

# Childhood's End



## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF ARTHUR C. CLARKE

Arthur Clarke was born in Somerset, England in 1917, the oldest of four children. He spent his childhood on a farm, looking at the stars through a homemade telescope and reading science fiction magazines, including the literary magazine *Amazing Stories*, which he credited as a major influence on his own entrance into science fiction. During World War II, Clarke was a member of the Royal Air Force for five years, working as a radar specialist and helping to develop new guidance systems. After the war's end, Clarke attended King's College in London, studying physics and mathematics. He continued working as a writer and editor, and was also the president of the British Interplanetary Society during two different periods. Clarke was a large influence on the development of geostationary satellites, foreseeing that they someday could make powerful relay points for telecommunication. He also wrote several nonfiction titles about futurism and the implications of space travel on society. During this period of his life, Clarke began to gain a reputation as a science fiction author, beginning with the novella, *Against the Fall of Night*. The publication of *Childhood's End*, his third science fiction novel, made him as one of the most popular authors of his time. Clarke wrote many more Hugo and Nebula Award-winning novels, developed the screenplay of *2001: A Space Odyssey* with Stanley Kubrick, and hosted a number of TV shows dedicated to exploration of the paranormal. Clarke and Robert Heinlein, two of the "Big Three" authors of 20th century science fiction (the third being Isaac Asimov), became good friends until political disagreements drove them apart in the 1980s. During his final years, Clarke was knighted for his contributions to science. He died in 2008, named by many as the greatest science fiction author of all time, with well over 100 novels, essays, and short stories to his credit.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Cold War, beginning in 1946 and continuing on in various forms until 1989, had an obvious effect on the themes of *Childhood's End*. As nuclear tensions between the US and the Soviet Union escalated, Earth seemed on the brink of nuclear disaster. Totalitarianism had once more reared its head in the Soviet occupation of Iran and the spread of Communism was greatly disturbing to the liberal democratic principles of the Western world. An Overlord occupation that enforced world peace and saved humanity from itself may well have seemed like a favorable alternative. At the same time, as broadcast technology and mass entertainment developed, there were

brewing fears that an over-saturated entertainment market would result in complacent individuals and the death of the arts.

### RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Arthur C. Clarke is one of the "Big Three" science fiction authors, the other two being Robert Heinlein and Isaac Asimov. All three authors played major roles in the development of technology, futurism, and elevated the field of science fiction literature to widespread popularity. Asimov's most recognizable works are *Foundation* and *I, Robot* from which came his famous three laws of robotics (although he wrote or contributed to over 500 books). Heinlein, also prolific, produced *Stranger in a Strange Land*, *The Moon Is a Harsh Mistress*, and *Starship Troopers*. Clarke also left a legacy in film, working with Stanley Kubrick to develop the script of *2001: A Space Odyssey*, which itself was an adaptation of one of Clarke's short stories, *The Sentinel*. As prolific a writer as Clarke was, it would be difficult to find a piece of modern science fiction that was not in some way impacted by his work.

### KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Childhood's End*
- **When Written:** 1952
- **Where Written:** England
- **When Published:** 1953
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** science fiction
- **Setting:** Earth and various places in space
- **Climax:** the children join the Overmind and destroy the Earth
- **Antagonist:** the Overmind
- **Point of View:** third-person

### EXTRA CREDIT

**Sooner Than He Thought.** The first chapter of *Childhood's End* initially described the space race between the US and the Soviet Union taking place in the early 21st century. At the time of writing, Clarke could never have conceived that man would first enter space in less than a decade. Realizing that he had misjudged humanity's foray into space by half a century, he rewrote the first chapter.

**Growing Skeptic.** At the time of writing (1953), Clarke was a firm believer in the existence of paranormal events and abilities. By 1989, having spent decades and millions of dollars trying to

prove their existence through his TV shows and other ventures, he declared that he was nearly a “total sceptic,” though still believed that something somewhere must exist outside the bounds of scientific rationalism.



## PLOT SUMMARY

As two cosmonauts are preparing themselves for ventures into the solar system, massive alien ships arrive overhead. “The human race was no longer alone.”

Five years later, the aliens, whom humanity has christened “**the Overlords**,” govern the Earth. The Overlords are minimally involved, allowing states to govern themselves so long as they are not cruel. To the few countries who ever defy them, they are not violent, but merely demonstrate their power—in one case by blotting out the sun for thirty minutes, which frightens their subjects into submission. The Overlords have never emerged from their ships and have never been seen by human eyes. Their leader, Karellen, who refers to himself as Earth’s “supervisor,” speaks with the Secretary-General of the United Nations, Rikki Stormgren, aboard his ship once a week to discuss matters of government. Stormgren is the single point of contact between humanity and the Overlords.

Stormgren meets with the leader of **the Freedom League**, a group opposed to the Overlords’ presence based on religious and libertarian grounds, even though most of humanity sees the Overlords as benevolent and seem content to live under their governance. The Freedom League also resent the Overlords’ secrecy, since the Overlords will not reveal their plans or even their physical appearance to humanity.

Stormgren relays the Freedom League’s concerns to Karellen during their next meeting, who says he will take the request for transparency to his superiors, although he knows what the answer will be. Some days later, Stormgren is kidnapped by an extremist element of the Freedom League and held hostage underground. His kidnappers are trying to discover the true nature of Karellen and devise a plan for Stormgren to attend his weekly meeting with a hidden observational device.

Stormgren refuses and is promptly rescued by Karellen, whom he realizes used him as bait to draw out and identify the resistance leaders. Stormgren is vaguely annoyed at being used and begins considering carrying out the plan to observe Karellen himself.

Stormgren becomes obsessed with the idea and enlists the help of a physicist to help him finally see the Overlord. Together, and with a little covert scanning, they realize that what Stormgren had assumed was a **viewing screen in the Overlords’ conference room** is actually a sheet of one-way glass that Karellen is sitting behind in an adjacent room. In their next meeting, Stormgren has brought a flashlight to shine through the glass and hopefully see Karellen’s physical form. Karellen

tells him that he has been given an answer to the Freedom League’s request for the Overlords to show themselves: the Overlords will emerge from their ships in fifty years. Stormgren is fond of Karellen, and his will to go through with the scheme to observe Karellen briefly falters. But when he realizes that he will be dead before the Overlords emerge, he shines the light through the glass. It seems that Karellen was wise to his plan, but also sympathetic to it. Stormgren only catches a glimpse of Karellen exiting through a doorway, but it is enough. However, he chooses to keep what he has seen a secret until his death.

Fifty years pass and the Overlords fulfill their promise to emerge from their ships. Karellen steps out first before a crowd of onlookers, holding two human children who entered his ship to meet him. The Overlord looks like the quintessential picture of the Devil: 12 feet tall; black, armored skin; leathery wings; barbed tail; short horns protruding from his head. However, in those fifty years, the Earth has become a utopian world-state. Everyone has access to all the necessities of life for almost no cost, sexual ethics have loosened, and education has become a lifelong and leisurely pursuit.

Years later, partners George Greggson and Jean Morrel are attending a party hosted by a wealthy friend and enthusiast, Rupert Boyce, who has amassed the world’s largest library on paranormal happenings. While exploring Rupert’s house, George and Jean stumble upon the Overlord, Rashaverak, who is busily reading through every book in Rupert’s library. During the party, George meets Jan Rodricks, a young enterprising scientist who is frustrated that the Overlords will not reveal where they have come from and have prohibited humanity from space travel. As the party is winding down, Rupert organizes several guests around a Ouija board as a party game, claiming that he doesn’t understand it but it seems to work. After several superficial questions are answered by the board, Jan asks what star the Overlords came from. The board lists off a string of numbers and letters, which the other guests assume is meaningless but Jan and Rashaverak both recognize as coordinates in space. As soon as the board answers, Jean suddenly faints, frightening George who promptly takes her home and asks her to marry him.

Rashaverak reports to Karellen on the contents of Rupert’s library and what happened with the Ouija board, advising that a close watch should be kept on Jean, since she seems to be channeling something.

Jan, determined to know more about the Overlords, comes up with a plan to stow away aboard one of their ships by hiding in a taxidermied whale specimen, which a friend of Rupert’s, Professor Sullivan, is currently readying to send to the Overlords’ home planet for them to study. Jan convinces Sullivan to help him, and his plan succeeds. The whale is delivered to the Overlords’ ship with Jan inside, and it leaves for its homeworld. Since the ship is traveling at near-light speed, Jan will only age two months during the trip, but forty

years will pass on Earth.

Although, in the Overlords' utopian Earth, everyone is well-fed, leisurely, and safe, the arts are in decline. Much art is being made, but without the stimulus of true suffering, hardship, and sorrow, there is nothing to give any of it substance. Humanity is left looking over its shoulder at the artistic greatness of past eras, the likes of which will never exist again.

In an attempt to solve this, a colony named **New Athens** is built upon a volcanic island. The colony is an artists' commune, attempting to re-stimulate humanity's dulled imagination by fostering competition between individuals and shirking some modern amenities to create a simpler, less distracted lifestyle. George, who works in theater and is now married to Jean, decides that they shall move to New Athens along with their son, Jeffrey, and newborn daughter, Jennifer.

One day, while Jeffrey is alone on the shore, a tsunami hits the island. Though it seems he should have died, an Overlord's voice (though he does not know it at the time) appears in his head and guides him to safety. Shortly after, an Overlord Inspector comes to New Athens under the pretense of wanting to investigate what the artists are working on, though his real intention is to observe Jeffrey. After the Overlord leaves, Jeffrey begins having vivid dreams every night of other planets, which remain in his head like actual memories. Meanwhile, Jennifer, still an infant, begins exhibiting psychic powers as well—she seems almost catatonic, eyes always closed, and yet is able to levitate objects around her. Rashaverak meets with George and Jean, explaining to them that their children are no longer technically human and will not remain with them much longer. All of the children on Earth start showing similar symptoms, standing with their eyes closed for hours at a time.

Karellen makes his final broadcast speech to Earth, where he finally explains the Overlords' purpose in full. They have been sent by a being called **the Overmind**—a universal collective consciousness that absorbs sentient races when they have achieved a certain level of development—to supervise humanity's next developmental phase. The children of Earth will soon merge into the Overmind and transcend their biological forms. The rest of the Earth is tragically doomed to die, comforted only by the fact that humanity is living on in a new form. As the Overlords prepare the children for their exit, the people of Earth die out by suicide, small warfare, or, in the case of New Athens, volcanic explosion.

On the Overlord ship bound for their homeworld, Jan reveals himself to the Overlord crew. When he arrives on the Overlord planet, scientists interview him and run tests on him, and then let him explore their world for several weeks with the help of a tutor. Most of what Jan sees he cannot understand, including a fiery mountain that he later guesses may be some sort of manifestation of the Overmind. He is put back on a ship returning to Earth, and he arrives eighty Earth-years after his initial departure. Humanity is dead. Millions of children have

been gathered on one continent, awaiting the Overmind. The Overlords prepare to leave, for it is too dangerous for them to stay, but Jan decides to remain and report to Karellen what he sees. As the last human being to ever live, Jan watches as the Overmind absorbs the children into itself. As it does, the children destroy the planet and consume its emitted energy.

Karellen observes this from his ship, listening to Jan's final narration of it. He thinks of all the humans he knew, looks at Earth's sun one last time, and returns home, having gained a little more knowledge of his master.



## CHARACTERS

### MAJOR CHARACTERS

**Karellen** – Karellen is the leader of the **Overlords** and the “Supervisor” of Earth. He forms an affectionate relationship with Stormgren over the course of their weekly meetings, and even seems fond of Jan, despite the fact that Jan defies his prohibition of space travel and stows away on an Overlord ship. As the only character present over the entirety of the book, Karellen is also the most complex, showing an obvious affinity for humanity despite how terribly unintelligent and primitive they are. After arriving on Earth, Karellen's first actions are to ban warfare and cruelty and to ensure that every person on Earth is protected and provided for. When interacting with humans, he always speaks compassionately, like a kindly old man, and almost never exhibits anger or frustration. Generally, Karellen is remarkably benevolent and affable. Though gentle, he is, however, also an authoritarian. From humanity's perspective, Karellen's power and knowledge are effectively absolute, so, although he does not rule ruthlessly, the possibility of such a rule is always implied. This creates a mixed reaction on the part of his subjects and on the part of the reader: On the one hand, Karellen is easily likable, generous, and protective. On the other hand, he is still a dictator. His presence denies humanity its ultimate liberty, and religion, the arts, and even the sciences suffer under his rule. Karellen is also a terribly sad figure. Though his plans are kept secret until the novel's end, for an entire century he is shepherding humanity toward its own destruction—though its children will live on in the **Overmind**—offering it one last Golden Age to enjoy. This is not something that he relishes, and he often feels sorrow over the tragedy of the humans, especially those with whom he has frequent interactions. Karellen is even more heart-broken for his own race, who, despite their wishes, will never be able to join the Overmind. He and the Overlords are evolutionarily stagnant, doomed to see that there are greater heights, but never able to reach them. For all their power and knowledge, Karellen and the Overlords will forever be the subjects of a greater being.

**Jan Rodricks** – Jan is Maia's brother and Rupert's brother-in-

law. Jan, a true scientist, represents the humanistic spirit of science and discovery. While much of humanity has lost its interest in adventure or new frontiers, Jan is determined to bring humanity to the stars. He dreams of exploring the vastness of space and he yearns to expand human knowledge and capabilities. Because of this, he is frustrated by the **Overlords'** prohibition on human space exploration and their refusal to share any knowledge about themselves or where they came from. After learning the location of the Overlord homeworld from Rupert's Ouija board, this frustration leads Jan to hatch a scheme with Professor Sullivan to stow away in an Overlord ship and go to the Overlords' planet, hiding himself in the body cavity of a stuffed whale. Jan's caper is successful, but he is somewhat underwhelmed by what he sees. Though he fulfills his lifelong dream of seeing an alien planet, it is all so foreign and utterly unintelligible that he realizes that the Overlords' prohibition was for good reason: human beings simply are not ready to participate in galactic society. His curiosity satisfied, Jan returns to Earth to find that the last adult human beings have died, and that the remaining children are awaiting the **Overmind's** imminent arrival. Jan becomes the last man on Earth. Rather than fighting against this knowledge or being overwhelmed with grief, Jan resigns himself to the inevitable, seeing it as fate, the next step in human development. Jan dies with the planet Earth. In this way, though he initially embodies the humanistic spirit classic to science fiction, he ultimately subverts it by accepting fate and the limitations of humanity.

**Rikki Stormgren** – Stormgren is the Secretary-General of the United Nations and the only liaison between the **Overlords** and humanity during the first years of the Overlords' occupation of Earth. He meets weekly with the Overlord Karellen and forms a friendship with him, even though he has never seen his physical appearance except for a brief glimpse of him exiting a room during their last meeting. Even so, Stormgren is convinced that the Overlords are benevolent and a benefit to humanity. He works with Karellen to aid the Overlords' plans and defends Karellen's name and reputation when confronted by individuals who resent the Overlords, namely **the Freedom League**. Stormgren shows that, although the Overlords are alien and somewhat dictatorial, they are also benevolent and work to make humanity prosper. Even so, they are secretive, a fact that eventually frustrates Stormgren when he realizes that Karellen is using him as a pawn. However, after Stormgren concocts a scheme with Duval and catches a brief glimpse of Karellen—which he suspects Karellen has allowed him to see—he understands the Overlords' reticence to reveal themselves to humanity just yet, since they look like exactly like the mythological picture of the Devil. Stormgren believes that humanity is not yet ready to see this and not be horrified, nor would it be until Stormgren's generation, the first to live under the Overlords, has died off. Stormgren thus takes what he has seen to his grave.

**George Greggson** – George is Jean's lover and later spouse, as well as the father of Jeffrey and Jennifer. George is a theater director who moves his family to **New Athens** so that he can further his artistic vision. Although George has long been skeptical of anything out of the ordinary and is irritated by Jean's preoccupation with paranormal activity, he eventually realizes that such phenomena do exist when their children begin developing latent psychic abilities, heralding the coming of the **Overmind**. George is depicted as a very average individual, a representation of the everyman. He is happy to live under the **Overlords'** rule—aside from the fact that art has suffered, prompting his move to New Athens. He has no interest in knowing what lies beyond his own world. When George asks Rashaverak why the Overmind has first affected his children, Rashaverak tells him that it could have happened to anyone; he is of no particular significance. As a partner and a father, George is selfish and often petty. As is common in his time, George is frequently unfaithful to Jean, despite her loyalty, until the tragedy of losing their children prompts his love for her to return, moments before their own deaths. George voluntarily dies together with Jean, his arms wrapped around her, when the volcano underneath New Athens explodes. Having lost their children to the Overmind, both George and Jean decide to meet their death with the rest of the colony.

**Jean Morrel** – Jean is George's lover and later spouse, as well as the mother of Jeffrey and Jennifer, the first children to display symptoms of the coming of the **Overmind**. Jean has long had a fascination with paranormal events, to George's irritation. That fascination abruptly ends, however, after she faints at Rupert's party while they are playing with the Ouija board; Jean unwittingly channels the psychic power of her future children through the board, enabling it to reveal the location of the **Overlords'** home and giving Rashaverak his first hint that Jean has some connection to the Overmind, though she is unaware of it. Jean moves to **New Athens** with George and her children and is a loyal mother and wife, though she is aggravated by George's constant infidelities. When Jeffrey and Jennifer first begin showing symptoms of transcending to the Overmind while they are living in New Athens, Jean is disturbed by their strange behavior and paranormal abilities. She is also heartbroken, realizing that it means she and George are losing their children. Jean is so distraught by the eventual loss of her children that she decides to die with her husband and the rest of New Athens rather than attempt to escape the impending volcanic explosion. She and George die together, the tragedy having rekindled their love for each other.

**Jeffrey Greggson** – Jeffrey is the son of George and Jean and the first human to start showing signs of Total Breakthrough, wherein he begins developing psychic abilities brought on by the approach of the **Overmind**. Knowing this, the **Overlords** have been observing Jeffrey for his entire life, and miraculously

protect him from a tsunami—speaking as a voice in his head and burning away a boulder that would have trapped him—giving George and Jean their first indication that there is something unique about their son. Before he begins to show symptoms of the Overmind’s coming, Jeffrey is a simple boy—he enjoys swimming on the coast of **New Athens**, playing with the family dog, and begins to share his father’s love of the theater. However, after the tsunami, he begins to have strange dreams of distant planets, which Karellen and Rashaverak understand are not actually dreams but Jeffrey’s mind developing its ability to leave his body and roam the universe while he sleeps. As time passes, Jeffrey begins having these “dreams” during the day as well, for hours at a time, greatly disturbing his parents. By the time the symptoms of Total Breakthrough start appearing in other children, Jeffrey is no longer himself, and no longer the son of George and Jean—he has turned into something else entirely. When the Overmind arrives, Jeffrey sheds his bodily form and joins it with the other children. Rashaverak implies that, due to his transformation, he is not technically human.

