation, he muses, "How do you eradicate contempt, especially when that contempt is founded on nothing more substantial than differences in table manners, variations in the structure of the eyelid?" (Coetzee 1980: 51). This comment is very reminiscent of Franz Boas, the pioneering anthropologist who helped to eradicate the biological notion of race in human relations. Unfortunately, the Magistrate's desire for decency and respect for the barbarians can go only so far. He is, after all, an administrator of the Empire, living on stolen land. The outpost by its very nature represents colonialism, indigenous repression, and even genocide. One could liken the outpost under the Magistrate's administration to a benign tumor - no matter how benign, it is still in a very real sense a tumor, unnatural and unwanted. He even comes to this realization himself late in the novel, saying "I was the lie that Empire tells itself when times are easy" (Coetzee 1980: 135). Like the other residents of the outpost, the Magistrate highly values peace and consistent food supply, the basic staples of life. It is worth noting that the outpost residents' desire for peace is markedly different from the Empire's desire for security, although the words themselves are quite similar. The Empire sees security as an abstract concept, one that can be fought and died for. War to achieve security, and by extension, peace, makes perfect sense to the imperial political theorists, but to those on the
ground, it still means life indefinite in an environment of famine, death, and fear. Succinctly, the imperial quest for security is anathema to real peace.

The Empire is every empire, and its goals and values are those of every empire from Rome to America: unquestioned might, unsurpassed longevity, and above all, unchecked growth. The children of Empire are raised in stories of its glory, learning from the beginning of their solemn charge to carry forth the flag and the light to all corners of the world. They hear nothing of the suffering inflicted upon those who stood in Empire's way, of the cruel subjugations and eternal occupations. The voice of Empire is the military trumpet, backed by the sword, for it is only through conquest that it has come to dominate, and only through repression that it will continue to do so. The story of Empire is always a story of failure; its ideology of growth is inherently unsustainable. The Magistrate recognizes this fact: "Empire has located its existence not in the smooth recurrent spinning time of the cycle of the seasons but in the jagged time or rise and fall, of beginning and end, of catastrophe" (Coetzee 1980: 133). There is a limit to resources and to space, a point where no further expansion can occur without pushing on the limits either of the planet or on another group of people. We see both of these cases in the outpost, where evaporation turns the lake steadily to salt and the barbarians may be plotting to take back their ancestral home. Imperial thought often fails to consider the practical, preferring to reduce most any problem to a Manichean, Good versus Evil struggle. The Empire is, of course, always on the side of good. Such simplified dualities tend to solve any problem theoretically; after all, how often in myth (and the Empire sees itself in the realm of myth) does the evil side win? As America has discovered all too painfully in Iraq, these reductions never work out; perhaps the people don't want to be liberated, or perhaps divine grace lies with the oppressed. The barbarians are fighting for the very tangible goal of their homeland, while the conscripted soldiers are fighting for an abstract ideal, the glory of an empire the capital of which they have probably never seen. One can also express the conflict between barbarian and Empire, savagery and civilization, in ecological terms. The barbarians forage and hunt for their food, immersed fully in the cycle of nature. They will leave behind nothing but their bones when they die. In contrast, the Empire feeds itself through agriculture, an inherently unnatural means of production that will not work on too large a scale. At the inevitable fall, great buildings will still scar the land, testaments to the arrogance of civilized man, Shelley's "vast and trunkless legs of stone, stand[ing] in the desert" (Shelley). The barbarians are by no means a force of nature, and they should not be romanticized as noble savages. They merely represent a way of life more in tune with the natural world, as opposed to one that divorces itself completely from it. The differences between the cultures are so great that not even Michael Walzer would argue that they should have their "noses held together"; since they are irreconcilable, the cultures must divorce (Walzer 1992: 324).
Caught in the middle of this intellectual struggle turned dangerously concrete, the people of the town are unfortunate enough to make their homes in the frontier where ideals and cultures clash. Seeking only basic material necessities, they are blown different ways in the tempest that surrounds them. First they side with the Empire, getting caught up in what the Magistrate calls a "patriotic bloodlust" (Coetzee 1980: 105). It is only when they feel the pain from the war, when their fields are flooded and their riverbanks burned, that they turn against it. They are automatons, not driven by any ideal or principle, constantly running to whichever promise seems the easiest. This lack of any higher motivation seems to follow Frederick Jackson Turner's Frontier Thesis, which states that "American social development has been continually beginning over again on the frontier," maintaining a "continuous touch with the simplicity of primitive society" (Turner 1893: 360). Living in such close proximity to the barbarians, and at such a great distance from the civilization of the Empire, they are the ones developing society in that area, and they have not gotten very far yet. The only part of his thesis that the townspeople lack (and the only part that might contain intellectual merit today, according to Salman Rushdie) is any kind of a sense of hope or enterprise in what they are doing. They are merely going through the motions of life.

As the army retreats from the outpost, the Magistrate meets Joll one final time and tells him the thought that has been germinating in his mind since imperial officers first arrived there: "The crime that is latent in us we must inflict on ourselves, not on others" (Coetzee 1980: 146). The only crimes the reader sees are the torture, killing, burning, stealing, and destruction of the Empire. One cannot sensically argue that Empire itself is the crime within us; rather, it can be seen as an extension or a manifestation of that inner failing, perhaps the evil inherent in all of us. The "black flower of civilization" (Coetzee 1980: 79) is spreading over the land, obliterating all in its path. In that sense, the physical and cultural borders of the Empire become the frontier of human decency. Its geographic expansion is the expansion of the realm of acceptable human behavior, now grown to accept torture as a daily occurrence necessitating specialists. The human psyche, though, cannot last for long this far from the norm. So, the resources dry up, the Empire is pushed back and some semblance of justice is restored. This expansion and contraction is as regular as the tides; one only need substitute every empire in history to see such a cycle. Given the current world climate, an American example seems most fitting. We have invaded and conquered Afghanistan and Iraq, and the native populations grow restless. Amid talk of a further spread into Iran, North Korea, or Syria we take prisoners without identity, without warrant, without charge, and without provocation and keep them away from the United States mainland and their own homes and families. They have no rights, and journalistic reporting from the area is minimal if it occurs at all. There is frequent talk of what unspeakable acts may be going on there behind closed doors, and there has been no denial from the United States government. Coetzee’s ability to universalize a tale is disturbing in this modern light. Our leaders would do best to heed the lessons of literature; even now, our own population grows skeptical and is unwilling to accept mere nationalistic bluster as justification. Will Bush, Cheney, Rumsfeld, and Wolfowitz
flee Washington under cover of night someday soon as the people pelt them with stones? It’s a comforting image for some, but even then, the damage may be irreparable.