

Blindness



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF JOSÉ SARAMAGO

José Saramago was born to a poor family and raised primarily in Lisbon, where his father was a low-ranking police officer in the administration of dictator António Salazar. Saramago also frequently visited his grandparents in the rural village where he was born—he cited his grandfather, an illiterate pig farmer, as the greatest influence on his writing. Although Saramago excelled in school, as a teenager he was forced to switch to a technical education; he became a car mechanic, although he read avidly in his free time. He married the engraver Ilda Reis, and they had one daughter in 1947—the same year that Saramago published his first novel, *The Land of Sin*. Though Saramago wrote sporadically over the next decade, he did not publish anything else until nearly 20 years later. Instead, he continued to move through different various trades as well as careers in the publishing industry. In 1974, socialist revolutionaries successfully toppled Portugal's authoritarian regime, and Saramago, a communist, was made director of a prominent national newspaper. However, the next year, backlash to this revolution led to Saramago's firing. Although Saramago was devastated, the experience persuaded him to focus on novel-writing. In the 1980s, he won widespread acclaim for a string of prominent books: *Baltazar and Blimunda*, *The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis*, *The Stone Raft*, and *The History of the Siege of Lisbon*. In 1991, Saramago's novel *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ* raised significant controversy: the Catholic Church officially denounced Saramago, and the Portuguese government formally withdrew his name from consideration for the European Literary Prize. In protest, Saramago left Portugal and moved to the Canary Islands, where he went on to live the rest of his life with his second wife, Pilar del Río. In the last two decades of his life, Saramago published more than a dozen more novels. In 1995, in addition to publishing *Blindness*, Saramago won the Camões Prize, the most important prize for Portuguese-language literature. In 1998, Saramago also became the first Portuguese-language writer to win the Nobel Prize for Literature. Saramago died in 2010 of leukemia.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Saramago famously names no characters, places, or time periods in *Blindness*, which is intended as a universal allegory for human experience, capable of taking place anywhere, at any time. However, *Blindness* is still undeniably rooted in the history of 20th-century fascism and authoritarianism—and especially the specific political history of Portugal. During most of

Saramago's life, from the 1930s to the 1970s, Portugal was ruled by a right-wing dictatorship called the Estado Novo (or "New State"), led by the economist António Salazar. During this period, the government essentially ignored public interest and operated as a corporation. As an atheist and communist living under this oppressive government, Saramago's suspicion of centralized political power explains why the Government in *Blindness* exercises its powers cruelly and arbitrarily. The novel's Government and soldiers essentially abandon the blind patients and start treating them as a problem to be solved rather than humans whom it is responsible for defending. This reflects the idea that authoritarianism and fascism recast citizens as threats to social order, dehumanizing their opponents to justify violence against them—the soldiers and thugs in the novel are both self-interested groups who use their power to exploit and abuse anyone who threatens them. It is no coincidence that the starvation, slaughter, and dehumanization that Saramago's protagonists suffer inside the mental hospital reflect the widespread violence, fascist regimes, and genocide that Saramago lived through in the 20th century.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Published in 2004, *Seeing* is Saramago's sequel to *Blindness*—it picks up on election day after the end of the "white blindness" epidemic. When the residents of Saramago's unnamed country overwhelmingly cast blank ballots, the imploding government begins attacking its own citizens and the nation descends into crisis. Saramago's style has often been compared to that of magical realism, particularly in the works of Latin American writers like the Colombian novelist Gabriel García Márquez (*One Hundred Years of Solitude*), the Argentine short-story writer Jorge Luis Borges (*Fictions*), and the contemporary Chilean novelist Isabel Allende (*The House of the Spirits*). On the other hand, Saramago is also compared to European writers of allegorical, philosophical fiction. Like *Blindness*, Albert Camus's novel *The Plague* takes up questions of affliction, social unrest, and the human condition through the lens of an epidemic. Additionally, Franz Kafka's skepticism about capitalism and bureaucracy in works like *The Trial* closely resembles Saramago's portrayal of power in *Blindness*. Saramago's pessimism and philosophical orientation also place him distinctively in the tradition of Portuguese modernism and postmodernism, which includes nationally-celebrated writers like poet Fernando Pessoa (*Message and Book of Disquiet*) and the contemporary novelist António Lobo Antunes (*Elephant's Memory* and *The Land at the End of the World*).

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Ensaio sobre a Cegueira (Essay on Blindness)
- **When Written:** 1992–1995
- **Where Written:** Lisbon, Portugal and Lanzarote, Canary Islands, Spain
- **When Published:** 1995 (English translation: 1997)
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary Portuguese Literature
- **Genre:** Philosophical Novel
- **Setting:** An unnamed city, primarily in an abandoned mental hospital
- **Climax:** The doctor's wife kills the thugs' leader; the hospital burns down; the blind patients regain their sight
- **Antagonist:** The mysterious blindness; the Government; the soldiers; the thugs; the struggle for survival
- **Point of View:** Third Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Tipsy Typo. José Saramago's surname is not his family's—rather, it was the result of an error on his birth certificate. As he explains it, *Saramago*, which is the Portuguese name of a kind of wild radish, “was an insulting nickname” for Saramago's father in his village. But the village's clerk, out of drunkenness or ill will, listed this as José's surname on his birth certificate, in addition to incorrectly listing his birthdate two days too late.

Ableism Accusations. Saramago predominantly uses blindness as a metaphor for central problems in human psychology and society, and many critics from disability studies have suggested that this metaphor perpetuates harmful ideas about blind people, even if this was never Saramago's intention. For instance, some have argued that Saramago's depiction of blind people covered in their own filth in the quarantined mental hospital wrongly suggests that blind people are incapable of caring for themselves, or that his characters' sense of despair when they are struck blind (and ecstasy when they regain their sight) puts forth the notion that blind people are somehow lacking in humanity or are inferior to sighted people.



PLOT SUMMARY

At an intersection in front of a traffic light, a driver remains stopped after the light turns green, which annoys the other drivers. The man yells out that he has suddenly gone **blind**: his entire field of vision is a sea of whiteness. After another driver helps the blind man back to his apartment, the blind man knocks over a vase and cuts himself trying to pick up the pieces, then passes out on the couch until the blind man's wife comes home and helps him clean up. It turns out that the person who drove the blind man home was a thief—he stole their **car**, so the

blind man and his wife take a taxi to the eye doctor. The doctor is baffled: there's seemingly nothing wrong with the blind man's eyes, and his condition is unprecedented. The only option, the doctor admits, is to “wait and see.”

After the blind man's appointment, the car-thief also suddenly goes blind, as does the doctor later that night. One of the doctor's patients, a young woman wearing dark glasses for an eye infection, works as a prostitute and goes blind while having sex with a man at a hotel. Two different police officers escort the car-thief and the girl with the dark glasses back to their respective homes. Meanwhile, the doctor realizes that the blindness is highly contagious and he tells the doctor's wife about his condition. The doctor then calls the Ministry of Health, which sets up a quarantine and sends an ambulance for the doctor. His wife insists on joining him—although she can still see, after boarding her husband's ambulance, she pretends that she has just gone blind as well.

The Ministry of Health's quarantine zone is set up in an abandoned **psychiatric hospital** guarded by armed soldiers. The doctor and his wife arrive first, followed by the first man who went blind, the man who stole his car, the girl with dark glasses, and a young boy with a squint who saw the eye doctor the previous day. The Government announces a long list of draconian rules that the internees must follow to protect the rest of the population from “the white sickness.” The concerned patients choose the doctor as their leader, but he refuses, worrying that future arrivals will reject his authority. Meanwhile, the car-thief and the first blind man get into a fight, and then nature calls: the little boy has to go to the bathroom, and so everyone lines up behind the doctor's wife, who promises to lead them there despite having not told anyone that she can still see. The car-thief starts groping the girl with the glasses, who indignantly kicks him in the leg with her high heels. This leaves him with a nasty, bloody wound, which the doctor's wife bandages as best she can.

In the morning, the doctor's wife worries that she will have to care for everyone else. More patients arrive, including the first blind man's wife and various minor characters who have briefly interacted with the protagonists (like the taxi-driver who drove the first blind man and his wife to the doctor). The car-thief's wound is badly infected, and the doctor and his wife beg the soldiers for medicine, but they refuse. Another huge crowd of patients enters the hospital after lunch, and that night the desperately ill car-thief crawls out of the hospital to beg the soldiers for medicine. But he startles the soldier on duty, who **shoots** him dead, and the sergeant orders the blind internees to retrieve and bury the car-thief's body. The blind internees manage to get a shovel from the soldiers and bury the car-thief's corpse in a shallow grave. But when the soldiers enter the hospital to drop off the internees' dinner, they come face-to-face with a group of hungry, blind internees waiting in the hall. Terrified, the soldiers massacre them indiscriminately,

leaving nine dead. The doctor leads his ward in burying half of the dead, but the internees living in the ward next door refuse to bury the other half. Meanwhile, in the hospital's filthy bathroom, the doctor breaks down when he realizes that he is "becoming an animal."

The internees begin losing all sense of time and routine. The soldiers decide to leave the food outside the hospital rather than entering, but the blind get lost while they search for it. A bloodthirsty soldier nearly murders a terrified blind man, but the new sergeant on duty stops him. On this day, several hundred new internees move into the hospital and fight for beds. Some are forced to sleep in the hallways, and others are frightened to come across the pile of corpses in the hospital's courtyard. Soon after this, the narrator notes that the hospital is now full and that the internees finally have enough food. One of the newcomers is another patient of the doctor's, an old man with a black eyepatch who tells the others about the sad state of the city: the Government has failed to control the epidemic, and an escalating series of catastrophes followed. Much of the city is blind, public services are collapsing, and the city is littered with abandoned cars. The narrator suggests that the patients are better off in the hospital, where they "pass the time" by remembering what they last saw before going blind.

In its crowded state, the hospital has become unimaginably filthy, a result of broken plumbing and people's inability to see who is defecating where. To address the situation, the doctor's wife considers revealing that she can see—but before she can, a band of armed thugs starts controlling all the food and demanding that everyone else give up their valuables in exchange for rations. The group from the doctor's ward reluctantly complies, but the thugs give them so little food that they begin to starve. The doctor's wife realizes she alone can stop the thugs, so she secretly surveys their ward at night. While the internees grow more and more desperate, the thugs start demand "more money and valuables" and then start systematically raping the women.

Overcome by anxiety, the women from the doctor's ward wait their turn to be assaulted. In a moment of weakness, the doctor and the girl with the dark glasses have sex—the doctor's wife witnesses this, but she comforts them rather than objecting. The girl and the old man with the eyepatch also begin a romantic relationship. One night, the thugs call over the ward's seven women and violently rape them for several hours, leaving them battered and traumatized beyond words—one of them dies moments after the attack ends, and the doctor's wife washes her corpse to "purify" it. Soon, the doctor's wife realizes that she has no choice but to act. A few nights later, she grabs a pair of scissors she has been hiding and follows another group of women into the thugs' ward, where she stabs the leader in the throat, killing him and causing a frantic struggle. After escaping with the women, she struggles to process what she has done.

After the leader's death, the thugs lose their grip on power, but they keep their stockpile of food. New food stops arriving, and without assistance from the soldiers, some of the starving internees decide that they were better off under the thugs' rule. The internees try and fail to attack the thieves, who have blocked the entrance to their ward with several beds. The doctor's wife desperately reveals that she can see, and then an unnamed woman decides to take matters into her own hands: she sets fire to the beds in the thugs' doorway, and the whole ward burns down with the thugs inside. The entire hospital ends up catching fire, and the patients run outside, only to find that the soldiers are gone—in fact, the whole city is eerily silent and dark. Disoriented and confused, the internees spend the night next to the burning hospital, hoping in vain that the soldiers will return with food.

In the morning, the blind internees are free but lost and starving. The doctor's wife guides a small group—herself and her husband, the girl with the glasses, the man with the eyepatch, the first blind man and his wife, and the boy with the squint—into town, where blind people are taking shelter in shops. One of them explains that the entire country is now blind and that people spend their days scavenging for food. The doctor's wife goes looking for food and finds a supermarket, which is full of people but empty of food. Luckily, she discovers a basement storeroom and fills several bags with food. On her way out, she decides not to inform the blind scavengers about it, and then she gets lost and breaks down crying. Then, a stray dog rescues the doctor's wife by licking up her tears and showing her to "a great map" that leads her home. This "dog of tears" joins her adopted family.

Now well-fed and well-dressed, the group goes to girl's old apartment, which is nearby. Her parents are gone, but her downstairs neighbor, an elderly blind woman, has managed to stay and survive by eating whatever she finds in the backyard, including raw chickens and rabbits. This woman has keys to the girl's apartment and opens it for the group in exchange for some of their food. The group spends the night there, but the next afternoon they move to the doctor and his wife's apartment, which is exactly as they left it. Here, "the seven pilgrims" make themselves at home: the doctor's wife helps them clean up, and during a rainstorm in the morning, the women bathe themselves and wash everybody's clothes on the balcony. Later that day, the doctor's wife leads the first blind man and his wife to their old apartment, where a blind writer is now living. Although he cannot read his own work, the writer continues working so as to not lose himself.

The doctor, his wife, and the girl with the glasses then visit the doctor's office, which has been ransacked, and then return to the girl's apartment to again check for her parents. They pass a speaker preaching to a crowd about the apocalypse, and when they arrive, they find the old woman laying dead outside, clutching the girl's keys. The doctor's wife buries the old

woman, and then the girl leaves a lock of her hair on her front doorknob, in case her parents return. Back at the doctor and his wife's apartment, the doctor's wife reads the rest of the group a story, and the girl with the glasses and the old man with the eyepatch reaffirm their love for each other.

Later on, the doctor and his wife visit the supermarket in search of food. Accompanied by the dog of tears, they pass another preacher speaking to a blind crowd, this time about law and government. In the supermarket's basement storeroom, the doctor's wife is horrified to find a pile of dead bodies and realizes that after she left the last time, the blind scavengers rushed downstairs, fell, and accidentally got locked inside. Feeling nauseated and overwhelmed with guilt, the doctor's wife follows her husband across the street into a crowded church, where she passes out. When the doctor's wife regains consciousness, she realizes that the eyes in all the images in the church are covered with paint or strips of cloth, and she and the doctor debate what this symbolizes. When the blind worshippers around them hear this, they riot and run out of the church, and the doctor and his wife take some of the food they leave behind.

Back in their apartment, the doctor's wife reads a book to the group. As she reads, the first blind man suddenly regains his sight, and the entire group begins rejoicing. By the next morning, all of them can see again, and the city is full of people celebrating on the streets. The doctor proclaims that all humans are "Blind people who can see, but do not see."

wife becomes the leader of the "family" that forms after the whole city goes blind and all public services disappear. She leads the doctor, the first blind man and the first blind man's wife, the girl with the glasses, the old man with the eyepatch, and the boy with the squint around the city. She houses them in her and the doctor's old apartment and feeds them singlehandedly, out of a sense of obligation and love.

The doctor / ophthalmologist – The eye doctor, along with the doctor's wife, is one of the novel's protagonists; he examines the first man to suffer from "white **blindness**" and then loses his own sight shortly thereafter. Rational and altruistic, the doctor admits that the man's condition has no known scientific cause or treatment, and he contacts the Ministry of Health as soon as he learns that it is contagious. The doctor ultimately gets thrown in quarantine in the abandoned **psychiatric hospital** with the rest of the novel's characters, including his wife (who is only pretending to be blind) and many of his patients, who are the first people in the city to go blind. In quarantine, the doctor takes an informal leadership role among the internees and tries to prevent the people in his ward from fighting. However, this contrasts with his actual sense of disorientation and powerlessness—in fact, he only appears to be competent because his wife helps guide him. Their loving and supportive relationship survives even the doctor's desperate affair with the girl with the dark glasses and his despondent realization that he may never be able to practice medicine again. At the end of the book, the doctor helps his wife cope with finding the supermarket storeroom full of corpses by bringing her to a church in which all the images are blindfolded, and soon after this they witness the city's population regain their sight. The doctor's sense of duty and willingness to tolerate uncertainty demonstrate his resilience in the face of catastrophe, but his reliance on his wife shows how leadership is often rooted in confidence and social authority rather than actual capacity. Indeed, by putting an eye doctor at the center of a novel about blindness, Saramago highlights the limits of science and medicine, especially in the face of unfamiliar and uncertain circumstances.

The girl with the dark glasses – The girl with the dark glasses is one of the novel's protagonists; she's a young woman who visits the doctor for an eye infection (hence her dark glasses) and goes **blind** soon after. The girl is a prostitute by trade, but the narrator emphasizes that she "goes with a man only when she feels like it" and has chosen this line of work intentionally, because of the freedom it gives her. In fact, she is struck blind while having sex with a man in a hotel room, which she initially views as punishment for her immortality. She is even more devastated upon arriving in quarantine, when she gives the car-thief (who gropes her) a wound that gets severely infected and indirectly leads to his death, but she soon proves to be one of the novel's most sympathetic and morally conscious characters: she takes care of the boy with the squint like her own son,



CHARACTERS

The doctor's wife – The novel's main protagonist, the doctor's wife is the only character who can **see** for most of the book. Although she can still see, the doctor's wife lies, saying she has also gone blind, when she boards the ambulance to quarantine with her husband and the rest of the blind internees. After arriving at the quarantined **hospital**, the doctor's wife does everything she can to help the people in her ward survive and stay unified without giving away the fact that she can see. She helps care for the car-thief when he is injured and she comforts the girl with the glasses, in addition to giving the doctor information that allows him to more effectively organize the group. After the group of armed thugs takes control over the hospital and start rationing out food, the leader violently rapes the doctor's wife, who realizes that she must finally take bold action as the only one who can see: she sneaks into the thugs' ward and stabs the leader in the neck with a pair of scissors that she has been hiding, killing him and setting off a crisis of leadership among his crew. However, her conscience gets the better of her: she is devastated to accept that she has killed a man, which illustrates how she is one of the only characters who truly confronts the moral horror of their circumstances in the hospital. During this final section of the book, the doctor's

comforting him when he cries and sacrificing her own food for him, and she develops a loving and supportive romantic relationship with the old man with the black eyepatch, even though he is several decades her elder. She also sleeps with the doctor in a moment of weakness but nonetheless develops a close relationship with the doctor's wife, whom the narrator likens to a motherly or sisterly figure. Nevertheless, the girl with the glasses also has a pessimistic streak: whereas the doctor's wife believes that the blindness epidemic must end, the girl with the glasses has no hope until everyone regains their sight at the end of the book. Her ongoing inner conflict represents the perpetual tension between hope and realism, purpose and meaninglessness, and self-preservation and self-sacrifice.

The old man with the black eyepatch – The old man with the eye patch is one of the novel's protagonists; he's a patient of the doctor. The old man has cataracts and has already gone **blind** in one eye (which he covers with a black eyepatch) prior to the blindness epidemic. After getting struck by the "white sickness," the man with the eyepatch ends up quarantined in **the hospital**, but he's the last of the central characters to arrive. Unlike the other blind internees, the old man with the eyepatch remains relatively calm in the hospital, where he informs everyone else about the "panic" that has taken hold of the city and recounts the news he hears on the radio to them. During his time in the hospital, he develops a romantic and sexual connection with the girl with the dark glasses, although the narrator cannot explain what attracts them to each other. Valiant and wise, the old man supports the doctor's wife when she begins to doubt whether she was right to kill the leader of the thugs, and he leads the protagonists' final attack on the thugs before the hospital burns down. After the fire, he reveals that he has no home to go back to, unlike the rest of the characters—he lived alone in a rented room, and the people he met in the hospital have essentially become his family. He selflessly worries that he will eventually turn into "an impossible burden" on the group's resources, but he remains an integral part of the group and maintains his relationship with the girl with dark glasses through to the end of the book.

The first blind man – The first blind man is one of the novel's protagonists; the highly contagious "white **blindness**" epidemic begins with the him when he's mysteriously struck blind while waiting at a traffic light in his **car**. Virtually everyone with whom the man comes into contact also starts suddenly going blind—this includes the car-thief (who takes the first blind man home and then steals his car), the first blind man's wife, the taxi-driver who brings him and his wife to the doctor, and the doctor himself. It also includes the various patients in the doctor's office: the old man with the eyepatch, the boy with the squint, and the girl with dark glasses. Since they are among the first to go blind, they all end up together in the quarantine zone, an abandoned **mental hospital**. Although the first blind man is

initially furious with the man who stole his car, they eventually make peace. While the first blind man occasionally helps participate in the group's efforts to secure food, fight off the thugs, and so on, he's generally pessimistic, adversarial, and bitter. He also appears to have a poor relationship with his wife: they seldom speak in the ward, unlike the doctor and the doctor's wife. While the first blind man protests loudly when his wife agrees to go visit the thugs who plan to rape her and the other women, it seems that he's more concerned with maintaining his own sense of masculine honor than with his wife's wellbeing. After leaving the quarantine hospital, he goes with his wife and the doctor's wife to his old house, where the writer has moved in. Although the cause of the first blind man's affliction or the mechanism of its transmission is never revealed, he is also the first to regain his sight at the end of the book.

The first blind man's wife – The first blind man's wife is one of the novel's protagonists; she drives her husband to visit the doctor at the beginning of the book and then goes **blind** herself and gets reunited with her husband when she arrives at the quarantined **hospital**. However, it soon becomes clear that her relationship with her husband is not as stable or loving as it may have initially seemed: they seldom talk, and when a group of thugs at the hospital demand that the ward's women submit to sex in exchange for food, the first blind man's wife agrees to go despite her husband's objections. After the hospital burns down, the first blind man's wife joins the group led by the doctor's wife and forms a strong bond with her.

The little boy with the squint – The boy with the squint is one of the novel's protagonists; he gets struck with "white **blindness**" after visiting the doctor's office at the same time as the first blind man. The little boy ends up quarantined in the **hospital** with the other protagonists, and he ultimately joins the group led by the doctor's wife when they escape from the burned-down hospital into the city. After being separated from his family and locked in the mental hospital, the boy with the squint initially occupies himself by calling out for his mother and complaining of hunger. The girl with the dark glasses takes care of the boy, primarily by giving him part of her food rations, and she generally serves as a kind of surrogate mother figure to him. In general, the boy is quiet and passive, representing the deep psychological toll that the blindness epidemic inflicts.

The narrator – The unnamed narrator of *Blindness* is not quite omniscient, but he or she is also not confined to the limited perspective of the novel's many **blind** characters. Full of irony and sarcasm, the narrative voice wanders in and out of characters' thoughts, to which he or she often has complete access but occasionally has no access at all. To some readers, it may be unclear whether the narrator is faithfully reporting facts or simply speculating about what may have happened. In fact, the narrator's self-consciously ironic attempts to appear objective—for instance, by rewriting the man with the black

eyepatch's report on the world outside the quarantine zone to give it more "rigour and suitability"—actually make it clear that the narrator really only offers one among many perspectives on the events of the book. Just like the Government's heavy-handed attempts to control the blindness epidemic (and the public's beliefs about it) actually backfire by revealing the Government's incompetence, the narrator's jokes and criticisms about the novel's characters make it clear that they do not have answers to the most mysterious and fundamental questions running through the book: where does the white blindness come from, how does it spread throughout the population, and why does it suddenly disappear at the end of the book?

The car-thief – Although the **car**-thief initially appears to be a "good Samaritan" when he drives the first blind man home at the beginning of the book, he turns out to be an opportunistic criminal: after dropping off the first blind man, he drives off in the man's car. However, he soon starts feeling a creeping sense of fear and then, as soon as he pulls over in the stolen car to take a walk, he suddenly goes **blind**. In the quarantined **hospital**, the car-thief initially makes trouble by arguing with the first blind man and groping the girl with the dark glasses, who kicks him with her high heels and punctures a hole in his leg. This wound gets infected, but since the internees have no medicine, the car-thief's infection progressively worsens in the days that follow. Eventually, he crawls out of the hospital to make a desperate appeal to the soldiers for help, but one of them instead **shoots** the thief dead within seconds. Afterward, the other internees struggle to bury his "hideous," disfigured body. The car-thief is a study in moral ambiguity and contradiction: although an unsavory and unsympathetic character, his punishment is far worse than his crimes. In fact, the narrator notes that the car-thief did offer to help the first blind man out of genuine "generosity and altruism," and while the car-thief blames the first blind man for his own blindness, he does not harbor any ill will toward the girl with the glasses, which suggests that he at least partially takes responsibility for his own misfortune.

The dog of tears – The "dog of tears" is an unusually human-like dog who joins the fledgling family led by the doctor's wife. The doctor's wife first encounters the dog when she gets lost on the way home from the supermarket to the store, where the others are waiting for her; the dog sits with her while she weeps in distress. The doctor's wife then brings the dog home to the rest of the group—they feed the dog, who in turn protects them from possible threats (mostly the packs of dogs and **blind** people who now roam the city's streets). But Saramago does not narrate this relationship as transactional—rather, the dog of tears is an important part of the blind people's family, both beloved by and deeply empathetic for the people who have adopted him. This is a remarkable reversal of metaphor, since throughout the book, various characters compare the blind

internees in quarantine to "dogs" because of the capacities they lose and inhumane environment in which they are forced to live.

The leader of the thugs – The leader of the thugs is a cruel, **gun**-toting criminal who leads the gang of **blind** patients that takes over **the hospital** and starts controlling its food supply. At first, he demands that all the other internees trade their valuables for access to food, and later, he leads the other thugs in collectively raping all the quarantined women. While his motives are unclear—the valuables he collects are worthless since society has broken down—he wields power with no interest in morality or equality, but simply to accumulate more power and wealth by threatening everybody else with violence and starvation. In this sense, the thug leader's rule can be seen as a metaphor for the senseless cruelty of both capitalism and authoritarian government. Eventually, the doctor's wife manages to stab the thugs' leader in the neck with her scissors, killing him and ending the thugs' reign of terror over the hospital.

The writer – The writer is a **blind** man who moves with his family into the first blind man and the first blind man's wife's apartment after another group of blind people occupies his family's apartment while they are away. Despite being unable to read his work, the writer continues to write because this allows him to maintain his individual identity by preserving his "voice" and capturing the experiences of the city's residents for posterity. After the first blind man and his wife leave **the hospital**, like the rest of the surviving internees, they hope to visit their old home and possibly resettle there, but they discover the writer living inside. The writer asks them about the quarantine and shows them some of his work, which only the doctor's wife can read, and then offers to let the first blind man and his wife return to their old apartment even if it means evicting him. It seems that the writer has managed to maintain his morality and empathy by continuing to write—in this way, he contrasts strongly with the hordes of starving blind people outside, who have lost all sense of identity, individuality, and voice through the crisis.

The blind accountant – The **blind** accountant is one of the "thugs" who takes control of their group (and their **gun**) after the doctor's wife kills their original leader. When the doctor and the first blind man bring turn over their ward's valuables to the bandits, they notice "the unmistakable sound of punching paper," which signifies that someone is writing in braille. To have learned braille, this accountant must be a "normal blind person," who was blind before the epidemic. Ironically, the accountant's disability turns into an advantage: his literacy in braille and familiarity with life as a blind man give him power over all the people who go blind during the epidemic, which is similar to the advantage that sight confers on the doctor's wife. These advantages also turn both of them into outsiders, which is why the narrator identifies with the blind accountant at times in the

book (for instance, by wondering what his powers could contribute to the other side), despite generally recounting events from a perspective tied to the doctor's wife.

The pharmacist's assistant – The pharmacist's assistant sells the girl with the dark glasses eye drops for her infection, clumsily hitting on her in the process, and later turns up **blind in the hospital**. During the middle portion of the novel, he enthusiastically supports the ward's efforts to try and win power back from the thugs. After the doctor's wife kills the thugs' armed leader, the pharmacist's assistant participates in the internees' attempt to raid the thugs' ward. However, the blind accountant fires indiscriminately and kills the pharmacist's assistant in the process. His corpse is consumed in the fire that destroys the hospital.

The old woman – The old woman lives in the apartment below the girl with the dark glasses. After **the hospital** burns down and the **blind** inmates escape, the group led by the doctor's wife decides to visit each of their homes in turn, starting with the closest: the apartment where the girl with the dark glasses used to live with her parents. When they arrive, they find the building empty except for one blind old woman living downstairs, who managed to hide out when the Government took everyone else to quarantine. However, the old woman has lived the last several weeks isolated and covered in filth, eating anything she can find in the back garden—including raw rabbit and chicken meat, which is strewn around her apartment. The old woman helps the visitors get into the girl's apartment, and in return they give her some of the food they have managed to collect. The old woman is perpetually suspicious of the visitors, and particularly of the dog of tears, who kills one of the woman's hens. However, the old woman is also incredibly grateful for the food that the visitors provide her, and the others realize that her crankiness is the result of her isolation and the dangers that have surrounded her since the Government quarantined everyone who surrounded her. In fact, when they leave, she cries for her own future, and readers might wonder if the doctor's wife is cruel to leave the old woman behind rather than caring for her as part of her new family. When the doctor, the doctor's wife, and the girl with the glasses return to visit the girl's old house, they find the old woman dead outside the building, holding the girl's keys, as though being part of the girl's family was her dying wish.