**Charles Yan Sen** – Sen is a “ironic but fundamentally cheerful” philosopher and the current council chairman of **New Athens**. When the Inspector visits the colony, Sen spends several days showing him around and asking him questions, though he finds much of the logistics and data about the colony far less interesting than his **Overlord** guest does. Though he tries to get the Inspector to describe how the Overlords raise their children, or even if they have any children, he is unsuccessful.

**Professor Sullivan** – Professor Sullivan is a marine scientist and a friend of Rupert’s whom Jan convinces to help him stow away aboard an **Overlord** ship. Professor Sullivan, like Jan, is one of the few remaining true scientists, studying Earth’s last frontier in the deepest parts of Earth’s oceans. Sullivan is cognizant of the fact that, although he has made many contributions to science, none of them are grand enough to cement his legacy in the history books. Sharing Jan’s boldness and desire to discover the unknown, as well as seeing an opportunity to do something that he will be remembered for, Sullivan quickly agrees to help Jan carry out his scheme. Sullivan is in the midst of building a replica whale for the Overlords to ship back to their home planet, and he adds a small room hidden in the whale’s body cavity for Jan to conceal himself in. With Jan inside, Sullivan delivers the whale to the Overlords, who load it in one of their supply ships and send it back to their planet, carrying Jan into space and beyond Earth’s solar system. As Sullivan sees Jan off, he realizes that he has grown fond of the young man, and hopes that he is not sending him to his death.

**Rashaverak** – Rashaverak is an **Overlord** who first identifies Jean as a person of interest regarding the coming of the **Overmind**. At Rupert’s party, when Jean faints at the Ouija board, Rashaverak realizes that she has a close connection to the first hosts of the Overmind. After discovering this,

Rashaverak is tasked with observing George and Jean’s family and reporting his observations to Karellen. When Jeffrey and Jennifer begin exhibiting symptoms of the Overmind’s coming, Rashaverak meets with George and Jean to help them understand what is happening to their family. After Jan returns from his expedition to the Overlords’ homeworld, Rashaverak spends some of his last days on Earth helping Karellen explain to Jan all that has happened in the years that he has been gone. Although Rashaverak was formerly a scientist who studied newly-discovered planets, on Earth he studies humanity’s history of paranormal activity, hoping that it will offer some clue as to the nature of the Overmind.

**Rupert Boyce** – An eccentric millionaire and caretaker of a wildlife preserve in Africa, Rupert has a hobbyist’s interest in the paranormal and has gathered the world’s largest collection of books on paranormal activity. He has given the **Overlords** access to this collection in exchange for a rare piece of holographic technology. He hosts the party where George meets Jan and he and Jean meet Rashaverak, and organizes the last stragglers of the party around the Ouija board that reveals the location of the Overlords’ homeworld. Although Rupert initiates and witnesses the strange event that reveals the location of the Overlords’ sun to Jan and reveals that Jean is in some way connected to the **Overmind** to Rashaverak, Rupert himself never manages to draw any conclusions about that night. Instead, he happily credits it to too much alcohol and continues in his ignorance. Rupert connects Jan with his friend, Professor Sullivan, who helps Jan with his plan to stow away aboard an Overlord ship.

**Thanthalteresco / “The Inspector”** – The Inspector is an **Overlord** who travels to **New Athens** under the pretense of inspecting the colony, but is actually there to observe Jeffrey and Jennifer and gather any data he can, since they are the first children to exhibit symptoms of the **Overmind**’s coming. The Inspector is very polite, sitting through days’ worth of theater shows, school tours, and musical performances. He always responds appropriately to the setting at hand, laughing at the right parts of the theater, for example, and paying warm compliments to the composers of the musical pieces. Even though his appreciation of the arts seems genuine, the artists of New Athens can’t help but wonder if the Inspector is putting on an act.

**Vindarten** – Vindarten is an **Overlord** who accompanies Jan for the few weeks that he spends on the Overlords’ planet. Vindarten is the only Overlord that can be found who can speak English, so Jan never leaves his company. Vindarten is friendly enough—after introducing Jan to several scientists who spend days running tests on him, Vindarten shows him around the city. Vindarten often carries Jan, as the city is built for flying Overlords and not for ground-dwelling humans. He shows Jan a museum with an exhibit of Earth and the eye of a creature the size of an asteroid, among other odd sights.

However, the strangest thing that Vindarten shows Jan is apparently a manifestation of the **Overmind**, though to Jan it appears as a massive, shape-shifting mountain rising from beyond the horizon. When Jan tries to take a picture with his camera, Vindarten stops him, fearfully reverent of the sight they are both beholding. When another supply ship is preparing a journey to Earth, Vindarten advises Jan that he should go home, as the strangeness of the Overlords' world to Jan could have a damaging affect on his mind.

**Alexander Wainwright** – Wainwright is a clergyman and leader of the **Freedom League**. He meets with Stormgren to petition the formation of the World Federation and to express his disdain for the **Overlords'** secrecy and governance over humanity, though much of his disdain comes from an underlying fear that the Overlords' presence will make organized religion obsolete, which indeed comes to pass. In a later meeting, when Stormgren announces to him that the Overlords will reveal themselves in fifty years, Wainwright insightfully notes that anyone who can remember what it is was like to be free, without the Overlords, will be dead by then.

**Jennifer Anne Greggson** – George and Jean's infant daughter, Jennifer also develops latent psychic powers as the **Overmind** approaches. Although her change starts after Jeffrey's, it happens much faster and develops more powerfully because she is younger and has "less to unlearn." Within weeks, she is able to levitate objects and mysteriously feed herself even though she never leaves her crib, and her eyes always closed. This terrifies George and Jean so much that they cannot even enter the nursery where she lays, but in her new state, she is completely self-sufficient so there is no need. Jennifer joins the Overmind with the other children when it arrives.

**Joe** – Joe is an affable Polish immigrant who kidnaps Stormgren on behalf of the resistance movement. Stormgren realizes that Joe is a natural fighter, but that he has not given much consideration to the causes that he fights for; he merely enjoys the thrill and the sense of purpose. Hearing that Stormgren is a skilled poker player, Joe buys a pack of cards and spends the days of Stormgren's confinement playing poker with him, beating Stormgren out of over one hundred dollars.

**The Blind Welshman** – The leader of the fringe element of the **Freedom League** that kidnaps Stormgren, the Welshman gives Stormgren the idea of smuggling an observation device into the meeting room with Karellen. The Welshman's primary objection to the **Overlords** is not religious, but that many smaller countries, which have fought so hard to preserve their cultures, will be swallowed and their cultures eradicated by Karellen's formation of the world-state. He turns out to be correct.

## MINOR CHARACTERS

**Pieter Van Ryberg** – Stormgren's assistant, Van Ryberg becomes the acting Secretary-General of the United

Nations while Stormgren is held hostage by the resistance movement. When Stormgren is present, Van Ryberg is constantly pitching far-fetched conspiracy theories about the true nature of Karellen.

**Pierre Duval** – A French physicist and old friend of Stormgren, Duval devises the scheme that Stormgren uses to catch a glimpse of Karellen, and designs and provides the equipment that enables the plot. However, Stormgren never tells Duval what he sees.

**Maia Boyce** – Maia is Jan's sister and the latest in Rupert's line of successive wives.



## 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.



### SCIENCE AND MYSTICISM

In *Childhood's End*, a benevolent race of aliens comes to govern Earth. **The Overlords**, as humanity names them, initiate a century of utopia on Earth, which ends with all human children transcending into **the Overmind**, an immaterial, universal collective consciousness. In doing so, the children advance the human race into the next stage of their evolutionary development, though they destroy the Earth and the non-transcendent humans in the process. The Overlords want to join the Overmind themselves but are unable to, since they have so committed themselves to scientific rationality that they have lost their capacity to appreciate the mystical and paranormal—the very capacity that allows humanity to transcend. Through this, Clarke suggests that although science and its requisite rationalism will take humanity into the future, sacrificing all forms of mysticism (that is, openness to the supernatural, spiritual, and scientifically unexplainable) will lead to a lifeless world and eliminate any potential for transcendence.

The Overlords themselves are the epitome of scientific rationalism: their home world is utterly utilitarian and devoid of aesthetic artwork or even decoration, they seek knowledge above all else, and they are living proof of the boundless possibilities of technology and scientific discovery. The Overlords prevent humanity from destroying itself—teaching them to set aside conflict—while utilizing technology and sophisticated organization to provide food, shelter, and basic amenities to every person on Earth at almost no cost. This all demonstrates the capacity of scientific progress to shepherd and provide for humanity.

Yet, though they have no desire to do so, the presence of the Overlords and their technology also inadvertently destroys organized religion, suggesting that pure rationalism is incompatible with the trappings of mystical beliefs. The Overloads' advanced technology allows humanity to effectively look back through time and witness the birth of every major religion, seeing that they are all mere myths. Although they take no pleasure in destroying the major mystical beliefs of humankind, the Overlords' very presence is inconsistent with many of those primary beliefs. Their knowledge and technological prowess elevates science and rationalism above religion—physical comforts of materialism replace the psychological comforts of mysticism, suggesting that the role of religion in society can be subverted by scientific knowledge and replaced by material security and abundance.

Although the Overlords are technically advanced and have achieved a pure level of rationalism, they are tragic figures and find themselves in envy of human beings' capacity for mysticism, which will allow them to join the Overmind. The Overlords have developed their faculties for knowledge, science, and technology to their fullest potential, but in doing so they have so elevated rationalism that they have essentially killed their own capacity for transcendence or imagination. They are described as being in an "evolutionary cul-de-sac," a dead end with nowhere else to go. Their race is doomed to be nothing more than a tool of the Overmind, but never to join it. Humanity, by contrast, has evolved in a less purely rationalistic direction. They are less technologically adept and less knowledgeable, yet this also means that they are more receptive to the possibility of irrational or supernatural experiences (as demonstrated by the myriad religions formerly practiced). Even after religion has been eradicated, the humans, in their penchant for mysticism, ascribe a sort of godhood to the Overlords, imagining them to be truly all-powerful and all-knowing.

The Overlords seem to regret their development into purely rational beings and envy the humans for their maintained mystical capacity. The Overlords wish to join the Overmind and take the next step in their racial development, but instead are forever imprisoned by their rationalism and unable to join the universal collective consciousness. This suggests a distinct value in being able to embrace the potential for things to exist beyond one's own understanding, as human beings do.

Yet even among humans, it is only the children, who are still open-minded, pliable, and have yet to develop a skepticism towards the mystical and paranormal, who are able to achieve transcendence and join the Overmind. Through this, Clark suggests that a childlike ability to believe in the unknown and unproven is vital to maintaining humanity's capacity for mysticism, which will potentially play a role in the future development of the human race. This rather ironically echoes the admonition of Jesus Christ to be like children in their

innocent capacity to believe, an idea which directly affronts scientific rationalism.

Clarke himself was a great advocate of scientific achievement and optimism, and yet in this story he warns against entirely throwing off mysticism and openness to the supernatural, arguing that it is a necessary trait of human beings and has a role to play in human development.



## BENEVOLENT DICTATORSHIP AND FREEDOM

The leader of **the Overlords** states, "All political problems can be solved through the correct application of power [...] for it's the *application* of the power, not its amount, that matters." Through the Overlords, Clarke envisions an ideal use of power to govern a stable, efficient society that provides for all of its people. Such a power is empathetic, non-invasive, and nurturing, becoming largely invisible in everyday life and maintaining order from a distance. However, an efficient government cannot also be a collaborative government with multiple perspectives and dissenting opinions, and the Overlords rule effectively as benevolent dictators. Although this benevolent dictatorship has created a utopian global society and although the individual citizens have a wide degree of autonomy, they are still not truly free, as they are unable to decide their own fates nor to find new frontiers to conquer. This paradox between an efficient, effective government and the freedom of its people creates a constant tension throughout the story, causing the reader to ponder whether such an ideal benevolent dictatorship is worth the limiting of humanity's freedom and pioneering spirit.

The Overlords rule through their *potential* for power, which they almost never have to actually use. Yet however seemingly passive, this power is still antithetical to human beings' autonomy and self-determination. Initially, humanity lives in fear of the Overlords' assumed power and are kept in line by the unspoken threat of it. When a provincial government tries and fails to destroy an Overlord ship, for instance, they are so fearful of retribution that Karelle, the Overlord leader, decides that their own self-recrimination is a more suitable punishment than anything he could dole out. In the same vein, when South Africa neglects to award full human rights to all of its citizens, the Overlords demonstrate their power by blocking the sun's heat for thirty minutes, which terrifies the country into quickly solving their civil rights problems.

Consequently, although the Overlords have the power to do great harm and rule with an iron fist, they never need to nor seem to want to, as they despise cruelty and suffering in all of its forms. Indeed, after the first few months, they exert very little direct control at all, becoming a governing force that is always present, though nearly invisible in day to day life. Though their example, Clarke seems to idealize a benevolent

form of diplomacy, wherein a ruling power achieves their goals and maintains order with the unspoken threat of retributive action, with the hope that that action is never required.

Importantly, although the Overlords were not elected by humanity, they are a nurturing force that seemingly operates with humanity's best interests in mind and are far more efficient than any elected government could ever be. The Overlords came uninvited, but they came to protect humanity from destroying itself. Following the Overlords' arrival, civil rights become universal, war and poverty and animal cruelty are ended, and crime plummets. A utopian era is initiated. The Overlords are singular in their intent and uncontested, yet the fact that they rule as (benevolent) dictators enables them to achieve all of these benefits for humanity within a few years—far faster than any representative form of government could. Democracies and republics are hamstrung by dissenting voices and varied opinions, obstacles that the Overlords never face. The Overlords thus seem to represent the most efficient and effective form of governing power for the provision of mankind's physical needs.

Yet despite the Overlords' benevolence, humanity is not actually free. Early on, the **Freedom League**, led by the clergyman Alexander Wainwright, resents the rule of the Overlords. Even though members do not feel their oppression in day to day life, they are existentially threatened by the Overlords' presence (as well as their substantiated fear that the Overlords will eventually make their religions obsolete), feeling that they are no longer free to chart their own course. Their ultimate autonomy has been stripped.

The construction of the island colony of **New Athens** is born out of the same fundamental desire for self-governance and control over one's own future as the Freedom League. However, rather than petitioning for the Overlords to leave, the residents of New Athens reestablish democracy and ensure that the colony's population remains low enough that every person's vote and action truly matters, and that everyone can be a "citizen in the truest sense of the word." Although this is not a permanent solution, it does serve to restore some sense of autonomy and spirit of self-determination to its participants, which they lacked under the governance of the Overlords.

As such, the novel suggests that benevolent dictators are still *dictators*. Although this model of government is presented as the most efficient for providing for humanity's physical needs and safety, humanity's potential for growth and progress are effectively crippled, causing one character to question whether the Overlords are misguided: "Suppose, in their altruistic passion for justice and order, they had determined to reform the world, but had not realized they were destroying the soul of man?"

The Overlords are easily the most effective government in earth's history: every citizen is well-fed, well-cared for, and

safe. This is something that has never before been achieved, and so complicates the question of whether the Overlords' benevolent dictatorship is the ideal form of government. Most of humanity seems fine with the Overlords' position of authority, and yet Clarke suggests that perhaps, due to the loss of freedom and the growth that that freedom fosters, such benevolence is not worth it in the end. Perhaps freedom, and the struggle and suffering inherent to liberty, is an invaluable asset in humanity's growth and progress.



## UTOPIA AND CREATIVE APATHY

**The Overlords** have transformed Earth into a utopian society, free from competition, struggle, or suffering. Every human being has access to everything they need for next to no cost, education has become a lifelong pursuit, and life itself—formerly defined by conflict—has become defined by comfort and leisure. However, this loss of conflict and struggle has resulted in a simultaneous loss of ideals—no progress has been made in the arts or sciences, and the humanistic spirit is languishing. Clarke suggests, as many authors in his era did, that human beings *require* conflict, suffering, and challenges in order to create the greatest masterpieces and seek answers to the questions that make life meaningful.

In the Overlord utopia, struggle has been eliminated, but so has triumph. Artists are left with nothing to feel strongly about, no questions worth asking, and, as such, nothing worth creating. The excess of leisure time created by the new wealth of utopia ironically causes the sheer number of artists and productive individuals to explode, yet the things that they create lack any substance or power; quality has been superseded by quantity.

With disease, war, strife, and even fear of the future largely eradicated, humanity finds that it has little left to say. This suggests that art that evokes strong feelings and passions depends upon contrast: there can be no sense of triumph if there was not first the threat of failure, heart-breaking beauty does not show itself if it was never preceded by the grotesque and horrible, and the relief of abundance is never felt if there was no famine to compare it to. Though it thrives materially, then, humanity is left looking over its shoulder at bygone eras when suffering was widespread but the art that resulted was more powerful than anything they are able to create in their era of plenty.

Scientific progress also languishes under the Overlords. Humanity has been banned from exploration and the Overlords possess such vast knowledge that it seems that there is nothing worth left discovering anyway. Clarke suggests that access to all knowledge and understanding actually results in less inquisitive, more complacent human beings. Though they are well-provided for, humanity's adventuring, pioneering spirit is crushed with no new frontiers to conquer. World travel has become an easy and simple affair—making the globe suddenly

feel very small and that nothing is foreign anymore—and space exploration has been prohibited. No new horizons are available. The pioneering lust for adventure, the consuming curiosity of what lies elsewhere has largely been quashed, leaving many people wondering, “Where do we go from here?” Without limitations to overcome or challenges to rise to, the sciences face the same fate as the arts: obsolescence. Utopia has robbed humanity of the necessary stimuli that propelled the race to grow and progress, even though it has stabilized its material needs.

The colony of **New Athens** aims to “restore humanity’s pride in its own achievements,” hoping that by imposing artificial limitations on themselves they can re-stimulate something of the humanistic spirit and produce something worthwhile. New Athens is fundamentally an attempt to get back to *doing something*. As a commune of artists and intellectuals, the members of New Athens are encouraged to strive to be the best on the island at one particular thing of their choosing; more important than achieving this is holding it up as an ideal to strive for, a purpose around which to orient their lives. The novel thus suggests that in the face of utopia, which many believe is inevitable with the progression of science and technology, mankind will need to learn to set challenges for itself to encourage growth, such as in the way that New Athens chooses to live without many modern amenities and fosters individual competition between its members to create idealism in an ideal-less world. However, while it does enjoy some success in revitalizing the human spirit, New Athens is ultimately destroyed by the ascension of the children into **the Overmind**. Its success was, in a sense, as artificial as the limitations it imposed upon itself, as the real human progress was being made by forces unknown to them until it was too late.