The woman who says, "Wherever you go, I shall go" – This woman is being raped by the leader of the thugs when the doctor's wife stabs the leader in the neck with her scissors, killing him. The woman then triumphantly bites off the thug leader's penis. The doctor's wife whispers to her, "Be quiet [...] Say nothing," and then helps her escape. Later, the internees convene to discuss their strategy moving forward, and one of the men declares that he wishes the thug leader had never died. Feeling conflicted, the doctor's wife starts to question her decision to kill the leader and decides to speak in order to give

this woman the opportunity to identify her. (Since she whispered in this woman's ear, this woman is the only person who knows that the doctor's wife was responsible for killing the thug leader.) Instead of accusing the doctor's wife of the crime, the woman comes out and declares, "Wherever you go, I shall go." In fact, she keeps this promise by following the doctor's wife to assault the thugs' ward. Ultimately, the woman's loyalty reflects her deep gratitude to the doctor's wife and shows that, despite the doctor's wife's doubts, her actions truly were heroic.

The Ministry of Health – The Ministry of Health is the agency of the Government that takes charge of the initial response to the **white blindness** epidemic. After going blind, the doctor calls the Ministry of Health and alerts its leadership to the situation. Although the Ministry is skeptical of the doctor's claims at first, it soon begins taking extreme but futile measures to try and contain the epidemic. Ultimately, it throws the doctor in quarantine along with all the other blind internees, completely abandoning him even despite his service to the public good. The minister chooses **the mental hospital** as a quarantine site because this is least likely to anger his powerful friends, and he then switches his focus to distracting and manipulating the public while the virus takes its course.

The Government – The Government is a distant, faceless entity that takes nebulous and counterproductive actions to try and contain the outbreak of white **blindness**. In the quarantine zone, the blind internees hear the Government's 15 rules every day over the loudspeaker. While they sound certain and authoritative, these rules are really baseless: it soon becomes apparent to the internees that the soldiers are unable to implement the Government's orders and do not care about how the prisoners are treated. The word "Government" is always capitalized, which is part of Saramago's critique of power in this book: human authority is short-sighted and incompetent in the face of crisis, and it takes oppressive measures simply to maintain the illusion of legitimate authority.

The soldiers – The soldiers are a constantly-changing crew that is charged with preventing the **blind** internees from leaving **the hospital**. Frequently confused about what is happening all around them and terrified of going blind themselves, the soldiers sometimes use disproportionate force against the blind—for instance, by massacring a group of internees who are waiting for food. They demonstrate how the Government and society at large dehumanize the blind in order to maintain order—until the disease reaches them, too. The soldiers' cruelty and indifference toward the starving, blind internees evokes the murderous fascist regimes of 20th-century Europe. Of course, once the blindness crisis gets serious outside the hospital's walls, the soldiers themselves disappear—presumably because they have gone blind and been forced to wander the city in search of food, like everybody else.

The police sergeants – The police sergeants are the officers

who command the soldiers that guard **the hospital** and who generally communicate with the **blind** internees when they request resources or assistance (but typically deny their requests). Like the soldiers they command, the sergeants are frequently replaced: in some parts of the book, there is a new sergeant virtually every time the internees go outside, and the sergeants range from unnecessarily cruel (like one who hopes the blind will die and make his job easier) to reasonably empathetic (like one who directs the blind to safety rather than letting one of his soldiers **shoot** them for sport). Nevertheless, all of them willingly advance the Government's cruel and unnecessary policies, and they therefore represent the way the Government anxiously persecutes the weak in order to try and cope with the blindness epidemic, a crisis it does not understand any better than the public does.

The man from the hotel – The man in the hotel is “an old acquaintance” of the girl with the dark glasses who enlists her services as a prostitute on the night that the girl goes **blind**. The man later goes blind and comes to the quarantined **mental hospital**, where he briefly lives in the doctor's wife's ward. Soon after he moves in, he gets killed by the soldiers, along with the taxi-driver and the two policemen (the one who took the car-thief home and the one who took the girl with the dark glasses home).

The taxi-driver – The taxi-driver drives the first blind man and his wife to the doctor after the car-thief opportunistically steals their **car**. Later, the taxi-driver also goes **blind** and ends up in the protagonists' ward, but he is soon **shot** and killed by the soldiers, along with the man who met the girl in the hotel, the policeman who took the car-thief home, and the policeman who took the girl with dark glasses home.

The policeman who takes the car-thief home – After the car-thief goes **blind** while trying to escape with the first blind man's stolen **car**, this police officer finds him and helps guide him home—but he never realizes that the thief committed a crime. Later, the policeman goes blind and gets quarantined along with the group of protagonists, and gets **shot** and killed—along with eight other men (including the taxi-driver, the policeman who took the girl with the dark glasses home, and the man from the hotel)—by terrified soldiers while he is waiting to retrieve food. Despite having worked for the same government as the soldiers, he quickly becomes subject to its arbitrary and indiscriminate use of force.

The policeman who takes the girl with the dark glasses home – This policeman escorts the girl with the dark glasses home after she goes **blind** at the hotel. The officer makes the girl pay for the taxi ride home as a kind of punishment for what he perceives as her apparent moral depravity as a prostitute. (This ironically contrasts with the policeman who takes the car-thief home, who treats the thief in a relatively humane manner.) The police officer who brings the girl home also eventually goes blind and ends up in **the hospital**, where the soldiers kill him

along with eight other internees (including the other policeman, the taxi-driver, and the man from the hotel) while he waits to retrieve food containers.

The maid – The maid is working at the hotel when the girl with the dark glasses goes **blind** while having sex with the man from the hotel. The girl begins screaming and attracts the attention of the hotel maid, who reports what she has witnessed. Eventually, the maid also goes blind and ends up in the quarantined **hospital**, where she inquires about the girl with the glasses, who evidently left a lasting impression on her.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



EXISTENCE, UNCERTAINTY, AND AUTONOMY

In José Saramago's philosophical novel *Blindness*, an unnamed city's residents start suddenly and inexplicably losing their **sight**. Rather than pure darkness, they see “impenetrable whiteness,” and their blindness appears to be contagious: in a matter of weeks, the entire city loses its sight—except, it seems, for the doctor's wife, who becomes the novel's main protagonist. This mysterious epidemic of “white blindness,” which brings Saramago's protagonists together in an abandoned **mental hospital** that is transformed into a quarantine zone, is also an allegory for the various ways in which real people, although literally capable of sight, are metaphorically blind about the nature of their existence. Specifically, Saramago suggests that people are blind in their limited control over their lives: they can neither fully understand why events happen (like this mass epidemic of blindness) nor know with any certainty what will happen to them in the future. At the same time, the novel shows that people can learn to “see” by accepting this uncertain human condition and taking responsibility for their own existence.

In this book, literal blindness is a metaphor for characters' general disorientation in the world. The blindness strikes its first victim suddenly and inexplicably. But when this first blind man visits the doctor, nothing appears to be wrong: the man's “eyes are perfect” and his “blindness [...] defies explanation.” In other words, even the doctor is blind to what causes the condition; its sudden appearance represents the inexplicability of many of the most important events that define and give meaning to people's lives. The spread of blindness also “defies explanation” throughout the novel: people suddenly find themselves blind while they go about their everyday routines.

In most cases, they are struck blind just after developing an intense fear of blindness, which implies that perhaps fearing the unknown is self-fulfilling in that such anxiety actually brings on what it is that people fear. One victim even calls the blindness a “spiritual malaise,” a reflection of people’s deepest feelings and emotions—indeed, the white blindness leaves no external signs on its victims, although such external characteristics also lose their meaning and importance. Unable to distinguish between people who can and cannot see, the seeing move through the world terrified of being struck blind, and the blind are completely uncertain of who and what surrounds them. Indeed, like the blind in this book, people more generally are “certain that life exists” but “unable to see it,” despite external appearances. In this way, Saramago suggests that people often drift through unfulfilling and alienating lives, secretly crippled by uncertainty and waiting for a sense of direction or purpose to strike them.

The protagonists’ blindness forces them to make sense of the world and their place in it in new ways, both figuratively and literally. They must rely on other senses in order to navigate, communicate, and understand the world—for instance, they start traveling along walls and identifying people by their voices. But they also lose their individual identities and their ability to grasp others’. By simply juxtaposing dialogue without quotation marks or attribution, Saramago shows readers how the blind lose track of speakers and names. Indeed, the writer (who moves into the first blind man’s apartment when the man and his wife are in quarantine) articulates why the characters go unnamed: “blind people do not need a name, I am my voice, nothing else matters.” In short, when faced with their affliction, the blind stop trying to define their identities—instead, they undertake a spiritual reckoning as they struggle to understand what happened to them and maintain the hope of regaining their sight. In quarantine, the doctor’s wife insists that the blindness “cannot last forever,” which “would be horrible,” but one of the other patients, the girl with the dark glasses, believes that the blindness is permanent and that “there is no salvation.” These different perspectives on hope and recovery show how humans will inevitably choose a stance about their uncertain future without knowing if their choices will ever pay off.

In fact, the sensory, social, and spiritual reorientation that the novel’s characters undergo in order to cope with their blindness is what leads them to truly understand their existence: losing their literal sight lets them figuratively “see.” The novel ends with a dramatic and inexplicable reversal of fortune: just as suddenly as the protagonists lost their sight, they mysteriously regain it. This happens just when the world appears to be on the brink of collapse: the city is littered with trash and corpses, its blind and starving residents congregate in public to listen to sermons and political speeches, and the protagonists are planning to move to the countryside. The doctor and his wife stumble into a church full of blind

worshippers, and the doctor’s wife reveals that all the idols, statues, and figures inside have their eyes painted over or covered. When the crowd hears about this sacrilege, they riot and flee. But the doctor praises whomever covered the images’ eyes as proposing “the fairest and most radically human” religion of all: one in which higher powers are just as lost as human beings, and so even “God does not deserve to see.” That night, as though reaping a reward for recognizing that not even God can give meaning to their lives or afflictions, the characters start suddenly regaining their sight. After they do, the doctor comments, “I don’t think we go blind, I think we are blind [...] Blind people who can see, but do not see.” He sees the white blindness as a manifestation of the deeper, atheistic truth that people start out blind, without inherent purpose or direction, but they can learn to see—or take control of their existence—through their own volition. The novel’s protagonists only understand this essential autonomy after their blindness shows them the starkest realities of human nature, tests their resolve to survive, and ultimately leads them to meaningful, loving relationships. In other words, blindness shows the protagonists that they are fundamentally responsible for their own salvation, even though they live in an inexplicable and unpredictable reality.



GOOD, EVIL, AND MORAL CONSCIENCE

Mysteriously struck **blind**, locked up in an abandoned **mental hospital**, and forced to fend for themselves, Saramago’s characters quickly come

face to face with the ugliest aspects of human nature: they compete for scarce food, soldiers slaughter them, and armed thugs starve them and repeatedly rape the women. But Saramago does not think that people are inevitably selfish: rather, he suggests that they are capable of as much radical good as they are horrific evil. Although people selfishly panic during crises, no situation can completely eliminate their capacity for solidarity and moral conscience. For Saramago, people are both altruistic and selfish, or good and evil, by nature—which means it is up to them and the social structures they create to determine which side will prevail.

Saramago shows that all humans are capable of extreme selfishness and brutal violence. This is apparent from the beginning of the book, when the car-thief steals the first blind man’s **car** and the Government shuts the blind in abandoned mental hospital, declaring that anyone who leaves the hospital will be **shot** on sight. Surely enough, the frightened soldiers soon start massacring the blind. Inside the hospital, social organization also exacerbates humanity’s worst tendencies: an armed group of thugs takes control of the wards and starts hoarding all the food, demanding everyone’s valuables, and raping all the women in the hospital. Saramago describes these rapes in graphic detail, forcing the reader to confront the profundity of humankind’s capacity for violence and the

frightening possibility that society might enable rather than repress these violent instincts. Ultimately, even the book's most altruistic and sympathetic character—the doctor's wife—is forced to abandon her principles because of circumstances: at the end of the book, she steals food from blind worshippers in a church in order to feed the other protagonists.

Nevertheless, the doctor's wife proves more than anyone else that people retain their capacity for goodness even in the darkest situations. She feigns blindness to follow her husband to the quarantined hospital, where she cares for, cleans, and defends the other internees. After the patients leave the hospital, she houses, feeds, and guides them. But she does not do this because she is uniquely benevolent: rather, she feels a sense of moral obligation because she is the only person who can still see. Her moral conscience holds the group together, proving that people retain the capacity for cooperation and selflessness even in the darkest circumstances. Other characters also demonstrate Saramago's faith in altruism and love: the girl with the glasses and the old man with the eyepatch fall in love and agree to stay together once they regain their sight, although they are separated by decades and the old man fears that the girl will abandon him once she sees that he is wrinkly, ugly, and bald. The old man talks people through moral crises in the hospital, and the doctor gives them what little medical advice he can muster. Even the soldiers occasionally show a deep inner humanity: when one of them tries to trick a terrified blind man into approaching the hospital's front gate so that he has an excuse to shoot, the sergeant reprimands the soldier and directs the blind man back inside. The sergeant sees the hopeless blind man as a human being worth protecting, even though his job is predicated on viewing the blind as afflicted enemies. This shows that humanity's capacity for good is just as profound as its capacity for evil, especially in extreme circumstances.

Ultimately, Saramago suggests that this choice between good and evil depends on people's social instincts, or their moral regard for others: when they view others as equals whose interests must be taken seriously, people harness the best instincts of humanity, but if they conceive themselves as superior to others and their desires as more important than others', they commit evil and brutality. For instance, the Government and the soldiers justify shooting and denying resources to the blind by comparing them to animals and telling themselves that the blind need to be scarified to prevent the epidemic from spreading. In other words, they decide that the blind prisoners are less than human and unworthy of fundamental rights, even though they would never accept that treatment if they were blind themselves. (Ironically, the soldiers soon go blind as well, along with the rest of the city.) On the other hand, certain characters—like the doctor's wife and the old man—insist on seeing everyone's humanity, even in the

darkest circumstances. This is why the doctor's wife cries when she sees the other protagonists soil themselves in public and the old man is overcome with delight when he smells the women bathing themselves and realizes "that there [is] still life in the world": the doctor's wife sees people's humanity when they have ceased to acknowledge their own, and the old man is learning to see this humanity again. While the soldiers and thugs generally refuse to see a reflection of their own humanity in the people over whom they have power, and therefore exploit and brutalize those other people, the doctor's wife and the old man insist on seeing others as human—even when they have been reduced to filth and starvation—and they ruthlessly defend those others' dignity.

Accordingly, Saramago doesn't think that people are inherently benevolent and that society is inevitably good for them, nor that people are naturally wicked and can only ever hope to protect themselves from harm. Rather, he sees human beings and societies as having unlimited *capacities* for both benevolence and wickedness: people can integrate their interests with other people's or reject others' humanity, depending on the circumstances and social pressures that shape their moral conscience.



BIOLOGICAL NEEDS AND HUMAN SOCIETY

From plumbing to supermarkets, many of humankind's most prized inventions are designed to distance people from their basic biological needs: food, water, shelter, excretion, and so on. But in *Blindness*, as "the white sickness" of unexplained **blindness** ravages the unnamed city, the people who run society's complex systems stop doing their jobs, and everyone else must completely dedicate themselves to meeting their basic biological needs. Throughout the city, people of all walks of life—doctors, policemen, taxi-drivers, prostitutes, children, and so on—become simply "the blind," undifferentiated in function and indistinguishable from one another. However, Saramago's point is not merely to show that human society is complex and fragile. Rather, by erasing the society that humans developed in order to meet their specific biological needs, Saramago demonstrates that people can never truly free themselves from these needs: no matter how sincerely we believe ourselves to be the most rational and sophisticated of all animals, we are still animals like any other.

The epidemic of "white sickness" shows how contemporary human life is designed to automate and distance people from their biological needs through technology. The novel begins with a traffic light, which embodies society's dependence on technology. When one **car** does not advance, breaking the accepted social rule, the other drivers lash out. But they soon learn that the stopped car's driver has gone blind, and the rest of the city soon follows. Blindness becomes a norm, creating something like a temporary alteration in human biology: human

society is organized around sight, without which people's social norms and identities collapse entirely. So while the traffic light is initially a universally recognizable and authoritative symbol, it later comes to represent a social order that, while highly complex and developed, was based entirely on a random quirk of human biology: the human eye. Without functioning eyes, people lack uses for the stoplight and many other technologies that previously seemed essential: abandoned cars fill the city, and the protagonists briefly camp out in a store full of electric appliances that they complain cannot "be eaten or worn." Similarly, while people initially rob banks during the outbreak, money soon becomes useless, which also shows how human society—while built to serve people's fundamental needs—actually often distracts from those needs. This does not mean human technology is completely useless. One kind of technology, in particular, is designed specifically to help modify and improve humans' biological resilience: medicine. And yet, in this book, medicine fails to achieve its goals: not only does the ophthalmologist have no idea why the first blind man has lost his sight, but the doctor himself soon becomes blind, too.

However, the frivolity of modern society does not change the fundamental importance of human biology. When public services and social norms evaporate, Saramago shows how this biology takes over and people are reduced to their animal nature. In the quarantined **hospital**, it is hard to miss the constant depictions of blood, disease, body odor, insect infestation, and especially feces: since the blind cannot reliably find their way to the lavatory or see one another if they defecate outdoors, the entire building eventually becomes covered with an "endless carpet of trampled excrement." Saramago constantly returns to the smells, textures, and sounds of a hospital full of starving blind people covered in their own filth. He does this not to shock readers, but rather to emphasize that people's bodily functions are one of the few constants in human life, which makes this biology more essential than people's identities, jobs, relationships, institutions, technology, and even vision, all of which can disappear without affecting people's fundamental nature. Similarly, in the hospital, the blind quickly become preoccupied with one thing: food. They steal, hoard, and even kill for it; everything else loses value in comparison, because food is a fundamental need that must be met before any other human need becomes worth pursuing. When the internees are fed, they often next seek out sex and companionship. (But notably, they do this outside the confines of traditional gender roles—for instance, the doctor's wife becomes a killer, breadwinner, and caregiver all at once—which suggests that such gender roles are just another kind of contingent, fragile social distinction that falls apart under crisis.) Once the blind internees leave the hospital and start living out in the city, they realize that they have been living in the same circumstances as everybody else: people have left their homes and started wandering around the city in groups, looking for food and

sleeping wherever they happen to find shelter. In other words, blindness has served as a great equalizer, and there is no longer any difference between the people inside or outside the hospital—just as all people, regardless of status or identity, are united by the same basic needs and biological functions.

In fact, when society disintegrates, the blind not only become the same as all other *people*: they also become the same as other *animals*. When interned in the hospital, the blind frequently comment that they feel like animals, and once they make it out into the city, they search the city for anything they can possibly eat alongside packs of dogs that do the exact same thing. When the doctor's wife gets lost, she is saved not by a human, but by a dog who licks up her tears and soon becomes part of her family. The narrator even calls the "dog of tears" an "animal of the human type," which makes it absolutely clear that Saramago rejects the notion that humans are inherently superior to or meant to rule over the rest of the animal kingdom. Rather, humans are a certain kind of animal that have developed a certain kind of society around our specific biological needs—but the ripple effects of blindness show that this biological nature is a product of evolutionary history, which could have been different and could even change in the future, and that society is a product of the quirks of human biology.



NARRATIVE, IDEOLOGY, AND IDENTITY

Throughout *Blindness*, Saramago's characters struggle to understand what has happened to them and their city. Faced with inexplicable and unconscionable circumstances as the population is struck with a mysterious epidemic of **blindness**, they give meaning to their lives through narratives that often end up defining their identities and commitments in ways they might not have expected. Saramago thus shows how the narratives people choose to tell themselves can empower to define their identities, but also how these very narratives can be rooted in oppressive ideology and shaped by those in power. He ultimately proposes a middle ground between these two tendencies: people should strive to express themselves and navigate their identities through personal narrative, but rather than attempting to conclusively define reality through those narratives, people must accept ambiguity and uncertainty.

Saramago emphasizes that narratives can function as survival mechanisms and help people achieve freedom from oppression. In **the hospital**, the blind internees "pass the time" by telling stories, which allows them to reclaim their humanity and individuality in an environment where they otherwise seem homogeneous. Later, when the first blind man and the man's wife visit their old apartment, they find a blind writer living there. This man goes on writing, even though he cannot read his own work, because this is how he preserves his "voice" and maintains his identity during the blindness crisis. While everybody else is desperately wandering the streets, focusing

on little besides food and seeking meaning through religion and politics, the writer maintains his decency and composure inside, using narrative as a means of survival.

However, Saramago also emphasizes that stories are always tied up with power and often serve to coerce people into accepting unacceptable circumstances. For example, in quarantine, the Government's version of events is inconsistent with the blind internees' actual experience: it announces 15 rules over the loudspeaker, but most of these are never followed (for instance, the Government obligates the blind to bury the dead but does not provide shovels). Its announcements are merely an attempt to create order and justify the Government's authority despite its complete ignorance about the epidemic. When terrified soldiers massacre a group of blind internees, the Government announces that they were fighting "a seditious movement." This cover-up shows how the government uses ideology to shape people's understanding of the world and justify its power. Paradoxically, even the internees accept such ideological narratives, told by the people who oppress them: after the hospital burns down, for instance, they do not celebrate their freedom—rather, they yearn for the soldiers to return and bring them food and order. In fact, the soldiers have long stopped guarding the hospital: the internees could have left at any time, but they remained inside because they took the government's threats to heart. While the hospital is like a "rational labyrinth" because it is familiar, the patients are terrified of being free in the city, which they see as a "demented labyrinth" of uncertainty. Similarly, after the doctor's wife kills the leader of the thugs who were starving the internees, some of the other internees rebel against her for disrupting the social order.

Having shown how stories both liberate and oppress people, Saramago offers examples of how storytelling can turn into a clash over power and identity. For instance, when the blind internees discuss the last things they remember seeing, one man recalls seeing a painting in a museum. Every time he describes a new aspect of the impossibly complicated artwork, someone shouts out the name of a country where they think the painter must have lived. This person is attempting to hijack the other's story by turning it into a clean narrative populated by familiar characters playing familiar roles. Meanwhile, the man who saw the painting keeps making up new features so as to maintain control of his narrative, even if the painting starts sounding absurd and impossible. He does not want to perfectly capture the painting in his audience's eye: he is speaking for himself, not for the others.

For Saramago, such openness to ambiguity and interpretation is what allows a story to liberate someone without oppressing someone else. The blind writer also insists on such a story: he declares that "a writer is just like anyone else, he cannot know everything, nor can he experience everything." This is a fitting

description of Saramago's own narrator, too: this narrator constantly tries out different viewpoints, showing how characters have different perspectives on the same events. For example, after describing the soldiers "howling in terror" while massacring blind internees, the narrator declares that these soldiers "reacted admirably in the face of danger," which is a way of pointing out that they actually acted cowardly and of commenting on the way they might justify their actions to themselves. In this way, Saramago consistently uses irony in order to explore differences in perspective, which undermines the authority of his narrator and opens space for his readers to interpret the book for themselves. For instance, the other internees repeatedly say things like, "if only one of you women could see," which highlights the dramatic irony at the heart of the narrative: the doctor's wife still has her sight. Saramago wants his readers to look beyond the narrator, who is neither omnipotent nor confined to a single character's perspective. When the old man with the eyepatch arrives in the hospital, he tells the others everything he knows about the world outside, but the narrator gives "a reorganized version" of the man's account, which apparently does not have the "rigour and suitability" the reader deserves. In this passage, Saramago mocks official communications' tendency to insist on giving an objective and complete account of events, when in reality no such account is possible. But he is also mocking the apparent authority of his own narrator, whom he emphasizes only provides a single and incomplete picture of events. Ultimately, in the alternative model of narrative that Saramago both defends and exemplifies, people accept the limits of their knowledge and the ambiguity of their understanding so that they can narrate their experiences without having to completely define themselves.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



BLINDNESS AND SIGHT

The epidemic of literal blindness that afflicts the characters in the novel symbolizes humans' metaphorical blindness to what is important in life. Saramago examines what this physical "white blindness" (in which people only see white light) does to his protagonists *spiritually*: for instance, after regaining his sight, the doctor thinks that perhaps the world is already populated by "blind people who can see, but do not see." While the protagonists literally go from sight to blindness, spiritually and existentially they go from blindness to sight, as the familiar but meaningless world of discernible objects and other people gives way to a new world that "swallow[s] up rather than absorb[s], not just the colours

[of things], but the very things and beings” themselves. In other words, amid their state of blindness, characters are better able to perceive the underlying essence and interconnectivity of different “things and beings” rather than being caught up in what sets these people and objects apart from one another.

Additionally, many of the protagonists see the blindness as a symptom of their own sense of moral responsibility: for instance the car-thief believes that going blind is his being punished for stealing the first blind man’s **car**, and the girl with the glasses—who is a prostitute by trade—wonders if her blindness constitutes a punishment “for her immorality.” In this way, the blindness epidemic is not just a plot device or a metaphor for the unforeseeable catastrophes that can strike humankind at anytime: it also represents contemporary society’s decadence—or its blindness to what is truly important for human beings—as well as people’s disorientation in a universe that neither provides them with clear answers the purpose of existence nor appears to consistently reward the morally good and punish the evil.



THE MENTAL HOSPITAL

Saramago uses the setting of the mental hospital to show how circumstances shape people, even to the point of defining their identities. When an epidemic of “white **blindness**” strikes, the Government in the story immediately sets up a quarantine in an abandoned mental hospital. The novel frequently compares the blind to the insane, who used to be house in the asylum—when the building eventually burns down, Saramago’s narrator exclaims that “the madmen escape.” Indeed, blindness becomes “madness” not because the blind are somehow mentally defective—rather, the violent, filthy, inhumane conditions of the asylum drive otherwise mentally sound people mad and strip them of their individuality.

The mental hospital also represents the illusion of safety that governments provide during times of crisis. Though the hospital is ostensibly delegated as a safe shelter for the blind internees, when they’re thrown inside and left to their own devices, the hospital becomes both a kind of prison and a kind of laboratory for the formation of a new society—the blind are left without resources and forced to organize themselves in order to guarantee their survival. In this way, the mental hospital symbolizes the incompetence and ineffectively of government aid during crises.



CARS

During the epidemic of contagious “white **blindness**” in the novel, cars represent how perceived necessities in human society are actually unnecessary and wasteful—and how such technologies are particularly irrelevant in times of crisis. Fittingly enough, the

first blind man is sitting in his car at a stoplight when he loses his sight. The man who brings him home goes on to steal the blind man’s his car—but the thief soon goes blind himself and ends up in the same quarantined **hospital**. The two men bicker about the theft but quickly realize that they now have greater problems to tackle: they are blind and could not drive a car if they wanted to. Indeed, as everyone in the city goes blind, they give up on their cars, abandoning them in the streets. Rather than useful modes of transport, cars become obstacles to navigate around or to use for shelter.

Just as the traffic light loses its function and meaning when the protagonists return to it, cars become relics of the past: specifically, they illustrate how society used to be dependent upon sight and how consumption used to be organized around a specialized division of labor. Cars become useless when people can no longer see where they are going or follow the traffic lights that ensure that their travel harmonizes with everyone else’s. And their function of transporting people and goods to enable complex economic exchange becomes irrelevant during the blindness epidemic, when people simply want the closest source of food. Cars are important and meaningful when society is organized around them, but when white blindness strikes, the car-thief’s robbery looks just as foolish as that of the thugs who take everyone else’s money even though there is nothing left to buy with it. For Saramago, although the world of white blindness is tragic, a society organized around the complex economic tasks that cars and similar technologies make possible is frivolous and wasteful: these technologies distance people from their fundamental nature and needs rather than enabling their fulfillment.



GUNS

Amid the **blindness** epidemic in the novel, guns symbolize the idea that a person or governing body’s capacity for violence determines how much power they hold. In the quarantined **hospital**, the blind internees quickly learn that none of the rules that used to govern society apply anymore: there are no rights nor authorities to appeal to, and food, plumbing, and medicine are no longer guaranteed. From the moment the hospital’s doors are sealed, force becomes the only law: soldiers rule over the blind because they are armed and unafraid to kill, and later, the thugs take power because they have a gun. The thug leader’s gun not only *symbolizes* his power: it also *is* his power, because it is what allows him to force everyone else into compliance (either as a member of his team or a target to exploit). Whenever he shoots, people flee in terror, unable to see where the bullet is headed. After the doctor’s wife kills the thug leader, the blind accountant takes the gun in order to take power, although his hold on it is insecure.

Saramago’s message is clear: all of society is ultimately based

on this capacity for violence, which governments usually reserve for themselves and promise to only use according to the laws they set out. But such promises are unenforceable: governments can wield their power however they like, just as in this novel the Government approves of the Ministry of Health rounding up the blind and the soldiers massacring them. Although people get used to the false sense of security that living in a democratic society gives them, crises like the white blindness epidemic are a stark reminder that all power is based on the capacity to cause physical harm or enlist others to cause that harm on one's behalf, and that all governments are always capable of committing the kind of authoritarian atrocities that people generally see as confined to history.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Harcourt edition of *Blindness* published in 1995.