The problem with utopia is that the strongest characters, the greatest innovations, and the grandest art are often forged difficult circumstances. Where there is no struggle or suffering, there is no crucible to refine people or ideas. The novel thus suggests that without trial, there can be no triumph. Faced with utopia, human beings risk losing the spirit that defines humanity itself.



## INDIVIDUALITY, GLOBALIZATION, AND PROGRESS

The utopian society that **the Overlords** have initiated has gone to great lengths to unify the masses of humanity. Every person on Earth has become proficient in English—since that is the language that the Overlords use to communicate with the humans—travelling the world has become a common pastime, and loosened sexual mores have eliminated many of the boundaries of the family unit. The world, in effect, is becoming more homogenous and interconnected, appearing more and more as a collective rather

than a gathering of individuals. While these effects are not inherently bad—many are even beneficial—the rich variety of individual viewpoints and personality that give flavor to humanity are gradually being eliminated. A tension arises between the individual and the collective, and through this, the novel suggests that, although somewhat tragic, the dissolution of individuality, personality, and culture seem to be the inevitable cost of human progress.

As the Overlord utopia develops, nation-states lose their borders, their national sovereignty, and even their particular cultures. When the Overlords arrive, they effectively form a single world-state. Nations are free to govern themselves internally, but they all understand that the greater decision-making power has been taken from human hands, eroding their concept of national sovereignty. Stormgren, the head of the UN, observes that this process was already underway before the Overlords arrived, as seen in the formation of the Federation of Europe; the Overlords merely expedited the process.

The ease of travel made available by the Overlords’ utopia has also diluted the concept of national borders. When people are free to easily come and go, the cultural identity of a nation becomes diluted towards the average culture of all. Particular identity is giving way to the average collective identity. The Overlords bring with them certain ethics (no war, civil rights for all) that though generally beneficial, contradict the cultural identities of particular countries. For instance, the Overlords despise cruelty to animals and so put an end to bullfighting in Spain. Although from a purely ethical standpoint this may seem like a triumph, it also erodes the traditions that form a cultural identity.

Neither artists nor scientists have the chance to distinguish themselves in this new, intensely collective world, and the personalities amidst the broader culture fall away. There are no celebrities and no heroes—only the collective mass of humanity. The utopian Earth under the Overlords is lacking for real, groundbreaking art or truly innovative science. Instead, there is a deluge of family TV serials and widespread recreational interest in the basic sciences without any true scientific progress. With the induction of mass society and a comfortable, controlled world state, there is little to push artists and scientists to rise from the masses and do anything original. Everyone is content to be entertained and to live within the status quo since there are no pressing problems that need solutions, no dilemmas to tackle.

**New Athens** offers the only opportunity for artist or scientist to distinguish themselves, due to its competitive nature and its small size. However, New Athens is short-lived, and in the march of progress it too falls to the collective mass of humanity. Human children, in their preparation to join the Overmind, literally are stripped of their individuality and join the collective consciousness of the universe. They meet their fate with

faceless stares, forgetting even their own identities before the merge into the collective. This suggests that in a truly progressive, universal mindset, there is no room for individuals; instead, individualism is something to eventually be evolved past.

Even before the Overlords, Earth seemed to be on its way to adopting a more global, collective approach. Upon their arrival and institution of utopia, the fate of the individual is sealed, doomed to be absorbed into the faceless mask of humanity at large. However, breaking from other novels that have used science fiction to explore the tension between the individual and the collective, *Childhood's End* does not elevate individualism as the highest value to be fought for. Rather, Clarke frames this as inevitable, the way that things are destined to go if humanity is to continue down the road of progress.



### THE FATE OF HUMANITY

In much of Clarke's other writing, as well as the majority of science fiction written in his era, there is a humanistic optimism, a conviction that through science, technology, and determination, humanity can reach the stars. With the possibility of space travel approaching more rapidly than any dare dream (Clarke himself admitted to being blown away by how quickly the first humans landed on the moon) the possibilities seemed endless. Mankind would soon be pioneering new planets, and human progress would march onwards, unstoppable. *Childhood's End* subverts that idea and poses an alternative outcome of the future. Through the character of the bold young scientist, Jan Rodricks, Clarke sets up the typical humanistic optimism and certainty that man is destined to live amongst the stars, and then flips it on its head. In its place, he leaves readers with a contemplative question: What if the inevitable future is not progress, but ruin? What if progress ends, and humanity discovers that "the stars are not for man"?

Jan functions as a symbol of the humanistic faith that science and technology will lead mankind to the future, to the stars. While most of humanity is content to simply live in the utopia that **the Overlords** have initiated—happy, if not a little bored—Jan maintains the spirit that seems to have been sapped from the masses, and is a prime example of a true scientist. He bravely defies the prohibition that the Overlords have put on human excursions into space, including their admonition that, "The stars are not for man." Jan succeeds in his quest to venture into space, stowing away on an Overlord vessel and visiting their home world. He is the first and only human to see another planet and is tutored by an Overlord about their world and culture. As a human scientist, he has achieved the high ideals of "discovering" another world and meeting a new culture.

However, it does not take long for Jan to realize that the

Overlords were right: the stars are *not* for man. He subverts the expectation of a scientist discovering a new world by essentially surrendering his ambitions, admitting that human progress perhaps has met its limit. Despite his optimism and ambition for knowledge and discovery, Rodricks is left with the conviction that the universe is too vast and overwhelmingly complex for humanity to participate in. There is no home for human beings amidst the solar systems and they would be better off remaining on their own insignificant planet and following fate where it may lead. He soon finds out that this means annihilation. Rather than fighting the coming destruction of Earth and the majority of its people, Jan recognizes it as an inevitability in the workings of the universe, the next step in the development of the human race through the transcendence of its children into the universal consciousness. Rather than leading the charge of human civilization into the stars, he makes peace with its end and becomes the final witness of its death.

Through the subversive character of Jan Rodricks, Clarke invites the reader to consider the possibility that the future will not meet current expectations, that progress will not march onward forever but perhaps be halted, and that the development of humanity will not follow a path that they would have wished for.

Clarke himself was optimistic about the future possibilities of science and space travel, saying, "I am an optimist. Anyone interested in the future has to be otherwise he would simply shoot himself." And it should be noted that he clarifies in his preface to *Childhood's End* that he certainly did believe humanity had a future to discover in space. Even so, in a story that needs a humanistic hero, a character to carry forth scientific progress and discovery, he deliberately sets up Jan Rodrick to fill the role and then turns him aside. The novel, this time around, suggests that perhaps it will not all work out so well in the end for humanity.



### SYMBOLS

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



### THE OVERLORDS

The Overlords, with their vast knowledge and incomprehensible technology, are the epitome of scientific rationalism, existing in tension with any form of mysticism. They represent the potential of science to create a better future for Earth, while at the same time showing the limits of such development in the way that it diminishes one's openness to the spiritual, supernatural, and paranormal. This resistance prevents the Overlords from achieving any form of transcendence beyond the physical world by joining the

## Overmind.

The Overlords also contribute heavily to the religious undertones of the story. Their physical appearance is that of the Devil of classic religious imagery—black-skinned, barb-tailed, leathery-winged, and horned. This appearance relates to their character and function in the story in a number of ways. On the one hand, it is ironic that the Overlords look like devils, since they effectively take up the role of guardian angels—they step in to stop humanity from destroying itself with nuclear weapons or latent psychic abilities, and they miraculously intervene to rescue Jeffrey from the tsunami. At the same time the descriptor is fitting—as paragons of rationalism, the Overlords bring down organized religion (though unintentionally) and usher in a materialist utopia. Due to their rationalism, they are unable to join the Overmind, who figures as both a god-like entity and a transcendent, non-religious version of heaven. The Overlords, like the Devil and his aides, are cut off from “God” and barred from entering “heaven” for eternity, doomed to die in darkness.

The Overlords, as the proverbial devils, both protect humanity from self-destruction and offer it a utopian Earth to live on, and yet, by the stagnation that comes with utopia, rob humanity of its soul. In effect, the Overlords represent a Faustian bargain: humanity can have health, wealth, and prosperity, but only at the cost of their spirit—that is, the thing that drives them to grow and progress.



## THE OVERMIND

The Overmind is Clarke’s vision of a possible transcendent future for humanity, and in the story, functions symbolically as a higher power and a final destination, an alternative for God and his authority and a vision of heaven as an eternal state of consciousness.

The Overmind is a universal cosmic consciousness that will come to Earth and absorb a portion of humanity into itself, allowing humanity to live on through the ages in a higher form of existence. The Overmind is the future home of humanity once it learns to transcend the material world, without its physical laws and bodily confines. Although the **Overlords**, who bear a symbolic parallel to both devils and angels, seem at first to be god-like to humanity, the Overmind is in fact the master and the Overlords are its servants. This, combined with its transcendent, non-corporeal state of being, puts the Overmind in the function of an ultimate higher power akin to God.

Pointedly, only those who have maintained a mystical capacity—those who have an openness to believing in things beyond the natural world—are able to join the Overmind; “God” will only accept those who “believe,” at which point they will shed their physical form, relinquish their individual selves, and enter “heaven” (that is, the Overmind’s cosmic consciousness). Although the Overlords abolish religion in the midst of their

building a utopian world, the Overmind rekindles that lost spirituality, though not in the same format. As the children, in preparation for its coming, develop their latent psychic abilities, the evidence of a non-rational plane of existence is plain for all to see. Ultimately, the God-like Overmind ushers in the apocalypse, absorbing its children into itself and laying waste to the rest of the world, alluding to the Christian prophecy of the Rapture.

Although it is certainly not the Christian God, the Overmind thus functions as a parallel alternative, based not in divinity but in a belief in the mystical, paranormal potential of the universe.



## NEW ATHENS

The artist colony of New Athens represents the resurgence of humanism and, as a symbolic counterpoint to the stagnation that humanity experiences while living in a utopia, effectively represents the failure of utopia to foster the human spirit. Noticing that humanity has become over-satisfied with utopia and lost all of its ambition, a group of visionaries spend twenty years designing and forming the island colony as a place for artists and intellectuals to recover the pride that humanity once took in its own accomplishments. The colonists of New Athens put themselves to the task of creating new breakthroughs in art and science, recovering the lost momentum humanity had had before the **Overlords** arrived.

The Overlords, who are rational, material beings, did not account for or consider significant that humanity, bored by the ease of utopia, would begin to lose its soul. Thus, the fact that New Athens exists at all is an indication that utopia has failed to meet all of humanity’s needs. Although the Overlords have managed to meet all material concerns—everyone is safe and well-fed—they have failed to account for humanity’s need for agency and ideals to stimulate its creative potential or challenges to stimulate its growth.

New Athens is successful in stimulating the human spirit for some years, but it is ultimately destroyed by the arrival of the **Overmind**. However, considering that New Athens aspired to human progress and the Overmind represents the mystical, god-like transcendent destination of a portion of the human race, it is not such a failure after all. Indeed, it was New Athens that produced the first two children to develop the latent abilities that signaled the Overmind’s approach. The colony which sought to bring humanity into the future truly did so, though in a much different manner than it had intended.



## THE FREEDOM LEAGUE

The Freedom League operates as a minor symbol of human liberty, and its mere existence serves to demonstrate the degree to which humanity still values that

liberty. In the initial decade or so after the **Overlords** arrive, when nearly every person alive remembers what it is like to live without them, the Freedom League operates to restore humanity's autonomy and free will. Though the Freedom League does not represent the majority of human beings, its members are considerable in their number. The protests of the Freedom League revolve either around the fear that the Overlords will disrupt organized religion or the fear that the Overlords' creation of a world-state will cause smaller cultures to lose their individuality.

Both of these fears are well-founded, and the Freedom League's predictions come to pass. Despite its foresight, as the years draw on under the Overlords' rule the Freedom League gradually loses its influence and withers away. The death of the Freedom League, inconsequential to most, signals that humanity ultimately prefers the peace and prosperity that the Overlords have brought to Earth over the traditions, cultures, religions, and comparative freedom that the Overlords have passively destroyed. The dissolution of the Freedom League reveals that human liberty has become a memory of a bygone age, and that most of humanity does not seem to care that it has been lost.



### KARELLEN'S ONE-WAY SCREEN

The viewing screen in the conference room in which Stormgren and Karellen periodically meet functions as a minor symbol of the **Overlords'** rule: it is opaque and deceptive, based on illusion and the inclination of humanity to not question its own assumptions.

Stormgren simply assumes that the viewing screen is in fact a display of some sort. He has never questioned that assumption in the five years that he has been meeting with Karellen, until he finally comes to discover that it is simply a sheet of one-way glass through which Karellen watches him. Despite the Overlords' vast technological capacity, the illusion is simple, merely a trick of the light. This is representative of the Overlords' use of their power to rule in general—like the trick with the viewing screen, much of the Overlords' perceived power is similarly an illusion. For example, the threatening Overlord ships that hover over humanity for fifty years are really just mirages.

Despite Stormgren's friendship with Karellen and despite the Overlords' displayed affection for humanity, the Overlords keep their plans as opaque as the viewing screen, never being fully honest about their own nature, their intentions, or what is transpiring around them. The Overlords base their entire rule on such deceptions, which are often comparatively simple, and their refusal to be honest or open with their subjects only reinforces their role as authoritarians, regardless of how friendly or benevolent they may appear to be.



## QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Del Ray Books edition of *Childhood's End* published in 1954.

### Chapter 1 Quotes

☞ He felt no regrets as the work of a lifetime was swept away. He had labored to take man to the stars, and now the stars—the aloof, indifferent stars—had come to him.

**Related Themes:**



**Related Symbols:**



**Page Number:** 5

### Explanation and Analysis

At the beginning of the novel, a cosmonaut preparing himself for a multi-nation expedition to Mars sees the first of the Overlord ships arriving on Earth and realizes that all of his life's work has just been made obsolete; the things he was seeking to discover have arrived on his own doorstep.

Opening with a cosmonaut about to go on an important mission underscores how critical the development of space travel capabilities should have been to humanity—and indeed *would* have been—had the Overlords not arrived. Space should have been the ultimate frontier, with infinite possibilities for human expansion and development, and yet, as the cosmonaut realizes, all human ambition to explore space evaporates as soon as the aliens arrive.

Describing the stars, and the beings therein, as “aloof” and “indifferent” is particularly apt. The Overmind, which will ultimately absorb a portion of humanity and destroy the rest in the process, never gives any indication of feeling empathetic to humanity's loss of agency. It is simply a process of the universe.

### Chapter 2 Quotes

☞ “Can you deny that the Overlords have brought security, peace, and prosperity to the world?”

“That is true, but they have taken our liberty. Man does not live—”

“—by bread alone. Yes, I know—but this is the first age in which every man was sure of getting even that.”

**Related Characters:** Alexander Wainwright, Rikki

Stormgren (speaker)

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:**  

**Page Number:** 9

### Explanation and Analysis

In the early years of Overlord occupation, Wainwright is protesting that the Overlords have stripped humanity's fundamental liberty. Stormgren defends the Overlords, stating that most of life has not been fundamentally changed, except that everyone is safe, comfortable, and well-fed.

The Overlords' dictatorship raises an existential question: is it better to live with greater freedom but to suffer as a consequence, or to live under authoritarian rule but in security, peace, abundance, and reasonable happiness? In the thousands of years of prior human development, when humanity was "free" (though, even then, many nations were dominated by others), Earth's societies had never found a way to achieve peace and provide for all people. Most of humanity's history is comprised of war, hunger, and suffering. If the Overlords were able to solve all of these problems practically overnight, is that worth the dictatorship? It could easily be argued as such.

However, though it takes decades to discover, the loss of liberty is more than a simple loss of an existential value; the loss of liberty, as well as the loss of danger, struggle, and pain (which the Overlords put an end to) also results in the decay of the human spirit itself.

☛ With the arrival of the Overlords, nations knew that they need no longer fear each other, and they guessed—even before the experiment was made—that their existing weapons were certainly impotent against a civilization that could bridge the stars. So at once the greatest single obstacle to the happiness of mankind had been removed.

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 19

### Explanation and Analysis

The narrator discusses the first year following the Overlords' arrival on Earth. The marvel of the Overlords'

seemingly limitless power is that they rarely have to use any of it—the simple knowledge that they are there, watching from the sky, is enough to dissuade violence between nations.

This once more nods to the complex nature of the Overlords' governance of Earth. While they have initiated the long-awaited dream of world peace, they have done so through the unspoken threat of violence. Even so, it seems better that such a power exists with an assumedly neutral third party than with any nation of Earth, who aside from keeping the peace, has its own concerns of trade policies, resource access, and so on. Humanity is given a neutral judge, though an assuredly dictatorial one.

Writing early on in the Cold War, with the threat of nuclear apocalypse seeming to grow larger by the day, Clarke would have been well aware of the need for such a judge. With nuclear weapons, humanity happened upon technological capabilities that it was not mature enough to handle. Even faced with the potential of such large-scale destruction, diplomacy was still failing between the West and the East. Rather than be driven to reason by threat of an apocalypse, humanity's leaders continued to feud and act in their own self-interests. In Clarke's day, humanity proved itself not as rational and pragmatic but as supremely childish. A benevolent authoritarian with the power simply to keep the nations of the world from wiping themselves out may have seemed like an appealing possibility.

## Chapter 3 Quotes

☛ “I can understand your fear that the traditions and cultures of little countries will be overwhelmed when the world state arrives. But you are wrong: it is useless to cling to the past. Even before the Overlords came to Earth, the sovereign state was dying. They have merely hastened its end.”

**Related Characters:** Rikki Stormgren (speaker), The Blind Welshman

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:**  

**Page Number:** 36-37

### Explanation and Analysis

Stormgren is arguing, during his meeting with the extremist leaders of the Freedom League, that the consolidation of humanity into a single entity—the induction of mass society—is an inevitable consequence of progress. This

reveals that he is, among other things, an extremely pragmatic individual.

Even without the Overlords, human progress had inevitably resulted in the process of globalization—as nations developed more powerful technology and fought for their share of the Earth's resources, the different nations and alliances of the world all necessarily became much more aware of each other and the need for cooperation and negotiation between states. Smaller nations were being absorbed into federations and alliances (such as in Europe), and individual cultures, suddenly assimilated into a great mass, were losing both their heritage and diversity. Even so, this increased coordination brought with it prosperity and security. When everyone is part of an alliance, minor wars are far less likely to occur, trade deals are easier to establish, and information and resources are more easily shared.

Before the Overlords arrived, humanity was already facing down the prospect of trading individualism for progress and prosperity. This is a tragedy, but as Stormgren points out here, seems, so far, to be necessary.

humanity's wealth until it meets all needs, nuancing the concept of a dictator to something far more dynamic than the classic cartoonish villainous concept propagated by Western society and its fear of Communism at the time.

Clarke makes the point that, disregarding the ethical and existential considerations, an authoritarian rule, especially by highly-intelligent, well-researched individuals, is so much more efficient that a utopia could already be had on Earth if its resources were properly allocated. It seems that the Earth and its people could produce enough for all people to be well-fed, well-educated, and safe, if only a more efficient form of government were in place. But, importantly, this would come at the cost of human freedom.