Chapter 1 Quotes

☞ The amber light came on. Two of the cars ahead accelerated before the red light appeared. At the pedestrian crossing the sign of a green man lit up. The people who were waiting began to cross the road, stepping on the white stripes painted on the black surface of the asphalt, there is nothing less like a zebra, however, that is what it is called. The motorists kept an impatient foot on the clutch, leaving their cars at the ready, advancing, retreating like nervous horses that can sense the whiplash about to be inflicted. The pedestrians have just finished crossing but the sign allowing the cars to go will be delayed for some seconds, some people maintain that this delay, while apparently so insignificant, has only to be multiplied by the thousands of traffic lights that exist in the city and by the successive changes of their three colours to produce one of the most serious causes of traffic jams or bottlenecks, to use the more current term.

Related Characters: The narrator (speaker), The first blind man

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 1

Explanation and Analysis

In the novel's opening scene, just before the mysterious white blindness claims its first victim, Saramago describes an ordinary intersection in a way that mocks the complexity

and futility of modern human technology and the social norms that rise around it. The drivers treat an ordinary stoplight as a race to be won, and people ascribe undue importance to the rules of the road. By caring so much about an arbitrary human invention like the stoplight, Saramago shows how absurd and animalistic people can be: blinded by technology and modern socialization, they live their lives intensely focused on things that they neither need nor enjoy (like cars and traffic). Meanwhile, their sense of possibility is so restricted that events that fall outside the narrow range of normal life—like the epidemic of sudden blindness that is about to take over the book's narrative—seem impossible and unfathomable to them.

Saramago uses this fleeting, everyday image of the cars at the intersection in order to point out the inevitable tension between the individual and the collective in modern societies. The drivers who accelerate through the yellow light represent humans' tendency to be selfish, but Saramago also asks whether the very attempt to accommodate everybody and ensure safety—the delay between the pedestrian crossing turning red and the stoplight turning green—might ultimately cause the miserable traffic that makes everybody want to avoid driving in the first place. In other words, perhaps individuals cannot be trusted to put the collective first, or perhaps the attempt to accommodate the collective ruins things for each individual. What narrative each reader (and each driver) chooses to believe is up to them—the narrator presents both as equally plausible.

☞ The blind man raised his hands to his eyes and gestured, Nothing, it's as if I were caught in a mist or had fallen into a milky sea. But blindness isn't like that, said the other fellow, they say that blindness is black, Well I see everything white.

Related Characters: The first blind man (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 3

Explanation and Analysis

Soon after he yells out that he has gone blind, the first blind man reveals that—unlike most blind people—he sees whiteness, not blackness. This is one of the novel's core, unresolved mysteries: why does *white* blindness strike the city as opposed to regular blindness? Besides distinguishing

the novel's events as extraordinary and its form of blindness as unprecedented, the whiteness has many different symbolic interpretations. However, Saramago leaves the meaning of white blindness intentionally ambiguous, rather than declaring it outright, in order to encourage his readers to ask questions and pursue new lines of thinking.

One way of interpreting white blindness is that it blurs the difference between seeing and not seeing: if someone sees all white, it is as though they are seeing too *much* light, not too little. Just as a camera exposed to too much light will produce an all-white photo, then, perhaps the novel's characters are simply becoming too sensitive to light, and their problem is that they see *too much*, not too little. Vision symbolically stands for spiritual or existential insight throughout the novel, so the white blindness may actually imply that the characters are spiritually blind *before* they're physically blind—and that they attain greater spiritual awareness *through* the white blindness.

☞ Let's wait and see, let's wait and see, you mustn't despair.

Related Characters: The doctor / ophthalmologist (speaker), The first blind man

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 15

Explanation and Analysis

When the first blind man visits the doctor, his symptoms prove mysterious and inexplicable: there is nothing wrong with his eyes and there is no record of a case like his in the history of ophthalmology. The man's condition, the doctor admits, is completely unknown and unknowable: it exceeds humankind's capacity for understanding, at least in the circumstances, and medicine is simply incapable of dealing with it.

This passage poses the question of how should people confront situations of absolute uncertainty and powerlessness—is it rational to hope when one understands nothing, and is it right to despair when one does not know what truly afflicts them? Throughout this novel, the characters face this kind of uncertainty on various levels—they do not know what conditions they will face in quarantine, who will rule over them, and how. After leaving quarantine, they do not know if they will find food and shelter. Most of all, they never know whether their blindness is temporary or permanent (at least not until the novel's closing pages). Their absolute lack of knowledge

means that the extremes of hope and despair are both unjustifiable—rather, as the doctor puts it here, the only course of action is to “wait and see.”

But what form can a human life take—what meaning can be given to people's triumphs and sufferings—while they are stuck in a state of “wait[ing] and see[ing],” in which all victories and losses appear temporary and can be erased in an instant? Saramago implies that people's only option is to grasp for meaning in the moment, even if fleeting and uncertain. In fact, he suggests that humans always confront this condition, since we can never fully control or predict the future. We manage to act nonetheless, even if our knowledge is imperfect and the results of our actions remain uncertain.

Chapter 2 Quotes

☞ The moral conscience that so many thoughtless people have offended against and many more have rejected, is something that exists and has always existed, it was not an invention of the philosophers of the Quaternary when the soul was little more than a muddled proposition. With the passing of time, as well as the social evolution and genetic exchange, we ended up putting our conscience in the colour of blood and in the salt of tears, and, as if that were not enough, we made our eyes into a kind of mirror turned inwards, with the result that they often show without reserve what we are verbally trying to deny. Add to this general observation, the particular circumstance that in simple spirits, the remorse caused by committing some evil act often becomes confused with ancestral fears of every kind, and the result will be that the punishment of the prevaricator ends up being, without mercy or pity, twice what he deserved.

Related Characters: The narrator (speaker), The first blind man, The car-thief

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 17

Explanation and Analysis

After the car-thief makes off with the first blind man's car, he suddenly grows tense and starts to mull over his actions: he started out with good intentions, but in the circumstances, his compulsion toward evil got the better of him. Although he is a criminal, this does not mean that he lacks “moral conscience”—indeed, the narrator affirms,

everyone has a “moral conscience,” even if they often violate it through “thoughtless[ness]” and the outright “reject[ion]” of what they know to be right. In fact, this “moral conscience” is what binds self-interested individuals into a collective: even if their instinct is to act selfishly, people know on some fundamental level that others are equal and that morality demands that everyone follow the same principles. Throughout the novel, what determines whether people act selflessly or selfishly is how well this moral conscience is cultivated and expressed through social relationships and organizations.

In the thief’s case, as he starts letting his guilt get the better of him, moral conscience achieves a kind of justice that not even the law can. If eyes are “a kind of mirror turned inwards,” then people’s blindness also symbolizes their loss of self-awareness in this sense—which helps explain why many of Saramago’s characters start acting like animals in quarantine. Even if the novel’s characters are unaware that they’re confronting the difficult task of uncovering and cultivating their moral consciences as a collective, it is no coincidence that their sight returns when they are able to do this. (Just like it is no coincidence that the car-thief loses his sight just when he realizes what he has done.)

Chapter 4 Quotes

☛☛ When she rejoined her husband, she asked him, Can you imagine where they’ve brought us, No, she was about to add, To a mental asylum, but he anticipated her, You’re not blind, I cannot allow you to stay here, Yes, you’re right, I’m not blind, Then I’m going to ask them to take you home, to tell them that you told a lie in order to remain with me, There’s no point, they cannot hear you through there, and even if they could, they would pay no attention, But you can see, For the moment, I shall almost certainly turn blind myself one of these days, or any minute now, Please, go home, Don’t insist, besides, I’ll bet the soldiers would not let me get as far as the stairs, I cannot force you, No, my love, you can’t, I’m staying to help you and the others who may come here, but don’t tell them I can see, What others, You surely don’t think we shall be here on our own, This is madness, What did you expect, we’re in a mental asylum.

Related Characters: The doctor / ophthalmologist, The doctor’s wife (speaker), The Government, The soldiers

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 40

Explanation and Analysis

When the doctor and his wife first arrive at the abandoned mental hospital where they will be quarantined for the indefinite future, the doctor confronts his wife about her decision to join him: he has gone blind, but she has not, and he cannot stand the prospect of her being unnecessarily locked up with him in the uncertain and potentially dangerous quarantine zone. In a sense, the doctor and his wife go out of their way to accommodate each other, and their love gets in the way of their self-preservation: each puts the other’s interests above their own. In fact, the doctor’s wife knows that she is indistinguishable from the blind and that, even if she proves to the guards that she can see, she will simply be locked up in the hospital’s other wing with the “contaminated” patients who are waiting their turn to join the blind.

What the doctor’s wife does not fully understand, however, is the moral gravity of her decision to enter the hospital while still seeing: she does not yet know that she will have to take responsibility for protecting and leading the other internees, nor that she will suffer gravely at the hands of the soldiers and the armed thugs who later take control of the hospital wards. Her decision looks like a kind of “madness”—but she points out that everything seems to have gone “mad” in the world. The doctor who alerted the Government to the epidemic is now being nonchalantly corralled into the quarantine zone, and the sick are being treated like criminals and madmen. In fact, the notion that living “in a mental asylum” *makes* people mad is a curious inversion of the usual presupposition that people go to an asylum *because* they are mad, and this reveals both the sense in which Saramago’s blindness is really a psychological or spiritual condition and the way that environment determines the roles that characters play throughout the novel.

●● The word Attention was uttered three times, then the voice began, the Government regrets having been forced to exercise with all urgency what it considers to be its rightful duty, to protect the population by all possible means in this present crisis, when something with all the appearance of an epidemic of blindness has broken out, provisionally known as the white sickness, and we are relying on the public spirit and cooperation of all citizens to stem any further contagion, assuming that we are dealing with a contagious disease and that we are not simply witnessing a series of as yet inexplicable coincidences. The decision to gather together in one place all those infected, and, in adjacent but separate quarters all those who have had any kind of contact with them, was not taken without careful consideration. The Government is fully aware of its responsibilities and hopes that those to whom this message is directed will, as the upright citizens they doubtless are, also assume their responsibilities, bearing in mind that the isolation in which they now find themselves will represent, above any personal considerations, an act of solidarity with the rest of the nation's community.

Related Characters: The Government (speaker), The soldiers

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 42-3

Explanation and Analysis

The first group of blind patients has crowded into the abandoned mental hospital that serves as a quarantine zone, and the Government officially welcomes them with this foreboding but reasonable announcement explaining the motivations behind the quarantine. Although the faceless Government admits that it does not fully understand the “white sickness,” it emphasizes its commitment to the nation and thanks the quarantined patients for fulfilling their civic duty by agreeing to be locked away.

Despite its apparent evenhandedness and competence, however, the Government also reveals that it is taking a complete shot in the dark: it has no idea how or why the white blindness spreads, and it certainly does not know that the disease will soon spread so widely and rapidly that it leaves the nation in pieces that the Government cannot pick up. In fact, the Government’s rhetorical strategies in this passage exemplify the way it carefully uses its authority to cover up its incompetence and indifference to the protagonists’ wellbeing throughout the novel. In other

words, while the Government demands that its “upright citizens” put the national interest first, it never repays them for their sacrifice or seems to care about the national interest at all: it governs out of self-interest and appeals to the collective only as an excuse to amass and retain power.

●● But this blindness is so abnormal, so alien to scientific knowledge that it cannot last forever. And suppose we were to stay like this for the rest of our lives, Us, Everyone, That would be horrible, a world full of blind people, It doesn't bear thinking about.

Related Characters: The girl with the dark glasses, The doctor’s wife (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 53

Explanation and Analysis

After they finally get their bearings in the quarantine zone, the protagonists travel together to the hospital’s bathroom, which the men use while the doctor’s wife and the girl with the dark glasses wait outside and reflect on their situation. They pose the most burning, fundamental, and yet unanswerable question that the protagonists face constantly throughout the novel: will the white blindness go away, or will it “last forever”? The doctor’s wife—who is only pretending to be blind—believes that it must end, as “a world full of blind people” is too “horrible” to consider, but the girl with the glasses is not so optimistic.

Their speculation and disagreement reflects the fundamental role that hope, uncertainty, and despair play in structuring human beings’ lives: even though nobody knows what will happen in the future or can justify their optimistic or pessimistic intuitions, everybody has to make some assessment of the world and their place in it in order to take any meaningful action whatsoever. The novel’s protagonists constantly struggle to find the necessary hope to motivate themselves to keep fighting for survival, and even Saramago’s narrator swings from extreme optimism to deep pessimism. Ultimately, although they never learn why, the “world full of blind people” that the doctor’s wife fears comes true, but it also turns out that the blindness “cannot last forever.”

Chapter 5 Quotes

☞☞ We're so remote from the world that any day now, we shall no longer know who we are, or even remember our names, and besides, what use would names be to us, no dog recognises another dog or knows the others by the names they have been given, a dog is identified by its scent and that is how it identifies others, here we are like another breed of dogs, we know each other's bark or speech, as for the rest, features, colour of eyes or hair, they are of no importance, it is as if they did not exist.

Related Characters: The doctor's wife (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 57

Explanation and Analysis

Late at night, the doctor's wife contemplates the fortunes and fates of the blind internees that surround her. Without their sight, she notes, not only does their way of perceiving the world through their senses change, but their capacity to relate to one another and even their personal identities do, too. As though reduced to the status of animals, people can no longer identify one another on sight and instead have to remember others' voices (or, she jokes, smells) in order to tell them apart.

This has the interesting consequence of making people essentially invisible to one another if and when they choose not to speak—at times, they need not even announce their presence at all. Beyond drawing a clear connection between human beings and the animals we like to consider inferior and less evolved, this comparison also shows how the social complexity of human life ultimately depends on the simple building blocks of biology. Without eyes, people cannot form the same kind of social relationships, and many of the structures and signals that they set up stop functioning and become unintelligible.

Chapter 6 Quotes

☞☞ It was my fault, she sobbed, and it was true, no one could deny it, but it is also true, if this brings her any consolation, that if, before every action, we were to begin by weighing up the consequences, thinking about them in earnest, first the immediate consequences, then the probable, then the possible, then the imaginable ones, we should never move beyond the point where our first thought brought us to a halt. The good and the evil resulting from our words and deeds go on apportioning themselves, one assumes in a reasonably uniform and balanced way, throughout all the days to follow, including those endless days, when we shall not be here to find out, to congratulate ourselves or ask for pardon, indeed there are those who claim that this is the much-talked-of immortality, Possibly, but this man is dead and must be buried.

Related Characters: The girl with the dark glasses, The narrator (speaker), The soldiers, The car-thief

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 78

Explanation and Analysis

The car-thief dies under complicated circumstances: he gropes the girl with the glasses, who kicks him out of disgust, leaving a nasty wound in his leg that soon gets infected. Unable to get the medicine he needs, the car-thief crawls out in desperation to plead the soldiers for help, but instead of giving him medicine, they shoot him dead. After he dies, the girl with the glasses blames herself entirely and grows distraught. But the narrator points out that people can never fully trace the consequences of their actions, since everything in the world is tied up in the same web of causes and effects: one person's actions influence another's, and one person's action can have different effects (some positive, others negative) at different, even indeterminate points in the future.

In short, while people certainly *are* responsible for their actions and ought to act morally, the narrator suggests that they cannot fully be held to account for *all* the consequences of *all* their actions, especially when unintended or indirect. This degree of moral complexity may be difficult to swallow—it is much easier to see people and their actions as entirely good or entirely evil. It is nevertheless central to this novel's view of both the uncertainty and indeterminacy of the future (which forces people to take actions and make choices without fully understanding the consequences) and the inseparability of morality and human social life (because people's actions are only good or evil in the context of the actions and

experiences of others).

Chapter 7 Quotes

☛ The soldiers would have liked to aim their weapons and, without compunction, shoot down those imbeciles moving before their eyes like lame crabs, waving their unsteady pincers in search of their missing leg. They knew what had been said in the barracks that morning by the regimental commander, that the problem of these blind internees could be resolved only by physically wiping out the lot of them, those already there and those still to come, without any phoney humanitarian considerations, his very words, just as one amputates a gangrenous limb in order to save the rest of the body. The rabies of a dead dog, he said, to illustrate the point, is cured by nature. For some of the soldiers, less sensitive to the beauties of figurative language, it was difficult to understand what a dog with rabies had to do with the blind, but the word of a regimental commander, once again figuratively speaking, is worth its weight in gold, no man rises to so high a rank in the army without being right in everything he thinks, says and does.

Related Characters: The narrator (speaker), The soldiers

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols:   

Page Number: 101

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the narrator briefly tries shifts to the perspective of the soldiers guarding the hospital, and it becomes clear that they are preparing themselves to commit what can only be described as crimes against humanity. Having decided to see the blind as subhuman animals (“like lame crabs” or “a dog with rabies”) whose very existence threatens to hinder the progress of humanity, the soldiers have determined that they have the legitimate authority to exterminate them, whether for sport or out of necessity. While ridiculing the soldiers’ excessively narrowminded and hierarchical way of thinking, the narrator points out how this perspective cultivates dehumanization and violence.

In its obsession with “rank” and “being right,” this mindset creates a hierarchy of human life with the powerful (those capable of commanding obedience and exerting physical power) at the top and the powerless (like the blind, who have lost the conventional use of their senses) at the bottom. Since those at the top are deemed more valuable,

these people justify and defend violence against those at the bottom, up to and including mass murder. This logic—the same logic that rules in authoritarian societies, cults, and prisons—is profoundly dangerous and disturbing: it represents the height of human evil, which is the willful negation and extermination of human life.

Chapter 8 Quotes

☛ From this point onwards, apart from a few inevitable comments, the story of the old man with the black eyepatch will no longer be followed to the letter, being replaced by a reorganised version of his discourse, re-evaluated in the light of a correct and more appropriate vocabulary. The reason for this previously unforeseen change is the rather formal controlled language, used by the narrator, which almost disqualifies him as a complementary reporter, however important he may be, because without him we would have no way of knowing what happened in the outside world, as a complementary reporter, as we were saying, of these extraordinary events, when as we know the description of any facts can only gain with the rigour and suitability of the terms used.

Related Characters: The narrator (speaker), The Government, The doctor / ophthalmologist, The old man with the black eyepatch

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 120

Explanation and Analysis

The old man with the black eyepatch is the last of the doctor’s former patients to arrive in quarantine, so he brings the others news of the world outside. Shortly after he begins recounting the breakdown of society and the Government’s desperate (but unsuccessful) attempts to maintain control over the population, the narrator butts in and declares that they will be offering “a reorganised version” of the man with the eyepatch’s story.

The narrator’s insistence on editing the old man’s account exemplifies Saramago’s ironic and self-undermining attitude toward narration and perspective. The narrator criticizes the same “formal controlled language” that their “more appropriate vocabulary” ends up requiring. The narrator also points out that the old man’s story is subjective and imperfect, but then they loses their own train of thought, which reveals their own subjectivity. Further, they call for objective fact while acknowledging that “without [the old man] we would have no way of knowing what happened in the outside world.”

In short, by mocking the attempt to provide a single, objective, universal narrative of events, Saramago reminds the reader that all perspectives—including his own narrator’s—are partial and biased. The very aspiration of objectivity is really a way of seeking power by faking authority through “formal controlled language,” just like how the Government uses such language to pretend that it has the epidemic under control. Saramago expects his readers to see right through this trick and understand that anyone who claims to be speaking objectively is acting fraudulently, while honest storytelling requires acknowledging the ambiguity of experience and limits of one’s perspective.

Chapter 11 Quotes

☛ Arriving at this point, the blind accountant, tired of describing so much misery and sorrow, would let his metal punch fall to the table, he would search with a trembling hand for the piece of stale bread he had put to one side while he fulfilled his obligations as chronicler of the end of time, but he would not find it, because another blind man, whose sense of smell had become very keen out of dire necessity, had filched it. Then, renouncing his fraternal gesture, the altruistic impulse that had brought him rushing to this side, the blind accountant would decide that the best course of action, if he was still in time, was to return to the third ward on the left, there, at least, however much the injustices of those hoodlums stirred up in him feelings of honest indignation, he would not go hungry.

Related Characters: The narrator (speaker), The doctor / ophthalmologist, The blind accountant

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 162

Explanation and Analysis

After the group of “hoodlums” takes control over the ward and the protagonists realize that one of them—whom the narrator takes to calling “the blind accountant” because he takes down notes in braille—is not blind in the same way the rest of them are. This man has seemingly lived much of his life blind, as nobody has had time to learn braille since the outbreak of white blindness. Although the accountant later proves just as vicious and cruel as the rest of the hoodlums, the narrator poses a rhetorical question: what would happen if the blind accountant went over to the other side of the hospital, whether out of curiosity or because of a moral disgust for his hoodlum buddies? What if he started

writing down the experiences of the doctor, his patients, and the people surrounding them?

The narrator rather pessimistically concludes that the “misery and sorrow” of the novel’s protagonists would be too much for the blind accountant to handle, even if he were a benevolent person who cared about morality. The stories would exhaust his capacity for empathy and he, like so many of the other internees in the hospital, would eventually have to give up on his principles and resort to simply doing whatever proves necessary for his survival. Pain and starvation, the narrator argues, cultivate cruelty and force people to put their social and moral instincts aside—although some people, like the doctor’s wife, do find the emotional strength to sustain these feelings. Might makes right in the hospital because, as everyone is starving, nobody feels that they can afford to care about anyone else. Just as the blind accountant would give up and offer his services to the thugs if his role were switched, the narrator suggests that any of the internees would sell out on their principles in exchange for a hot meal or a guarantee of protection.

Chapter 12 Quotes

☛ She had blood on her hands and clothes, and suddenly her exhausted body told her that she was old, Old and a murderess, she thought, but she knew that if it were necessary she would kill again, And when is it necessary to kill, she asked herself as she headed in the direction of the hallway, and she herself answered the question, When what is still alive is already dead. She shook her head and thought, And what does that mean, words, nothing but words.

Related Characters: The narrator (speaker), The leader of the thugs, The doctor’s wife

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 192-3

Explanation and Analysis

After a group of blind thugs that takes over the quarantine hospital and starts restricting its food supply, they decide to begin raping all the women inside, and the doctor’s wife finally reaches a breaking point. She and the other women in her ward suffer a night of brutal physical and sexual torture at the thugs’ hands, and the doctor’s wife realizes that she must finally accept the great power and moral responsibility

that come with her mysterious, miraculous eyesight.

A few days later, the doctor's wife stabs the thugs' leader in the neck with a pair of scissors, and after she leaves the thugs' ward, she breaks down and tries to make sense of what she has done. Needless to say, she is not prone to violence, nor did she ever think herself capable of committing it. Loving, fair, and principled, the doctor's wife struggles to accept the fact that she has killed a man—and, more than anything, that she has done so because it was morally necessary for her to do so in order to stop greater, ongoing violence. She has singlehandedly freed the internees from the tyranny of the thugs' reign, but she has also forever compromised herself and her conscience: she has become unrecognizable to herself, yet knows she must stand behind her decision, so she searches for the words that she needs to make sense of what she has become.

☝ All I know is that we would never have found ourselves in this situation if their leader hadn't been killed, what did it matter if the women had to go there twice a month to give these men what nature gave them to give, I ask myself. Some found this amusing, some forced a smile, those inclined to protest were deterred by an empty stomach, and the same man insisted, What I'd like to know is who did the stabbing, The women who were there at the time swear it was none of them, What we ought to do is to take the law into our own hands and bring the culprit to justice, If we knew who was responsible, we'd say this is the person you're looking for, now give us the food, If we knew who was responsible.

Related Characters: The soldiers, The old man with the black eyepatch, The leader of the thugs, The doctor's wife

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 195

Explanation and Analysis

After the doctor's wife kills the thugs' leader and prevents the thugs from continuing to monopolize the hospital's food rations, the internees are surprised to discover that food is not coming to them anymore: the soldiers have stopped bringing it, and nobody understands why. In this quote, seemingly with a touch of Stockholm syndrome, one of the internees insists that the enemy is not the thugs, but whomever killed their leader. Fortunately, the doctor's wife has not revealed her identity yet, but she soon begins to

struggle with the implications of what she thought was a morally necessary act. Is she responsible for the group's misfortune if she indirectly contributed to their starvation—even if they would be starving anyway, under the thugs' watch? Fortunately, the man with the eyepatch soon reminds the doctor's wife that she has saved the group as a horrendous fate and should view herself as a hero.

However, the anonymous man's defense of the rapist thugs presents a stark example of how powerless people assent to power. He is unwilling or unable to recognize the women's traumatic experience, which the doctor's wife considered worse than having to kill a man. Indeed, his failure to empathize accounts for his complete blindness to morality: he does not care about what is right, but only what will get him food as soon as possible. Indeed, this is an example of how people more generally come to embrace and support the forces that oppress them: the man seems to forget that the thieves were stealing *his* food and threatening *him*.

However, since the thugs present the man with the path of least resistance to food, he chooses to support them and defend their horrendous tactics. Choosing the comfort of a certain oppression over the uncertainty of freedom, this man exemplifies the moral degradation that violence and desperation can create, and he shows how people need to pay collective attention to moral conscience in order to live in a way that respects and upholds their humanity.

Chapter 13 Quotes

☝ Say to a blind man, you're free, open the door that was separating him from the world, Go, you are free, we tell him once more, and he does not go, he has remained motionless there in the middle of the road, he and the others, they are terrified, they do not know where to go, the fact is that there is no comparison between living in a rational labyrinth, which is, by definition, a mental asylum and venturing forth, without a guiding hand or a dog-leash, into the demented labyrinth of the city where memory will serve no purpose, for it will merely be able to recall the images of places but not the paths whereby we might get there. Standing in front of the building which is already ablaze from end to end, the blind inmates can feel the living waves of heat from the fire on their faces, they receive them as something which in a way protects them, just as the walls did before, prison and refuge at once. They stay together, pressed up against each other, like a flock, no one there wants to be the lost sheep, for they know that no shepherd will come looking for them.

Related Characters: The narrator (speaker), The doctor's

wife, The soldiers

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 217

Explanation and Analysis

The abandoned mental hospital in which the protagonists have been quarantined for most of the book burns down when a nameless woman impulsively sets fire to the armed thugs' ward. The blind rush away from the heat and out of the hospital, and those who are lucky make it to the front courtyard, where the doctor's wife sees that—to everyone's astonishment—the soldiers who are supposed to be guarding the gate are nowhere to be found. In other words, the internees have been free but did not realize it and stayed inside due to their own misunderstandings and misplaced expectations. In this way, they were prisoners of their own imagination, and now they are unsure of what to do with their own freedom.

Clearly, there are practical difficulties to living in a city while blind, particularly when social services have collapsed and food is nowhere to be found. But what the internees really fear is the unknown: although they were trapped inside the hospital, at least they knew where everything was: its "labyrinth" was organized by "rational" principles of straight hallways and identical beds, whereas the city is endless and open, full of winding roads and lacking in discernable landmarks. So just like the man who praised the thieves who gave him meager rations of food, the internees now yearn for the soldiers who (themselves having gone blind) are not coming back. They crave certainty, perhaps because their lives are already so full of uncertainty and perhaps simply because they are starving and exhausted. Of course, ironically enough, it is precisely when they no longer care about escaping that they get their freedom and are forced to make something out of it.

☛ She now closed [the door] carefully behind her only to find herself plunged into total darkness, as sightless as those blind people out there, the only difference was in the colour, if black and white can, strictly speaking, be thought of as colours. [...] I'm going mad, she thought, and with good reason, making this descent into a dark pit, without light or any hope of seeing any, how far would it be, these underground stores are usually never very deep, first flight of steps, Now I know what it means to be blind, second flight of steps, I'm going to scream, I'm going to scream, third set of steps, the darkness is like a thick paste that sticks to her face, her eyes transformed into balls of pitch.

Related Characters: The doctor's wife, The narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 229

Explanation and Analysis

After the doctor's wife leads her newly-formed group of blind people into the city and finds a shop for them to wait inside, she goes out alone in search of food and manages to find a supermarket with a hidden basement storeroom, which the city's blind scavengers have not yet been able to access. Delighted at her discovery, she starts making her way downstairs, but she's horrified "to find herself plunged into total darkness," completely unable to navigate—just like all of the blind people in the hospital were for weeks.

All alone, in an unexpected place at a crucial moment, the doctor's wife is suddenly forced to empathize with all the people she has been caring for: she has no choice but to experience their altered way of navigating physical space, identifying objects, and imagining what is right in front of them. This is terrifying and disorienting for her, and it helps her understand the vast difference between her perception of events—both literal and moral—and the limited version of them available to her blind compatriots, whose desperation and lack of moral concern she begins to understand.

Chapter 14 Quotes

☛ What's the world like these days, the old man with the black eyepatch had asked, and the doctor's wife replied, There's no difference between inside and outside, between here and there, between the many and the few, between what we're living through and what we shall have to live through, And the people, how are they coping, asked the girl with dark glasses, They go around like ghosts, this must be what it means to be a ghost, being certain that life exists, because your four senses say so, and yet unable to see it, Are there lots of cars out there, asked the first blind man, who was unable to forget that his had been stolen, It s like a cemetery. Neither the doctor nor the wife of the first blind man asked any questions, what was the point, when the replies were such as these.