☞ The end of strife and conflict of all kinds had also meant the virtual end of creative art. There were myriads of performers, amateur and professional, yet there had been no really outstanding new works of literature, music, painting, or sculpture for a generation. The world was still living on the glories of a past that could never return.

## Chapter 6 Quotes

☞ Fifty years is ample time in which to change a world and its people almost beyond recognition. All that is required for the task are a sound knowledge of social engineering, a clear sight of the intended goal—and power.

**Related Themes:**    

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 62

### Explanation and Analysis

The Overlords, now well into their tenure on Earth, have utterly remade human society. Significantly, though they certainly possess some level of destructive power, the Overlords achieve what hundreds of wars never could, all without harming a single human being: total peace, plenty, and security.

The Overlords demonstrate a vision of efficient power. Since they rule as benevolent dictators, the Overlords and their processes are not hamstrung by democracy with its committees, councils, and checks and balances. Admittedly, humanity is somewhat less free than a century before, but due to the Overlords' efficiency—the ability to do more with less time, money, or energy—they have been able to extend

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 68

### Explanation and Analysis

Continuing to describe the changes in the years since the Overlords came to Earth, the narrator notes that the onset of utopia has eliminated the ambitions of humanity. The humanistic spirit, the zeal for higher achievement and greater creations that had been present in societies for millennia, has disappeared. The absence of any challenges, obstacles, or ideals, has pacified humanity's creativity and willpower.

This passage suggests that the loss of good art is the first sign of the decay of the human spirit brought on by utopia, the first noticeable cost. Artistic creation is a hallmark of Homo Sapiens, practiced in every culture and every era for thousands of years. For an entire race to lose its creative faculties, its ability to describe itself and its place in the universe, is a dark sign indeed. More than the loss of good art, then, the novel suggests that utopia has brought about a loss of identity.

Clarke makes the case, as many authors of his day have, that human beings require conflict to sharpen themselves and excel. Without challenges, human beings become weak-

mindful and weak-willed. For human beings to create and to have something worth saying, they need to have experiences that truly shape them, and that other people can resonate with. Without such shaping experiences, human beings lack a firm identity for themselves. Thus, grand art cannot exist in a utopian world. All of the things that art communicates—beauty, triumph, struggle, defeat, love, sorrow—cannot be experienced in a world that is too easy, one that offers no challenges and thus no chances for human growth.

## Chapter 8 Quotes

☝☝ Man was, therefore, still a prisoner on his own planet. It was a much fairer, but a much smaller, planet than it had been a century before. When the Overlords had abolished war and hunger and disease, they had also abolished adventure.

**Related Characters:** Jan Rodricks

**Related Themes:**     

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 85

### Explanation and Analysis

While on the roof at Rupert's party, Jan stewes on his frustration with the fact that the Overlords have effectively put an end to the expansion of most sciences, including research into space travel. Humanity is been so flabbergasted by the immense, otherworldly complexity of the Overlord spacecraft that they quickly stop trying to reach a comparable level of technological prowess.

It is a notable sign of the Overlords' power that, even before they prohibit space travel, their presence and the scale of their technological power already puts humanity in a sort of cage. Humanity, though struggling before the Overlords arrived, was independent. Humanity had to take care of itself, provide for itself, protect itself, and moderate its own impulses. With all of this responsibility and self-sufficiency came a certain confidence and a desire to test and extend its own abilities, but the Overlords' arrival swiftly puts an end to that.

Like overprotective, overindulgent parents, the Overlords have effectively enabled humanity to become complacent. No longer does humanity need to care for itself—the Overlords handle everything now. No longer does humanity desire to test its own limits—with the Overlords there, there will never be the need to develop any further.

Everything they could ever need is provided for them.

This is a turning point of the theme of power, and also reflects the problems with utopia. In the beginning of the story, the Overlords' power is depicted by the narration as largely beneficial since it has kept humanity from self-destruction, but one generation later, their power is shown to have created a gilded cage.

## Chapter 10 Quotes

☝☝ The human race continued to bask in the long, cloudless summer afternoon of peace and prosperity. Would there ever be a winter again? It was unthinkable. The age of reason, prematurely welcomed by the leaders of the French Revolution two and a half centuries before, had now really arrived. This time, there was no mistake.

**Related Themes:**    

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 103

### Explanation and Analysis

Humanity is at the height of its utopian happiness. There is no war, no hunger, no poverty, no material scarcity. Despite the constant presence of the Overlords, it seems to many that such a utopia was already inevitable, as if humanity would have gotten there just fine on its own. The future thus seems assured. Such prosperity and happiness, they believe, will never come to an end.

Human beings continue to live relatively happily in the utopia created by the Overlords. This moment reflects a mindset consistent with much of science fiction and typifies the misplaced confidence of humanism that progress is inevitable and that the future will only get better and better. However, as the story progresses and the inevitability of the Earth's doom is revealed, this confidence quickly wanes.

Clarke, rather than painting a bright future for humanity, instead envisions one in which humanity's end is approaching before the novel even starts, in which all of human beings's striving and scheming and ingenuity will have absolutely no effect when set upon by forces in the universe that are larger than themselves.

It is again indicative of the Overlords' power that humanity had tried and failed to create a rationalistic utopia with the French Revolution. The Overlords are depicted as fulfilling many of the greatest wishes of humanity—peace,

prosperity, happiness—and acting as the solution to human ineptitude and the inability to achieve its dreams.

☞ Yet among all the distractions and diversions of a planet which now seemed well on the way to becoming one vast playground, there were some who still found time to repeat an ancient and never-answered question:

“Where do we go from here?”

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 105

### Explanation and Analysis

Humanity, in the midst of its Golden Age, finds itself with infinite entertainment, plenty of leisure, and no ideals or existential goals, once again asserting the idea that without greater purpose to aim for or challenges to overcome, the human spirit starts to weaken.

There is a great irony in the fact that the “progress” that has been made, which catapulted humanity into a sudden, rationalistic utopia—described earlier as the final realization of the Age of Reason that early humanists strived for—has actually eliminated all human progression. Now that it seems there is nothing worth discovering, humanity has ceased its investigations and lost its creativity. The human race has reached a developmental plateau with no ambition to go anywhere else, much like the Overlords reached their own evolutionary plateau and now find themselves trapped in the physical world.

For all humanity’s pining for a better world, it seems that such a utopian Golden Age is perhaps bound to end in ruin, even without an external cataclysmic force. Given enough time and with no ideals to seek or challenges to rise to, humanity’s weakening spirit will result in the general degradation of society. As purposeless life loses its substance and nihilism sets in, the order and functioning of society will begin to come apart at the seams.

## Chapter 14 Quotes

☞ “It is a bitter thought, but you must face it. The planets you may one day possess. But the stars are not for man.”

**Related Characters:** Karellen (speaker), Jan Rodricks

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 129

### Explanation and Analysis

Karellen delivers this injunction at a press conference after learning of Jan’s stowing away to the Overlords’ planet, and it is one of the few firm prohibitions laid down by the Overlords.

Although Clarke himself did not believe that humanity should not reach for the stars, he uses this story to pitch a very different concept of humanity’s future, almost like a test case. In the midst of the space race, Clarke and his contemporaries were incredibly optimistic about humanity’s future in space and the wealth of new opportunities and discoveries it would bring. The idea that humanity would be better off relegating itself to its own planet was a highly unusual one, perhaps even disturbing.

The case that Clarke makes in the story is not that humanity cannot reach the stars—since they were on the eve of it before the Overlords arrived—but rather that once they got there, they would not be able to interact with or understand anything that they found. Rather than breakthroughs of scientific discovery, which everyone was greatly anticipating, the vastness of the universe would simply be ineffable. The human mind would not be able to handle it. In effect, there would be nothing for humanity to do out there and they would only be confused and worse off for their arrogant quest. In effect, Clarke asks: What if humanity is not ready to meet the universe? And what if it never will be?

## Chapter 15 Quotes

☞ “There’s nothing left to struggle for, and there are too many distractions and entertainments. Do you realize that *every day* something like five hundred hours of radio and TV pour out over various channels? [...] Soon people won’t be living their own lives anymore.”

**Related Characters:** George Greggson

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 135

### Explanation and Analysis

As George and his family are visiting New Athens for the first time, a guide shows him around and explains the reasons for its creation and goals of its founders.

Since basic functions of living or producing are no longer a challenge—everyone is automatically well-fed, well off, and safe—there is no more satisfaction in simply providing for oneself or one’s family since it requires very little effort. Outside of New Athens, society has given itself over to the creation and consumption of mass entertainment.

This seems to be a reflection of Clarke’s own fears. Clarke was writing in the 1950s, when broadcast TV was reaching a new level of penetration into home and family life and broadcast serials were reaching a critical mass. Fear was growing that the next generation of children would be so consumed by entertainment that they would not learn to care for themselves and would not sharpen their skills or ever reach their potential. An excess of leisure, it was feared, would not result in healthier, more vibrant minds, but rather in over-mediated, over-entertained, passive viewers.

It is telling, that in a book that decries the spirit-numbing effects of a utopian state and an over-entertained culture, a mere 500 hours of available content a day seems like a great excess. The modern world of entertainment offers several thousand times that amount at any instant. As such, one has to wonder what Clarke would think of the current state of mass media.

☞ Suppose, in [the Overlords’] altruistic passion for justice and order, they had determined to reform the world, but had not realized that they were destroying the soul of man?

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:**  

**Page Number:** 139

### Explanation and Analysis

The initiator of New Athens, a man who is just old enough to remember the Earth that existed before the Overlords, is reflecting on their re-ordering of society, and asking himself if perhaps more was not lost than was gained.

This pitches an interesting tension between order, justice, and humanity’s soul. If the ordering of society so that it is fair results in a soul-crushing utopia, are order and justice

not ideals that should ever be reached? Or is it possible to attain some semblance of order and justice without losing the competition among humanity that propels it to new heights? Such competition seems to be a strong accelerant in human progress—the race between the U.S. and the Soviets to reach space certainly accelerated the development of that capability with a nationalistic fervor.

Perhaps then, if utter utopia crushes humanity’s spirit, a near-utopia would be a better option. The New Athens colonists maintain much of the security and prosperity of the rest of the world while posing challenges for themselves and abstaining from certain pleasures and entertainments as a way to remain creatively stimulated. Perhaps, in the same way, an Earth that is safe from self-destruction (through war or disease) but which still has several hurdles left to overcome in economics, infrastructure, or technology, as well as healthy competition between nations, would lead to a healthier version of humanity than what currently exists.

### Chapter 16 Quotes

☞ The universe was vast, but that fact terrified him less than its mystery. George was not a person who thought deeply on such matters, yet it sometimes seemed to him that men were like children amusing themselves in some secluded playground, protected from the fierce realities of the outer world.

**Related Characters:** Jan Rodricks, George Greggson

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:**   

**Page Number:** 144

### Explanation and Analysis

George, in the midst of his happy life on New Athens, thinks back to the evening that he had met Jan, who is now somewhere in the vastness of space aboard an Overlord ship, flying to an alien planet.

Contrary to the idealistic and brave Jan, George is an average man. He has no desire to discover the unknown or to see what else is out there. However, despite his averageness, George’s intuition that human beings are akin to children playing in an enclosed space is quite astute and directly alludes to the book’s title, *Childhood’s End*.

Humanity, for all its technological progress and lofty ideas, finds itself utterly humbled by the arrival of a race that is so superior that it seems nearly god-like. This race shepherds

or parents the childlike humans until a portion of the race is ready to leave its childhood behind and transcend to a higher state of being as the Overmind, symbolically entering into adulthood.

George is, in this way, an embodiment of the alternative idea posed by Clarke in the story: space is too vast, the universe too unknowable for human beings to conquer it. Humanity should stick to what it knows. And perhaps, for all the science and research and human ingenuity, humanity is just a child scratching in the sand, utterly unaware of the greater forces at play around it.

## Chapter 17 Quotes

☞ Twenty years ago, the Overlords had announced that they had discontinued all use of their surveillance devices, so that humanity no longer need consider itself spied upon. However, the fact that such devices still existed meant that nothing could be hidden from the Overlords if they really wanted to see it.

**Related Themes:**    

**Related Symbols:**  

**Page Number:** 151

### Explanation and Analysis

In the waning years of Earth, the Overlords offer more and more freedoms back to humanity—in this case, freedom from total surveillance. However, as with all of the Overlords' abilities, the passive power remains and is more than sufficient to control human beings. Just as the knowledge that the Overlords can wipe out an entire country if its leaders refused to submit is threatening enough to ensure humanity's compliance, the knowledge that the Overlords can still see whatever they want to see is enough of a threat to largely prevent any espionage or covert activities.

With their immense power and knowledge that dwarfs any capabilities of humanity, the Overlords cannot truly be anything but authoritarians. Benevolent as they are, trusting as they are, even unobtrusive as they are, the supreme imbalance of power between the Overlords and their human subjects means that they can never be seen as anything other than dictators. Whether they wield it or not, their power is absolute.

☞ Nothing in [New] Athens was done without a committee, that ultimate hallmark of the democratic method [...] Because the community was not too large, everyone in it could take some part in its running and could be a citizen in the truest sense of the word.

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:**  

**Page Number:** 152

### Explanation and Analysis

Citizens of New Athens prepare for the arrival of an Overlord inspector. They are reclaiming the idea of democracy, a symbol of the individual's right to participate in government and a form of rule that has been lost since the arrival of the Overlords.

The participation of each individual in the governance of their community seems to be the greatest way to combat the soul-numbing problems of both utopia and a mass, uniform society. When an individual is given the power to participate in making decisions that will affect their lives, they retain their human agency—rather than being a cog in a machine, they are an active contributor to the health of society.

There is a caveat to this, however. Such participation and the feeling that one's vote actually makes a difference requires a reasonably small community, which is why New Athens limits itself to a maximum of 100,000 people (for the feeling of individual contribution to persist even in a community that size seems rather dubious).

Sixty-five years after Clarke wrote this story, the population of Earth had tripled, something that he could not have seen coming. Although his argument for allowing each individual to have a real input in government is an appealing counteragent to the loss of agency brought on by utopia and mass society, as Earth's population exponentially swells, maintaining small enough communities for this solution to work seems less and less plausible.

☞ “Everybody on the island has one ambition, which may be summed up very simply. It is to do *something*, however small it may be, better than anyone else. Of course, it's an ideal we don't all achieve. But in this modern world, the great thing is to *have* an ideal. Achieving it is considerably less important.”

**Related Characters:** Thanthalteresco / “The Inspector”

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:**  

**Page Number:** 155

### Explanation and Analysis

As the Inspector is making his visit to New Athens, several professors talk to the Overlord about the ideals of the colony, gently challenging the Overlords' utopian system as they do so.

The New Athens colonists demonstrate an interesting method with which to combat the stagnation brought on by utopia. Building one's own habitat, fostering competition between peers, and seeking to create new ideals all go some way toward restoring human agency and rebuilding what was lost of the human spirit. Though a singular society and utopia may rob humanity of its self-sufficiency and desire to excel, rejecting both can go some way towards restoring that.

However, it is telling that *having* an ideal is more important than what that ideal *is* or actually *achieving* it. As a utopian world is essentially "complete," with no problems to solve or major concerns to tend to, even the sense of purpose that New Athens seeks to propagate is in itself artificial. The damage wrought by utopia seems to be, in a way, irreversible, providing an even stronger warning to readers against letting that be humanity's primary aspiration.

## Chapter 18 Quotes

💬 This was a thought that had never occurred to [George]. He had subconsciously assumed that the Overlords possessed all knowledge and all power—that they understood, and were probably responsible for, the things that had been happening to Jeff.

**Related Characters:** Rashaverak, Jeffrey Greggson, Jean Morrel, George Greggson

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 166

### Explanation and Analysis

While Rashaverak meets with George and Jean to discuss the change that is overtaking Jeffrey, he reveals that not even the Overlords completely understand the process that

is occurring.

George, like most of humanity, has attributed a sense of godhood to the Overlords and consciously or unconsciously put the Overlords in the same position that God, in its many forms, once held. As with God, the common people find the Overlords' power either comforting for the security it offers or vaguely disturbing since they cannot imagine what its true purposes are.

This attribution of godhood is not something the Overlords ever ask for, and with their highly rational minds it seems unlikely that they would have attributed it to any other higher being. Their minds are set in purely rational ideas, which means that no god can exist within their frame of reference. Humans, however, are so mystically-inclined that even when able to see the power of scientific knowledge, they gravitate either towards the paranormal or the supernatural. Rather than recognize that the Overlords are powerfully intelligent, yet still limited as all things in the natural world are, they think of them as omnipotent and omniscient beings, suggesting that the desire for a higher power or ideal under which to structure themselves is innate to human beings, though many may seek to throw it off.

## Chapter 19 Quotes

💬 In the space of a few days, humanity had lost its future, for the heart of any race is destroyed, and its will to survive is utterly broken, when its children are taken from it.

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 173

### Explanation and Analysis

Humanity's children, though still physically present on Earth, are mentally gone. The Overmind is nearing its arrival, and in preparation almost every child younger than 10 has begun the process of transcending into a higher state of being.

The loss of humanity's children, and thus of its future, is the full realization of the decay that had set in with the arrival of utopia. Even in a utopian, stagnant society without ideals or goals, children and family still provided humanity enough reason to carry on. However, it is worth questioning how long this would have lasted in a utopia even without the arrival of an Overmind. The family unit was already

dissolving; marriage had been demoted to short-term contracts, polyamory and infidelity was the expected norm, and reliable contraceptives had loosened sexual mores.

This suggests that the family unit is bound to collapse in a utopian society, just as religion, art, and breakthrough science are. As such, utopia seems certain to be the beginning of the death of human society. Without children and family, among the most fundamental and universal human experiences, the last hope for humanity's future—or even reason for its existence—is gone.

## Chapter 20 Quotes

☞ “All of our sojourn here has been based on a vast deception, a concealment of truths which you were not ready to face.”

**Related Characters:** Karellen (speaker)

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:**  

**Page Number:** 175

### Explanation and Analysis

Karellen delivers his final speech to humanity to explain what is happening to Earth's children and what will soon transpire, revealing why the Overlords came and what they have been doing for the past century on Earth. For the first time, humanity is hearing the full truth.

Deception plays a critical role in the way that the Overlords wield power and govern. Like the viewing screen in Karellen's conference room or the illusion of many ships floating over humanity, much of the control that the Overlords exert is based merely on the illusion of power. Additionally, their power is subtly progressive. The Overlords roll out their plan slowly over a century, and thus, since each stage of the plan does not seem too unbearable (except for the final result) there is never altogether enough human resistance to pose any real threat.