Related Characters: The first blind man, The girl with the dark glasses, The doctor's wife, The old man with the black eyepatch (speaker), The little boy with the squint, The first blind man's wife, The doctor / ophthalmologist

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 242

Explanation and Analysis

The protagonists have managed to eat and spend the night in an abandoned shop, and now, as they plan to start returning to their abandoned houses, the others ask the doctor's wife about what has become of society. The doctor's wife reveals that the city is just like the hospital: people live like "ghosts," blind and desperate, a shadow of their former selves pursuing a hollowed-out version of human life. Everyone is experiencing the confusion and hunger that the protagonists thought was their particular punishment in the hospital. And ironically, in contrast to the rest, the protagonists are now well-off, with a seeing guide to lead them around and bring them food. They can see their former selves in the scavengers wandering the city, which both shows them how far they have come and how inadequate society has proven in a world of blind people. With most of the things people rely on in their day-to-day lives (cars, electronics, and supermarkets) now completely useless, society has broken down because of a simple change in human biology—the loss of the sight around which human society is designed—and stopped functioning as a collective.

☞ Today is today, tomorrow will bring what tomorrow brings, today is my responsibility, not tomorrow if I should turn blind, What do you mean by responsibility, The responsibility of having my eyesight when others have lost theirs, You cannot hope to guide or provide food for all the blind people in this world, I ought to, But you cannot, I shall do whatever I can to help, Of course you will, had it nor been for you I might not be alive today, And I don't want you to die now.

Related Characters: The girl with the dark glasses, The doctor's wife (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 252

Explanation and Analysis

Having arrived at the girl with the glasses's old apartment and realized that her parents are nowhere to be found and unlikely to return, the protagonists debate what to do next: the girl wants to stay and wait for her parents to return, but the doctor's wife worries that this would be dangerous and futile. The doctor's wife explains to the girl why, because of her sight, she feels a sense of moral responsibility for everybody in her group and has no choice but to care for them. This began in the hospital, where the doctor's wife continually felt the need to help the blind but struggled with figuring out how until she realized that the community's most acute need was for the thugs to lose control.

While the doctor's wife's love for the others is genuine and personal, it is significant that it comes from a sense of *obligation* and not out of mere generosity: above all, she is driven by the same moral conscience that Saramago thinks forms the foundation of social relations. Ethics and human communities, he insists, do not simply come from people deciding in one moment that they like each other—rather, they come from a sense of sustained obligation, grounded in mutual empathy, that makes people see their own identities and wellbeing as inseparable from those of other people in their group. It is clear that the doctor's wife's unconditional commitment to the others, so long as her sight gives her the ability to care for them, is the only thing holding the group together.

☞ All stories are like those about the creation of the universe, no one was there, no one witnessed anything, yet everyone knows what happened.

Related Characters: The narrator (speaker), The old man with the black eyepatch

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 265

Explanation and Analysis

The group of blind protagonists passes through a broad downtown avenue filled with tall buildings and expensive cars, and the old man with the black eyepatch tells the rest stories while the narrator goes on about the collapse of the city's banking system, which included a curious episode in which a bank chairman got trapped in an elevator and left for dead. It is unclear if the protagonists hear this story, or only the reader—but regardless, the narrator uses it to

point out the mystery inherent in stories: they are based on testimony and trust, and since most of the things people know are known through stories, we cannot prove most of the things we think we know.

Accordingly, in addition to making an obvious commentary on the protagonists' blindness, which means that none of them (besides the doctor's wife) ever "witness[es] anything," in this passage the narrator points to people's fundamental uncertainty regarding both the nature of things in general ("the creation of the universe") and the truth of specific stories like the urban legend of the man in the elevator. Although "no one was there" when the universe was created, of course, "everyone" has an opinion about it, and most people consider their opinions definitive. In order to live a human life people must form and accept some rudimentary understanding of the workings of the world despite never truly being certain. This is just like the way that Saramago's protagonists must deal with their blindness: they can never know what caused it or how long it will last, if it reflects their sins or their bad luck, or if it physical, psychological, or some combination of both. Nevertheless, they must move on as best they can, unable to "witness[] anything" but somehow "know[ing] what happen[s]" at the same time.

return to their old lives and that their old selves still remain intact. In this passage, they've reach the apartment where the first man to go blind and his wife used to live—this is the same apartment from the novel's first chapter, to which the first blind man returned with the help of the car-thief and where he first realized the extent of his disorientation and cut his finger on the flower-vase he sent crashing to the ground. A blind writer—who may or may not be the narrator—is now living in this apartment and, perplexingly, continuing to write pages and pages of work that he cannot read (and does not know if he will ever be able to read in the future). Flattered by the apartment's new occupant, the first blind man asks about his identity, and the writer responds that he is simply a "voice."

Of course, by this stage in the novel, readers are familiar with Saramago's peculiar style of dialogue, in which commas rather than line breaks separate different speakers, and so it can be difficult to discern who is speaking. In other words, it is easier to separate voices than identities, as this is the only way the blind can tell one another apart. But the blind writer is not just alluding to blind people's perceptual capacities (or lack thereof), making fun of the novel's not-quite-omniscient narrator, and implying that the novel's final version might be precisely the story he is writing out, unsure if he will reach a conclusion or ever be able to read it. He is also talking about the way voice functions in a narrative and, specifically, in helping people determine and preserve their identities. The blind writer clearly does not go on writing because he wants to be recognized or read: rather, he does so simply because it is a way of preserving his voice and identity.

Whereas most of the city's other residents are busy scavenging for food and have lost all sense of connection with and moral respect for other people, the writer remains calm, kind, and forgiving, which suggests that his insistence on continuing to write—to explore, reflect on, and give concrete expression to his thoughts—is what has preserved his humanity and identity so far. Voice, in other words, becomes more important than people's appearances or kin relations as a source of personal identity in this novel: the ability to speak and be heard is ultimately what separates the protagonists from the blind masses that surround them.

Chapter 15 Quotes

☝ I am a writer, we are supposed to know such things. The first blind man felt flattered, imagine, a writer living in my flat, then a doubt rose in him, was it good manners to ask him his name, he might even have heard of his name, it was even possible that he had read him, he was still hesitating between curiosity and discretion, when his wife put the question directly, What is your name, Blind people do not need a name, I am my voice, nothing else matters, But you wrote books and those books carry your name, said the doctor's wife, Now nobody can read them, it is as if they did not exist.

Related Characters: The doctor's wife, The first blind man's wife, The first blind man, The writer (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 290

Explanation and Analysis

In the novel's closing chapters, the protagonists start visiting their old homes one by one, hoping that they might

Chapter 16 Quotes

☞ On their way to the home of the girl with dark glasses, they crossed a large square with groups of blind people who were listening to speeches from other blind people, at first sight, neither one nor the other group seemed blind, the speakers turned their heads excitedly towards their listeners, the listeners turned their heads attentively to the speakers. They were proclaiming the end of the world, redemption through penitence, the visions of the seventh day, the advent of the angel, cosmic collisions, the death of the sun, the tribal spirit, the sap of the mandrake, tiger ointment, the virtue of the sign, the discipline of the wind, the perfume of the moon, the revindication of darkness, the power of exorcism, the sign of the heel, the crucifixion of the rose, the purity of the lymph, the blood of the black cat, the sleep of the shadow the rising of the seas, the logic of anthropophagy, painless castration, divine tattoos, voluntary blindness, convex thoughts, or concave, or horizontal or vertical, or sloping, or concentrated, or dispersed, or fleeting, the weakening of the vocal cords, the death of the word, Here nobody is speaking of organisation, said the doctor's wife, Perhaps organisation is in another square, he replied. They continued on their way.

Related Characters: The doctor / ophthalmologist, The doctor's wife, The narrator (speaker), The girl with the dark glasses

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 298

Explanation and Analysis

While the doctor, his wife, and the girl with the dark glasses are heading from the doctor and his wife's apartment to the girl's apartment (where she hopes she might encounter her parents), they pass a peculiar assembly in a public plaza. Talking about a long list of superstitions and religious symbols, the speakers rile up the crowd of starving, confused blind people by giving them a narrative through which to understand the world and make sense of their own suffering. Although the doctor and his wife see it as nonsense, the people congregating in the ruined city plaza eagerly listen to the speakers and get riled up at the prospect of joining something—a community and a moral project—that is larger than themselves.

Here, Saramago introduces the religious imagery that overtakes the novel in its final chapters, in which the doctor's wife begins to look and act like a messiah, and then the protagonists mysteriously get their sight back. Of

course, he is skeptical of religion and mocks those who invest their energies in it—for instance, in this case, the preachers' sermons culminate in “the weakening of the vocal cords, the death of the word”—presumably the loss of human voice and expression, which people achieve by sacrificing their individuality and free thought to the illogical superstitions of the speakers' religion.

Chapter 17 Quotes

☞ Most likely other blind people closed it, converting the basement into an enormous tomb and I am to blame for what happened, when I came running out of there with my bags, they must have suspected that it was food and went in search of it, In a way, everything we eat has been stolen from the mouths of others and if we rob them of too much we are responsible for their death, one way or another we are all murderers.

Related Characters: The doctor / ophthalmologist, The doctor's wife (speaker), The dog of tears

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 314

Explanation and Analysis

In the novel's final chapter, the doctor's wife goes searching for food one final time, this time by leading her husband and the dog of tears back to the underground storeroom in a supermarket where she found food a few days before. When they arrive, there is a putrid stench, and when the doctor's wife goes downstairs, she discovers a pile of corpses. Exactly what she most feared when she last came here has now happened: the blind rushed down the stairs, following the smell of food, and then fell and got stuck on the stairs, where they died and “convert[ed] the basement to an enormous tomb.” The doctor's wife believes that she could have stopped this, had she offered to bring the food to the other blind people, and she sees her refusal to do so as a moral failure—and, therefore, the death of the blind as her fault.

It is difficult for the doctor and the reader to place the blame here: can the doctor's wife truly be faulted for failing to share the food, and does this make her responsible for the deaths of the blind people who got locked in the basement? More generally, how extensive can her obligations to other people be? Although her special power of sight gives her a responsibility to others, must she care

for *everybody*, and not only the members of her group? There is no clear answer about where to draw the limits of her moral obligations, and her sense of despair reflects her fear that it is impossible to do good for her new, adopted family without injuring people outside of it. In other words, the world's morals as are zero-sum as the doctor's wife's resources, and therefore what she considers good is what another person will consider evil.

In the most extreme case, this would make the doctor's wife's group just like the band of thugs that took control of the hospital and started extorting everybody else for food. But while Saramago takes this possibility seriously, he does not offer a clear answer—rather, he puts faith in moral consciousness itself. This is the same process of reflection and questioning, based on a sense of social obligation and interdependence, that leads the doctor's wife to agony in this scene. She will never be able to definitively say whether she has performed evil in addition to good, but without this very *process* of questioning, the world would be devoid of goodness altogether.

☝ If the priest covered the eyes of the images, That's just my idea, It's the only hypothesis that makes any sense, it's the only one that can lend some dignity to our suffering [...] that priest must have committed the worst sacrilege of all times and all religions, the fairest and most radically human, coming here to declare that, ultimately, God does not deserve to see.

Related Characters: The doctor / ophthalmologist, The doctor's wife (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 317-8

Explanation and Analysis

After the doctor's wife encounters the supermarket basement storeroom full of corpses and breaks down, the doctor takes her across the street to help her rest in a church that turns out to be full of blind worshippers. When the doctor's wife regains consciousness, she looks around and realizes that all the images and statues in the church have their eyes covered with either white cloth or white paint. She and the doctor speculate about what might have happened and what this surprising "sacrilege" might symbolize. They wonder if a priest who saw the world going blind around him might have lost his faith and blinded the

idols in order to "lend some dignity to [everyone's] suffering" and ensure that the divine continued to resemble the living.

This hypothetical priest is a powerful vehicle for Saramago's atheism, not only because he would presumably be the last person to give up on God but also because his social function as a protector and caregiver suggests that he saw in the white blindness a new basis for social life, one organized around human powers and interests. It seems that not even God can understand or rescue people from their blindness—and indeed, their faith in God can itself be seen as a kind of spiritual blindness, one from which they are able to wake up through the reckoning that their physical blindness causes them to undergo. After all, it is no coincidence that the novel ends with everybody regaining their sight just after this scene: it suggests that the protagonists bring humans back to life spiritually and morally by showing them that their salvation lies within themselves and in the relationships and societies they form, rather than in invisible powers to whom people are always blind.

☝ Why did we become blind, I don't know, perhaps one day we'll find out, Do you want me to tell you what I think, Yes, do, I don't think we did go blind, I think we are blind, Blind but seeing, Blind people who can see, but do not see.

Related Characters: The doctor's wife, The doctor / ophthalmologist (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 326

Explanation and Analysis

At the very end of the novel, after all of the protagonists regain their sight and the city's residents start to follow, "shouting [and] singing" in the streets because they can see, the doctor and his wife try to make sense of their blindness and contemplate their twisted and confusing fortune. The doctor and the rest of the group have regained their sight just as abruptly and inexplicably as they lost it in the first place, and the doctor makes explicit what the narrator and protagonists have hinted at throughout the entire book: the characters' blindness represents a more fundamental psychological and spiritual blindness that always afflicts all human beings.

Essentially, the city's people stopped seeing because they already *were* blind: when their eyes stopped working, it was merely a symptom of the fact that their *minds* had stopped working. People do not truly understand their motivations for acting or the principles that guide them through life, it seems, and so they are figuratively blind to the truth of the world and human nature. The novel's main characters have formed a kind of fledgling family, which has not only allowed

them to survive but also endowed their relationships and lives with a greater sense of empathy, love, and meaningfulness. They do not have all the answers, of course, but they have brought *themselves* back to sight—spiritually first, and physically later—by learning to accept the frailty and uncertainty of human life while investing fully in the love and social solidarity that give value to that life.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1

A traffic light turns red, and drivers impatiently wait for pedestrians to cross. When the light turns green, one **car** fails to advance. While the narrator muses that it is probably for some mechanical reason, the other drivers start “beat[ing] furiously on the [car’s] closed windows.” The man driving the car begins shouting repeatedly, “I am **blind**.” Although the blind man’s “eyes seem healthy,” his face shows “that he is distraught with anguish.” Bystanders argue about what to do, but the blind man just wants to go home, and another man offers to drive him home in his car. The bystanders help the blind man get out of his car and into the other man’s passenger seat. The blind man remarks that he only sees white, and he thanks the man who has offered to drive him. The other man simply remarks that nobody “know[s] what might lie in store for” them. The light is red again, so they are forced to wait it out.

Near the blind man’s house, the other man can only find parking on a street so narrow that the **blind** man has to get out of the **car** before the driver parks. When the blind man gets out, he feels “abandoned” and panics until the driver taps his arm and begins leading him inside. The blind man isn’t sure if his wife will be around, and his neighbors watch him curiously but do not ask what has happened. The driver takes the blind man upstairs to his apartment and offers to keep him company until the blind man’s wife returns, but the blind man finds this offer suspicious and says that “there’s no need, please don’t bother.” The driver lets himself out, and the blind man hears the elevator start to descend. “Forgetting the state in which he [finds] himself,” the blind man instinctively looks out his door’s peephole, but he only sees “an impenetrable whiteness.”

The way in which the other drivers react to the man’s crisis of sudden blindness exemplifies how luxury and modern technology, such as cars, now dominate and completely structure human life and society. Rather than empathizing with and helping the man, the other drivers are angry at the minor inconvenience of being held up at the light, suggesting that they value convenience and efficiency over fellow human beings. The driver’s terror at going blind reflects the fact that there will always be things about the world that we can neither explain nor understand—no matter how developed human society becomes—and the narrator echoes this fundamental ignorance by initially withholding the explanation for the car’s sudden lack of movement from the reader. In the same vein, the driver who helps out the blind man comments about people’s fundamental uncertainty about the future—human beings are always forced to act without any kind of guarantee or certainty about what will happen.



The blind man’s sense of “abandon[ment]” shows that, without sight, he feels that he cannot confirm the existence of anybody else. But it also reflects a sense of human spiritual abandonment or isolation, in the sense that people are fundamentally alone in their individual decisions and feelings. His suspicion that the altruistic fellow driver might have ulterior motives might seem unfair, but they reflect his recognition that people are as capable of evil as they are of good, and that people are often blind to one another’s true intentions or capacities. Further, the blind man’s illogical instinct to look out the door’s peephole reflects the extent to which his blindness will inhibit his perception and his ability to navigate the world.



The blind man knows he is at home because of “the smell, the atmosphere, [and] the silence.” He feels the textures and forms of the objects in his apartment, but they start to blend together. He remembers pretending to be **blind** as a child and concluding that blindness meant “the simple absence of light” but did not change things themselves. But now, his blindness has “swallowed up [...] things and beings” themselves, which have become “twice as invisible.” On his way to the living room, he knocks over a vase of flowers, which shatters. He tries to recover the flowers, but cuts himself on a piece of glass and struggles to get to the sofa, where he wraps his bleeding finger in a handkerchief and falls asleep. He dreams of seeing again, but he begins to awaken and realizes that he is afraid of opening his eyes.

The blind man’s wife awakens him by asking, “what are you doing there?” while she cleans up the water and broken glass on the floor. At first, she is frustrated that he did not clean up his mess, but then she notices his bleeding finger and rushes over. The man opens his eyes and discovers that he is still **blind**—he tells his wife, who initially thinks he is joking but then starts crying and embracing him. His wife insists that he will get better and needs to see a doctor. She calls a number she finds in the phone book, and the doctor agrees to see her husband immediately.

After disinfecting and wrapping the blind man’s finger, the blind man’s wife takes him downstairs to find the **car**. The **blind** man does not know where the keys are, but his wife has a set, so he waits in the lobby while she looks for the car. But the car is nowhere to be found: the “good Samaritan” from before has stolen it. The blind man’s wife curses the car-thief and leads her husband to a taxi that is waiting outside. The blind man contemplates his misfortune during the taxi ride, and when they arrive at the doctor’s office, they wait in a room with various people with obvious eye problems, “but no one who was blind, [because] blind people do not consult an ophthalmologist.” Fortunately, the doctor calls in the blind man immediately, over the protests of the other patients.

As the blind man learns to navigate the world using his other senses, he is more aware of what he misses than what he can still detect. Home is now a general feeling, the result of various senses mixed together—but without sight, it feels like a foreign and foreboding place. It seems that the things in his house are not real in the same way now that he cannot see them: indeed, his injury shows how helpless he is without the eyesight around which he has organized his entire life. His dream shows that his brain clearly remembers what sight is like, but he wakes up to something more like a nightmare.



Like the other drivers at the stoplight, the blind man’s wife is initially unprepared to face such a bizarre and inexplicable situation. Her instinct to turn to medicine is a familiar one, but the man’s sudden blindness also conveys a sense of mysticism that’s outside of human control. Further, the blind man’s ability to turn to the doctor is a direct result of relatively recent developments in human technology and society—in other words, the phone call to the doctor shows how modern human beings are deeply dependent on one another and on technology.



Just as the blind man predicted, the helpful stranger turned out to be taking advantage of him while he was in the midst of a traumatic experience. As such, this thief illustrates Saramago’s skepticism of human beings, who may all harbor such sinister self-interest. By noting that “blind people do not consult an ophthalmologist,” the narrator illustrates how the blind man’s case is truly beyond the realm of ordinary human experience, but also points out the irony in modern society, in which medicine cannot help the people who need it most.



Inside the doctor's office, the blind man explains what has happened. He has no personal or family history of eye problems, related diseases, general risk factors, or recent head injuries. The doctor examines the man with a machine, but nothing is abnormal and there is seemingly no explanation for his **blindness**. The doctor has never seen something like this—the man's condition seemingly has no medical precedent. The doctor cannot prescribe any treatment, so he sends the man and his wife away with a list of tests to have done. On the way out, the doctor assures them, "let's wait and see, you mustn't despair." That night, the blind man dreams that he's blind.

Medicine is incapable of explaining or resolving the man's blindness, which seems to have a supernatural or immaterial cause, unlike most of the problems that humans face (and are capable of resolving through science and government). But this does not change the fact that the blind man must now adapt to his new circumstances, and this struggle in the face of an inexplicable crisis is a metaphor for the human condition as a whole. The doctor's injunction to "wait and see" shows that, in his rational medical attitude toward risk and uncertainty, hope is just as logical as disappointment when one is faced with inexplicable causes and effects. Meanwhile, the man's dream implies that he is finally beginning to grasp the reality of his condition and accept that it may be permanent.



CHAPTER 2

The narrator notes that the thief who stole the first blind man's **car** offered to help him out of genuine selflessness—he's not a "hardened criminal[.]" He only thought to steal the car when he got the chance, and if the blind man had invited him to spend the afternoon, the thief might have chosen to remain generous. The narrator notes that "moral conscience [...] has always existed" and reveals that the thief's conscience—a mixture of fear and remorse—gets the better of him as soon as he steals the car. Terrified of the police, the thief drives carefully, but he grows so flustered that he decides to park the car on a side street and take a walk to try and calm his nerves. But after just a few steps, he goes completely **blind**.

It becomes clear that the mysterious white blindness is contagious. The car-thief's infection might seem like divine punishment for his evildoing, but it could also just as easily be random, or even the product of his own fear. Indeed, the narrator's analysis of his motives complicates the idea that this man was simply a remorseless criminal looking for someone to rob. In fact, the man only thought to become a criminal because of the situation in which he found himself. This does not mean he is not responsible for his actions, but rather that people are not inherently good or evil: rather, circumstances influence whether they decide to behave morally. So while "moral conscience" is universal, people can choose to follow or ignore it in different situations.



Back in his office, the doctor treats an old man with an eyepatch for cataracts, then starts going over the blind man's file repeatedly and calls a colleague to discuss the case. The man's **blindness** cannot just be psychological, nor can it be mere agnosia ("the inability to recognize familiar objects") or amaurosis (seeing "total darkness," not total whiteness). Washing his hands in the bathroom after this call, the doctor ponders how to apply the great body of established science to this individual, totally unique case. The doctor explains the case to the doctor's wife over dinner, then spends most of the night assiduously leafing through all of his medical books. But he reaches no meaningful conclusion. Soon, he starts to fear going blind himself, and in a matter of minutes, he does.

The doctor is clearly dedicated to his profession, but science remains unable to explain the mysterious case of blindness. As the man's blindness is neither obvious to a trained doctor nor explainable through medical research, the novel implies that the man's blindness has a spiritual origin rather than a bodily one. And yet the affliction is still contagious—the doctor is a benevolent character thus far, so the fact that he also catches the white blindness suggests that it may not have to do with morality or guilt, as it may have seemed when the car-thief was struck blind. The doctor's astonishment that the vast knowledge base of medicine provides nothing meaningful about the blind man's case reflects a more general aspect of the human condition: namely, that people are able to draw upon historical precedent but still face unique and unprecedented circumstances.



One of the doctor's patients, a young woman wearing dark glasses, smiles at the doctor after her appointment. Her smile is "a trick of the trade," and her trade is prostitution. However, the narrator warns readers against judging the girl because she only takes the clients she wants to take, so she's in control of her own life. After her appointment, the girl buys eye drops at the pharmacy, where the pharmacist's assistant hits on her. Then she takes a taxi to the hotel, where "an old acquaintance" is waiting to visit her. On the way, she fantasizes about sleeping with the man in the hotel. When she arrives, she has a soft drink at the hotel bar and then goes upstairs to room 312. Here, over the course of 20 minutes, the girl has sex with the man and feels intense pleasure. Afterward, she realizes that she has gone **blind**.

Saramago's narrator explicitly rejects the presumptions of immorality that are conventionally tied to prostitution. For the girl with the dark glasses, prostitution is a source of freedom and autonomy, not a reflection of immoral character or a sign of victimization. This further shows how conventional beliefs about morality fail to capture the complexity and ambiguity of people's actual inner lives. The fact that people like the pharmacist's assistant still objectify the girl shows the damage that this conventional morality can create when it is not challenged. Like the car-thief and the doctor, the girl with glasses loses her sight while working, and her character description reveals itself to be willfully ironic: just as the doctor's training cannot help him address the man's blindness, the girl's glasses become useless.



CHAPTER 3

An unsuspecting police officer takes the car-thief home, and the thief's wife realizes that her husband has not merely been caught stealing—she thinks that something much worse must have happened. Similarly, a policeman brings the girl with the dark glasses home to her parents' apartment, but the girl is "overcome with embarrassment" to have been discovered naked and kicked out of the hotel after the staff heard her "piercing shrieks." The officer makes her pay for her taxi home, and the girl wonders if her **blindness** is punishment "for her immorality." Meanwhile, the ophthalmologist does not give in to despair—rather, he lays silently in bed, pondering what to tell people and nervously awaiting morning, which he knows he won't be able to see. Tomorrow, he must "inform the health authorities" about the potential catastrophic epidemic that "highly contagious," sudden blindness could create.

The obvious contrast between how the police treat the car-thief and how they treat the girl with the glasses underlines Saramago's critique of conventional morality. Namely, the police are blind to the car-thief's actual crime and treat him as an unfortunate victim, while they see the girl's consensual sexual liaison as irredeemable and treat her as a criminal under arrest. The reader knows that it is really the other way around, and so it becomes clear that society's conventions are actually enforcing the opposite of morality. The doctor, on the other hand, seems to act out of a private moral impulse to save others: even though the blindness has caused him a personal tragedy, he only thinks about the societal implications of a potential epidemic and is not at all preoccupied with his own well-being.



In the morning, the doctor pretends he's asleep as the doctor's wife kisses his forehead, and then he cries because he now understands what his patients most fear. After the doctor makes it to the bathroom, his wife returns, and the doctor reveals that he's having trouble seeing. His wife looks into his eyes but doesn't observe anything wrong. The doctor replies that his vision is completely gone and that the **blind** man who came to his office must have "infected" him. Even though his wife knows that blindness isn't contagious, she does not question this—she merely asks what must be done. But suddenly, the doctor forcefully pushes her away because he realizes that she could catch the blindness from him. He calls himself foolish and asks his wife to leave, but she refuses.

Blindness inverts the doctor's defining trait: his world is now defined by his vision problem, and he is no longer able to cure others. This mysterious blindness forces him to empathize with his patients: although he consults them every day, he has never fully understood how they felt precisely because he always approaches these interactions through the defined social role of his job. Now forced to abandon that role, he empathizes with the disorientation of blindness and the uncertainty of illness for the first time. His belated realization that he might infect his wife—even while he spent the whole night worrying about the rise of an epidemic—shows that he is still reorienting his thinking, but also that he sincerely loves his wife and refuses to let her put his comfort above her own wellbeing.



The doctor's wife insists that the doctor eat breakfast. After the doctor finishes his meal, he calls the Ministry of Health and asks to speak with "someone in authority." But the person on the other end of the line demands details, decides that the man must not really be a doctor, and hangs up. After ruminating for a few minutes, the doctor decides to call his own boss at the hospital and tell him everything. The hospital director is surprised but uncertain: they have no proof that the **blindness** is contagious, and he warns the doctor against making assumptions. But after a half hour, the director calls back to report that a little boy who visited the doctor's office the day before "has also suddenly gone blind." The director says that he will inform the Ministry of Health himself.

Three hours later, the doctor gets a call from the Ministry of Health, which asks for his files and tells him not to leave his house. After a few minutes, the hospital director calls again to report two more cases of sudden **blindness**: the car thief and the girl with the glasses. Finally, that evening, the Ministry calls the doctor to report that they are sending an ambulance for him. The doctor's wife readies his suitcase, but the doctor does not know that she is also packing her own clothes—she plans to go with him. After an hour, the ambulance arrives, and the doctor and his wife go downstairs and climb in the back. The ambulance driver protests that the doctor's wife cannot join him, but she says that she needs to be taken as well—she, too, has just gone blind.

CHAPTER 4

The minister has ordered that all the patients be quarantined until the Government figures out what has caused their **blindness**. Of the city's vacant buildings, the minister chooses an empty **mental hospital** as the quarantine site. There will be one wing for the blind and another for those who are undiagnosed but who likely have the disease. In the middle, there will be "a no man's land" where the newly blind will pass through to join the others.

The Ministry and hospital director's skepticism of the doctor exemplifies the figurative blindness of organized social institutions, which are incapable of coping with events that are far outside the ordinary. Specifically, bureaucratic organizations' hierarchical structure and systematized procedures make them slow to accept change and skeptical of dissent. In other words, such organizations have dangerous blind spots that can make them act immorally or worsen rather than resolve crises. Ultimately, though, the case of the boy confirms the doctor's expert assessment of the situation. The doctor has performed his civic duty, and matters are now out of his hands.



The doctor heads into an unexpected and deeply uncertain future in a quarantine zone that has not even been defined yet. Although the budding epidemic was entirely in his hands just a few hours ago, now the doctor is deprived of all agency and forced to simply obey the Ministry's directives. His lifetime of specialized medical experience becomes irrelevant—now, he is nothing more than one patient among others. Meanwhile, it's unclear whether the doctor's wife is telling the truth about going blind. After all, nobody can know whether she is really blind or not since the illness has no external markers. If the doctor's moral purity and sense of selfless responsibility are any indication of his wife, she may be prepared to take extreme measures to stay with her husband.



The minister seemingly chooses the abandoned mental hospital because it is the most convenient and least disruptive site for the government to use—not because it has any advantages for the quarantined patients themselves. Still, it is a deeply symbolic choice: first, it further establishes that the blindness is as much a psychological illness as a physiological one. Second, it gestures to social ostracism and isolation that the quarantined patients will face, similar to how mentally ill patients are often cast out from general society.



That same day, the Commission of Logistics and Security sends all the **blind** patients, their families, and their colleagues to **the hospital**. The doctor and the doctor's wife are the first to arrive. They pass the soldiers guarding the main gate and then follow a large rope that has been strung up like a handrail to guide them to the front door. They enter their ward, which is full of grey beds with grey sheets. The doctor sits on one of them while his wife explores the rest of the ward. Among the dilapidated facilities, she finds padded rooms and a cupboard full of straitjackets. The doctor's wife is not really blind at all—the doctor knows this, and he insists that she leave. But his wife declares that she will not be let out, since doing so means that she will catch the blindness anyway. In the meantime, she will try to “help [the doctor] and the others.”

Soon, the “others” arrive together: the first blind man, the thief who stole his **car**, the girl with dark glasses, and the little boy from the doctor's office, who cries out for his mother. The doctor's wife describes them all to the doctor, who confirms that he remembers all of them from his office, except the car-thief. Then, the doctor's wife calls out that she and the doctor are there, and the others also establish their presence. She notices some tension between the first blind man and the car-thief, but she does not understand it.

Suddenly, the Government broadcasts a message over a loudspeaker, declaring that this quarantine is necessary to protect the population from the disease that the Government is calling “the white sickness.” The **blind** people's participation in the quarantine is “an act of solidarity with the rest of the nation's community.” The Government then announces a list of 15 rules, which include: the lights will always be kept on, anyone who leaves will be killed, and the patients must care for and organize themselves. They must also burn everything they use—although nobody will help them if they start a fire, nor if they get some other disease. They should bury their own dead, and anyone who goes blind must be moved to the proper wing. Finally, the same announcement will play every day as new people arrive at the **hospital**.

It is clear that the blind are having their rights stripped away and being turned into prisoners: even though the doctor is the one who reported the threat to the Ministry of Health in the first place, now he and his wife are seen as a threat to be contained. The padded rooms and straitjackets further underline the way that the blind are being pathologized and confined. Although they clearly can infect others and should be quarantined, the government seems to be treating them as collateral damage rather than part of the society that needs to be protected. This shows how easily even ostensibly democratic and fair governments can turn against a portion of the population by declaring them a threat and defining them in opposition to the nation at large.



Because the white blindness is contagious, all the characters who arrive are already somehow connected to one another, largely by chance. In other words, the disease traces their social networks, revealing connections that would have never seemed important otherwise. These networks center on the doctor, reinforcing the ironic fact that the white blindness outbreak centers on an office that people visit to fix their vision problems.



The Government's narrative is dangerous because it mixes elements of truth and fiction: while the quarantine clearly is necessary to protect the rest of the population, this does not mean that the patients imprisoned in the hospital are willingly acting in “solidarity” or that the Government's rules are necessary or helpful. Indeed, these rules seem cruel and arbitrary, designed to draw as sharp a line as possible between the patients—who might as well be prisoners—and the outside world. In short, the Government seems to be treating the patients as dangerous criminals simply because they were unfortunate enough to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. This calls into question the Government's authority to make such sweeping decisions about who is guilty or dangerous, all in the name of the “the nation's community.”



The people in the ward begin to talk: the girl recognizes the doctor, who in turn recognizes the girl, the boy, and “the first blind man.” The doctor asks the car-thief about his identity, but the man simply says that he went **blind** randomly, while walking down the street. The doctor’s wife kisses him and contemplates the fact that she will also soon go blind. The doctor declares that the group should organize itself before new patient start arriving, and the girl suggests that he “take charge of the ward.” But the doctor protests: new patients won’t want to be ordered around by authority they haven’t chosen.

The car-thief yells out that the first blind man is “to blame for our misfortune.” But the first blind man reveals that the thief stole his **car**—which the thief denies. The doctor’s wife tells them that they need to reconcile, but the first blind man refuses and proclaims that the car-thief’s **blindness** is “justice.” The first blind man resolves to go to another ward and finds his way to the door, where the car-thief jumps on him and starts “tak[ing out] his revenge.” The doctor and his wife separate the two men, who are fighting on the ground, and they insist that the men must put their personal conflict aside and start working together. The two men keep taunting each other, but the first blind man agrees to stay in the same ward with the others.

The car-thief announces that he is going to bed, and the boy reveals that he has “to do a wee-wee.” Everyone else does, too, and fortunately the doctor’s wife knows how to find the lavatory. The other patients form a line behind her and start following her there. On the way, the car-thief starts groping the girl, who kicks him in the thigh with her heels. He is bleeding profusely, and the doctor’s wife brings him and the doctor to the kitchen. The doctor’s wife washes the thief’s wound, quickly makes a bandage out of his vest, and ties it on his leg. The patients return to the ward, where the boy has already peed his pants, but the doctor’s wife pretends not to notice and the patients form their line again. She leads them to the lavatory.

Because the patients are blind, they can choose what to reveal and what to hide about their identities, and they can only recognize one another through their voices. They have to make collective decisions with incomplete and unreliable information about one another, but this is the case in any social interaction. On another note, the doctor’s selflessness comes into conflict with the morally ambiguous and contradictory demands of politics: even in relatively free democracies, people are ultimately governed by others whom “they have not chosen,” and the doctor’s hope for everyone else’s unanimous consent might turn out to be unrealistic and counterproductive.



Having initially committed his crime under the presupposition that he would never again meet his victim, the car-thief is now forced to admit and confront his actions. But there is no established authority to enforce “justice,” and it becomes clear that the car-thief is uninterested in repentance—his immoral actions, in other words, will go acknowledged but unpunished. However, his theft seems almost trivial now, since nobody in the quarantine has any use for a car. In fact, the car-thief punishing the first blind man for unwittingly passing on his syndrome completely inverts the normal parameters of justice: the willfully evil are punishing the unwitting victims of a contagion. This blurs the distinctions between guilt and innocence, perpetrators and victims. To make sense of the senseless epidemic, everybody searches for someone to blame: the government settles on the blind themselves, while the blind are left with no clear target.



Nature calls, so the blind internees must shift away from trying to form some kind of political structure or resolving the dispute between the first blind man and the car-thief. Now, they have to figure out the equally important and logistically difficult challenge of using the bathroom while blind. The doctor’s wife is the natural leader, but she does not yet reveal to the others that she can see. The car-thief proves his morally unscrupulous character by groping the girl with the glasses, who shows that she is not willing to tolerate men objectifying her. However, she likely did not expect to seriously injure the man by kicking him—in fact, her response is ethically confusing and indeterminate, much like the Government’s quarantine: it is arguably justified but extreme.



The men enter the lavatory while the doctor's wife and the girl wait outside and tell each other how they went **blind**. The girl says that the doctor's wife is lucky to be able to stay with the doctor, but the doctor's wife tells the girl that the blindness can't be permanent—that would be too horrible. The girl has to use the bathroom, so they go find another lavatory. After they return, the patients re-form their line and return to the ward. The doctor's wife tells everyone to count how many beds they pass on the way to their own, so that they can remember their spot in the future. Once everyone finds their bed, the boy asks for food, but there is none, and the girl starts putting in the eyedrops that the doctor prescribed her before she went blind.

Able to pause and reflect for a moment while the others are in the bathroom, the girl and the doctor's wife draw out the fundamental question that all the internees must confront as they struggle to adapt to their new circumstances: will this ever end? The internees do not understand why they went blind in the first place, so it's unclear how they should rationally view their futures. It remains to be seen, then, whether they'll hold out hope, succumb to despair, or try to forge a new way of living while also expecting to stay blind forever.



CHAPTER 5

In the morning, the doctor's wife is awake but afraid to open her eyes. When she finally does, she discovers that she can still **see**, and she accidentally says so out loud. Fortunately, she sees that everyone is still asleep. She realizes that the patients are powerless, but nobody is coming for them or even knows they are there: "any day now," she even thinks, "we shall no longer know who we are." Like dogs, they do not need names anymore. The car-thief wakes, groaning in pain, and the doctor's wife realizes that the patients cannot access medicine for him. She goes and adjusts his bandage, then gazes at the doctor and starts wishing that she was **blind** too, so that she could see the "inner side" of things.

The doctor's wife is genuinely surprised: just as inexplicably as everybody else has gone blind, she seems to be retaining her sight. Her realization that the blind are losing their identities suggests both that identities are flexible in principle and that sight plays a crucial part in how humans discern themselves from different people and things. If the blind, when clustered together, become like animals and treat one another as indistinct and homogeneous, then everyone else is just a few steps from living in the same conditions—in other words, human life and society are just as fragile as they are complex. The narrator emphasizes this loss of identity by refraining from naming the characters or describing much about them. However, the doctor's wife's hope that she'll go blind to see the "inner side" of things suggests that the internees' blindness is a metaphor for some deeper, spiritual kind of vision or knowledge.



Outside, "angry voices" signal the arrival of more **blind** patients. When they enter, the doctor explains that there are six patients already in the **hospital** and that they have room for all the newcomers. The five new patients, who just crossed from the hospital's other wing, introduce themselves and choose beds. The first blind man recognizes the blind man's wife's voice, and the narrator reveals that the other new patients are ["the pharmacist's assistant who sold eye-drops to the girl with dark glasses," "the taxi-driver who took the first blind man to the doctor," "the policeman who took the car-thief home after the thief went blind, and the maid who discovered the girl with the glasses screaming in the hotel.](#) However, the patients themselves may not realize this or even remember one another.

The newcomers are simply more people who have had contact with the existing internees, and except in the case of the first blind man and his wife, it is unclear whether their previous relationships will have any significance in the quarantine zone. Regardless, quarantine seems to be a kind of equalizer for these characters, who are now forced to confront one another as unfamiliar individuals solely on the basis of their shared humanity, rather than on the complex social roles that defined their interactions before.



The first blind man tells the first blind man's wife that the car-thief is there, and she initially thinks that the car-thief's **blindness** is a form of poetic justice. But they pity the man for his wound, which is getting worse—the doctor admits that is infected but that he cannot do anything about it. The girl with the glasses approaches the car-thief and asks him to forgive her, but the car-thief tells her to “forget it.”

Suddenly, the loudspeaker announces that “food has been left at the entrance.” The doctor and his wife go to collect it, but they continue to the main door and tell the soldiers that they need medicine for the car-thief. The soldier on duty says that this is not his business and orders them back inside. The doctor's wife thinks this is “against all the rules of humanity,” but she and the doctor return inside and admit that medicine is not coming. The food—milk and biscuits for five people—is not enough, and there are no plates or silverware. The injured car-thief vomits up his food, and after they eat, the first blind man and his wife take a walk around **the hospital** wing.

At the pharmacist's assistant's behest, the doctor explains what he researched just before going **blind**. After he finishes, the taxi-driver chimes in with his opinion: “the channels that go from the eyes to the brain got congested.” The pharmacist's assistant calls him a foolish, but the doctor remarks that “in truth the eyes are nothing more than lenses”—it's a person's brain that allows them to see. He admits that he does not know how long everyone will be sick or stuck in the ward. The hotel maid comments that she wants to know how the naked girl with the dark glasses ended up; when she says this, the girl takes her glasses off. The doctor's wife starts to feel “contemptible and obscene” for observing the others, who still do not know that she can see.

While the car-thief's blindness and festering wound would be read as punishments for his immoral behavior, this view of events seems just as plausible as the car-thief's own amoral worldview, in which people act selfishly and deal with whatever fate happens to hand them—this is why he does not hold the girl morally responsible for his injury.



The Government remains vague and distant—the soldiers confirm that the Government is interested in protecting the rest of the city from the patients, not protecting the patients themselves with medicine and proper care. The Government has resolved to view the patients as enemies and criminals, even though they are not guilty of anything, and the doctor's wife struggles to make sense of this dehumanization. When she declares that this is “against all the rules of humanity,” Saramago is suggesting that a government's commitment to protect its citizens is only a theoretical pact, an idea that it can never fulfill in practice. He seems to be pessimistic about politics and humanity in general, which is always fragile and imperfect. In times of crisis like the blindness epidemic, the ugliest and most selfish aspects of human nature seem to dominate people's actions.



The taxi-driver and pharmacist clash over the legitimacy of scientifically-informed versus uninformed speculation, but ultimately neither of them can explain their blindness, which has completely blurred the normal authority of science. Ultimately, each chooses the explanation that is more useful for their own purposes. Indeed, the doctor's admission that “the eyes are nothing more than lenses” establishes that vision is a psychological property as well as a physical one, which further supports the notion that the characters' blindness represents some deeper disorientation or loss of perspective. Further, the doctor's wife realizes that her sight, by giving her knowledge of things that are invisible to everyone else, confers on her a kind of responsibility for the wellbeing of everybody else. This feels “contemptible and obscene” not only because she is deceiving the others, but also because it seems to suggest that she is somehow superior to them in terms of both power and responsibility.



At lunchtime, the first blind man and the taxi-driver crawl outside into the corridor to retrieve the food, and they return by following a rope that the doctor's wife has made out of blankets. There are still only five portions of food, and the soldiers probably do not even know that more people have entered this wing of **the hospital**. The taxi-driver goes outside and yells that there are 11 of them now, but the police sergeant dismisses him. Back inside, the patients divide up their rations while the injured car-thief, who does not eat, periodically moans in pain.

Soon, three more people arrive: one of the doctor's employees, [the man from the hotel with whom the girl with the dark glasses had sex](#), and [the rude policeman who took the girl home](#). Then, a huge crowd of uproarious **blind** people stumbles into the ward. The people who cannot find a bed leave for another ward, and the Government's instructions play on the loudspeaker. The newcomers protest that they were promised a cure, not a quarantine, and the doctor notes that things in the **hospital** are becoming tense. No more food comes on this day, and the injured car-thief's leg is "completely swollen" by the evening. Whispering desperately, he tells the doctor's wife, "I know you can **see**"—but she denies it, goes back to bed, and tells the doctor that the thief's infection is serious.

After most of the patients fall asleep, the car-thief manages to get out of bed—he wants to go outside and plead for help. After falling down, he crawls outside to **the hospital's** front door, where he reflects on the morality of stealing the first blind man's **car**. He falls down the hospital's front steps and, once he overcomes the extreme pain, pulls himself towards the main gate along the rope that has been put up as a handrail. The soldier who is stationed at the gate fires his **gun** as soon as he notices the car-thief. By the time the other soldiers arrive, the car-thief is dead in a pool of his own blood, which the sergeant warns could be infectious. A group of the **blind** has followed the commotion outside, and the sergeant orders them to retrieve the car-thief's body.

Again, while the blind internees plead to be taken seriously, as human beings who deserve fair treatment and are guaranteed rights by the Government, the soldiers dismiss them without a second thought. Clearly, the soldiers and Government do not have power because they have people's best interests in mind. Rather, the mere status of their positions (and the fact that they are armed) means that they can forcibly command the obedience of others. This contrasts with the doctor's wife's authority, which is legitimate because she can see, but unwanted because it feels like a burden.



As more internees move into the hospital, they overturn the fragile order that the small community of patients had already established. The large crowd also signals that the epidemic is only worsening outside the hospital's walls. These newcomers are too numerous to be named or meaningfully discerned, and they become an anonymous and dehumanized mass to the readers, much like they are to the protagonists. Given the soldiers' indifference to the internees' wellbeing, the patients are right to be skeptical about the Government's promise of a cure to their illness. Meanwhile, the car-thief's critical condition also seems to be beneficial (though morally complicated) for the doctor's wife, who cannot risk revealing that she can still see.



The car-thief has been a villainous and morally indefensible character until now, but now his desperation evokes pity. This situation cannot be analyzed in the black-and-white terms of moral good and evil—rather, the reader is again forced to invert their moral presuppositions: when the criminal becomes a victim, the soldiers' indifference to his rights and dignity must also be recognized as a crime. In fact, by remorselessly killing the car-thief, the soldiers commit the most unconscionable moral injustice yet. The quarantine already threatens to reveal humanity's most evil instincts, and the Government's treatment of the patients resembles the way in which marginalized people and prisoners of war were interned and tortured in the 20th century.



CHAPTER 6

In the morning, the **blind** have to bury the car-thief's body in the courtyard. Only the doctor's wife sees the corpse, which is horribly disfigured. She can't find anything with which to dig a grave, although she does glimpse "the terrified faces" of the infected patients across **the hospital**. She and the doctor consider asking the soldiers for a shovel. Meanwhile, the girl with the glasses cries because she blames herself for the car-thief's death. The narrator comments that, while it is technically her fault, people can never think through or control all the possible consequences of their actions.

The girl joins the doctor and his wife to ask the soldiers for a shovel. When they reach the front door, the soldier on duty yells and fires a warning **gunshot** into the air. The three patients return inside, and then the doctor's wife comes to the doorway and asks for a spade. However, the sergeant declares that there isn't anything of the sort at the **hospital**, and he tries to dissuade the doctor's wife against burying the body. The doctor's wife suggests that the car-thief's body could infect the air and therefore the soldiers. The narrator reveals that this sergeant is new: the first one went **blind** and is now in the army's quarantine zone. This sergeant promises to ask for a spade, and the doctor's wife also asks for more food—but the sergeant replies that this isn't his responsibility and then disappears.

Later that morning, over the loudspeaker, the Government reports that there is a spade for the patients outside the front door. The doctor's wife goes to retrieve it—at first she pretends to be **blind**, but eventually she just grabs the spade and walks straight back to the front door, and the sergeant remarks that the blind are quickly able to adapt and navigate their surroundings.

In a society of blind people, it becomes increasingly clear that the doctor's wife's ability to see is as much a curse as a blessing: she is forced to confront the horrors of the patients' internment more fully and viscerally than anyone else. The Government's failure to provide a shovel is somewhat ironic, since one of its rules is that the internees must bury their own dead—its failure to coordinate its response demonstrates that it is making up its policies as it goes along, which suggests that its power is arbitrary rather than deserved. The narrator's commentary on causality and moral responsibility further draws out the tension that Saramago sees at the heart of moral thinking: people's actions (whether good or bad) seldom produce the consequences they intend, so to what extent should they be held responsible for these consequences?



The soldiers' warning shot demonstrates that they see the internees as inherently threatening, and they're willing to respond with unjust and brutal violence (as they did to the car-thief). Of course, the nature of infectious disease is such that merely being in someone's presence can constitute a risk, and the doctor's wife clearly understands this when she turns the sergeant's logic back against him. The fact that the previous sergeant went blind shows that the soldiers' attempt to contain the infection is futile and that there is no fundamental distinction between the people on either side of the hospital's gate. In this way, the soldiers' fears—if not their actions—are justified.



The sergeant's ironic misinterpretation of the doctor's wife's situation is as close as Saramago gets to comedy. This reminds readers that there are no externally-visible traits that separate the blind from the seeing. More importantly, it illustrates how different characters in the novel, separated only by a gate, form diametrically-opposed narratives in order to justify how they relate to one another.



The **blind** dig a shallow grave in the courtyard's firm soil and toss the car-thief's body inside. The girl with the glasses proposes putting up a cross, but the others dismiss her idea and go back inside. Everyone has learned to navigate **the hospital**. The narrator comments that those who are "gifted" even develop "frontal vision" like the doctor's wife. The doctor and his wife talk lovingly, unlike the first blind man and the first blind man's wife, who seldom speak. The little boy with the squint continues complaining of hunger, and the girl keeps giving him her food. In fact, there was no breakfast this morning, and now that it is lunchtime, some of the blind are awaiting the next meal in the hallway—they know that food is "first come first served."

Eventually, the soldiers come inside and drop the food containers in the hallway, but they're terrified when they **see** the blind patients waiting nearby. Two of the soldiers "react[] admirably" by firing indiscriminately at these patients, whose bodies pile up outside the ward. The soldiers sprint outside, where one insists that he will never go back in. Ironically, the narrator reveals, this man soon goes blind himself. The sergeant, who secretly wishes that the blind would just starve to death, declares over the loudspeaker that the soldiers have subdued a "seditious movement" by killing the patients in the hall—they can't be blamed for their actions. In the future, the sergeant says, the army will simply leave the food outside **the hospital** and **shoot** anyone who gets too close to them.

During the **shooting**, the **blind** internees are frightened because they assume that the Government has decided to kill them. When those who aren't yet blind but are assumed to be "contaminated" run out of their wards into the hallway, they see a pile of bodies and a pile of the blind's food boxes, the latter of which they decide to take. They pause in terror when they realize that they might get infected by the blood of the deceased, whose spirits might come after them, but they take the food anyway. Some blind patients also come to the hallway for food, frightening the contaminated, who feel that the dead are seeking revenge. But instead, these blind patients retrieve the food containers and drag the corpses to the courtyard. One blind woman (the doctor's wife) seems to be leading the others and often looks over at the contaminated as though she could see or otherwise sense them. Frightened, the contaminated return to their wards.

The internees do the bare minimum that is necessary to give the car-thief a proper burial, as they clearly have more important matters to attend to. The narrator echoes the soldier's comment about the doctor's wife, both mocking the soldier's ignorance and pointing out that such "frontal vision" wouldn't be unthinkable in the world of the novel—after all, the rest of the internees could regain their sight at any time, and the soldiers would probably neither realize nor care. Meanwhile, the girl with the glasses begins to stand in as a mother figure for the little boy—perhaps to assuage her guilt over the car-thief or perhaps out of genuine empathy. In contrast, the other blind internees wait in the hallway for food because they have little trust in the others and so decide that it is better to act in self-interest than to be sorry.



By sarcastically stating that the soldiers "react[] admirably," the narrator mocks the absurdity of their actions: not only are they heavily armed against blind people who cannot fight back, but killing the blind will not do anything from preventing the blindness from spreading. Of course, blindness is what the soldiers truly fear, and they likely already know that going blind is inevitable—the massacre simply proves that they are emotionally incapable of accepting this reality. The sergeant's explanation, while obviously absurd to the reader and the narrator, is designed to further scare the blind—who will never learn the truth about what happened—into submission. But it also seems to be a way to assuage his own guilt by refusing to accept that the people on his side could possibly do anything wrong. Indeed, in hoping that the blind starve and die, he reveals that he has cut off all empathy, as though the position to which he's been assigned demands it.



Having briefly stepped into the soldiers' perspectives in the previous pages, the narrator now examines the situation from the perspective of "the contaminated," who share the soldiers' existential dread at the prospect of going blind. This group also experiences the same fear of death, starvation, and social disorder that the already-blind internees feel. Caught between their hunger and their fear of blindness and divine punishment, they see the blind as a homogenous group—it seems they've already adjusted their outlook in response to living in the hospital's horrific, life-and-death conditions. Meanwhile, the doctor's wife appears as an ominous, haunting figure—just like the sergeant and the Government do to the blind. This again shows that the question of who stands for good and evil—at least in the world of the novel—largely depends upon subjective perspective and narrative.



The **blind** assemble to decide whether to first eat or bury the nine dead, whose identities they do not know. (In fact, they are the man who from the hotel, the taxi-driver, the policeman who took the car-thief home, the policeman who took the girl home, and five people from the other ward.) The group decides to eat first, as this will give them strength to bury the dead. But they struggle to divide the rations: some pretend that they have more people, and ultimately many people get double portions of food. The doctor's wife sees this but doesn't say anything: she fears that the others will turn her into a slave if they find out that she can see. She recognizes that the patients need to organize themselves, but she knows that any authority among them will be tenuous.

After eating, the patients flatly refuse to bury the dead. At night, the doctor convinces two men from his ward to join him in burying half the corpses, and his wife secretly helps him select the bodies of the four men from their ward. Three more men join to help dig. Meanwhile, the daily announcements that play over the loudspeakers start to sound more sinister. After the doctor's team finishes burying their dead, the other ward's patients refuse to do their part but promise that they will do so tomorrow.

On his way back to his ward, the doctor goes to the bathroom, where he steps on feces left by someone who missed the toilet. He wonders what the place looks like; there is no toilet paper. Disgusted, the doctor starts to cry. He finds the door and makes his way out, but he feels that he is dirty and "becoming an animal." Back in the ward, his wife helps him clean up while everyone else sleeps. She wonders when she will go **blind** and why she has been spared so far. She and the doctor hear moaning and labored breathing across the ward, and someone calls the couple making these noises "pigs."

The blind internees' decision to eat before burying the dead seems at once practical and sacrilegious, as though they've been reduced from humans with a sense of collective responsibility to mere animals more concerned about their own survival than the community they have formed in the hospital. In fact, the doctor's wife says nothing because she recognizes how these animalistic impulses are starting to take over. The dead are nameless and faceless to them, and in fact, only the narrator truly understands their connections to the other characters. But the fact that these minor characters die so unceremoniously also forces the reader (who is unlikely to be particularly affected by their deaths) to confront the ways in which they're similar to the soldiers who killed them and the internees who shrug the situation off.



The doctor and his wife clearly see how the internees' growing culture of selfishness threatens to create widespread disorder among all of them, and the doctor does his best to encourage the opposite outcome. Meanwhile, the Government's announcements now sound sinister because the internees realize that they are an attempt to cover up the Government's fear and confusion. The leadership is clearly willing to use power arbitrarily for whatever purposes it deems necessary, without taking the internees' humanity or wellbeing into account.



In this passage, various characters compare themselves and one another to animals, which points to the way all of them have essentially started thinking selfishly rather than socially. The disgusting state of the bathrooms is another sign that the hospital's fragile social order is on the brink of collapse—or has already collapsed—and the internees must dramatically lower their expectations for themselves and one another.



CHAPTER 7

The **blind** wake up well before dawn, whether because they are hungry, because their internal clocks are broken, or because others wake them up. Realizing that her watch has stopped because she forgot to wind it up, the doctor's wife starts crying uncontrollably. At first, the doctor assumes she has woken up blind, but she soon explains herself, and the girl with the glasses comes over to try and console her. The doctor's wife says that she is alright and still has hope for them all, but the girl thinks that "there is no salvation for us" and continues to blame herself for the car-thief's death. The doctor's wife helps the girl back into bed, and then a fight breaks out between two men who accidentally switched beds after coming back from the bathroom.

Anxious for food, which the soldiers have promised to leave outside, some of the patients wait in the hallway and speculate about whether they might get **shot**. The other ward's men still haven't buried their dead but insist that they won't do so until after they eat. They debate how to ration the food equally, but each side believes that the other's proposals are unfair.

Over the loudspeaker, "the voice" of the Government announces that the food is being delivered, but that the **blind** must stay away from the gate or be **shot**. The internees are afraid, but the voice tells them they have three minutes. They cautiously move outside, and the sergeant guides them to the food containers, which are off to one side. Meanwhile, the soldiers fantasize about shooting the blind, which the regiment's commander has said would be necessary, sooner or later, to contain the disease. One of the blind men finally reaches the containers, and the others pile on top of him in an effort to carry the food inside for themselves.

Without their sight, the blind lose their ability to sleep and wake with the sun, a routine that tied them to their previous lives as working members of a complex modern society. Similarly, the doctor's wife agonizes about her watch falling out of sync not because she cares what time it is, but rather because being able to know the time and follow some semblance of a schedule are signs of normalcy that she can use to stave off the creeping sense of disorientation in quarantine. Still, the contrast between her hope and the girl's despair shows how people's orientation toward the future (optimism or pessimism) is independent of the circumstances in which people live.



Just as the doctor's wife and the girl with the glasses debate whether they will ever see again, the other patients' debate about whether the soldiers will kill them reveals how fear and uncertainty structure their sense of self and emotional wellbeing. Their debates about food indicate that they are trying (and failing) to form an organized society in which they can agree on some principle that allows them to put the collective's interest before each individual's.



Notably, the Government only appears in the novel through this "voice" over the loudspeaker, which underlines the distance from which it makes its life-and-death decisions and amplifies Saramago's critique of centralized power. The internees' struggle to find the food containers further shows how they are dehumanized and ridiculed by the Government's attitude toward them—just as it is possible for blind people to live full and dignified lives, in these circumstances, the Government is turning the blind into the faceless, desperate, animalistic prisoners that the soldiers mortally fear becoming.



One **blind** man is clinging to the rope out of fear, but he leaves it to join the chaotic mass of internees looking for the food containers. When the sergeant orders everyone back to the main door, this man cannot find his way to the steps, and the soldiers aim their rifles at him. The sergeant tells them not to **shoot**, but one of the soldiers urges the man to continue toward him—the man takes three steps before realizing that this soldier is looking for an excuse to shoot him. Fortunately, the sergeant reprimands this soldier and tells the blind man to turn around, which he does. The blind man then follows the commotion made by the other patients to **the hospital's** front door.