Demonstrating the most efficient use of authoritarian power once again, the Overlords' use of illusion and deception allows them complete control. While doing relatively little, Earth's masters are able to ingratiate themselves to humanity, reshape society, and guide them through a golden age that results in their own destruction, and humanity hardly resists at all. The employment of deception, on top of an already subtle use of authoritarian power, can allow for maximal control with little exertion of

energy. This is a chilling thought to consider with regards to the real world.

## Chapter 21 Quotes

☞ It was thus with [New] Athens. The island had been born in fire; in fire it chose to die. Those who wished to leave did so, but most remained, to meet the end among the broken fragments of their dreams.

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 181

### Explanation and Analysis

After accepting that their children are leaving them for good, the rest of the people of New Athens choose to meet their own end quickly. The volcano that the colony was built upon is ready to blow, and many colonists decide to stay and accept their fate.

The creation of New Athens was an act of human assertion. Rather than existing passively in the utopian world-state, the colonists chose to strive for an ideal, to be active agents in their own lives and in the progress of human history. Rather than simply watching the Earth turn and enjoying themselves, they committed themselves to building something, to action and autonomy.

It is thus fitting that they meet their deaths as active agents. The people of New Athens know the volcano is about to erupt, but they choose to remain. If they opted to escape, they would still be doomed to live out the rest of their lives in the face of looming obscurity, passive entities waiting for time and old age to take them. Instead, the colonists choose to actively meet their fate and die with the entire colony, their ideals, and the future. Faced with the apocalypse, a small group of humans make their last act of human agency, embodying the ideals of New Athens even in death.

## Chapter 23 Quotes

☞ “And do you not resent being used as a tool by the Overmind?”

“The arrangement has some advantages: besides, no one of intelligence resists the inevitable.”

That proposition, Jan reflected wryly, had never been fully accepted by mankind.

**Related Characters:** Rashaverak, Jan Rodricks (speaker)

**Related Themes:** 

**Related Symbols:**  

**Page Number:** 200

### Explanation and Analysis

Jan and Rashaverak are discussing the arrival of the Overmind and the Overlords relationship to it, being that they are bound as its servants, seemingly forever.

Jan's submission to the inevitability of fate—to the fact that humanity has no place among the stars and indeed no future whatsoever in its current physical form—directly subverts the classic humanistic hero of most science fiction. Throughout most of the book, he has perfectly fit into that archetype; Jan was the brave scientist, defying authority and questing for new frontiers. Now, at the end of all things, he accepts that the universe has other plans. Clarke's sharp turnabout of Jan's character and the overall tone of the story's final act are markedly different even from the other fiction that Clarke himself wrote, offering a dour alternate vision of humanity's entrance into the stars.

The Overlords' submission to another being also nuances their own demonstration of power. Even in the midst of their mastery of efficient power and control—for they truly are the perfect dictators—the Overlords are beholden to the Overmind, who it must be assumed possesses an even greater mastery of power. Every ruler must answer to someone, it seems, even those who appear as powerful as gods.

## Chapter 24 Quotes

●● For all their achievements, thought Karellen, for all their mastery of the physical universe, his people were no better than a tribe that has passed its whole existence upon some flat and dusty plain. Far off were the mountains, where power and beauty dwelt [...] And they could only watch and wonder; they could never scale those heights.

**Related Characters:** Karellen

**Related Themes:**    

**Related Symbols:**  

**Page Number:** 211

### Explanation and Analysis

At the end of the novel, Karellen reflects on how the Overlords will never be able to transcend the physical realm, since they have evolved and developed their rational minds and mastered the physical world to such an extent that it is now the only reality available to them.

Clarke, while demonstrating the danger of pure, unflinching rationalism, also posits the existence of a higher plane of being, a different state of existence, represented in the story by the Overmind. Human children were eventually able to step out of the physical realm at will and travel the universe as a pure consciousness. It is curious that when Clarke, who was mostly non-religious, pictures such a transcendent state of existence, what he comes up with sounds very similar to heaven. It makes sense, though; Clarke's vision of the transcendent, and assumedly his hope for the future of humanity, involves a mastery over the confines of the physical realm and the loss of all ego—since the children cease to be individuals and become a collective entity—which could be argued to be the basis for many of humanity's problems.

In Clarke's vision, technological mastery of the physical world is a low target for humanity's future. The novel suggests the hope that humanity will reach far greater heights that will not only solve the human issues that utopia addresses, but make those issues entirely obsolete.



## 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 Russian cosmonaut is preparing for a launch. Before traveling to launch site, she enacts her customary pre-flight ritual of speaking to now-deceased Yuri Gagarin, the first human to enter outer space. She is accosted by a group of tourists with cameras, but before they take a single photo, a massive shadow blots out the moon.

*The original Chapter 1, written in 1952, contained a narrative about the race between Russia and the U.S. to put a human being in space, which Clarke imagined would take decades to achieve. Yuri Gagarin reached space less than a decade later, in 1961, and Clarke rewrote his first chapter. This opening scene foreshadows how the Overlords will put an end to space travel and human exploration.*



The commander of an upcoming multi-nation mission to Mars stands on the rim of a volcano in Hawaii, preparing himself to face the volcano, Olympus Mons, on Mars. He reflects on the president's inauguration day in 2001 and the push for space travel that had been announced. He begins leaving when he sees massive ships flying through the clouds above him, and he realizes that humanity is "no longer alone."

*This scene reveals the scope of this event to be global. Since the arrival of the Overlords effectively ends humanity's ambitions to achieve space travel, even before the full prohibition, these cosmonauts are the last in human history (aside from the stowaway, Jan Rodricks, introduced later in the story).*



## CHAPTER 2

The Secretary-General of the United Nations, Rikki Stormgren, stands on the 43rd level of a New York tower, wondering if working at such a height has led him to become detached from the rest of humanity. His assistant, Pieter Van Ryberg, enters the room to tell him that Alexander Wainwright, leader of **the Freedom League**, will be there for their scheduled meeting any minute now, and a procession of protesters are accompanying him.

*Though the specifics of his situation are not yet clear, Stormgren is presented as a character at odds with the rest of human society; this position is symbolically reflected by his physical position atop a tower. The mention of the UN, the Freedom League, and protestors creates a sense of foreboding, as something has clearly affected the entire planet.*



Van Ryberg and Stormgren can see Wainwright's group coming down the street, what looks to be 3,000 protesters with their fists in the air, protesting the aliens who arrived in the ships, whom humanity has christened the **Overlords**. Stormgren imagines that Karellen, the leader of the Overlords, must be looking down in amusement, since it was he who initiated Wainwright and Stormgren's meeting. Stormgren does not understand why Karellen asked to meet with **the Freedom League**, but he trusts that it is part of Karellen's plans.

*This is the first introduction to the Overlords, the beings whom the astronauts in the opening chapter must have seen. Clearly enough time has passed since that initial arrival that these beings are enmeshed in global politics. As will later be revealed, Karellen governs most often through clever scheming and social engineering, using his deep understanding of human psychology and society to guide humanity along without their realizing it.*



Wainwright arrives, and he and Stormgren discuss the lodging of his formal protest against the **Overlords'** plan to create a global federation, a single world-government. Stormgren points out that the idea of consolidating separate national governments into a single unit was already underway before the Overlords arrived—the countries of Europe had recently been formed into a single federation. Wainwright replies that they are worried about the idea of worldwide-government itself. Rather, what disturbs the **Freedom League** is that this government is being created by the Overlords, rather than being created and run by humanity.

Stormgren knows that the heart of the matter is that he trusts Karellen while **the Freedom League** does not. He challenges Wainwright to deny that the **Overlords** have made everyone on Earth safer, wealthier, and happier through their governance. Wainwright admits that they have, but says that in doing so, humanity has lost its autonomy—its right to make its own choices without answering to anyone else. More than material provision, he believes, humanity needs to be free to govern their own lives “under God’s guidance,” tipping Stormgren off to the fundamentally religious nature of the conflict.

Stormgren promises to relay Wainwright’s concerns to Karellen, though he knows it will not change anything. Wainwright adds one final thought: more than their control, **the Freedom League** detests the **Overlords'** secrecy, since not even Stormgren, the only human to speak with Karellen at all in the last five years, has ever seen an Overlord or has any inkling of their plans.

The narrator recalls the day that the **Overlords** came to Earth. Though it was a small operation to the Overlords, it was the biggest day in humanity’s history. The Overlord ships arrived without warning, hanging steadily and silently over every major city for six days. On the sixth day, Karellen spoke through every broadcast channel, in flawless English, and explained that the Overlords would be governing the Earth.

*The Overlords are quick to consolidate power, since it is far easier to rule a single government entity than to constantly be moderating between numerous little nations, each with their own ideas and expectations. A single world-state allows them to rule centrally and exert more influence through Stormgren and the United Nations so that they can carry on their work of making Earth a utopia.*



*This moment reflects the novel’s broader consideration of benevolent dictatorships, and whether prosperity is worth sacrificing freedom for. Stormgren’s readiness to defend Karellen reveals that he believes that the trade-off has been worth it for humanity. This scene also establishes the Overlords as incompatible with religious faith and mysticism.*



*The Overlords’ secrecy and mysteriousness also reinforces the psychological control they have over humanity. Without any knowledge of who the Overlords are, why they are on Earth, or even what they look like, humanity’s imagination is allowed to run wild. More threatening than a powerful enemy that humanity can observe is a powerful enemy who remains invisible, but whom humanity knows is there.*



*Even the Overlords’ arrival was a subtle use of human psychology to magnify their power. Rather than immediately speaking and announcing themselves, they let humanity fret for six days, imaginations running wild. When the Overlords announced that they were peaceful—rather than aggressive, as many imagined them to be—it would have been such a relief that most would not want to fight. This underscores the Overlords as benevolent dictators—but dictators nonetheless.*



Resistance was futile, though some did try. When one government shot a missile at an **Overlord** ship, the missile simply vanished. When the South African government refused to give its citizens civil rights, the Overlords demonstrated their power by blotting out the sun for thirty minutes, terrifying the government into compliance. Other than that, aside from a constant suspicion that something worse may yet happen, the world had not greatly changed in the five years since their arrival.

Stormgren gathers his briefcase and walks out to a field, where a small **Overlord** transport ship arrives to take him to his weekly meeting with Karellen. He arrives in the Overlord ship, stepping into a small conference room with one chair, which he sits in, and a **viewing screen** that is always off.

Karellen's voice enters **the room through a hidden grille** and he begins discussing with Stormgren the meeting with Wainwright. Karellen wishes that the people of Earth would stop seeing him as a dictator and instead see him as the administrator of a colonial policy that he truly is. Stormgren reiterates that it is difficult for the people of Earth to trust the **Overlords** when they have never even seen them.

Karellen points out that the real source of **the Freedom League's** distrust is the fear that the **Overlords'** presence will make religion obsolete, even though Karellen states that they have no desire to take humanity's mystic beliefs away from them. The humans suspect that the Overlords have been watching Earth for thousands of years, and if that is indeed the case, then the Overlords could say definitively whether the various miraculous events that began many religions truly did happen (because they would have seen them), though they refuse to ever do so. Even so, Karellen states that he will ask his superiors when they may reveal themselves.

Van Ryberg meets with Stormgren after his meeting, sharing his latest conspiracy theory about Karellen's true nature. Stormgren comments on how often Karellen alludes to his superiors and refers to his post on Earth as something temporary, seeming to suspect that the Overlords, too, answer to a higher power. Van Ryberg agrees with **the Freedom League**: the Overlords ought to show themselves.

*Again, the Overlords, rather than using any direct power, simply let the imaginations of humanity do the work for them—if the Overlords could simply block the sun's light for half an hour, then they are certainly capable of far more terrifying and destructive acts. This fear of unknown power is enough to keep the whole world in line.*



*The viewing screen, Stormgren later realizes, is simply a sheet of glass through which Karellen watches him. This reflects the power dynamic between the two, and between the Overlords and humanity in general: Karellen is always in control.*



*It is interesting that Karellen sees the role of a colonial administrator as so much better than a dictator. Even as colonizers, the Overlords arrived uninvited and instituted changes without humanity's permission, governing without input from their subjects. This is a dictatorial form of government, regardless of whether it is benevolent or ruthless.*



*Although the Overlords have no desire to wipe out religion—they seem quite content to let human beings believe whatever they want—their mere presence on Earth challenges many of the basic assumptions of organized religion. For example, many religions teach that humanity are the children of God, the most important beings in the universe. The existence of another, far superior race seems to defy that idea.*



*Although much of humanity assumes that the Overlords are all-knowing and all-powerful, Stormgren's closeness to Karellen helps him to realize that Karellen is not a god, just a worker. The rulers of humanity also have their own hierarchy above them.*



The narrator recalls how, in the first year of their arrival, the **Overlords** seemed almost completely unobtrusive, except for when humanity paused to consider how their swiftly-rising standard of living was due to their new governors. The Overlords did not seem to care what type of government a country had, so long as it was not oppressive, and their presence eliminated the possibility of war between nations. Other than that, the Overlords were largely unnoticeable.

*The Overlords are masters of using passive power to govern and control. Humanity is initially so fearful of the Overlords' potential power that even after the fear has subsided, human beings know that to disobey their rulers would put them in great peril. Thus, the world is finally at peace, and the Overlords are able to take a hands-off approach.*



## CHAPTER 3

Lying in bed at night, Stormgren is unable to sleep, so he walks out onto his rooftop garden and stares at Karellen's ship hanging in the sky. He realizes that he, too, is starting to become obsessed with the **Overlords'** secrecy. His obsession was not only due to the resistance that **the Freedom League** and other groups had to being ruled by someone they could not see. Stormgren saw Karellen as a person, even a friend, and simple curiosity drove him to want to know more about this person.

*Stormgren's curiosity about Karellen's physical appearance and his plans mirror the Freedom League's own ambitions, but Stormgren is differently motivated. The Freedom League wants to know if their fears are justified. Stormgren's motivation is mostly personal—he just wants to know his friend.*



Stormgren fails to arrive for work the next morning, and Van Ryberg discovers that he has disappeared. Van Ryberg becomes the acting Secretary-General. The intermittent protests around the world against the **Overlords** suddenly cease, as humanity realizes it has lost its only spokesperson. **The Freedom League** declares its innocence in the matter.

*From humanity's perspective, Stormgren is effectively the face of the Overlords. Once he is removed, the protesters are suddenly unsure of where to direct their protests—shaking their fists at the ships in the atmosphere won't make any difference. It is difficult to defy a faceless enemy.*



Stormgren awakens in an underground cell. A man enters his cell, addressing him as "Mr. Secretary" and explains that Stormgren has been unconscious for several days. The stranger gives him some clothes from Stormgren's own house and invites him to dine. The stranger introduces himself as Joe.

*That Stormgren feels very little fear demonstrates his extreme confidence in Karellen's omniscience and abilities. Stormgren's understanding of the extent of the Overlords' power makes his defense of them even more compelling. He knows what Karellen is capable of, yet rather than fearing this power as others do, Stormgren remains loyal to him.*



Once Stormgren has dressed, Joe leads him down a corridor carved from rock. They seem to be in an abandoned mine, which Stormgren surmises will prevent Karellen from being able to locate and rescue him. Stormgren is for the first time worried about his kidnapping.

*This is the first time that Stormgren or the reader must consider that perhaps the Overlords are not truly all-powerful, foreshadowing their future depiction as helpless servants of the Overmind.*



They arrive at a room where two other men are sitting around a table. Joe tells Stormgren that Wainwright had nothing to do with the kidnapping, and then explains in detail how they pulled off the heist, as if it were in a movie. Stormgren is amused at their enthusiasm, though also disturbed, as the plan seems as if it possibly could have deceived Karellen.

Joe and his comrades confirm to Stormgren that they are part of a movement fighting for their independence. They tell him that they will have visitors in a few days to speak with Stormgren, and they will spend the meantime playing poker.

Van Ryberg, in the Secretary-General's office, is unable to make any progress discovering who kidnapped Stormgren. He enters **Stormgren's communications room** and uses his equipment to query Karellen for answers and advice. Karellen quickly replies that he has none, and leaves everything to Van Ryberg's own judgment.

Stormgren spends the days playing poker and analyzing his captors. It seems that Joe is a committed man but not one who has given much thought to the causes he fights for. Several days later, Joe tells him that their visitors, the leaders of the movement, have arrived.

Stormgren is led into a room where the leaders of the movement, obviously far more powerful and intelligent than Joe, are waiting for him, led by a Welshman. Stormgren inquires what his ransom will be, but the men tell him that they do not want cash. They offer Stormgren freedom in exchange for information.

*Stormgren's amusement at the description of the heist seems sympathetic to Joe and his comrades. This demonstrates how Stormgren's loyalties are split—on the one hand, his kidnappers share his common humanity and he can enjoy their excitement, even if their aims may disturb him; on the other, Karellen, his ally, is foreign, alien, and utterly inhuman.*



*Once again, Stormgren is able to share a very human pastime with his captors: playing games. Stormgren cannot play poker with Karellen, and it seems that this simple activity of human interaction reinforces Stormgren's similarity to Joe and the resistance movement, as opposed to his dissimilarity to Karellen.*



*It is notable that Karellen makes no effort to interact with Van Ryberg in the way that he did with Stormgren. This again suggest that there is level of personal affection in Stormgren and Karellen's relationship that transcends the merely administrative duties of the office.*



*Joe is the sort of man who simply fights for fighting's sake. Such a person would naturally be inclined to fight if any governing force, however benevolent, were placed above him. Thus, he seems representative of the entire resistance movement, who want freedom for freedom's sake, without considering the pragmatic implications.*



*Even the extremists, who have gone so far as to kidnap a major figure of government, are primarily occupied with finding answers. It seems unbearable to be ruled by a faceless entity, even when that entity has little to no impact on daily life. This suggests that even though the Overlords' power is benevolent, its technically dictatorial nature is reason enough for humanity to try to throw it off.*



Stormgren decides to cooperate for now, as he does not believe that any information he could give could actually harm Karellen. When they ask him what the **Overlords** truly are, he tells them he does not know, but he does explain how the weekly meetings with Karellen work and draws a map of the conference room for them.

Van Ryberg carries on Stormgren's duties for him, making no more attempts to communicate with Karellen. Briefly, Karellen's ship disappears from the sky above New York, prompting shock and some panic, and then it is seen flying low and fast to the south until it disappears into the distance.

Stormgren continues speaking with his captors, trying to defy them but at the same time hoping that they may help him discover the **Overlords'** secrets. The Welshman is frustrated by their lack of progress, so he offers a course of action: a plan for Stormgren to set off some type of observational device during one of his meetings with Karellen.

Stormgren is reticent, declaring that he believes Karellen is working for the good of humanity and he has no intention of interfering with that work. As proof of the **Overlords'** benevolence, he recalls the way that they put an end to cruelty to animals by causing the spectators at a bull fight to momentarily feel the pain of the bull as it was pierced by a spear. Immediately, the fight ended and the spectators no longer had the stomach for such cruelty.

The Welshman concedes that the **Overlords** may be benevolent, but states that the problem is that they came uninvited and robbed humanity of its liberty. Stormgren retorts that this is simply the price of progress—the world is changing and there is no use in clinging to the past. The idea of state sovereignty was already on its way out, and the Overlords simply hastened the process. No one should try to stop it.

As he finishes speaking, he realizes that everyone in the room has frozen like statues; Karellen has seemingly paralyzed everyone else in place somehow. A small orb speaks to Stormgren with Karellen's voice and leads him out of the mine and to a flying transport. Karellen explains that he had known where Stormgren was the whole time since he had put a tracer on him, but Karellen wanted the leaders of the resistance movement to all be present when Stormgren was rescued, so they would know that now they, too, were being watched. Stormgren is irritated that Karellen used him for his own ends.

*The Overlords' power is so disproportionately large that there seems to be nothing that Stormgren can possibly do that would disrupt their plans. To Stormgren, Karellen seems an unstoppable force and his plans for humanity seem inevitable.*



*To the people of New York, who for so brief a time are not under the shadow of the Overlords, it must be a tremendous (but short-lived) shock. This too, indicates Stormgren's importance to Karellen, since this is the only time he has moved any of the ships since they arrived five years ago.*



*Stormgren is split between his commitment to Karellen—both for the sake of his friendship and because he believes Karellen's plans are good—and his fellow human beings. Once again, Stormgren's loyalties are torn—though Stormgren is opposed to the extremists, they share a common humanity; Karellen, however, is utterly alien.*



*In the case of the bull fight, the Overlords use their authoritarian power to teach human beings empathy, complicating the morality of their style of government. Causing the spectators to feel the bull's pain is effectively the same as a parent telling its child, "Put yourself in their shoes," though the implications of this specific power are far more terrifying.*



*The Welshman, like the Freedom League, would probably have been similarly dissatisfied even if the Overlords had never arrived. The Earth already was on the path to mass society, the individual seemed already destined to be lost to the collective whole.*



*Like the rest of humanity, Karellen has also been using Stormgren as a pawn in a greater game. This reinforces the imbalance of power between them once again. The trust that Stormgren has placed in Karellen, and because of which he often defended him, is breached by a misuse of Karellen's power.*



Stormgren asks Karellen if his superiors have given an answer on whether the **Overlords** are allowed to reveal themselves. Karellen responds that he has received no answer, but he already knows that he will be refused. Stormgren, disappointed, begins thinking about the Welshman's plan to attempt to observe Karellen during a meeting, realizing that though he would not do it under threat, he might try it of his own accord.

*It seems that to Stormgren, Karellen using him as a pawn changes the nature of their relationship and absolves Stormgren of whatever guilt he may feel at breaching Karellen's trust with his own scheme.*



## CHAPTER 4

Several days later, Stormgren is still considering attempting to observe Karellen. He enlists the help of his physicist friend, Pierre Duval, and together they begin conspiring. When Stormgren explains the shape and build of the meeting room to Duval, Duval surmises that perhaps the **viewing screen** is no screen at all, but merely a sheet of one-way glass, and that it could potentially be seen through with the right equipment. Duval suggests they hide such a device in Stormgren's briefcase.

*Duval is the first to see that often the Overlords' tricks are much simpler than they first seem. Just as the screen is just a piece of glass, so humanity will discover, fifty years later, that all of the Overlord ships that filled them with fear in the early days are simply mirages, except for Karellen's. The impression of power makes the viewer more susceptible to being deceived.*



Days later, Stormgren is finishing his meeting with Karellen, his briefcase sitting inches away from the **viewing screen**. Karellen announces that he has received word from his superiors—to ease some of the tension, the **Overlords** will announce that they will emerge from their ship and let humanity see them in fifty years. Stormgren will not live to see them.

*Announcing that the Overlords will reveal themselves is an elegant solution to the protestations of the Freedom League and the resistance movements. Humanity can be assuaged by the knowledge that someday the questions will be answered, even though very few people will live to see them, and by that point humanity will have grown far more used to their presence.*



Karellen alludes to the fact that, in the past, other races have reacted negatively to seeing the **Overlords**, revealing that Earth is not the only planet the Overlords have supervised. Stormgren pushes Karellen for more information, but Karellen dodges his questions. This strengthens Stormgren's resolution; as they are speaking, he presses a button to activate the scanner in his briefcase. Karellen seems unaware of the plot, and they part ways.

*The revelation that the Overlords have "colonized" several other races on several other planets only reinforces humanity's smallness. On Earth, human beings are the only beings of intelligence and seem like the center of the universe. In the scope of countless intelligent races on countless planets, they seem startlingly insignificant.*



Stormgren reads an early release of Karellen's pronouncement to the head of **the Freedom League**. Wainwright is disappointed and bitter, knowing that in fifty years, anyone who can remember life without the **Overlords** will be gone, but even so, it is better than nothing. Stormgren hopes that time will ease things, reflecting that good men who are deluded are far more dangerous than evil men.

*Wainwright astutely recognizes the use of the Overlords' power to affect humanity's perception of them. Though his generation can remember a time of greater freedom, those born in the midst of the Overlords' occupation of Earth will have much less resistance to the idea; it will be another fact of life that has always been.*



Duval returns Stormgren's case, having analyzed the results of the scan. He tells Stormgren that the results show that Karellen is indeed sitting some six feet behind the sheet of one-way glass of the **viewing screen**. Karellen is sitting in a dark room and Stormgren in a brightly lit room, thus Stormgren cannot see through. The next thing to do, Duval determines, is to shine a high-powered flashlight through the glass. Stormgren is concerned about hurting Karellen, but Duval assures him it is completely safe.

During Stormgren's next meeting with Karellen, Karellen is explaining that **the Freedom League** will be even more hindered when Stormgren retires, as Karellen does not plan to find a new liaison. His plan is proceeding as it should and when the **Overlords** reveal themselves to the humans, their "real work" will begin, though, sadly, Stormgren will have died of old age by then. When Stormgren asks if Karellen's plans have ever gone awry, he quietly admits that the Overlords have had failures in the past.

Karellen pauses for five seconds, and then suddenly says goodbye to Stormgren for the final time, calling him "Rikki." Stormgren realizes that he has been tricked, briefly paralyzed like the Welshman and his comrades had been when Karellen had rescued him. Stormgren moves quickly and presses his light against the glass of the **viewing screen**.

Thirty years later, an elderly Stormgren is walking among the trees at his secluded retirement home. A reporter suddenly arrives by aircraft and accosts him. It seems that the equipment that Duval had built for Stormgren had been discovered, and the reporter wants to know if Stormgren ever managed to see Karellen. Stormgren lies and tells him he did not, understanding now that mankind still is not ready to see the **Overlords**. However, he thinks back to his final meeting with Karellen, where he did catch a glimpse of him leaving through the door, but decided to keep what he had seen to himself.

## CHAPTER 5

Twenty years later, the day has arrived for the **Overlords** to emerge from their ships. The whole world waits in anticipation. Humans discovered the day prior that there had only ever been one real ship floating over the Earth: Karellen's. Though supply ships did actually come and go, all of the ships that had hovered over every major city turned out to be nothing more than an illusion that had lasted an entire generation. They had promptly dissolved into thin air. Karellen had "thrown away his psychological weapons."

*The simplicity of the ruse is made possible by the severe imbalance of power and ability between Stormgren the human and Karellen the Overlord. Stormgren would never have guessed that such a simple, easily explainable set up was used to conceal Karellen's appearance when the Overlords are so technologically adept.*



*With Stormgren's retirement, as with his kidnapping, the Overlords will become an even more faceless entity and thus that much harder to resist. Rather than an alien power personified by Stormgren, they will be an alien power who is faceless, shapeless, and because of that, even more pervasive and harder to target.*



*That Karellen uses Stormgren's first name show his fondness for the human. Even so, he exerts his own power by freezing Stormgren, an unfair advantage only previously used on his enemies.*



*Having seen a glimpse of Karellen, Stormgren adopts the same tactics as the Overlords: deception. As is later revealed, there is a good reason for the Overlords to keep their appearance hidden for now. Once Stormgren understands this, he sees fit to also keep certain things hidden. His proximity to Karellen's power and secrecy seem to have rubbed off.*



*Now that the generation of humanity that was holding on to its memories of freedom has died and been replaced by a generation that has never known life without the Overlords, humanity is ready to accept them as rulers without the looming threat of retribution hanging over every city. The ships, like the viewing screen in the conference room, were simply a ruse, a form of passive power. Now that that power is solidified, they are no longer necessary.*



Karellen's ship moves westward to an empty plot of land and descends to Earth. Thousands of people and cameras follow him. An opening appears in the ship and a gangway extends down to the ground. Karellen's voice emanates gently out, requesting that two children come up the gangplank to meet him, and two plucky young ones do, drawn up the gangplank by some type of gravitation well.

After twenty seconds, Karellen steps out into the sunlight, a child sitting on each arm. The people watching are momentarily terrified, and a few faint, but the terror does not last. Karellen is horned, black-skinned, leather-winged, barb-tailed, and holding children.

*Even though the present generation has lived its whole life with the Overlords on Earth, Karellen knows that his appearance will still be a shock. To soften that image, he first gains the trust of two children—who by nature are naturally more trusting in spite of appearances.*



*The appearance of the Overlords is ironically fitting: the Overlords effectively put an end to religion and humanity's devotion to God, fulfilling the classic role of the Devil or Anti-Christ, and ultimately shepherd humanity towards its own destruction, fulfilling the mythological Devil's apocalyptic function as well.*



## CHAPTER 6

In fifty years, the world and its people have been entirely transformed through the **Overlords'** vast knowledge, social engineering, and intelligent use of power. Karellen had once explained this to Stormgren, arguing that what matters is not how much power is used (in terms of destructive potential), but the way that it is applied. This was demonstrated in the way that the illusions of the Overlord ships were a very simple trick, but the effect gave the Overlords much control over humanity. Stormgren thought this was a little too similar to "Might makes right." Karellen had been right, however, to not reveal the Overlords' appearance too early, since the Overlords were the exact image of the Devil passed down through millennia.

The **Overlords** rarely left their single ship. Few people had ever seen one in person and it was anyone's guess how many there actually were. Even so, the Earth has been transformed into a utopia. Consumer goods are available at nearly no cost, war is a distant memory, and crimes of passion are rare, now that humanity is much more psychologically stable. The world has slowed down its frantic pace of the 20th century and has embraced a leisurely attitude of tranquility. Education has become a lifelong pursuit. Reliable contraceptives and precise methods for determining the father of a child loosen sexual conventions. Air travel has been so improved that travel has become remarkably easy.

*This is the key behind the Overlords' efficiency with which they exert their power. Rather than dominate militarily or with any shows of great force, they just assert their presence and let humanity surmise and dread about their obvious technological superiority. With a little technological sophistication and a deep understanding of human psychology, massive populations are able to be controlled by a seemingly few number of people. The Overlords have mastered colonization.*



*The Overlords' power has become so well-established and well-respected that they are able to take a mostly hands-off approach to governing, allowing humanity to at least have the illusion of relative freedom. It should be noted that the Overlords are never giving up any control or power; they are simply letting it fade into the background as humanity grows more content and more less concerned about its rulers.*



Religion has also fallen; the world has become entirely secularized. The **Overlords** possess an observation tool that allows its user to look back at any point in history. Humanity immediately used it to look at the starting points of various organized religions and apparently saw that they were built on false pretenses. This crumbled organized religion overnight. “Humanity had lost its ancient gods: now it was old enough not to need new ones.”

However, with the fall of religion has come the fall of art and science. Although many now have a recreational interest in science and art, nothing new or truly original is being created. Earth is still sating itself with the greatness of past works. Most of humanity is still enjoying the newness of utopia too much to notice.

## CHAPTER 7

Rupert Boyce has sent invitations for a grand party, and people are traveling from all over the world to come. George Greggson and Jean Morrel have flown in from Alaska and they land in the African heat. A 12-foot hologram of Rupert appears next to their vehicle (imaging technology that normally only the **Overlords** possess) and asks what they want to drink. George and Jean, ill-humored, walk to Rupert’s house, wondering how he could have an Overlord device. George surmises he must use it to wander about the African wilderness from the comfort of his home.

George and Jean reach the house, meeting Rupert’s beautiful new wife—he has had several already—Maia. George is quite distracted by her, irritating Jean, though she seems resigned to it. They enter the house, which is packed with guests, most of whom George and Jean do not know.

George and Jean decide to explore Rupert’s house, which is massive and elaborate. Jean comments that Rupert’s ex-wife would have loved the place. They find the library, containing 15,000 books on paranormal events and experiences. George and Jean both notice a faint and odd smell in the library, but they are unable to place it. Jean gasps as she realizes it is an **Overlord**, sitting in Rupert’s library and reading his books incredibly quickly.

*Though humanity has abandoned religion, it is revealed throughout the story that many of them ascribe a level of godhood to the Overlords themselves, wrongly believing that they are all-knowing and all-powerful. This suggests that humanity’s proclivity for the mystical and supernatural is far more deeply-rooted than organized religion itself.*



*This suggests that religion, though it stands in many ways antagonistic to scientific development, is also spurred by it. The belief in higher power and higher purpose—rather than simply the hedonistic pleasures of utopia—also pushes scientific minds to greater heights in an effort to extend humanity’s knowledge and its reach.*



*This is introduction of George and Jean, both of whom will replace Stormgren as main characters. Unsurprisingly, despite the technological wonders that allow them to comfortably fly across the globe in a few hours, just to attend a party, they are still ill-humored. Even utopia, all the comfort in the world, cannot cure a sour attitude.*



*Due to the loosened sexual mores of utopia, social structures seem to be somewhat less firm. Rupert’s many wives and George’s obvious interest in newly-married Maia both suggest that the family unit has loosened.*



*An Overlord, symbolic of science and technology, sitting amidst a library of paranormal and mystical experiences is an odd sight indeed, marking a tonal shift from the story’s first act, which focused largely on power, to a focus on mysticism.*



The **Overlord** introduces himself as Rashaverak and continues reading, making small talk with George as he does so and explaining that he has been reading through Rupert's entire collection. George and Jean are surprised that Rupert has any association with the Overlords, since this kind of mingling is still quite rare. Rupert calls to them on an intercom to come back down to the party. Rashaverak accompanies them down, and Rupert calls him "Rashy," summoning him to meet more newly-arrived guests.

George and Jean separate and mingle with the other party-goers, most of whom are celebrities of some sort. George accosts Rupert, questioning him about the **Overlord**. Rupert explains that Rashaverak has come to see his library of paranormal writings, odd though it seems that such a scientific race should have any interest in it. Rupert is called back to the other guests, and George makes his way up to the roof while Jean dances with the other party-goers. On the roof, he meets Jan Rodricks, Maia's brother. They chat briefly, but George sees that Jan wants to be alone and takes his leave.

## CHAPTER 8

Jan is discontented by utopia. He is the son of a professional magician and an esteemed mathematician, having spent his life moving between Scotland and Haiti where his parents' families lived, resulting in some level of instability. At 27, he is still in the midst of his academic studies, but he breezed through bachelor's degrees in mathematics and physics. Most importantly, he is heart-broken over a woman who has recently broken off their brief relationship.

Jan is also frustrated at the **Overlords** for limiting his own ambitions. Jan dreams of traveling to the stars, but the Overlords' presence has eliminated nearly all inquiries into space travel. Though humanity had visited the moon, they had been discouraged by the superiority of the Overlords' technology and their own inability to ever understand it, so they turned to other pursuits. "Man was, therefore, still a prisoner on his own planet." Jan has spent most of the party standing on the roof, watching an Overlord supply ship leave Earth's orbit and launch into unknown space.

When the party ends, the majority of the guests leave. Though George wants to go home, Jean insists that they stay, as she shares Rupert's interest in the paranormal, which George resents. Rupert pulls out a large Ouija board that he has designed and invites the remaining guests to sit around it with him, including Jan. George reluctantly joins, making a snide remark about the foolishness of such an interest before realizing that Rashaverak is present for just such a purpose.

*The Overlord's interest in books about paranormal activity seems discordant—the paragons of science and rationality taking an interest in ghost stories and tales of psychic power. This is the first clue that the Overlords' take the possibility of paranormal happenings serious to some degree (as did Clarke), bridging the divide between science and mysticism. However, the reasons for this will not be revealed for quite some time.*



*Jan is introduced into the story by a brief and awkward interaction with George. The contrast between George and Jan is considerable: George is quite happy to exist in utopia, under the rule of the Overlords and submitting to their boundaries. He does not want anything to change or be different. Though Jan's character will not be fleshed out until the next chapter, George's depiction as a mostly ordinary, rather dull man sets a backdrop for Jan to contrast against.*



*Unlike George, Jan is obviously intelligent, perhaps too much so for the intellectual stagnation that has overtaken the sciences in the Overlords' utopia. His recent heartbreak and childhood instability make him a perfect candidate for a rather bold and reckless adventure such as the one he will soon undertake.*



*Jan embodies the classic humanistic spirit—he is bold, daring, adventurous, and like the early cosmonauts, wants to take humanity to new heights. His withdrawal from the party is symbolic of his greater withdrawal from utopian society. Rather than muddle through the social tedium—of the party or utopian society—he would rather stand alone and dream of space travel.*



*It is noteworthy that in the absence of religion, people such as Rupert and Jean still seek out some sort of spiritual experience. The Overlords' presence on Earth may have eradicated organized religion, but humanity is still reaching for higher powers or some plane of existence beyond their own. It seems to be human nature to do so.*



The guests place their hands on the board and Rupert explains that, in the past, it has delivered true answers, though he believes there must be some subconscious, scientific reasoning behind it. A woman named Ruth Schoenberger is sitting outside the circle taking notes and Rashaverak is observing.

Rupert begins by asking if anyone is there, referring to whatever force may control the Ouija board. When they receive a positive answer, the board spells out, “I am all.” Rupert finds this to be a “typical reply.” The guests continue asking superfluous questions and receiving vague answers for some time. George is drowsy, as are the others, but Jean seems almost afraid to quit, worrying George. He tries to guess what Jan is thinking, but he cannot. Jan has been silent during the entire experience.

Rupert, also falling asleep, decides there should be one last question. He decides Jan should ask it. Jan already knew what he would ask: “Which star is the **Overlords’** sun?” Rashaverak leans forward to see the Ouija board’s response. It spells out NGS 549672, and Jean faints.

## CHAPTER 9

On the **Overlords’** ship, Rashaverak reports what he has seen to Karellen, as well as an analysis of the books in Rupert’s library. Amongst the 15,000 volumes on paranormal activity, most of which he believes are trash, Rashaverak found 11 “clear cases of partial break-through” and 27 “probables.” Rashaverak is more interested in Jean than in Rupert, whom he considers just a hobbyist. Jean, it seems to him, is the “channel through which the information came,” even though she is too old to be a “Prime Contact.” Rashaverak thinks that she must be connected to this Prime Contact somehow, and that they need to closely observe her, since she could be “the most important human being alive.”