During this man's near-death experience, some of the other patients ran away with food containers. The rest split the remainder and formed a "committee" to investigate the stolen food (after eating, of course). The patients who have been waiting in bed note that they heard the thieves run past, and everyone agrees to wait in bed after eating until the thieves return, so that they can be identified. But the internees do not catch anyone, and many of them fall asleep.

The narrator comments that the ward is like a hotel—surely it is better than being **blind** in the outside world. The narrator even praises the authorities for bringing the blind people together—who "we must organise ourselves," the narrator says, in order to maintain "self-respect" and avoid getting killed by the guards. The narrator just wishes that the blind had some form of entertainment.

There is **gunfire** outside: the sergeant is trying to frighten the roughly 200 newcomers who are headed into **the hospital**. There is not enough space, but rather than massacring the **blind**, they decide to open up all the empty wards to them. The soldiers direct the chaotic mass of people inside, and the new internees spread themselves around the hospital. The contaminated try to prevent the new patients from entering their wards, first by screaming and then by lashing out violently. With most of the internees inside, the front door is blocked off so that nobody else can enter. The soldiers nearly open fire, but the sergeant again stops them.

The bloodthirsty soldier's attempt to kill the innocent blind man exemplifies the vicious cruelty of the state in this novel, which is enabled and worsened by the system that forces the soldiers and blind internees into opposing roles of guard and prisoner. In other words, the soldiers seem to forget that the blind people inside the hospital have not committed any crime, and their very duties are designed to facilitate this forgetting. The sergeant's show of human decency is clearly an exception to the rule, but it does show that goodness can be found in even the darkest people and circumstances—just as even seemingly principled and moral people are capable of evil.



While the sergeant manages to save the innocent blind man, the other blind internees take advantage of the profoundly unjust situation in order to secure more resources for themselves. This shows that there is never truly justice in a corrupt circumstance like the one in the novel: when the sergeant rights one wrong, another takes its place.



The narrator's praise for the Government and the hospital is sarcastic, reflecting Saramago's ongoing critique of corrupt power. Additionally, by referring to themselves, along with the blind, as "ourselves," the narrator is perhaps conveying that they are also a blind person in the hospital. Alternatively, the narrator may be implying that in some fundamental and spiritual way, all human beings can count themselves among the "blind."



In a sense, this wave of newcomers forces the reader to see the blind as the soldiers see them: a nameless swarm of people who cease to be individuals and who are now entirely defined by the simple fact that they happen to be blind. This wave, which shows that the Government significantly underestimated the contagiousness of the white blindness, upends the fragile order that used to reign in the hospital. While brutal and prejudiced, the old sergeant at least kept to his principles—he believed that the blind should be shot—as does the new one, who sees unnecessary violence as wrong.



Gradually, the new internees find their way to the empty ward in the right-hand wing of **the hospital**, with the other **blind** people. But space soon runs out, so the new internees spread out in search of beds. Some fight with the contaminated, and others end up in the courtyard, where they come across the five corpses and begin yelling out to the others in shock. In a frenzy, these newcomers break into the wing of the contaminated, who begin suddenly going blind. Injured internees lie around the hallway, along with everyone's possessions. An old man with an eye patch "wait[s] for peace and silence to be restored" in the courtyard, and when it is, he starts asking around for a bed.

The narrator's description of the new internees is haunting because it portrays them like a liquid that fills all available space: again, the reader is forced to see the blind from the same dehumanizing perspective that the soldiers and Government take toward them—and that they increasingly take toward one another. The horror of corpses and sudden blindness proves that things can always get worse, and it gives the newcomers little time to adapt to the hospital's brutal conditions, which the Government has proven it cares little about fixing.



CHAPTER 8

The new arrivals bring "two advantages": first, with **the hospital** full, people can "establish and maintain stable and lasting relations" with one another. Second, with more people, food rations are more regularly provided and more equally shared. All in all, despite everyone's continued "misfortunes," things have noticeably improved. The second ward finally buries its dead, and the first ward, with guidance from the doctor's wife, remains clean and civil.

Just as quickly as the narrative descended into the horrors experienced by the latest group of internees to enter the hospital, it now shifts back to the positivity that always coexists with evil and suffering. Notably, all of the improvements that the narrator cites have to do with the hospital's changing social organization: namely, people invest in their relationships, which they see as meaningful because they are "stable and lasting," and people no longer fight over resources. In a sense, even after all hope of establishing a collective seems to have been lost, now the internees are establishing various smaller-scale networks, even if there is no centralized or universally-recognized power.



The first ward also welcomes the man with the eye patch, who takes over the car-thief's bed. The doctor's wife tells the doctor that this newcomer was one of his patients, so the doctor goes over, pretends to discover the man's eye patch, and reintroduces himself. They joke that, fortunately, the old man no longer needs surgery.

With his wife's invaluable but invisible help, the doctor maintains his moral and social authority in the ward. His jovial banter with the old man reveals that things truly are looking better and illustrates how people retain their humanity and capacity for good—like their ability to use humor as a survival mechanism—even amid adversity.



The old man with the eye patch reveals that the city is in a state of "panic" because of the **blindness** epidemic. All the other ward members who were in the doctor's office also introduce themselves to him, and then the doctor pulls out a radio, which will allow them to follow the news (although the girl with the glasses wants to listen to music). To the doctor's wife's delight, they tune into a station that announces the time: four o'clock. As the ward's patients crowd around, the man with the eye patch starts recounting everything that has happened since the white blindness began spreading. At first, there were hundreds of cases and everyone was frightened, but after a day, the Government claimed to have everything "under control."

The old man's late entry into the hospital and preexisting relationship with the doctor allow him to serve as a link between the outside world and the quarantine zone. Indeed, the doctor's wife resetting her watch symbolizes the way that this link gives the internees a sense of meaning or purpose and reminds them of their former lives that they hope to rediscover. Saramago's readers already know not to trust the Government when it says that things are "under control"—outside the hospital's gates, as well as inside, the Government has put its self-preservation first and is primarily interested in maintaining its power by any means necessary.



From this point, the narrator includes “a reorganized version” of the man with the eyepatch’s original story, which lacks credibility. After the initial outbreak, the Government announced that the **blindness** was temporary, just an unfortunate coincidence, and the public even thought that the blind would recuperate their vision. The Government held medical conferences in an attempt to find a solution, but the attendees went blind as well. Soon, there were too many blind people to quarantine, but they also could not be asked to quarantine themselves at home. People suddenly went blind while walking down the street, and entire families went blind together and became unable to care for themselves. Anyone who helped care for the blind went blind, too. Bus drivers and commercial pilots went blind on the job, causing horrific accidents, and transportation fell into chaos: the city is now full of abandoned **cars**, which turned into obstacles for the blind people roaming the streets.

The old man concludes his story and briefly chats about his eyepatch with the doctor. Then, the old man proposes they play a game “to pass the time”: each patient should share what they saw just as they went **blind**. The old man remembers examining his “blind eye” when he lost sight in the other one. The doctor explains that he was seeing his ophthalmology books, and the doctor’s wife says that she was in the ambulance. Finally, an unidentified man says that he was looking at a painting in the museum; his description of this piece is so complicated that it seems to be a number of different paintings all jumbled together. Meanwhile, someone repeatedly but unsuccessfully guesses the painter’s nationality. The girl with the glasses comments that everyone went blind because of fear, and the news announces “the formation of a government of unity and national salvation.”

The narrator’s bold and symbolic decision to “reorganize” the blind man’s story allows Saramago to mock the Government, whose formal-sounding language is used to create an illusion of objectivity and absolute truth. In fact, Saramago would surely want his readers to be more suspicious and skeptical of official-sounding narratives. Clearly, the Government’s repeated failures to control the situation show that its seemingly-objective narratives not only cannot be trusted, but moreover are designed in order to consolidate its power and advance its specific political ends. On another note, the blindness epidemic has revealed the extent to which modern technology and complex social organization makes people dependent upon one another—and specifically reliant on sight. Technology is entirely built around the fragile evolutionary development of human sight, a sensory system so complex that people often forget it is still a product of nature.



Although the old man has just shocked the other internees—and likely the reader—with his account of what’s happened since the epidemic started, he keeps his composure and quickly returns to the hopeful, positive side of things. This, in turn, helps the other internees remain calm. In fact, his storytelling game offers a rare moment of collective reflection for the internees, who get a chance to share their individual experiences in a way that they have generally been denied throughout their time in quarantine. Whereas the soldiers’ narratives about these internees have dehumanized and degraded them, when they are given the chance to narrate their own experiences, the internees reclaim their humanity. Indeed, this plays out on a smaller scale within the conversation: the person who keeps guessing the painter’s nationality is trying and failing to hijack the speaker’s story. Although the things that this speaker remembers seeing clearly could not all coexist in the same painting, his point is not to accurately describe what he saw, but rather to claim his individual narrative—his voice. Meanwhile, the Government’s promise seems both empty and foreboding: while “unity and national salvation” are needed, everybody in the book seems to understand that the existing state cannot provide it.



CHAPTER 9

At first, the internees satisfy their bathroom-related needs without conflict. But with **the hospital** full, “the filth” is indescribable: the bathrooms clog up, and the internees start defecating in the hallways and courtyard. Soon, these spaces are ridden with excrement that people have stepped in. The doctor’s wife desperately wants to resolve this nightmare, but the doctor warns that she cannot reveal that she can still **see**—it would be too dangerous. His wife insists that she has to help, but he warns that the hospital is a “harsh, cruel, implacable kingdom,” and that people without eyes are like people without souls. Still, the doctor’s wife decides that in the morning, she will reveal that she can see.

In the morning, the doctor’s wife wonders whether she should admit that she has been **seeing** all along or pretend that she’s regained her sight after being blind like everyone else. Overcome by the stench of **the hospital’s** unwashed residents and their feces, however, she starts to wonder whether she can really clean things up: the plumbing is broken, and she can’t fix everything on her own.

Some of the internees go to retrieve the food—although they always fight over it, they have developed a regular system for everyone to get their share. However, today, the men who retrieve the food come running back to report that another group of internees have seized all the food and prevented the men from taking any—they demands payment from anyone who wants to eat. This group of “thieves” is large, and they’re armed with clubs of some sort.

The doctor, the doctor’s wife, and the pharmacist’s assistant go out to try and negotiate with the thieves, who are armed themselves with sticks as well as metal rods taken from the beds. The armed thieves stand in a circle around the food, beating away the other **blind** people who are protesting loudly and trying to get to the food. The soldiers ignore these protests in hopes that they all end up killing one another, since this would mean fewer contagious people around. Many of the blind get beaten to the ground, and then the leader of the thieves pulls out a **gun** and fires into the ceiling. He declares that his gang is taking charge of the food, and that the others have to pay. The doctor’s wife asks how, and the man threatens her and then explains that the blind will pay with “all their valuables.”

Having finally accepted that she has a moral obligation to address the situation, no matter how much it horrifies her, the doctor’s wife finally decides to act. The passage’s description of “filth” and “excrement” is intentionally hard to stomach—Saramago wants his readers to confront the ugly and disgusting yet fundamental dimensions of human life. Human society is specifically designed to whisk away and hide bodily functions. However, when society falls apart, these basic biological facts of human nature—the things that unite us with the rest of nature’s “kingdom”—become unavoidable.



Caught between her sense of moral responsibility to the other internees and her paralyzing sense of incapacity, the doctor’s wife points out that heroes never truly act alone—they only act with the support of a social fabric.



Just like the soldiers standing guard outside, the “thieves” seize power the old-fashioned way: with brute physical force. As such, Saramago calls into question the nature of the Government that has set up the quarantine in the first place, as it is just as indifferent to its citizens’ wellbeing as the “thieves” are to their fellow internees. The novel seems to imply that this is how all government works: those who have the ability to hoard wealth and control resources have the power to govern, regardless of whether they really deserve that power.



The thieves make it clear that they are not interested in negotiating or establishing a system based on consent—they do not think the others have any legitimate rights, and they make it clear that the others are their subjects, not their equals. Of course, the soldiers treat the internees the exact same way, and the narrator makes the parallel between the Government and the thugs clear by pointing out that the thieves’ seizure of power benefits the Government: even though it claims that its job is to protect the nation’s citizens, the Government’s actual goal is clearly just to control and suppress the internees, no matter the cost.



Everyone returns to the wards, and the doctor and pharmacist's assistant agree that they must sacrifice their valuables and find a way to make weapons. Anyone without valuables will have to depend on others' charity. The ward agrees that the doctor will take charge, and he chooses the first blind man to join him. The doctor's wife empties her bag for them to use to collect everyone's valuables, and in the process, she discovers a pair of pointed scissors that she does not remember packing. The doctor collects everyone's things, starting with his own, while his wife hides her scissors by hanging them on a nail in the wall.

The doctor and the first blind man collect everyone's things and then go to ward where the thieves are staying. On the way, they comment on the absurdity of the situation and debate whether things will—or even could—get any worse. They wait outside the thieves' ward while other people give up their goods, and then come up to the ward's door, where the thieves have propped up a bed as a makeshift "trading counter." The doctor wonders how many of these "thugs" there are and realizes that, since the leader with the **gun** has asked someone to "take note," this means that someone among them is able to write. As the leader assesses the bag of valuables, the sound of paper being punched indicates that someone is recording the amounts in the braille alphabet. This accountant must be "a normal **blind** person," meaning that he was blind before the outbreak.

The accountant and the leader evaluate the ward's things and give the doctor three containers of food. The doctor complains that it is not enough, but the thug threatens to take some of it away and sticks his **gun** in the doctor's neck. The doctor and the first blind man reluctantly take the three containers back to their ward. On the way back, the doctor says that he regrets not grabbing the thug's gun, but the first blind man suggests that this would have led to a "real war." When they arrive and explain what happened, the ward's residents celebrate them as their rightful leaders.

The patients recognize the injustice of their situation, but more importantly, they recognize that justice is completely irrelevant to the thieves (as it is to the Government). In their moment of desperation, the ward's residents turn to the doctor for guidance, but they fail to realize that his competence and expertise are largely the result of guidance from his wife. The doctor's wife's scissors, on the other hand, present an opportunity that only she can seize—the thugs have taken power simply because of their weapons, but their blindness will hinder their ability to use them. The doctor's wife now has a tool capable of overthrowing the thugs, if she can use it correctly and build up the moral courage to act.



This situation is absurd not only because the thugs are preying on people who have already been reduced to nothing, but also because the "valuables" that the thugs are demanding actually have no value whatsoever inside the hospital. In fact, there is a contradiction at the heart of the thugs' behavior: they have seized power by ignoring all social conventions and establishing a regime based on brute force, but they are now demanding that the other internees turn over things like money, which has no use or value outside the context of society. Since they are blind, they could not even distinguish one denomination of currency from another. Their greatest asset is the accountant, who is able to harness the technology of writing without his sight. While this shows that different conditions and resources can enable blind people to have capacities that the internees lack—and therefore that life could go on after the blindness epidemic—it also shows how conditions that are conceived as incapacity can actually become a source of power in certain circumstances.



Again, the protagonists' outrage—and readers' indignation on their behalf—ultimately achieves nothing: justice and morality are irrelevant to the thugs, who retain absolute authority to do whatever they want, simply because they have a gun. Unfortunately, the doctor's sense of moral responsibility outpaces his capacity to act: he desperately wants to fight for the oppressed internees but simply has no tools available to him, and his ward's respect is no match for the thugs' weapons.



CHAPTER 10

The old man with the eyepatch does not give away his radio with the valuables. Just to be cautious, he starts secretly listening to his news program in bed, then relaying any important news to the people next to him, who gradually pass it around the room and end up distorting it in the process. That same night, the announcer on this program screams out that he has gone **blind**. Knowing that the show's whole crew will follow and the program will never return, the man with the eyepatch begins to cry.

Fortunately, the internees have eaten three full meals, and they sleep peacefully. The narrator suggests that this might even mean that "the concentration of food supplies" has "positive aspects." Meanwhile, the doctor's wife is lying awake, thinking about the doctor's comment that one of the thugs might be a spy who is actually not **blind**. Of course, the doctor's wife can still see, but she has seen such "horror" that she wishes she were blind. She sees that the girl with the glasses and the boy with the squint have pushed their beds together and realizes she can do the same with her husband. Then, she starts thinking about the scissors.

The doctor's wife sneaks out to the hallway without alerting anyone. She **sees** some internees sleeping on the hallway's floor: they are the people couldn't find a bed when they first arrived in the **hospital**." She stops to watch a couple have sex—not because she's jealous, but because she feels sympathy for them. At the front door, she sees one of the soldiers guarding the gate and senses a profound silence that makes it seem as though "the whole of humanity [...] had disappeared." The blind, the doctor's wife thinks, cannot tell day from night, and the guards do not know about the war happening inside. She wonders what to do with the scissors. A guard notices the doctor's wife sitting down on the steps and he shines his light at her as a warning, so she goes back inside and heads to the thugs' ward.

Like in a game of "telephone," the news gradually changes as the patients pass it on, adapting it to their own purposes and leaving their own mark on it. But this does not have significant consequences, because for them the news is just a story that has no obvious bearing on their everyday lives in quarantine. However, for the old man, these stories represent his last connection to the world outside the quarantine. The news crew's blindness, which literally prevents them from getting the perspective on the world that they need to produce news stories, signifies that the internees are again locked in their own experience, with no outside narratives to sustain their hope for the future.



The narrator facetiously praises "the concentration of food supplies" in the same sarcastic way that workers might praise their bosses or citizens might praise a government that rules over them. The blind people are grateful for the hand that feeds them, even though it is actually oppressing them, and they don't fully understand the larger structures that prevent them from getting what they actually deserve. The doctor's wife is frightened at the thought that she has a counterpart who is using their power for evil rather than good—still, by fantasizing about going blind, she continues to wish away her moral responsibility rather than boldly accepting and acting on it. But, as she contemplates the beds and the scissors, she reveals that she is starting to inch toward action.



When the doctor's wife observes the people sleeping and having sex on the floor, she finally allows herself to process the extent to which the people around her are suffering: their most basic needs are denied, and they are losing the drive to satisfy all but the most fundamental biological instincts. People have these instincts all the time, of course, but people often imagine their "humanity" in terms of their ability to transcend these basic instincts and dedicate themselves to more complex and specialized tasks. The doctor's wife's sight, which she shares with the guard outside (who does not know she can see) is clearly a metaphor for her ability to continue pursuing higher tasks, the responsibility for which weighs on her more and more with every passing day.



A man stands guard outside the thieves' ward, waving a short stick back and forth. The doctor's wife approaches him and then looks over his shoulder into the ward, but the man seems to sense her presence and starts looking for an intruder. Eventually, he gives up, and the doctor's wife gets a good look at the 20 people and the pile of food boxes inside. The guard goes to sleep, and the doctor's wife wonders what to do. She realizes that she cannot blame the guard for the gang's thievery—instead, she feels “a strange compassion” for him, and then “a cold shiver” that is either a fever or perhaps something deeper within her soul. She slowly walks back to her ward, and on the way she passes **blind** people who are oblivious to her presence.

The doctor's wife inches closer and closer to accepting the moral authority that seems to have fallen into her lap, simply because of her inexplicable continued ability to see. Perhaps her sight has conferred a sense of responsibility on her, or perhaps it has simply allowed her to see the dehumanizing and horrific conditions in which all of the internees are living in a way that they others cannot. Either way, the doctor's wife is still thinking about what to do in terms of morality, justice, and empathy, while the rest of the blind people are simply thinking in terms of self-preservation. While she has to fight people who are acting on this basis—like the guard who works for the thugs—she also empathizes with them, realizing that they are doing what they believe is necessary for their survival.



CHAPTER 11

The narrator suggests that if the thieves' accountant “c[a]me over to this side,” he might instead chronicle the inmates' lack of food and resources, note that the thieves made **the hospital's** sanitary situation even worse by blocking access a bathroom, and condemn them for hoarding and wasting food. The healthy have become sick, the flu has spread fast, and nobody has any medicine—including the two **blind** people with cancer. The narrator continues that the accountant would give up, realize that someone else has stolen his food, and go back to the thugs' ward just so that he wouldn't go hungry.

Just as the doctor's wife felt a troubling sense of empathy for the thugs' bodyguard at the end of the previous chapter, here the narrator points out how easy it would be for the roles to be switched and the novel's various characters to be forced to defend principles opposite to the ones they actually hold. Moreover, the narrator's commentary on the accountant is a way of pointing out how perspective often determines what appears good or evil and illustrating that morality ultimately proves irrelevant to human beings when survival is on the line.



In fact, every time that the food arrives, the internees angrily protest and consider a collective uprising, but they give up when they remember that the thieves have a **gun**. They eventually decide to send a larger group to retrieve the food, but the thieves chase this group away with a gunshot and cudgel blows, then deny the other ward food for three days and cut their rations by half afterward.

The internees' resignation is similar to the hypothetical situation in which the accountant switches sides, because it shows that people can only make use of their moral and political imagination when their lives are not on the line—not only do basic physical needs come first, but when some people act selfishly and refuse to treat others as equal members of a community, collective decision-making becomes impossible. This leads to a sort of paradox: while people can best ensure everybody's survival by forming a community, people avoid forming communities when their individual well-being is on the line. The only way to resolve this conflict is to create a sense of trust in the collective through social or moral conscience.



At this point, the thugs start demanding additional valuables from the rest of the internees, who start to complain that they have nothing left and turn on one another, inventing excuses for why they (but not others) deserve food. People find valuables hidden by their wardmates, but “to conceal their crime,” some pretend to be others when they hand them over. Luckily, the accountant does not check these new contributions against people’s original ones.

A week later, the thugs demand that the others send them women, and they threaten to withhold food when everyone refuses. In one of the wards, a messenger proposes that women volunteer, which leads to an outcry: the men try to convince the women to go, but the women ask whether the men would go if the thugs had asked for *them*. In the first ward on the right, the doctor’s wife agrees to go, but the first blind man protests vehemently that the blind man’s wife must not go. However, she volunteers anyway, infuriating him. She asks, “What are we to do?” Gazing at her scissors, the doctor’s wife is thinking either the same thing, and she’s also wondering what to do with the scissors.

The thugs decide to take women one ward at a time, which is more systematic and efficient for them. Meanwhile, the women start remembering their past sexual experiences so that they can use these memories of consensual sex as a kind of shield against the thugs’ violent assaults. The girl with the dark glasses refuses to go to the thugs, but she does have sex with the old man with the eyepatch for reasons that nobody quite understands.

The hoodlums do not care that their demand is unreasonable because they refuse to listen to all dissent—if their demand is illogical, in other words, they will punish the other internees rather than recognizing their own error. This effectively breaks down everyone else’s morale: as the internees desperately adapt to these new and unreasonable conditions, they turn against one another. With trust and empathy thrown out the window, it’s even more difficult to form the kind of organized force that would be necessary to reclaim power and seize food from the thugs.



The thugs’ new demand is a horrifying example of human evil, both because of the specific trauma inflicted through sexual violence against women and the dehumanization inherent to treating human beings like property in a transaction. The men’s easy agreement reflects that, perhaps because of the horrible conditions in the hospital, they have completely lost empathy and can no longer imagine the world from anybody else’s perspective—this is why the women turn the proposal back on the men, who are likely not used to being sexually objectified. Similarly, the first blind man’s insistence that his wife not go to the thugs seems less about his wife’s wellbeing than about protecting his own feelings and sense of ownership over his wife. This reflects the underlying disrespect in their relationship and suggests that the violent and transactional nature of the thugs’ demand might actually reflect a deeper pattern of oppressive relationships between men and women in the novel.



Knowing that they will soon be raped, the women desperately try to ensure that the assaults will not dominate their associations of sex. This process also reminds them of how consensual, pleasurable sex is a part of the human experience that’s missing for those incarcerated in the hospital.



Another night, while the doctor's wife watches, the doctor gets up and walks over to the girl with the glasses, then gets into her bed. The girl wakes up and then has sex with the doctor, who afterward wonders whether his wife might find out. When the doctor is about to return to his bed, his wife lightly touches him and tells him not to get up or try to explain himself. The girl with the glasses starts crying, but the doctor's wife embraces her and tells her that this is not her fault, and that sometimes "words serve no purpose." Then, the doctor's wife reveals to the girl: "I can **see**." The girl notes that she has suspected this from the beginning, and they whisper back and forth for some time, the doctor's wife consoling the girl. Then, the doctor's wife helps her husband back to their bed.

The doctor's tryst with the girl with the glasses is impulsive and inexplicable, seemingly a product of the desperate circumstances. The doctor's wife seems to understand this and, accordingly, she doesn't treat it as a meaningful violation of their marriage. Her admission that "words serve no purpose" in this situation illustrates a broader principle about how trauma silences people in this book. The novel's words strive to capture the full depth of the characters' emotions, just as characters attempt to use words to change their circumstances—but both of these attempts inevitably fall short. Nevertheless, while language cannot change the circumstances that cause trauma, forming one's own narrative is one of the few ways in which a person can move beyond trauma and preserve their sense of humanity and individuality.



At dinner the next day, the thugs arrive at the doctor's wife's ward and ask how many women they have. There are seven—"three men for each women," the thugs note, laughing. The thugs declare that the women must visit them after they finish eating, and one of them warns that any women who are menstruating aren't wanted. The thugs leave, and the women, who cannot bear to eat any more, form a line behind the doctor's wife. They consider going outside and letting the soldiers **shoot** them, but instead they continue towards the thugs' ward. On the way, the doctor's wife **sees** the other wards' women "curled up in their beds like animals," traumatized to the point that they scream if anyone approaches them.

The thugs' laughter suggests that they are an embodiment of willful evil: they get a sadistic, animalistic pleasure out of violence. This contrast with the women's utter despair, as it shows that the thugs clearly neither want to understand nor are capable of understanding the actual consequences of their actions. As the women's circumstances continue to worsen and they begin losing all hope, they seriously consider the possibility that death might be their best option.



The women enter the thugs' ward, where the men surround them and their **gun**-toting leader starts to fondle them, one after another. He chooses to stay with the doctor's wife and the girl with the dark glasses. The leader violently rapes the girl, who vomits as he finishes, and then he tells his cronies that she is theirs. They come and drag the girl away, and then the ringleader forces the doctor's wife onto her knees and demands oral sex. At first, she refuses. The ringleader tells her he remembers her voice, and she replies that she remembers his face—he is confused but does not understand. She tries to reach for the man's gun, but she cannot get to it, and she does what he has demanded.

This rape scene is intentionally graphic and difficult to read—with it, Saramago is challenging his readers to confront humanity's boundless capacity for evil, which is deeper and more horrific than most people would like to acknowledge and tends to be most prominent in times of crisis. Looking the other way and failing to acknowledge this evil is, in a sense, failing to do justice to those who suffer it: for the reader, taking the women's experiences seriously and empathizing with them requires digesting all the unsavory and horrific details. Accordingly, this passage requires readers to find a kind of emotional strength that most people do not use in their daily lives, and this is similar to the emotional strength that the novel's protagonists must find to overcome their circumstances.



At dawn, the women return to their ward, having suffered “everything that can be done to a woman while still leaving her alive” throughout the night. As they pass the front door and **see** the soldiers preparing to give out the food boxes, one of the women collapses. In the ward, the doctor’s wife lays this woman on her bed and announces that “she’s dead.” The doctor asks “what happened,” but the women say nothing, as no words can explain their experience. The doctor’s wife tells the men to get the food, and the doctor and the old man with the eyepatch agree to go, while the first blind man refuses.

The women’s death punctuates trauma with tragedy. Since no words can fully capture the physical pain, sense of objectification and powerlessness, and loss of dignity and autonomy that the women have just suffered, putting any words to it would simply mean watering down their experiences for the men. Indeed, the emotional labor of putting their experience into words—which first requires fully acknowledging and making sense of it—is also an unrealistic feat for the traumatized women. The doctor’s wife makes it clear that the least the men can do is respect the women’s need for silence to recuperate—and to pick up some of the burden by retrieving the food. The first blind man’s refusal to help suggests not only that he is lazy and selfish, but also that he remains incapable of empathizing with the others or viewing himself as part of a collective.



The doctor’s wife looks for some way to wash the dead woman’s body, “to deliver her purified to the earth.” In **the hospital’s** dining hall, she layers the plastic bags from the food inside one another, and then she fills them with water and runs out before the confused **blind** internees all around her catch up. In the ward, the doctor’s wife washes the dead woman’s corpse, the rest of the women, and then herself.

The doctor’s wife’s quest to “purify” the dead woman represents her hope to regain some semblance of control, even if just symbolic and narrative, back from the thugs: she refuses to let them have the last word. In washing the rest of the group, she also takes on the role of protector and caretaker, which suggests that the severity of her trauma at the hands of the thugs may be driving her to finally start using whatever tools she can access to fight back.



CHAPTER 12

A few days later, on their way to another ward, the thugs stop by the protagonists’ ward to taunt the women. The doctor’s wife reveals that one of them has died, and one of the thugs dismisses this as unimportant. “It wasn’t much of a loss,” the doctor’s wife says sardonically, and the thugs pause, confused, before sauntering away.