*Rupert’s belief that there is some quasi-scientific explanation to truly paranormal phenomena mirrors Clarke’s own belief at the time of writing, though by the end of his life he was almost entirely a skeptic.*



*“I am all” seems to be a reference to the Overmind, which is later revealed to be the source of information that Jean is channeling through her future children, though she and everyone else is unaware of this. The Overmind’s self-description of “I am all” is conspicuously similar to the Hebrew God’s self-description of “I am” in the Bible, suggesting that in the absence of God, a god-like entity may still exist.*



*Once again, Jan is the only person to ask the Ouija board anything of consequence, reinforcing his distinctness from the other human characters in the story. While the others engage with the Ouija board as a game and a curio, Jan is investigating, testing it, and uses it to discover information. Also, the fact that Rashaverak leans forward indicates that he was, at the very least, open to the possibility that the board may give true answers—a very odd thing for a rationalistic Overlord to be even willing to consider.*



*It is revealed that the Overlords’ interest in paranormal events is far more serious than a simple anthropological review, suggesting some level of connection—or at least, synergy—between science and mysticism. This seems to be a reflection of the author’s own view: Clarke himself took the paranormal very seriously and invested millions of dollars and countless hours trying to prove the existence of paranormal happenings and psychic abilities. By the end of his life, however, he was skeptical of nearly all of it.*



Karellen also inquires about Jan. Rashaverak says he was there by happenstance, though with his interest in space travel he will certainly investigate what he has heard. Karellen opts to closely watch him as well, since the **Overlords**, as a matter of policy, never reveal where they have travelled from. Rashaverak does not believe the information Jan has will lead him anywhere, but Karellen is wary.

Rupert had pondered the strange happening, but never drew a conclusion. The page on which Ruth had written the string of numbers the Ouija board had answered with had disappeared, and to Rupert it seems like nonsense.

George is most affected by the fear he felt when Jean fainted, though he caught her as she fell. That fear makes him realize that he cares more for Jean than any of his other lovers, and as she awakens in their flying transport, destined for home, he asks her to sign a marriage contract for five years. She accepts, but says it should be for ten years instead. Jean confesses to George that she fears the **Overlords**, not because she thinks they are evil, but because she cannot imagine what their plans are.

Jan goes to London on the pretense of attending an astronomy conference, but his true purpose is to look up “NGS 549672,” which he alone has recognized as coordinates in outer space, at an astronomical observatory. He finds a star in precisely the right place, in the direction he had seen the **Overlord** supply ship launch when he was standing on Rupert’s roof. Although Jan is conflicted about believing an answer given to him by a Ouija board, since it seems scientifically unviable, the correlating evidence that the Overlords’ star is there seems too great to be coincidence. Jan smiles, realizing that he is the only human being who knows the origin of the Overlords, which gives him power.

*Jan is the perfect person to come upon such information. While most people would have done nothing with the information even if they had understood what it was, Jan, the curious scientist and brave adventurer, sees it as the opportunity of a lifetime. And now that the Overlords’ secrecy, from which they draw much of their power, is threatened, they begin to exert their overreaching power once more.*



*Contrary to Jan, Rupert represents the majority of humanity in its utopian stupor: happy to write off anything that does not fit within a familiar frame of reference. Although he sought evidence of the mystical, as merely a hobbyist, he does not know what to do once he has actually witnessed it.*



*George’s love for Jean does not stop him from seeing any of his other lovers, just that he wants to stay with Jean for at least several more years. This suggests, again, that a utopian, sexually-liberated state results in weakened commitments and a weakened family unit. This seems to be intended by the author as a sign of the moral degradation of society.*



*That Jan has obtained this scientific knowledge—the location of the Overlords’ star—through the mysticism of a Ouija board implies that there ought to be a synergy, rather than outright conflict, between mysticism and science. And though he is conflicted about using data gained from such an unscientific source, that Jan, the hero scientist, is open to investigating that data at all suggests that the ideal scientist is one who is open to the paranormal as well as the rational, again implying a synergy between the two.*



## CHAPTER 10

Humanity continues to enjoy utopia, despite the fact that, without crises and crime, life is rather less eventful. People work much less, though now that the mundane tasks have been taken over by automated processes, the work that is left to humans is considerably more engaging. All armed forces have been disbanded, adding significant wealth into the economy. Despite all the leisure, very few people are too slothful or restless. Most people own two homes on different continents and keep themselves busy with entertainment and sports. Even so, amidst all the benefits and ways to occupy one's time, the question quietly persisted: "Where do we go from here?"

*Although utopia is pleasant, humanity is beginning to feel the effects of nihilism. This boredom and growing restlessness indicate the major entrance of the theme of utopia not being an ideal state for human growth and progress, as well as setting the stage for the start of Jan's journey in the next chapter. His (considerably dangerous) adventure is a response to boredom, to restlessness, and a defiance of utopia itself.*



## CHAPTER 11

Jan is visiting with Rupert, admiring the elephant he has just hunted. He has had it taxidermized as a specimen for the **Overlords** to send back to their homeworld museums. Rupert has sent many of these animals. Jan asks Rupert if he thinks that the Overlords would accept a living specimen of a human to take back with them. Rupert laughs and offers to ask Rashaverak, but Jan declines.

*Although it is asked half-jokingly, Jan's question about a human specimen lightly foreshadows his future experience on the Overlords' planet (described later in the story)—several Overlord scientists spend days running tests on him, interrogating him, and quizzing him about various human artifacts; he becomes a human specimen for study.*



Jan asks Rupert if he ever learned what Rashaverak was looking for in Rupert's library of the paranormal, since it seemed odd that the **Overlords** should take interest in the "occult." Rupert tells him that, as anthropologists, the Overlords merely wanted to study all aspects of human culture. Jan is not convinced that that is the true reason, but he hides his suspicion.

*Jan's suspicion of the Overlords' interest in the paranormal is quite ironic: he himself has gathered his own data from a paranormal event and crossed the world to investigate it.*



Rupert tells Jan about the animals that Professor Sullivan, a marine scientist and personal friend of Rupert's, is preparing to send: a sperm whale and a giant squid in combat, the biggest creatures ever sent. Jan inquires how the delivery is made, and Rupert explains that it will be as simple as an **Overlord** ship landing, opening its hatch, and bringing the display aboard.

*This is the introduction of Professor Sullivan, who is similar to Jan in his humanism and idealism. It is ironic that these two characters, both of whom represent a certain defiance of utopia, are brought together by Rupert, who seems to epitomize the perils of utopia in his shallowness and ignorance.*



Jan goes by submarine to visit Professor Sullivan in his laboratory deep in the Pacific Ocean where he does research and explores. When they reach the undersea buildings, he sees a giant squid named Lucifer latched onto the landing bay. Jan meets Professor Sullivan in his workshop. They chat briefly about Rupert, their mutual connection, and Sullivan pontificates about how the deepest parts of the ocean are as mysterious and unexplored as outer space.

*Sullivan, like Jan, is one of the few true scientists left on Earth after the utopian conditions had dulled humanity's scientific interests. Sullivan is an explorer of the last unknown frontier on Earth: the deep sea. With humanity lacking any other new frontiers, it is curious that no other scientists had joined Sullivan to plumb the unknown depths of the ocean.*



Jan cautiously brings up the request he has come to make of Sullivan, beginning by asking him what he would do if the **Overlords** had barred him from the ocean, but he saw an opportunity to explore it anyway. Sullivan says he would defy the Overlords without hesitation. As Jan leans forward, preparing to make his request in full, Sullivan figures out why Jan has come to him and encourages him to make his argument.

*Jan and Sullivan are kindred spirits. As scientists and achievers, both of them are not satisfied with the easy trappings of utopia and press ever further away from it; for Sullivan, that is into the ocean, and for Jan, it will soon be revealed, that is into space.*



## CHAPTER 12

Sullivan is an excellent scientist who has made many discoveries, but he is aware that none of them have been sufficiently groundbreaking to leave him a history-making legacy. Though he initially refuses to commit to Jan's plan because of the consequences it could have, he later sends word that he will help. Jan himself has brief second thoughts, but he realizes that he would always be haunted by the missed opportunity if he did not follow through.

*Again, Sullivan is quite unique among humanity in his desire to make history, since most human beings have been content to enjoy themselves at their leisure. His character operates as counterpoint to the general safety and banality of humanity in utopia. Rather than enjoy the comforts of modernity, Sullivan explores the cold, dark, inhospitable oceans.*



Putting his affairs in order, Jan sends a letter to Maia detailing his plan and saying goodbye. He tells her that, using the coordinates that came from the Ouija board at Rupert's party, he has discovered the location of the **Overlords'** homeworld. He will conceal himself in a secret compartment inside Sullivan's sperm whale and stow away aboard the Overlords' ship.

*Although Jan and Maia are siblings, and although they were at the same party, never once are they shown interacting throughout the course of the entire novel, indicating that they do not have a close relationship.*



Jan has calculated the journey will take 40 Earth-years, but since they will be traveling at near-light speed, he will only age a couple of months in the journey due to Einstein's Theory of Relativity. He will use a tranquilizer to put himself to sleep for the duration of the voyage, and when he wakes up, the **Overlords** may do with him what they decide is best, though he expects they will send him back to Earth on the next supply ship. At the very least, he will see some of their world, and so he will bring a camera and film

*Since, in the duration of the trip, 40 years will have passed on Earth, if Jan returns, the soonest he could be back to Earth would be 80 years after his departure, though he will have aged less than a year. Everyone he has ever known will be long dead, meaning that even if he survives, he will have sacrificed everything and lost everyone he ever knew. This cements Jan's character as a humanistic hero, if not a somewhat reckless or even foolish one.*



Jan ends his letter pronouncing that he and Maia were never close, and so he imagines that she will not be bereft. Should he make it back, she will be gone, but he looks forward to meeting her grandchildren.

*Jan does not have close relationship with his family, his love interest has rejected him, and he is never shown to have any friends aside from Sullivan as they prepare for the journey. Thus, Jan has comparatively little to lose, making him a perfect candidate for what could be a suicidal quest.*



## CHAPTER 13

Jan visits Sullivan as they are building the frame of the sperm whale and Sullivan reveals that they are not giving the **Overlords** a real whale at all, only a convincing replica, since it is much easier to handle. Jan briefly thinks that if they are only getting a replica, the Overlords should have just built it themselves on their homeworld, rather than shipping a fake. On the other hand, a 60-foot whale will take up little space in such a massive and powerful spaceship, so perhaps it would make little difference to them.

Later, Sullivan is surveying the finished display. With the sperm whale and giant squid put together, impressively locked in mortal combat, the piece is over 90 feet long. A clerk finds Sullivan and announces that they have been given a high honor; Karellen is coming to see the display before it is delivered to the **Overlords** and shipped off.

During his visit, Karellen is studying the whale that is about to be loaded. Sullivan is watching him, but cannot tell if Karellen suspects anything or not. Karellen explains to Sullivan that the **Overlords'** home does not have any creatures so large because their planet does not have any oceans, which surprises Sullivan.

Although it is impossible to tell by looking at the whale that a compartment for Jan is concealed inside it, Sullivan can't help but wonder if Karellen is toying with them somehow. Karellen even asks about the story of Jonah, which obviously parallels Jan's exploit. Sullivan replies that, while it is difficult to believe, he thinks it is technically possible for a man to survive inside a whale for so many days. Satisfied, Karellen moves on to looking at the squid and Sullivan breathes a silent sigh of relief.

*Jan's consideration highlights once more the disparity in power and capability between humanity and the Overlords. For human beings, shipping a massive mounted whale even across the globe would be a large and costly endeavor. For the Overlords to transport such an item across the galaxy, however, is simple, like carrying a small package on an airplane*



*Although unnecessary, Karellen's desire to visit once again seems to indicate a certain fondness for humans, especially those, such as Sullivan, who despite the utopian state of the world have continued to extend humanity's reach. He admires what Sullivan has done, even though, for the Overlords, obtaining a sperm whale would assumedly be a very simple task.*



*As secretive as the Overlords are, Karellen is often in the habit of revealing small details about their past to humans that he seems to feel an affinity for, telling Sullivan that their planet has no oceans, piquing his interest as a scientist. This reinforces the complexity of Karellen's character: he is immensely secretive, but occasionally reveals details that he thinks might stimulate certain individuals, seemingly just because he cares for them.*



*In the same way that Karellen allowed Stormgren to catch a glimpse of him during their last meeting, it is quite possible that he also knows of Jan and Sullivan's plan and is choosing to let them get away with it while keeping up the appearance of being a firm governor. The parallel of Jan's plan to Jonah is also particularly apt—Jan will hide in a whale's stomach to escape the watchful eye of the Overlords (standing in for God, now that religion has ceased) and to travel to a new land.*



Six hours before delivery, Sullivan expresses the stress he experienced during Karellen's visit, and tells Jan that this is his last chance to change his mind. Jan thanks Sullivan for his help, promising to dedicate a book about his adventure to Sullivan if he ever makes it back alive. Sullivan points out that he'll have been long dead by that point and realizes that he is sad to see Jan leave: he has grown to like the young scientist and fears that he is doing nothing more than aiding a bizarre suicide. Nevertheless, he helps Jan climb into the jaws of the whale and into the hidden compartment. As Sullivan walks back to his office, he reflects on the fact that if Jan should survive and return to this very place, it will be no less than 80 years from now.

Inside the hidden compartment, Jan closes the airlock and runs a final check to make sure he has everything he needs, including food and oxygen masks. After an hour of checking, he lays back on the couch, prepares a syringe full of the tranquilizer (a drug that induces a state of suspended animation, similar to animals in hibernation), injects himself, and sleeps. Hours later, while he is unconscious, the whale and its stowaway passenger are loaded into the **Overlords'** ship. The ship rises from Earth's atmosphere, sets its course, and engages its interstellar engine.

## CHAPTER 14

Karellen has organized a press conference and all of the journalists and reporters are in attendance, waiting. Karellen emerges, stepping up onto a dais to make his announcement, speaking briefly with the doyen of the Press Club. Karellen announces to the reporters that the **Overlords** have just discovered that a stowaway named Jan Rodricks made it onto an Overlord supply ship, stunning the room. It is not something that will be possible again. When a reporter asks what will happen to Jan, Karellen replies that it is not his decision, but he assumes Jan will be sent back on the next ship, since their planet is much too alien for him.

Karellen states that the main purpose of his announcement today is to explain why humans are banned from space. A man entering the incomprehensible complexity of space at their current mental acuity, he says, would be similar to a cave man being dropped in a modern city. He goes on to say that the inability of humanity to understand what they would see in space could even be potentially lethal. Karellen shows the people in the room a holographic map of space to explain that, at their current evolutionary stage, humanity is simply not ready to face the vastness of the universe. His statement over, Karellen begins to leave, turning briefly to say, "It is a bitter thought, but you must face it. The planets you may one day possess. But the stars are not for man."

*In the process of preparing their plan, Jan develops his closest relationship to another human being that is seen in the text, assumedly over their shared passion for science and dissatisfaction with utopia. This is, in a way, a tragic development of Jan's character, since his underlying loneliness seems to have briefly been answered, but he sacrifices his friendship with Sullivan to his ideals of exploration and discovery.*



*Though humanity has already been to the moon, Jan becomes the first human being ever to leave Earth's orbit. At this point, he is still the classic science fiction hero, sacrificing everything to see new worlds.*



*Karellen's pronouncement that the Overlords' planet is far too alien for Jan stay on foreshadows what Jan will discover himself later in the story: humanity is not ready for space. Though Jan will see many things on the Overlord planet, he will understand very few of them and discover that Karellen is right: there is no place for him there. This is a marked tonal shift from Clarke's other work and the majority of that era's science fiction, which pictured the universe as humanity's future conquest.*



*Karellen speaks to the natural limits of human progress and achievement. This is a unique angle for the author to take, especially in the optimism and excitement of the 1950s when the novel was written. The space race was in full swing, and though Clarke underestimated how long it would take humanity to reach space, many assumed that once that was achieved, it would be a simple few extra steps to reach the moon, then Mars, and soon be colonizing other planets. In the face of a seemingly limitless future, Clarke poses the question: what if humanity simply isn't capable of handling any domain beyond Earth?*



From his ship in the stratosphere, Karellaen looks down at the Earth and thinks of the people on it, reflecting on the Golden Age they have had the opportunity to experience, more happiness than has ever been achieved before. He feels a sense of responsibility for them, and sadness, for he knows that the Golden Age is about to end.

*Clarke poses another possibility: perhaps it is all going to end, not by war or nuclear winter but by the workings of the universe and circumstances utterly beyond human control. Reflecting these questions, from this point on, the novel takes a decidedly pessimistic turn.*



## CHAPTER 15

George throws his newspaper across the table, telling Jean to read it. She scrapes the breakfast off of it and sees a review of one of George's theatrical works that was broadcast on TV. George is furious, but to Jean, the review seems favorable. He eventually tells her that he is furious about a slight mischaracterization of his color palette, which Jean simply does not see the gravity of. George mentions that he is considering accepting an invitation he has received to join a recently-developed artist's colony called **New Athens**. Though Jean is somewhat skeptical, she is willing to move there with George and their two children.

*Even George, representative of the average person, has become dissatisfied with utopia, though not to the same degree that Jan has. While Jan, due to his humanistic character, was dissatisfied long before most, George's dissatisfaction implies that much of humanity is becoming similarly dissatisfied and beginning to desire a more stimulating life. Utopia has gotten old.*



George and Jean have traveled to the two-island colony of **New Athens**, where a guide explains to George that it was built on an extinct volcano as a colony for intellectuals and artists. Their goal is to "save something of humanity's independence, its artistic traditions," not as an act of rebellion against the **Overlords**, but just to be able to set their own course. New Athens is an attempt to strip away many of the distractions of modern life and cultivate the arts once again. While New Athens does not force its people to stay, it is rare that any choose to leave. Jean is open to it, George is quite intrigued, and they both agree that their children would love it there.

*New Athens, in a way, carries on the work of the Freedom League, though in a different manner. The founders and residents of New Athens are, similar to the Freedom League, hoping to regain some of humanity's agency and freedom. At the same time, it is a reaction against the world-state and the woes of mass society, which the Freedom League had initially petitioned Stormgren against as well.*



Six weeks later, George, Jean, and the children move into a small house. Jean is relieved to see that it has basic amenities, but she is confused by the presence of a kitchen, since normally they would just order from Food Central. The view from the house is beautiful, looking down a hill and across the thin strip of land that connects the second island and its dormant volcano, though Jean wonders how they can be so certain it will not come back to life. She can hear George clumsily riding his bicycle up the hill, not quite stable on it yet, since motor vehicles are not allowed except for emergency use on the island.