The thugs are surprised to hear the doctor’s wife make fun of the woman’s death because they assumed that nobody else could be as cruel and heartless as they are. By momentarily agreeing with them, the doctor’s wife rejects the role they have given her (a battered victim) and instead forces them to see her as their peer. In a sense, she models empathy by mirroring the thugs’ position, both to make them consider everyone else’s position and to indicate that she is willing to fight back.



The doctor's wife grabs the scissors and waits by the door until the next ward's 15 women come into the corridor. Terrified by the stories they have heard, these women slowly walk toward the thugs' ward, and the doctor's wife silently follows them. When they arrive, the thugs examine and begin to rape them, and then the doctor's wife slips into the ward behind them with her scissors. She approaches the leader, who is raping one of the women. The doctor's wife waits for the perfect opportunity and then drives the scissors "deep into the **blind** man's throat." As he starts screaming and his blood starts spurting everywhere, he also ejaculates, and the woman he is raping takes the opportunity to bite off his penis. The doctor's wife whispers in this woman's ear to comfort her.

The other **blind** thugs realize that something is wrong and head toward the leader. The blind accountant reaches the leader's body first and grabs the **gun** out of the man's pocket. Meanwhile, the women try to flee to the hallway, but they run toward the men by mistake. While the men and women fight, the doctor's wife waits in the corner. The accountant tries to establish order by firing into the air, but this only creates more chaos. The other men to give up on their fistfights with the women, and the doctor's wife starts to attack, hitting the men indiscriminately in an attempt to make space for the women to escape. She is successful, and the women make it to the corridor.

From the doorway to the thugs' ward, the doctor's wife yells out that, just as she did not forget the ringleader's face, she "won't forget [the others'] faces either." The accountant threatens her in turn, claiming that they remember her voice and will kill her, and that he is not **blind** like the others. Then, he declares that the thugs will withhold food from everyone else, but the doctor's wife replies that if they do so, she will kill one of the thugs every day until they give up—in fact, her ward will take charge of the food now. The accountant fires a **gunshot** at the doctor's wife but misses, after which the doctor's wife heads down the hallway toward her ward.

The doctor's wife takes advantage of the thugs' distraction while they rape the women, but readers might wonder why she does not kill the leader before the women arrive, in order to spare these women the suffering she had to endure. There is no clear or easy answer to this question, but it is significant that the doctor's wife stabs the thugs' leader while he is doing the same thing to the woman who bites off his penis as he did to the doctor's wife a few days before. This makes it clear that she is acting in symbolic revenge. But she is also careful to comfort the blind woman, who is likely to be confused and even more frightened by the commotion. In the process, however, the doctor's wife indirectly reveals her identity in the only form that the blind can perceive it: her voice.



In the pandemonium that follows the thug leader's death, the blind accountant recognizes that whoever has the gun will have power over the rest of the group, and so he grabs it while the others run in confused circles. The doctor's wife went after the thugs' leader both to avenge her own trauma and to destabilize the thugs' organization. But curiously, she does not stab or kill anyone else—she only attacks the others in order to help the women escape. This suggests that she places blame solely and squarely on the leader's shoulders—she does not want to do more harm than is necessary, and the other thugs do not deserve the same punishment as the leader who organized them in a way that enabled their potential for evil.



The doctor's wife makes it clear that, in killing the thugs' leader, she fully intends on replacing him and acting as the hospital's new dictator—now, she will use the thugs' own starvation tactics against them. Her scissors, combined with her sight, easily outpace the blind accountant's gun. By mentioning the thugs' "faces," she hints at the fact that she can see and intensifies her threats against them. When the accountant says that he is not blind like everyone else, he is pointing out that he has been blind all his life and thus has some level of advantage (though not nearly as much of an advantage as the doctor's wife). The doctor's wife already knows this about the accountant, however, since her husband reported hearing someone type out braille.



On the way back to her ward, the doctor's wife bursts into tears and falls to the ground when she realizes that she actually killed someone and will do so again if needed. Such drastic measures are necessary, she decides, "when what is still alive is already dead." The doctor finds her in the hallway—he has heard that a woman stabbed killed the leader of the thugs, and he knew this woman had to be his wife. The doctor's wife admits what she has done. She insists that "someone had to do it," but the doctor worries that this will spark some kind of war between the thugs and the other internees. They decide to barricade their ward's door with beds, like the thugs did, to make sure nobody attacks them while they sleep.

Over the next few days the accountant's threat proves to be true: the soldiers only deliver food inconsistently. After two days without food, a group led by the doctor's wife goes outside and asks the new sergeant for an explanation. The sergeant insists that the soldiers aren't responsible—there is simply no food to give the internees, who will still be **shot** if they come outside. Back inside, the internees debate what to do—they know they will start to starve soon if they stay inside, but they'll probably be shot if they go outside.

One of the internees laments that the thugs' leader has died: the thugs were giving everyone food, which was worth the price the women had to pay. The man declares that whoever killed the thugs' leader should be bought "to justice." Unexpectedly, the doctor's wife agrees, thinking that she'll be to blame if any of the internees starve to death. She nearly admits that she killed the leader, but the old man with the eyepatch stops her and says that whoever killed the man was actually a courageous heroine who protected the internees' dignity. Just as the interned men profited from the women's exploitation "like low-life pimps," he declares, the men should put their bodies on the line by stealing the food from the soldiers.

The doctor's wife is overwhelmed to recognize that she has finally taken the decisive action necessary to reclaim the hospital from the thieves, but she cannot shake the recognition that she has done something horrendous and inhuman. The situation, she realizes, completely transforms the meaning of good and evil—but this does not make the demands of morality any less important, just much harder to fulfill. Unlike the thugs, who feel no empathy or remorse when they commit acts of horrific violence, the doctor's wife retains her moral conscience and refuses to suppress her feelings. In other words, her breakdown is a sign of moral fortitude, not of emotional weakness: it shows that she continues to value and pursue what she knows to be right, even though most of the people around her have given up on their principles.



The lack of food reminds the internees that, for a long while, the thugs were the only people mediating between the indifferent soldiers and the patients inside the hospital. Now, the reader is forced to question the notion that the thugs represented pure evil: what if the thugs were actually carefully rationing food to help keep the patients alive? Of course, this does not excuse their violence, but it does show the extent to which circumstances and the inclusion or omission of particular details can determine the morality and consequences of different actions.



The nameless internee's defense of the thugs shows that he does not understand the women's experience, and it arguably shows how significantly the deprivation of basic needs like food can distort people's thinking. More broadly, it also represents the human tendency to defend the actions of the powerful, even when they are against one's own interests, in order to continue feeling that the world is ordered logically and that the powerful justly deserve their positions. But the doctor's wife's near acceptance of responsibility shows that she continues to struggle with the moral implications of what she has done. The old man with the eyepatch again serves as the voice of reason and wisdom, reminding the group of the actual situation and the fact that the women know the depth of the thugs' cruelty better than the men.



The woman who bit off the thug leader's penis—the only person who knows that the doctor's wife killed the man—comes into the hallway. To give this woman the opportunity to identify her, the doctor's wife decides to speak: she announces that the women should “return to that place where they humiliated us,” to “rid ourselves of it,” and the woman who knows her identity replies, “Wherever you go, I shall go.” The men are surprised, and the doctor asks if anyone still wants to punish the leader's killer, or if whoever stabbed him was acting on behalf of everyone else. His wife suggests that the prisoners will launch an attack to get food if they are not given it by tomorrow.

The meeting closes, and everyone returns to their wards just as the loudspeaker plays the daily instructions—this has only happened occasionally as of late, which has annoyed all the **blind** people who relied on it to help keep count of the days. Suddenly, after the full instructions play out, the lights in **the hospital** go off. It is night, and when the doctor's wife goes outside, she sees that there's an apparent power outage in the surrounding area of the city.

In the morning, the internees assemble on the front steps and wait for food or the soldiers. But nothing happens all day, so they return inside to try and take food from the thugs, who have again blocked the entrance to their ward with beds. The man with the eyepatch starts planning an attack. Although some of the **blind** resist the idea, 17 of them agree to go—including the doctor and his wife, the girl with the glasses, the pharmacist's assistant, a number of other men, and “that woman who had said, ‘Wherever you go, I shall go.’” They debate tactics and decide to advance silently, barefoot, with the metal bars that make up their beds. The girl with the glasses insists that the women must play their part, although the man with the eyepatch objects and laments, “[if only one of you women could see.](#)”

The **blind** advance on the thugs' lair. One of them drops their metal bar, which makes “a deafening sound,” but the doctor's wife goes ahead to confirm that the hoodlums are not startled. Other internees gather around to observe, and some decide to join in at the last minute. The evening breaks, and when they reach the thugs' ward, the doctor's wife doesn't notice that there are even more beds blocking the door now. The man with the eyepatch yells out, and the inmates start pushing on the beds but make no progress. Everyone starts screaming, and then the accountant fires three **gunshots** from inside, which strike two of the inmates.

The woman who says “Wherever you go, I shall go” privately affirms her loyalty and sets up the doctor's wife as the patients' legitimate leader. Serving as kind of a mirror for the doctor's wife to enable her to see the effects of her actions, this woman defends the killing as righteous and encourages the internees to organize against their actual enemy (the rest of the thugs) rather than inventing a new enemy who is easier to confront.



The loudspeaker's inconsistency highlights the unreliability and impotence of the Government, whose 15 rules are no longer relevant under the actual conditions the inmates are forced to endure. The loss of electricity represents the collapse of organized society and authority more generally, which ominously signals to the internees that anarchy reigns outside as well as inside the hospital.



There is no longer any sign of the Government that locked the inmates inside in the first place, and they decide to attack the thugs for the sake of food, not power. These internees are trying to seize food for everyone, not only themselves, which suggests that there is now a heightened sense of unity and moral conscience among them. While their numbers are small, the uprising is still significant enough to indicate that the doctor's wife has brought them hope—as they organize, their morale improves, and vice versa. Of course, the comment from the man with the eyepatch at the end of this section is deeply ironic, because it shows that nobody understands the true source of the doctor's wife's power (or their growing power as a collective).



Now leaderless and on the defensive, the thugs simply lock themselves inside with their food, and the doctor's wife's seemingly mystical power of sight hits an obstacle it cannot overcome. Ironically, the authority of both the Government (including the soldiers) and the thugs seems to have completely collapsed—so while the internees have gained a kind of freedom and independence, this is meaningless without the resources they need to survive.



The internees retreat and debate whether to rescue the wounded. The doctor, his wife, the man with the eyepatch, and the woman who said “Wherever you go, I shall go” decide to crawl over and check, while others make noise back in their wards. When they arrive, there is so much blood that they know the two fallen men are dead, and they drag them out. The accountant fires a **shot** but misses, and the **blind** carry the corpses out to the main hallway.

The narrator reveals that there has been some dissent among the thugs since their leader was killed. The accountant has the **gun**, but not people’s respect, and “he loses a little more authority” every time he shoots.

In the moonlight, the doctor’s wife can **see** that the dead are the pharmacist’s assistant and “the fellow who said the blind hoodlums would **shoot** at random.” After announcing their identities, she also reveals that she is not blind—some people are surprised, but others already suspected this. The doctor’s wife then leads the others in dragging the corpses to the courtyard, and people go to bed wherever they wish (rather than in their old wards). But, due to some combination of their starvation, terror, excitement, and uncertainty, nobody can sleep: everyone stays awake, like “buzzing insects.”

Meanwhile, one **blind** woman finds a cigarette lighter that she had packed before coming to **the hospital**; she crosses over to the thugs’ ward and sets fire to the beds that are blocking the door. The flame grows rapidly, killing the both the thugs and the woman who set it. Terrified, some of the blind flee for the hospital’s front door, trampling one another in the process. Others open their windows and jump out into the courtyard. The blind start yelling for the doctor’s wife, who has just led her ward’s residents out into the corridor. With the other half of the hospital on fire, the inmates decide to “get out,” despite the risk posed by the soldiers. As the man with the eyepatch puts it, “Better to be **shot** than to be burnt to death.”

Yet again, the decision to rescue the wounded is not only a practical question—it also represents the protagonists’ insistence on preserving the dignity and individuality of their compatriots, who have died in a fight against abject evil. The precision afforded by the doctor’s wife’s sight continues clashing with the brute physical power represented by the blind accountant’s gun, and there is still no clear resolution to this struggle between opposite kinds of power.



Although the lead thug originally wielded power simply because he had the gun, it becomes clear that he also managed to win everybody else’s confidence (perhaps through charisma) in a way that the blind accountant simply cannot.



The doctor’s wife’s decision to reveal that she can see is at once desperate and triumphant: since the internees are engaged in a bitter battle against the thugs, they need any advantage they can get, and her sight is one of them. But this also represents her insistence on finally taking moral responsibility for leading and coordinating the group, even though she did not initially feel up to the task. After a long period of despair, the group is suddenly overcome with a sense of hope and anticipation—finally, they can imagine a future besides detention in the hospital.



The nameless blind woman’s lack of identity is fitting, because it suggests both that she could be anyone and that she is acting on behalf of everyone—she is not interested in the meaning or the consequences of her action but merely motivated by a burning desire for revenge. The suddenness of her decisive action contrasts almost comically with the anxious despair the inmates endured for weeks—but now, with the situation becoming life-or-death, they run from a certain danger and toward an uncertain one.



The doctor's wife leads the inmates through the smoke-filled corridor to **the hospital's** front steps, where she shouts out for the soldiers. However, there is no light, and there are no soldiers. She tells the inmates that they're free just as the hospital's roof comes crashing down. Some of the inmates make it outside, but many die inside either crushed by the fallen building or trampled by the fleeing crowds. "The gate is wide open," the narrator concludes, and "the madmen escape."

The soldiers' unexpected disappearance ironically shows the internees that they could have left in search of food long ago and avoided the gory deaths they now incur: they were trapped inside simply because of their expectations and sense of defeat. Just like the man who lamented the lead thug's death, the internees as a whole became so used to their adverse conditions that they completely gave up on the possibility of autonomy. Because of the conditions in which they've been confined, the novel's characters truly resemble the "madmen" stereotypically associated with asylums—they are completely out of touch with the reality of life in the city. By suggesting that the mental hospital has made the blind into "madmen," Saramago points out how environments and circumstances inevitably shape and define people.



CHAPTER 13

There's a big difference between "rational labyrinth" of **the hospital** and "the demented labyrinth of the city." The **blind** huddle together outside the hospital, unsure of where to go and afraid to move, hoping that the soldiers will return to with food to give them. They speculate about whether there might be a cure. Some say that they will wait until dawn, when they feel the sun, and others fall asleep—some do not awaken. The doctor's wife, wearing rags from the waist down and naked from the waist up, agrees that it is best to wait for morning. She starts planning a route to bring the blind from her ward to their homes. When the fire stops burning, the night grows cold—the blind sleep lightly, crowded together like a single, suffering entity.

The contrast between the hospital's "rational labyrinth" and the city's "demented" one is not only a commentary on their architecture: it also ironically points out how life was regimented and familiar to the patients in the hospital, but is now foreign and unknown in the city where they used to live. Their attachment to the familiar and fear of the unknown, a conventional human impulse now heightened by crisis, leads them to cling to the very hospital that has been a symbol of their oppression and powerlessness. Just as the narrator called them "madmen" but now calls the hospital a "rational" place, what used to look like evil oppression has started looking benevolent for the blind. This narrative trick demonstrates how easily opposites like good and evil, rational and irrational, and allies and enemies can flip when contexts change.



It rains in the morning, which convinces some of the inmates that the soldiers will not bring their food. Led by the doctor's wife, "the woman with eyes that can **see**," some of the **blind** muster up their last strength and head for the city center. The doctor's wife wants to leave the others somewhere so that she can search for food on her own. The streets and all the shops are empty, perhaps because it's early or perhaps because it's raining, so the doctor's wife leads the group to a shop, where she notices people lying on the floor. One man walks up to the door, sticks his arm out and tells the others, "It's raining." He is blind—and so are all the rest.

The soldiers' complete disappearance is a more compelling reason to think they will not bring food, but the internees seem to choose the rain because this provides a more soothing and comfortable narrative: the soldiers are still out there, thinking about the internees' dietary needs—they are just unable to come today. Realizing that this is absurd, the doctor's wife takes the leadership role she has already assigned herself. The city is an eerie shell of its former self, which suggests that the blindness epidemic has fundamentally transformed it: the blind can no longer hope to return to their previous lives. Rather, they must figure out how to fashion new ones entirely.



The doctor's wife introduces herself and explains her group's predicament. But the man reveals that the entire country has gone **blind** and that anyone who can still see keeps it a secret. In order not to lose other people, everyone looks for food in groups and takes shelter wherever they can. The people who managed to lock themselves in food stores were lucky at first but soon became targets: the man even remembers hearing that one food store got burned down with its residents inside. When the rain stops, the man tells the other members of his group, who grab their bags and head outside in their heavy winter clothing. Gradually, such groups fill the street, relieving themselves and wandering around in search of food.

The doctor's wife leads her group into the empty store, which is full of electric appliances and contains nothing useful in terms of food or clothing. The group settles inside, and the doctor's wife tells them to wait for her to return (hopefully with food and clothes) and not to leave under any circumstances. Uncertain how far she will have to go to find food, the doctor's wife notes the address. All around, she **sees** people walking up and down the street clinging to walls, sniffing around in search of food. She goes directly into the food stores she can see, but they are completely ransacked and barren.

The doctor's wife scours the city until she finds a supermarket, which is just as empty as the rest of the food stores. Inside, groups of **blind** people are crawling around, looking for food. One man gets a piece of glass stuck in his knee and complains about the "pricking"—his companions laugh at the sexual double-entendre and a woman goodheartedly fishes it out. The doctor's wife wonders about the group's morals and, watching those around her fight for food, admits to herself, "Hell, I'll never get out of here." But then she realizes that there is probably a storeroom of extra product somewhere near the supermarket, so she begins searching around. At the end of a long hallway, she finds a door that leads to a basement staircase, and she smells food behind it.

The internees' worst fears—and possibly also the reader's suspicions—are proven true: everyone is blind, and the world outside the hospital now represents the world inside. If alliances and organizations forming inside the hospital seemed like a small-scale representation of primitive societies forming in the real world, that is because it was: now, the entire world is forced to endure the same terrors that the doctor's wife and her group already went through in quarantine. Of course, the blind man ironically suggests that some people might be able to see while talking to the doctor's wife—possibly the only person who truly can see. But he recognizes both that the blind and the seeing are indistinguishable and that sight can be a danger or burden—like the responsibility the doctor's wife has reluctantly chosen to accept.



The city of blind people is one in which the hallmarks of modern society have been rendered irrelevant: just like the valuables that the thugs insisted on collecting inside the hospital, now appliances and other modern consumer goods are completely useless. People instead focus on fulfilling their most basic needs, which demonstrates how the complexity of modern society is ultimately unnecessary to fulfill these needs. Rather than performing their individual specialized functions, people all take up the same work—hunting for food—and form rudimentary groups like dogs form packs.



The doctor's wife gives her group an extraordinary advantage, one that seemed like a blessing in the quarantine zone but starts to look unfair and unearned in this part of the novel. But her zealous and determined search for food contrasts with the blind scavengers' calmness and sense of humor, reminding her that the world—even if hungry—may not be under the same acute stress and violence as the internees in the hospital. As the doctor's wife continues to be affected by the trauma she experienced in the hospital and struggles to adjust to the new circumstances of the city, her sense of crisis is pulled in two directions.



The doctor's wife grabs plastic bags for the food and mentally plots out her return to the store where her husband and companions from **the hospital** are waiting. Then, she starts descending into the pitch-black basement and begins to panic: in the dark, she finally feels like she's **blind**. Three flights down, she nearly faints out of terror and starts crawling around, looking for food. She finds various containers full of various kinds of food and starts filling the plastic bags. She knocks over a stack of matchboxes and, delighted, lights one. "Praised be light," she thinks, filling her bags with a huge amount of goods. Lighting match after match to guide her way, she eats some packs of chorizo sausage and bread before climbing the stairs back to the supermarket.

The doctor's wife debates whether to tell the other **blind** people in the supermarket about the food downstairs, but she decides against it and justifies this decision by telling herself that the blind would injure themselves on their way down the stairs. (An added bonus, of course, is that she can return for more food when she needs it.) She runs out through the supermarket, past the blind people who are starting to smell and shout about the sausage she has eaten. Out of fear, she starts sprinting, indiscriminately running into people and knocking them over in cruel manner. Outside, it is raining—the blind use buckets, bowls, and pans to collect water.

The doctor's wife trudges onward, noting the street signs as she passes, until "she realizes that she has lost her way." She sits and weeps, and then a group of dogs approaches her, sniffing at the food. She embraces one of the dogs, which licks up her tears, and then looks up and **sees** "a great map before her." Its destiny must have been to appear, the narrator says, and the doctor's wife follows it back to the store a few blocks away.

When the doctor's wife arrives at the store, she announces that she has food. Her companions wake up from "dreaming they were stones" and "transform themselves into persons" as they dig into the food. While they eat, the doctor's wife recounts her journey to find the food, although she does not tell them that she decided to leave the door to the storeroom closed. They even feed the "dog of tears," who barks at the people who approach their door.

Although the doctor's wife has made it to the storeroom through a combination of reason and sight—which generally go hand-in-hand throughout this novel—she soon finds both of these faculties useless in helping her descend to the basement. Now, she is forced into an experiment in radical empathy: momentarily struck blind, she confronts the terror that everybody around her has been experiencing. The reader, who has largely followed the doctor's wife's perspective through the narrative and has accordingly been able to understand events through what is visible to her, is also suddenly forced to imagine this same darkness and confusion.



By saying nothing about the storeroom, the doctor's wife (for perhaps the first time in the novel) makes a self-interested decision that is arguably immoral, as she's looking out for own group but also denying food to other starving people. This shows how all people, even those who are generally morally good, can act selfishly and evilly under particular circumstances and pressures: the doctor's wife has turned from a heroic savior to a "wholly reprehensible" thief.



The doctor's wife's confusion is also a metaphor for the way that she has morally "lost her way" by keeping the secret storeroom to herself. Like her personal crisis after killing the thugs' leader, her emotional breakdown here represents her moral reckoning with her own behavior. That time, the doctor's wife reminded herself that her actions were necessary, but this time, she cannot. Meanwhile, the dog she meets appears to feel an empathy that even the novel's human characters have lost.



The other characters' symbolic transformation from inanimate "stones" to "persons" suggests that, after multiple days without food, the rations the doctor's wife provides give them something of a new lease on life. Although they do not fully explain why, they even adopt the dog into their group. This could be interpreted either as a meaningful act of gratitude or a sign that the group is unfairly excluding other humans in order to feed an animal in their place.



After they finish eating, the doctor's wife concludes that the group can't know whether they'll find their homes the way the left time. She wonders whether her own housekeys and scissors would now be melted into one because of the fire that burned down **the hospital**. Fortunately, the doctor has their keys; then the rest admit that, for various reasons, they do not have their own. Still, they plan to find their homes, starting with that of the girl with dark glasses, who lives closest. But first, they sleep.

The characters' desire to return home stands for their search for normalcy, comfort, and identity amid the crisis, but the doctor's wife points out what they all secretly know: there is no way to simply return to the past and, in one way or another, the blindness epidemic has transformed them and the spaces they inhabit.



CHAPTER 14

Although they have not yet figured out how to wash, the group led by the doctor's wife is well-fed and dressed stylishly—most of them wear functional rubber boots. The **blind** people who surround them wander around with no sense of purpose or direction, constantly searching for food." There is no music, theaters and museums stand empty, and there are no seeing scientists left to work on a cure nor doctors left to treat the blind. Patients fled hospitals when they ran out of food, and many died on the streets and were devoured by dogs. The doctor's wife tells her companions what the world is like now: inside and outside seem indistinguishable, and people have all become "like ghosts," who are "certain that life exists" but "unable to see it."

Knowing that nobody will be able to see them, the doctor's wife dresses her compatriots fashionably because this small luxury represents a return to the conventions and concerns of everyday life before the outbreak. Now, the contrast between their group and city's other desperate blind inhabitants, who spend all of their time searching for food, highlights the extent to which the doctor's wife's sight gives her group an advantage that allows them to hold onto more of their humanity than the others. When the doctor's wife compares the blind to "ghosts," however, she also recalls the way her group felt in the hospital, where everyone's blindness led them to metaphorically lose sight of the purpose of their lives and actions. In fact, it could be argued that the doctor's wife's group is able to pursue goals besides mere survival because they grew stronger in the hospital.



The group slowly makes its way to the home of the girl with dark glasses, which is on a narrow and deserted street. Her apartment window is open, and the building's front door has been forcibly opened, but the doctor's wife doesn't point any of this out. Instead, she follows the girl up the stairs, where the girl knocks and yells for her parents. Nobody is there, and the girl starts crying. The doctor's wife suggests asking the neighbors—but there is no answer next door, the apartments upstairs have been broken into and completely "ransacked."

In the hospital, the doctor's wife often withheld details from the others because she did not want to reveal that she could see. Here, however, she does so out of a desire to protect the girl with the glasses: the doctor's wife does not want to scare or confuse the girl by revealing that her apartment building appears to be abandoned. Unable to enter her apartment or reunite with her family, the girl is forced to finally confront the fact that she will never be able to return to the life and identity she had before going blind.



Downstairs, however, “a gruff voice” answers the door. It belongs to an old woman, who explains that the girl’s parents—and the woman’s own family—were taken away just after the girl. The old woman hid upstairs, then broke back into her apartment. She took all the building’s food—the girl asks if any remains, but the woman distrustfully says that there is none. Now, the old woman eats whatever she finds in the garden, including raw rabbit and chicken. The doctor’s wife promises to share food with the woman, who tells the girl with the glasses that she can return to her apartment. Wanting to feel around her old room, the girl follows the old woman through her putrid-smelling apartment, full of animal carcasses and scraps of rotting meat, to a staircase that leads to her former apartment.

The doctor’s wife notes that the girl’s apartment remains “clean and tidy,” in contrast to the back gardens, which are like “jungles.” The girl passes through her apartment by memory and comes to her parents’ unmade bed, then breaks into tears. In her own room, she feels the dead flowers in an old vase and contemplates the fragility of life. The doctor’s wife looks down at the rest of the group out of the window, and the girl, who has found the keys in the front door, tells her to invite everyone upstairs. The doctor’s wife leads everyone up the stairs, where the old woman approaches them, frustratedly demands her food, and then becomes hysterical when nobody replies to her. The dog of tears barks at the old woman, causing her to run back to her apartment.

The doctor’s wife lights two candles, and the group has “a family feast,”—but not until the girl and the doctor’s wife go downstairs to bring some food to the old woman. The woman complains that they are wasting food on the dog, but she thanks them and gives them a key to the building’s back door. Back upstairs, after everyone else goes to bed, the doctor’s wife and the girl sit together in the kitchen like a mother and daughter would.

The doctor’s wife asks if the girl has plans, and the girl says she will wait for her parents, but the doctor’s wife points out that this is both lonely and dangerous: the girl could become like the old woman downstairs or have to compete with her for food. The girl says that she does not care: she thinks that everyone is already dead because they’re **blind** or blind because they’re dead. But the doctor’s wife remarks that *she* can still see, which gives her a “responsibility” to help as many people as possible. Besides, the girl’s parents might even be different people—in fact, now that blind people are the majority, everything is changing and unpredictable. The whole group, the doctor’s wife insists, should come to her house—but especially the girl, who has become “like a sister” to her.

In part, the old woman living downstairs represents the isolation and suspicion that took over the internees in the hospital, as each of them began thinking only about their own survival. To an extent, the group led by the doctor’s wife managed to avoid this because of the social bonds they formed from the beginning of their time in the hospital, which have allowed them to avoid the isolation that the old woman—and, likely, many of the city’s residents—are experiencing. In other words, the group’s empathetic concern for and social bond with one another allow them to survive and sustain a sense of purpose.



The girl’s “clean and tidy” though dust-filled apartment reminds the protagonists of the social order that the city has been forced to leave behind because of blindness. This has reduced them from participants in a complex society to creatures constantly fighting for their own survival who are, like the paranoid old woman, better suited to a “jungle.” While the protagonists yearn for and cherish this social order, which they have begun to establish by forming a collective of their own, the dead flowers symbolize how all of society is just one crisis away from collapse.



Like their clothes at the beginning of this chapter, the protagonists’ dinner shows that they are beginning to reconstruct the comforts and social bonds of everyday life, albeit in a radically altered form, and creating a kind of surrogate family that provides everybody with the enduring, loving bonds that have all but disappeared during the blindness epidemic.



The girl is forced to choose between waiting for her biological family, the social unit that defined her in the past, and continuing to live with and support her new adopted family, which supports and cares for her but is defined by their shared trauma. The girl wants to undo the experiences of the last several weeks and simply return to her old life, but she struggles to accept that this is simply not possible. Curiously, most of the other characters are optimistic in this section of the book, but girl seems to have already given up—although the doctor’s wife forces her to see possibilities that she would rather forget. At last, the doctor’s wife explicitly points out the connection between her sight and her sense of moral responsibility.



In the morning, the boy with the squint visits the bathroom, but he discovers that the old woman has long since plugged it up. Instead, he goes in the back yard alongside everyone but the doctor's wife, who watches and cries. Back upstairs, they clean themselves with "sheets and towels" and then they eat.

Over breakfast, the doctor's wife declares that the group must come up with a plan. The whole city is **blind**, there are no public services or supplies, and nobody knows if there is a government or a future to look forward to. The doctor's wife wants the group to "stay together," rather than risk "be[ing] swallowed up by the masses and destroyed." The doctor points out that there *are* groups of blind people, but his wife notes that they are disorganized and unstable. In contrast, she can be this group's leader, and she proposes that everyone move into her house. The others agree, but they ask to also visit their own homes—except the man with the eyepatch, who has no family and lived in a small rented room. He simply asks the others to tell him if he becomes too much of a burden on them.

Just before leaving, the seven survivors give the old lady some more food and the keys to the girl's flat, and then they watch the dog of tears eating a hen in the yard and hastily burying its carcass. Just after it finishes, the old woman asks the group to control the dog before he kills one of her hens. She also hears the doctor's wife say that she "can't **see** a thing" on the way out—this raises the old woman's suspicions, but she later decides that she must have heard the doctor's wife wrong. Meanwhile, the doctor's wife reminds herself to watch her words.

The doctor's wife organizes the group into two lines and leads them with a rope. When they leave, the old woman cries because her life is lonely and meaningless. Throughout the city, **blind** people are still out looking for food, mostly unsuccessfully. They cannot cook anything, and dogs and cats—the most accessible meat—have learned to "hunt in packs and [...] defend themselves." The doctor's wife notes that the group has one more meal worth of food, and another day's worth in her house (unless someone has broken in). On the way, the streets are full of trash and feces, and the group passes a pack of dogs eating a man's corpse. The doctor's wife vomits in disgust, but she tells the others that the dogs were eating another dog, instead of a human.

The doctor's wife despairs to see the people whose humanity she is trying to preserve and rescue reduced to the animalistic desperation of going to the bathroom outside. While this shows how far they have strayed, it also reveals how deeply the doctor's wife is invested in them.



The doctor's wife essentially proposes to the rest that they formalize their arrangement and officially start living as a family, which is the smallest-scale and most rudimentary form of society or government. Everyone else in the city is caught up in their individual desires and thus becomes one among many, "swallowed up by the masses" and are only members in a group because of their own self-interest. But the protagonists can insist on maintaining the kind of social concern and selfless love that the blindness epidemic has forced the rest of society to shed. In fact, the man with the eyepatch, who does not have any biological family, shows how the kind of isolation and abandonment that the protagonists fear is actually a common part of modern life, even though social bonds are one of the most fundamental and irreplaceable elements of the human experience.



The comedic conflict over the hen between the old woman and the dog of tears shows that the woman is always one step behind, just as she suspects something unusual but does not connect the dots and realize that the doctor's wife can see. Still, readers might wonder why the doctor's wife does not also adopt the old lady into her family and care for her, as she does for the rest. After all, the doctor's wife has nothing to lose by revealing that she can see, and she seems to be willfully abandoning the old lady, just like all the blind people at the supermarket.



The rope symbolizes the protagonists' decision to formalize their social tie and start living as a family, and the old woman's tears demonstrate that, despite her isolation and despair, meeting the protagonists has reminded her that humans are inherently social beings who require community, empathy, and solidarity in order to lead meaningful lives. The city's state of disrepair shows that most people are living like the old woman—all the comforts and conveniences of modern society have collapsed. In fact, everybody in the city is now living exactly like the cats and dogs by "hunt[ing] in packs," which are bonds of convenience and not of true social concern. In other words, the other groups of blind people are not families or communities.



The group passes through a wide street with tall buildings and expensive **cars** that now house **blind** people. There is even a limousine that took a bank chairman to an emergency meeting from which he never returned because he went blind in the stuck elevator after the power went out. The narrator comments that “all stories are like those about the creation of the universe, no one was there, no one witnessed anything, yet everyone knows what happened.” The doctor’s wife asks about the banks, and the man with the eyepatch remembers that it was chaotic: everyone withdrew their money, the banks collapsed, the Government tried and failed to take over these banks, and then people looted everything they could find inside—they went so far as robbing ATM machines. People even moved into banks, hoping to get into their safety deposit boxes.

In the late afternoon, the group reaches the doctor and his wife’s house, which is on a street that’s indistinguishable from the others except that there happen to be two enormous rats outside. The doctor’s wife is not nostalgic, but she rather feels disappointed by the filth she **sees** all around. The group enters the building where the doctor and his wife live and they slowly make their way up to the fifth floor, passing some former residents and some newcomers on the way. The doctor’s wife simply says, “we used to live here,” and then continues to her apartment’s front door, where she helps her husband with the keys.

CHAPTER 15

The doctor and his wife’s house is orderly, as they left it when they went to **the hospital**, but covered with a layer of dust. For “the seven pilgrims,” it is like “paradise.” They love its musty smell and refuse to open the windows up to “the putrefaction outside.” The doctor’s wife collects everyone’s shoes in a bag, and then everybody struggles to get out of their clothes. She takes everything to the balcony, then “lights an oil lamp inside and amasses enough clean clothing for everyone. Still filthy, everyone at least has clean clothes, and they each find a space in the sitting room.

This important downtown neighborhood, where many financial and political decisions with profound social impacts were probably made, has been turned into housing for homeless blind residents who probably do not even know what street they are living on. Not only are social distinctions overturned, then, but this happened just like the bankers’ backroom decisions and, according to the narrator, like all origin stories—secretly, even though “everyone knows what happened.” Indeed, the story that the man with the eyepatch tells shows how all distinctions of class and power became irrelevant when everyone lost their sight, but people clearly did not know how to adapt: like the thugs in the hospital, they continued to seek out money even though they knew it would not be good for anything.



The doctor and his wife’s building is anonymous and indistinct, mixed in with the rest of the street just like the protagonists are mixed in with the city’s stumbling, blind residents. Along with the doctor and his wife’s indifference to their neighbors, this reminds the reader that they are only hearing one particular story from one particular group of people affected by the novel’s radical events. Numerous other perspectives are possible, and they would yield a variety of different stories and lessons.



Like the girl with the glasses’ apartment, the doctor and his wife’s is orderly and untouched, in stark contrast to the chaotic outside world. Indeed, the protagonists are drawn to the smell of dust not only because it gives them a break from “the putrefaction outside,” but also—more importantly—because it represents the preservation of the past, the kind of life they used to live before and now hope to cultivate. By calling the protagonists “pilgrims,” the narrator introduces a religious dimension to their quest for comfort, identity, and connection: this is also a quest for salvation from their affliction and from the corrupt society that surrounds them.



Before dinner, the doctor's wife explains that there is room for everyone in the apartment and asks someone to come with her to the supermarket tomorrow, both to help her carry the food and so that they can start to familiarize themselves with their surroundings in case she goes **blind** too. They'll use a bucket out on the balcony as their bathroom, which is unpleasant but not nearly as bad as the degradation of internment. Now, all seven of them "are equal regarding good and evil," and good and evil are based on people's "relationships with others." The doctor's wife sets the table and they eat.

After dinner, the doctor's wife helps the boy feel the oil lamp, which "one day [he] will **see**." The boy asks for water, which the doctor's wife fetches from the back part of the toilet. Then, the doctor reminds his wife that they have some water in the refrigerator, so she retrieves it and pours it for everyone in fancy glasses. Drinking this water brings some of them to tears.

That night, the seven pilgrims share "vague [...] and imprecise" dreams about one another. In the morning, rain awakens the doctor's wife, who sets out bowls, pots, and pans on the balcony to catch the rainwater and looks for soap and brushes to clean her companions' filthy clothing. The other two women—the girl with dark glasses and the first blind man's wife—join her on the balcony, where they undress and help her wash the clothing. The rain washes them, too, and the doctor's wife tells them that they look beautiful. The girl with the glasses says that, in her dream, she saw the doctor's wife as beautiful, too. The three women weep and embrace in the rain, then help wash one another and go inside, where they dry off with clean towels.

Recognizing that her group has finally reached its destination but continues to live with profound uncertainty about the nature of their blindness, the doctor's wife starts making provisions for someone to replace her, so that the community she has established can continue to function in her absence. Although only in passing, here the narrator makes the book's fundamental argument about morality and society explicit: all people are both good and evil, and their social organization and "relationships with others" are what bring out one side or another. These "relationships" are tied to people's individual moral conscience, which is a function of their ability to imagine other people's experiences and perspectives on events.



The doctor's wife next starts reestablishing the hope that her group has lost: by promising the boy that he will "one day" see the lamp, she insists that he has a future to look forward to. The provision of water, which is as basic an element of human life as light, shows that the protagonists are regaining the humanity that they have been denied throughout the novel. Indeed, the fact that they can lose access to something so fundamental as a glass of water serves to remind readers of the complex, interconnected, and interdependent nature of their lives.



Although "vague [...] and imprecise," the protagonists' dreams show that, even unconsciously, they are beginning to see themselves as a collective. The protagonists washing off the accumulated filth of the past also represents their washing off the pain, sin, and despair of their recent past. It also recalls the doctor's wife washing the dead woman's body after being raped by the thugs, and its clear connotations of religious purification shows how the protagonists are beginning to find their salvation through themselves and their newfound family relationships. If their blindness signifies a kind of spiritual disorientation, their washing and purification represents them gradually discovering a new moral orientation through the collective that they have formed.



The old man with the eyepatch is sitting up: he has heard and smelled the women on the balcony, which showed him “that there [is] still life in this world.” The doctor’s wife says that the men can wash now, and the old man asks if he can use the bathtub. The doctor’s wife agrees and helps him carry in a basin of water to fill the bathtub, and then she hands him her last fresh bar of soap. The doctor’s wife leaves the old man alone to bathe, and he lathers up his whole body so intensely that he ends up covered in a cloud of foam. A pair of hands he cannot identify helps him wash his back, and he speculates about whose they might be while he finishes cleaning and shaving himself. When he is done, he goes outside to meet the others in the sitting-room.

The boy eats the remaining food, then the doctor’s wife leads the first blind man and his wife out to search for more. They pass piles of trash, horrible smells, masses of **blind** people, and stray dogs. But the first blind man and his wife get used to the feeling of their street corner, and the dog of tears sniffs the wind as though to remember the spot’s special scent. The group collects beans and peas from various food stores, and then they head for the first blind man and his wife’s house. They pass the street corner where the first blind man went blind and the car-thief offered him sympathy. The first blind man and his wife agree that their blindness “still seems like a dream,” and then the first blind man navigates the rest of the way to their house. He forgets the address, but fortunately his wife remembers.

When the first blind man, his wife, and the doctor’s wife reach the building, they make their way upstairs to the third floor and knock on the door of the apartment where the first blind man and his wife used to live. A man opens it, and the first blind man explains that he and his wife were the apartment’s previous residents, which they can prove by identifying everything inside. The man who is occupying the flat explains that his wife and two daughters are out searching for food and reveals that he is a writer. The first blind man’s wife asks for his name, but the man replies, “**Blind** people do not need a name, I am my voice, nothing else matters.” His books, he explains, might as well “not exist.”

The old man with the eyepatch finds pleasure and hope through the senses that he still retains: his newfound belief “that there [is] still life in this world” offers a hopeful counterpoint to the girl with the glasses’s repeated declarations that all of them are dead because they are blind. His playful cloud of foam in the bath suggests a return to childhood and underlines the way the protagonists’ new family allows them to reclaim a sense of innocence, vulnerability, and hope that they had to completely abandon in the hospital. Finally, the mysterious pair of hands, which could be anyone’s, represents the love the old man has found through his new, adopted family. This moment of connection is at once intimate and anonymous, a profound personal love based in the abstract sense of absolute equality and moral responsibility that the protagonists accept for one another.



In contrast to the peace and cleanliness of the doctor and his wife’s apartment, the city remains in a fallen state, full of the disheveled remains of what used to be civilization. In fact, it resembles the hospital while the protagonists were trapped—to the blind people living there, it may even be indistinguishable. Now that the protagonists are relatively comfortable and secure, they can observe the “dream” they lived before from a more removed and reflective perspective—much like the reader’s position relative to the protagonists.



The haunting figure of the writer contrasts starkly with almost all of the other characters in the book: patient and reflective, the writer seems to have held onto the humanity that everyone else has been forced to sacrifice. The writer’s claim that “blind people do not need a name” recalls the point in the novel when the protagonists first entered the hospital and realized that they could no longer distinguish one another except by their voices: without blindness, they lost their sense of identity, and then their humanity. And yet, despite not having any real sense of identity, the writer has sustained his humanity by sustaining his voice.



The first blind man asks why the writer has moved in, and the writer admits that other people have taken *his* house. If his old apartment ever empties out, the writer promises, he will move back home, so the first blind man and his wife can get their place back. Otherwise, he offers, they can evict him and take their flat back, or they can move in with him.

The writer moving into the first blind man's house is a metaphor for the way that writers must occupy other people's lives, stories, and perspectives in order to do their work. In fact, this is an exercise in the kind of empathy that Saramago consistently argues is the basis for people's social and therefore moral conscience. However, the writer's offer that the first blind man and his wife can have their house back shows that adopting and communicating another person's perspective does not necessarily have to mean stealing it from them—in other words, the same story can have different or ambiguous versions, even from the same perspective.



The first blind man, his wife, and the doctor's wife explain that they have recently left quarantine, and the writer asks about it—he wants write a book to preserve their feelings. He shows them his writing, which consists of “tightly compressed lines” in ballpoint pen. He cannot read it, but the doctor's wife can. The writer asks about the quarantine and apologizes for how ridiculous his own writing is, because everyone has to tell their own story. The doctor's wife asks to see the writer's work, and he brings her to his dingy desk and presents about 20 handwritten pages. She touches his shoulder, and he kisses her hand and says, “Don't lose yourself, don't let yourself be lost.” Back home, with three days' worth of food, the doctor's wife reads her companions a book from the study.

It's possible that this writer is the novel's narrator and that the book he plans to write is Blindness. The ambiguity is probably intentional, as it allows Saramago to explore the relationship between the act of writing and the process of defining one's identity and orienting oneself toward the future. The writer serves as a stark reminder that all stories are written from a specific perspective and that no narrator can ever be entirely omniscient. Indeed, the writer cannot even read his own words, which shows that he is writing not for consumption, but for survival: his goal is to maintain his sanity by expressing himself.



CHAPTER 16

Wondering about the state of his office and medical equipment, the doctor decides to visit it with his wife. The girl with dark glasses accompanies them so that she can visit her house on the way back. The doctor's wife laments the city's disorder and wonders if the **blind** could form governments and “begin to have eyes.” The group debates whether blindness will kill them or if it just reflects their inevitable mortality. When they arrive at the doctor's office, they find that it's ransacked—presumably by the Ministry of Health. The girl talks as though she is living in a dream. The doctor regrets that he can no longer perform medical “miracles,” but his wife comments that their survival is a “miracle.” The others note that she can still see, but she says that their blindness is affecting her, blocking her from seeing the truth, and that the worst blind people are those who don't want to see.

Like all the other characters, the doctor wants to return to the space where he used to live his life in order to find out if he will be able to recover it and make sense of the transformations his identity has undergone. The doctor's wife's comment about the blind forming governments is also clearly a reflection of her own role in this part of the novel: by comparing physical sight to the kind of collective and moral leadership that an effective leader provides to their citizens, she makes it clear that the true tragedy of the characters' blindness is the loss of perspective and orientation it has given them—although perhaps they never had this perspective or orientation to begin with. If humans' ability to form autonomous, consensual communities is similar to the “miracle” of medicine or sight, she notes, then nobody can truly see—or find truth and meaning in their life—unless they are part of such a community.



After leaving the doctor's office, the group passes a square where a crowd listens to a **blind** preacher talk about redemption, the apocalypse, and various mystical powers, signs, and practices. The doctor's wife comments that this is not the "organization" she was looking for, but things do seem to be coming to an end: there are no more resources, and the streets are littered with corpses. The girl with the glasses comments that her parents might be among them.

When the group reaches the house where the girl with the glasses lived, they find the old woman who lived downstairs dead, with much of her body eaten by stray animals, outside. They debate why she came outside into the street, then notice that she is holding the keys to the girl's apartment. They cannot explain this but resolve to bury the woman and muster all their strength to bring her up and down the stairs to the backyard garden. The doctor's wife looks for a shovel, realizing that she is reliving the car-thief's burial, and then she digs a grave for the old woman.

While the doctor's wife digs, **blind** people assemble on the nearby balconies. The doctor's wife instinctively yells out to them, "She will rise again," which scares them back inside. The doctor asks his wife why she said that, but she admits that she doesn't know. They lower the old woman's body into the grave, and the doctor's wife fills the grave and ensures that "everything [is] in order," meaning that "the dead [are] where they should be among the dead, and the living among the living." The girl with the glasses wants to leave a sign in case her parents come back, so the doctor's wife cuts off a lock of the girl's hair and ties it on the apartment's doorknob. The girl weeps, and the doctor's wife comments that the dead woman's hand has turned from a symbol of death into one of life. They return home.

The obvious religious imagery of this passage, which includes numerous figures and symbols taken straight from the Catholic tradition of Saramago's native Portugal, contrasts with the kind of strictly humanistic salvation that the protagonists have found through one another. In other words, Saramago rejects the idea of finding salvation and meaning through religion—he thinks that people must instead do so through one another, through the relationships and societies that they form.



Although the protagonists do not witness or understand the old woman's tragic, lonely death, they do note that her final act—bringing the girl's keys outside—seems to represent her yearning for community, a hope to at least symbolically reestablish the social relations she lost in her isolation. As the doctor's wife buries a dead person once more, she has a bizarre moment of déjà vu and realizes that she has taken over the role of seeing the blind out of the world. Performing burial rites is, of course, usually reserved for priests and other religious leaders, but Saramago has suggested that these figures will not save anyone.



The doctor's wife surprises herself by acting like a priest and characterizing the old woman into a Jesus-like martyr, but her strange promise to the blind and her ability to put "everything in order" shows that she truly does fulfill a priest-like role in the novel, as the other protagonists' practical and spiritual guide through a deeply uncertain and anxious time. By drawing and enforcing the line between "the dead" and "the living," as well as honoring the old woman's dying wish and enabling her to commune with the living through the girl's keys, the doctor's wife at least gives meaning to the woman's death.



Back in the doctor and his wife's flat, the group again passes the evening listening to the doctor's wife read. The others enjoy it, but the man with the eyepatch wonders if there's anything more to life than this. He and the girl with the glasses debate whether it is still worth hoping that they will get their **sight** back someday, and their conversation quickly becomes tense because of their ongoing romance. The old man declares that he loves the girl with the glasses, and she says that she loves him too and wants to live with him as a couple, although he does not believe her and thinks she will soon change her mind. They reach out and hold each other's hands, and that night they move into the living room together, as a couple.

The book that the doctor's wife reads to the group is not just a sign that the protagonists are now comfortable enough to have leisure, but also a clear allusion to the blind writer from the book's previous chapter. Just like the man's writing sustained his voice and kept him sane in a time and place that were anything but, the doctor's wife gives her new family something to focus on and a new perspective through which to interpret their experiences by reading to them. The old man allows himself the indulgence of hope and reveals his greatest fear: that his relationship with the girl will end when she finally sees him. Fortunately, love proves to be blind, and by finding romance and connection in the darkest of circumstances, the old man and the girl with the glasses demonstrate how no conditions are so horrific that they destroy people's capacity for the most fundamental human emotions.



CHAPTER 17

In the morning, the doctor's wife tells the doctor that the group is almost out of food, so she needs to make another run to the supermarket store room. She remarks that caring for the others has worn her out, but she will keep persevering as long as she's able. She and the doctor start bickering about why the doctor had sex with the girl with the glasses in **the hospital**, but then they go to breakfast. After eating, they go outside with the dog of tears and find the city even filthier and more dilapidated than before. Out of empathy and despair, the dog of tears howls at a corpse. The group again passes a crowd listening to **blind** speakers in a square, but this time, they are talking about "great organized systems" like the free market, and the criminal justice system, the military, and the government.

Saramago emphasizes that the doctor's wife is a regular person acting out of a sense of moral responsibility, not a superhuman savior or messiah acting out of divine inspiration. Having spent the last several chapters leading the rest of the characters, the doctor's wife admits that she is exhausted and that the burdens of her newfound job are difficult to carry. Indeed, this fear of responsibility—of being enslaved to others because of her extraordinary capacity to see—was what initially prevented her from taking decisive action in the hospital. The proto-political rally they pass in the square this time is a clear foil for the preacher they passed in the previous chapter, and this makes explicit Saramago's comparison between religion and social organization (or politics) as different ways of giving meaning to human life. However, there is also an important difference between the distant, repressive Government in the novel and the kind of organic, small-scale community that the protagonists have formed. But Saramago leaves open the question of whether it is possible to have an entire society function like a commune, with everyone taking a personal stake in the wellbeing of everyone else.



The doctor's wife checks the same street map where she first encountered the dog of tears, and then she leads her husband and the dog to the supermarket two blocks away. The doctor's wife comments that nobody is entering or exiting and worries that the **blind** might have already cleared out the storeroom. A group of blind people next to her is confused to hear her talk about seeing, but they brush it off as a figure of speech. Inside, the supermarket is empty—both of food and people—and it smells like death. The dog whimpers anxiously as he follows the doctor and his wife to the door leading to the basement, where the smell only gets worse.

After passing by the site where she had her own breakdown and then was saved by the dog of tears, the doctor's wife begins to reflect on her decision to say nothing about the supermarket's basement storeroom. Just like the last time she entered the supermarket, here the doctor's wife guides herself by smell—just as her blind companions have been doing throughout the book. In fact, the forbidding stench that she encounters here suggests that something is horribly wrong.



The doctor's wife tells the doctor to wait upstairs while she goes down to the basement. On the staircase, the rotting stench makes the doctor's wife vomit, and then she **sees** two low, flickering lights. The doctor rushes over to comfort her and lead her back into the hallway, where she starts crying hysterically. She exclaims that "they are dead" and then explains that the blind must have fallen down the stairs in a pile before someone closed the door behind them, and that now the basement is essentially a mass grave. The doctor's wife blames herself for this, because the blind probably went downstairs just after she ran outside. She concludes that all their food has essentially been stolen from others, meaning that they're indirectly responsible for their deaths. She questions why her group has survived and worries that soon it will all come to an end.

Outside the supermarket, the doctor's wife realizes that she needs to lie down, and she spots a church across the street that would be "a good place to rest." The doctor guides his wife across the street, where she helps him climb the six steps to the church's front door. Knowing that dogs aren't allowed inside churches, the dog of tears hesitates but enters, nonetheless. The church is completely packed with people, but the dog growls at some **blind** people so that they make space for the doctor's wife, who lays down and loses consciousness. The doctor sits her up to improve her circulation, and she slowly wakes up and starts to see again.

When she comes to her senses, the doctor's wife **sees** that the eyes of [all the images in the church are covered with paint or strips of cloth](#), except for one woman who has gouged-out eyes that she carries on a tray. The doctor's wife tells the doctor about this, and they wonder whether someone who lost their faith might have covered the images' eyes out of spite, or if the local priest decided that the images should be blind like everyone else. The doctor's wife claims that she is also going blind now that there is nobody left to see her. She and the doctor wonder whether the blindfolds dignify their suffering and conclude that this is "the worst sacrilege of all times and all religions, the fairest and most radically human." The priest who did this is, the doctor says, was essentially making the statement that not even God should be allowed to see.

The doctor's wife collapses in agony when she realizes that she is to blame for the deaths of so many blind people in exactly the way that she earlier predicted might happen if she did tell the blind scavengers about the hidden storeroom. This forces her into a moral reckoning even more serious than what she underwent after killing the thugs' leader and after losing herself on the way back from this same supermarket. In a sense, she begins to feel that she is letting down the rest of the world by prioritizing her group. A symptom of the unfortunate fact that even the most noble people cannot save everyone, her confusion and despair are a reminder that people's capacity for good is ultimately limited by the situations in which they find themselves. People like the doctor's wife must find a means and a motivation to keep acting selflessly, despite knowing that their actions will prove imperfect or even futile.



The church's six front steps immediately recall the six steps leading up to the quarantine hospital. Indeed, both places are tightly packed with blind people seeking meaning, salvation, and sight—but Saramago seems to be suggesting that the churchgoers are imprisoned by their religion, much like the internees were imprisoned in the hospital. The dog of tears demonstrates a surprisingly deep awareness of human customs, which separates him not only from other dogs, but also from the blind characters who populate the rest of the book. By bridging the gap between humans and the rest of the animal kingdom, the dog of tears shows how humans are simply animals—but this does not mean they lack qualities like empathy and reason.



The remarkable, sacrilegious sight of the church full of blinded images is Saramago's attempt to declare that people must turn to themselves for a "radically human" kind of salvation. Whether because no benevolent God would allow such horrors or because no God could understand them, the blinded figures represent humanity breaking with faith and taking matters into its own hands, even if the future is uncertain and indeterminate. The woman with gouged-out eyes stands out as a foil for the doctor's wife, the only character who has not been blinded but who offers her sight to others, as though to facilitate humankind's acceptance of responsibility for itself.



The **blind** people surrounding the doctor's wife and the doctor begin to ask about the covered images and question how the doctor's wife knows about them. As news spreads around the church, people are dubious but alarmed. The people start to scream in horror, and they panic and collectively flee the church. Meanwhile, the doctor and his wife "take advantage of the misfortune of others" by stealing some of the food that the escaped worshippers left behind.

Back at the doctor and his wife's house, their companions are shocked and dismayed to hear about their day, but they have different feelings about the **blinded** images in the church: the first blind man and his wife consider it inexcusably disrespectful, while the man with the eyepatch finds it humorous. The group eats the food that the doctor and his wife have brought home and start planning to abandon the city and go to the countryside instead, where food is more abundant. In the evening, although there is no food, the group still crowds around the doctor's wife to listen to her read.

While the doctor's wife reads, some of the others drift off to sleep. The first blind man has his eyes closed, but he's preoccupied with the plan to move to the countryside. When he starts **seeing** dark instead of white, he thinks he has fallen asleep, and then that he has gone from white-blind to dark-blind. He tells the first blind man's wife that he is blind, and then he opens his eyes and starts yelling out that he can see. After embracing his wife, he hugs all of his other companions, most of whom he is seeing for the first time. The doctor remarks that perhaps the blindness is coming to an end and that they'll all regain their eyesight. The doctor's wife starts crying out of joy, and the dog of tears goes over to lick up her tears.

The astonished worshippers, likely inspired by the pious Portuguese Catholics who surrounded Saramago, struggle to make sense of the notion that God will not save them—while the doctor and his wife seem to have already accepted this. Of course, their morally questionable decision to steal food from the blind worshippers reminds the reader that human beings' responsibility for their own existence does not necessarily make them benevolent.



Although they do not reach any agreement about the moral implications of what the doctor and his wife have seen, the group of protagonists gleefully eats the stolen food; readers can only speculate about how this might have affected other blind people. In short, while their collective spirit has helped them survive and band together, the group's survival is contingent upon hoarding resources, just like the thugs in the hospital. With this, Saramago poses the question of whether one group's salvation might always mean another's devastation.



The protagonists regain their sight as suddenly and inexplicably as they lost it in the first place: it has no clear moral cause or implication, and even now, nobody understands what made them blind in the first place. Nevertheless, just as the mystery of their blindness did not change the struggles they faced at the beginning of the book, now they enjoy the return of their sight without striving to draw moral lessons or explanations from it.



The group starts chattering anxiously, and the first blind man and his wife plan their return home. A few hours later, the girl with the glasses also starts **seeing** again. She immediately embraces the doctor's wife and then goes to the man with the eyepatch and resolves to stay with him even though she now sees that he is wrinkly and bald. In the morning, the doctor is able to see, and people outside start triumphantly yelling that they can see, too. In this atmosphere of celebration, the protagonists' memories of going **blind** feel alien. Still, the protagonists wonder if they'll ever learn why they went blind, and one of them suggests that they didn't really go blind—rather, they were already “blind people who can see, but do not see.” Looking out the window, the doctor's wife wonders if she will now go blind—but she does not.

It might be difficult for readers to accept that a book so concerned with confronting human evil can end on such a short-lived optimistic turn. But ultimately—through the character of the doctor's wife, the romance between the girl with the glasses and the old man, and the protagonists' return to sight—Saramago shows that the human capacity for benevolence is just as profound as their ability to injure and exploit one another, and that people's good luck can be just as sudden and transformative as their bad luck. Ultimately, then, he suggests that people have much more power to change the world than they generally believe—but that their capacities are limited. Although the reader does not learn what the protagonists do with their newfound sight, it is clear that their trials have left them with a moral and spiritual fortitude that they lacked at the beginning of the book. In other words, their physical blindness has brought them to spiritual vision— perhaps this means that everyone must go through their own trials in order to seek their personal freedom and future.





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