*One of the aims of New Athens is to make human beings self-reliant again. Rather than simply ordering food, Jean must learn to cook. Rather than driving everywhere, George must learn to use the strength of his physical body to ride his bicycle for transport. While New Athens does not aim to be primitive (to Jean's relief) it has stripped several modern amenities to encourage its residents to learn to be self-sufficient once again. This suggests that, among other things, self-sufficiency and the ability to use one's body to care and provide for oneself is necessary for maintaining a strong spirit and a creative mind.*



George comes in, kisses Jean, and tells her about his day. He is meeting interesting people and starting to work with the local theater. Overall, he is quite happy and artistically stimulated, even though he has difficulty with the bicycle.

**New Athens** is a deliberate product of very careful social engineering by highly-intelligent men. Initially, it was an act of open resistance against the **Overlords** and their methods, and they expected Karellen to interfere. He did not, which made the designers of New Athens somewhat nervous, but they pressed on. The fact that it is situated on an island keeps the population ideally low, 100,000 at the most, which suits their aims for a small, closely-knit community.

The main personality amidst the founders was a man named Ben Salomon, a Jew who was old enough to just barely remember what life was like before the arrival of the **Overlords**, and who had died three years before the colony was established. Though Salomon never desired to return to those dark days, he did wonder if the Overlords were inadvertently killing man's spirit. He could see that the arts were in decline, as were the sciences, and the idea of **New Athens** became the solution to that decline, a solution that took 20 years and billions of dollars to build. Using principles of probability discovered by early-20th century mathematicians, the colony's attributes were calculated extremely precisely.

Though it was a gamble, thus far **New Athens** has been a success. There have been breakthroughs in every format of the arts aside from painting, which everyone assumes is archaic and dead. An interesting trend is that time has played a central role in much of the artwork that has been developed, even in sculpture. Work is being done on virtual reality, but so far this has been unsuccessful, to the great relief of some. In all, New Athens has enjoyed a successful beginning, summoning up some of the spirit of old Athens, but without the slaves and superstition. It remains to be seen if it will continue to be so successful.

## CHAPTER 16

Jeffrey Greggson, though he has no interest in art or science, loves the colony. He spends much time swimming in the ocean, bicycling with his friends, and playing with the family dog, Fey, who is obsessed with him (to George's dismay, since he is jealous of Fey's affection.) Jennifer Greggson is still an infant, and thus has no opinion of **New Athens** or anywhere else in the world.

*These positive developments in the characters of George and Jean pose New Athens as a possible solution to the stagnating spirit of utopia, should it ever come to pass in the real world.*



*The power that the Overlords used to engineer a utopian Earth is mimicked by the humans who have designed New Athens. A key difference, it is later revealed, is that New Athens is democratic, as opposed to the Overlords' dictatorship. Although it is not as large or efficient, the existence and relative happiness of New Athens suggest that such knowledge and social engineering, ethically applied to a growing community, can still produce desirable results, and may be the best course for the future.*



*Salomon and New Athens offer a possibility: In the face of utopia, human beings may still be able to foster their creative and intellectual potential by setting limitations for themselves to stimulate their minds and keep them more actively engaged. While it seems that humans do not thrive in a perfectly stabilized and convenient environment, perhaps there is a middle ground in a technologically adept, carefully-built society that still requires input and agency of its citizens.*



*New Athens represents a breakthrough for humanity at this point in story, a resurgence of the human spirit in the face of utopian stagnation. For the first time since the Overlords arrived, there has been a revitalization of creativity and human progress. A small group of human beings has managed to merge the technology, comfort, and ethics of the new world with the intellectual and artistic rigor of the old, presumably setting an example for Clarke's vision of the ideal future community.*



*This introduction of Jeffrey, at least initially, presents him as being as utterly average as his father. George and Jean's family are happier and healthier than they ever were, however, suggesting that utopia is not actually the ideal state for mankind.*



George is so busy with his work that he rarely thinks about the past, except to spare an occasional thought for Jan, now somewhere in the vastness of space aboard an **Overlord** ship. For his own part, George has no interest in comprehending the vastness of the universe or seeing the unknown and he agrees with Karellen: “The stars are not for man.”

George comes home, complaining that Jeffrey always seems to be out of the house when George is in it. Jean explains that he and his friends are swimming on the other island, the volcano. George considers going over there to catch a fish for dinner, but he is cut short when a siren begins wailing.

Jeffrey is exploring the beach alone when a tremor briefly shakes the land. The water begins to rush away from the land and Jeff follows it, hoping to find something interesting in the newly exposed rock. He stops when he hears the sound of water moving swiftly beneath the rocks.

A salvage party finds Jeffrey, hours later, sitting on a slab of coral that had been thrown out of the ocean by the tsunami. He is unhurt and untroubled, except for the fact that he lost his bicycle. Jean bursts into tears when she is reunited with Jeffrey, having thought that he was killed by the wave.

Jeffrey cannot explain what happened, except that a voice had guided him to safety. George presses him to recall everything that happened: a voice spoke in his head, telling him to get to high ground or he would be killed. As he was making his way, he found his path blocked by a massive stone. The voice told him to close his eyes and shield his face with his hands. Jeffrey did so, there was a flash, and when he looked again, the stone was gone, apparently burned away because the path was hot.

George and Jean put Jeffrey to bed and then have several discussions about what it could possibly mean. The next day, Jean takes Jeffrey to the local psychologist, who thinks that there is nothing more to it than an active imagination—no illness. This is little comfort to George, however.

*The contrast between George and Jan is stark—George is happy to be in one place and amidst the familiar, Jan seeks new horizons and adventure. Yet each has now found what they are seeking in life. This implies that in a future, non-utopian society, there is room for both attitudes. Some must carry the human race into new frontiers, as Jan is, and some must raise families and work to refine what is already there, is George is.*



*George and find themselves at risk of losing their son to a natural disaster, something that likely would not have happened if they had remained in the modern utopian world. Stepping out of technological utopia, they have once again placed their family in the risk inherent to the natural world, suggesting that mortal risk is one of the necessary costs of a fruitful and stimulating life.*



*Jeffrey, despite his mortal danger, seems a healthy young child, bold enough to explore on his own and curious enough to follow the water out. It would seem that New Athens, with its recreational opportunities and physical challenges, is a far more ideal place to raise healthy children than the utopian world—even with the potential for danger it introduces.*



*Jeffrey is, as young children often are, resilient in the face of disaster, notably unburdened by his near-death experience.*



*Significantly, in his childlike openness, Jeffrey does not question the seemingly god-like voice that directed him to safety or the disappearance of the boulder. He is neither skeptical nor cynical about the experience, as an adult would be. He simply observes it, obeys it, and then relays it to George and Jean. This openness, it will later be seen, is a critical aspect of Jeffrey’s character and enables his future development.*



*George, who most often resists change, is particularly disturbed by these events. As the representation of the average, George’s disruption over his child particularly foreshadows the future disruption of society.*



Weeks later, when the debris has been cleared, George rides his bike to the beach and sees the patch of melted stone in the path, meaning that Jeffrey's story was true. Though he tries to convince himself it was naturally-caused, he cannot believe it. Finally, George says to himself, "Thank you, Karellen, for whatever your people did for Jeff. But I wish I knew why they did it."

*In his human penchant for mysticism, George attributes godhood to the Overlords. George prays to Karellen in his head, assuming that Karellen, omniscient, would be able somehow to hear him. But of course, Karellen is merely another living being and cannot. This once again reiterates the way in which, lacking a central god figure, human beings so often try to ascribe mystical meaning or deity to something else. It would seem that there is comfort in dwelling beneath such a figure.*



## CHAPTER 17

Karellen requests that **New Athens** allow an **Overlord** to come and inspect the work that they have been doing, throwing the whole island into a frenzy, since the Overlords have never before expressed interest in the colony. Many are interested to see how the Overlords respond to art, since no one knows if the Overlords have any preference for aesthetics and expression, or if they regard it as a waste of time. Committees are formed (committees and democracy are the way in which all decisions are made on New Athens, since it allows each person to be a "citizen in the truest sense of the word"), debates are had, and preparations are made, all led by chairman of the council Charles Yan Sen.

*New Athens's use of committees, and thus democracy, set its governing structure as at odds with that of the Overlords'. While the Overlords govern as authoritarians, which naturally forms their subjects into a collective group (since one individual must dictate to the masses), the democracy of New Athens puts the power to make decisions in the hands of each individual. This argues that democracy gives each individual greater agency, which is good for their spirit, and is less inclined to abolish the individual by absorbing them into a collective mass.*



George is a leading community member, so he is able to ensure that he is a part of the reception. Although he understands that the **Overlords** are coming to study the humans, he sees it as an opportunity to also study them. Jean dislikes this, as she has maintained her dislike of the Overlords since the night she fainted at Rupert's party, and she fears that they are threatening the island's independence, which she has come to cherish.

*Although she was born during the Overlords' occupation, Jean, too, has found that she values independence. This suggests that humanity's desire for freedom, though currently forgotten by most, is innate, rather than just an inherited value. Although Jean has no nostalgic memory of freedom from before the Overlords' rule, when able to experience it herself, she finds it far more favorable.*



The **Overlord** arrives and introduces himself as Thanthalteresco, though the islanders just call him "the Inspector." He is greeted by Sen and informed of the logistics of the island (their production of resources, their birth rates), and he is given a stack of annual reports. The following day, the Inspector tours the school, chatting with the chairman throughout. When Sen asks if the challenges **New Athens** faces in tutoring their students bear any similarity to the Challenges the Overlords faced with humanity, the Inspector replies that a closer analogy would be the colonization of the British in India. Sen then asks whether the Overlords will abandon their colony as the British did. The Inspector tells him that, yes, they absolutely will. Sen, disturbed, does not press the matter further.

*The analogy between the Overlords and the British colonization of India is quite apt on a number of levels. Like the British administration did in India, the Overlords brought advanced technology and organizational capacities, helping to build out the infrastructure of Earth. Also like the British, the Overlords maintain control of a huge population with a tiny number of rulers, which means resorting to manipulation, social engineering, and many ethically questionable strategies. The Inspector's analogy, though accurate, once again suggests a severe imbalance of power and a bitter ending.*



The Inspector later meets with a number of professors who explain to him their theory that humanity has lost its initiative and ideals, and thus their goal on the island is for every person to aim to be the best at something—although it is not the achievement that is important, but rather the sense of purpose. The Inspector is remarkably tactful, as he also is during the symphony performances, making a point of congratulating several of the composers on their innovative work. The day after, watching the theater pieces, he laughs and applauds at the right times. Though it all seems genuine, some colonists can't help but wondering if the Inspector is putting on a charade.

George does not get his chance to speak with the Inspector at length, and after the **Overlord's** departure from the island, the missed opportunity leaves George in a bitter mood for two days. However, Jeff tells George that he heard the Overlord speaking to some teachers at his school, and it was the Inspector's voice that he had heard upon the beach. Or if it was not the Inspector himself, it was certainly another Overlord. George sends Jeff to bed.

After Jeffrey has gone to sleep, George sits in the living room and Jean is sitting on the floor, leaning against his legs. They discuss what has happened, both now firmly believing that what Jeff told them is true. George feels he ought to be grateful and nothing more, but also he has had the feeling that they were being watched since the night at Rupert's house, and now he is nearly sure of it. But at least Jeffrey is being protected. Jean wonders if it is only Jeffrey that the **Overlords** are interested in, or if there are more people they watch and protect. It is also revealed that George no longer loves Jean and has a lover on the side.

Later, the Inspector gives his report to Karellen. His opinion is that no action is necessary, since **New Athens** will have no effect on the future course of events. The school records did not show anything new, but often "breakthrough" happens suddenly, so that means little. Most of all, the Inspector feels sadness for the humans.

For George's part, he decides that Jeffrey is just a normal boy, aside from one unusual event. Jeff enjoys spending time with his father and his friends, he is developing normally, and he shares George's love for theater. He is somewhat elitist, as everyone in **New Athens** is, considering the colonists as the cutting edge of humanity that will bring the next ascent to great heights. He is right, though it will come sooner than he thinks.

*Since almost everything the Overlords do is a carefully calculated ruse, such as the images of their ships floating above Earth's cities, it is probable that the Inspector's laughter and engagement with the art is also a ruse, especially since it is later revealed that Jan discovers that their own planet is completely devoid of art or decoration. As utterly rationalistic beings, they seem to see no utility in aesthetics or the arts.*



*Once again, the Overlords are cast in a god-like position, even by the narrator, which only serves to further their impression of power. However, since it was done by the Overlords, it can be safely assumed that while their rescue of Jeffrey seemed miraculous, it was achieved through technological means. This suggests that perhaps the difference between miracles (or other mystical events) and scientific phenomena is simply the ability to explain it.*



*Jean's fear of the Overlords began—or at least was first admitted to—on the night of Rupert's party, when she fainted at the Ouija board. From her perspective, her fear of the Overlords, their secret plans, and their meddling is well-founded. In Jean's eyes, the Overlords have certainly acted like dictators; not cruel, but intrusive, always surveying their subjects.*



*It seems that Karellen is not the only Overlord to feel some level of affection for the humans, once more complicating the Overlords' position as authoritarian rulers.*



*New Athens is becoming elitist. With the sense of competition, which seem to be key to fostering a vital human spirit, also comes arrogance. It takes little time at all for human beings who are nobly climbing to greater heights to look down upon the rest of humanity. Human beings, it seems, for all their ingenuity and achievements, will always be petty.*



## CHAPTER 18

Six weeks later, Jeffrey begins have strange dreams. George wakes suddenly in the night, which is strange for him, and he can hear Jean in the children's bedroom, talking to Jeffrey. Jeffrey explains his dream—not a nightmare, exactly—about being in a foreign place with snowless mountains covered in blue-flame, watching as a blue sun rapidly rose over the horizon. His parents tell him to go back to sleep, though they are disturbed, as well. Jeffrey says he thinks he'll try to return to that strange place.

On the **Overlord** ship, Karellen and Rashaverak are discussing Jeffrey's dream. Rashaverak is sure he knows which planet Jeffrey saw in his dream, though it appeared that the boy was experiencing time much more quickly than it normally occurs. Rashaverak says that is all he can determine without directly questioning Jeffrey, but Karellen warns him away from doing so, saying that they must not let their own curiosity interfere with the course of events, even if George and Jean reach out to them for help. Karellen tells Rashaverak to keep watching them, but not to interfere.

Jeff seems normal when he is awake, which is a small comfort to his parents, but every night he dreams of unknown places. George and Jean ask him to describe his dreams each morning; sometimes he can and sometimes he can't, though never because he cannot remember them clearly—he does in fact, see them as memories—only because he doesn't always have words to describe the strangeness of what he has seen.

Rashaverak and Karellen observe one of Jeffrey's dreams—which is actually Jeffrey traveling out of his own body—and trying to guess at where he is going. They cannot, but they agree that, in any case, he is moving further away from "home." They observe another dream, seeing a planet that looks quite like Earth but with massive columns rising out of the oceans. Rashaverak is awed, stating that Jeffrey has reached the "center of the Universe." They see another planet, this one absolutely flattened by its own gravity. Flat beings crawl upon its surface, and Karellen and Rashaverak discuss the difficulties that Rashaverak and his scientists have had exploring it, as well as the errors they have made. They see another planet with six suns and an irregular orbit. Rashaverak states that this planet is new, beyond the reaches even of the **Overlords**. Jeffrey has departed their galaxy, and they suspect there may not be much time left.

*Jeffrey's dreams are beginning the story's deep forays into the paranormal and possibilities of human transcendence. As previously noted, Clarke was, when he wrote the story, a firm believer in the latent paranormal abilities of the human mind and included his own ideas and hopes for what might exist.*



*This point in the story also marks a transition for the characterization of the Overlords. Where they had once been described as all-knowing and quite powerful, the language around them changes. Just as Rashaverak admits that his knowledge of what Jeffrey is experiencing is incomplete, the limitations of the Overlords knowledge and power will continue to become very apparent.*



*It is heavily implied that Jeffrey's dreams are not fictitious, but somehow memories of other worlds, suggesting that the dreaming, at least in some instances, is the most basic form of a latent form of alternative perception in the human mind.*



*Jeffrey is revealed to have developed the ability to transcend the physical world, at least while he sleeps, and travel across the universe with only his mind. Again, significant to the characterization of the Overlords, Rashaverak admits to having shortcomings as a scientist and is awed at Jeffrey's capabilities. The Overlords, who began as symbols of knowledge and power, grow smaller and smaller.*



Later, Rashaverak meets with George and Jean, at George's request. They remember each other from Rupert's party. Rashaverak expresses that he is trying to understand what is happening just as George and Jean are, which shocks George, as he had assumed that **Overlords** were practically omniscient. George goes on to say that he is guessing that Jeffrey's dreams are of real places, since they are so specific and bizarre. Rashaverak does not confirm this, but he also does not deny it.

George goes on to say that while he does not believe in the supernatural, something happened with Jennifer. Rashaverak tells him that he knows this, as he saw it. George is only partially surprised, but when he protests, saying that Karellen had said he would no longer surveil humans, Rashaverak implies that George and Jean's children are no longer human.

During their meeting, the narration briefly looks back upon the incident with Jennifer that George referred to: the infant had been laying on her back with her eyes closed for a long time. She would no longer open them, for it seemed she no longer needed her sight. Her toy rattle, however, continued shaking, waking Jean who got up to see what was happening. The baby was smiling, and the rattle was hovering in the air shaking on its own. "Soon, she would pass her brother, for she had much less to unlearn."

Back in their meeting, Rashaverak tells George and Jean that it was clever not to disrupt Jennifer and the rattle, for he cannot guess what may have happened if Jennifer was irritated. However, there is nothing that Rashaverak can do. He explains to the parents that their children just happened to be the first to achieve Total Breakthrough, which he felt certain would be the case after the night at Rupert's party. Rashaverak explains that Jeffrey and Jennifer are experiencing an early version of something that is like telepathy, though not exactly.

George struggles with all these ideas, but they begin to form in his head. He feels that it explains many things that have happened since Rupert's party. He asks Rashaverak who caused this, but Rashaverak has no answer. He explains that many races have gone through this same process and are waiting for humanity to join them. As for the **Overlords**, they are only there to aid the process. As Rashaverak explains it, "We are the midwives. But we ourselves are barren." George understands that this is a great tragedy for the Overlords, a forever unfulfilled desire.

*As the reader is surprised by the changing characterization of the Overlords, so too is George taken aback. Though, in his humanness, he had ascribed godhood to the Overlords, he now sees that to be a mistake. This suggests that ever applying such ideas of omniscience or omnipotence to physical, finite beings, as the Overlords are, is a mistake.*



*Although Jeffrey and Jennifer are obviously still in human bodies, their minds, it seems, are becoming something more. This suggests (perhaps hoping, on Clarke's part) that in the future, humanity will manage to also transcend the physical space and become something more than human, the next stage in the race's development.*



*That Jennifer is able to develop her abilities much quicker because she had "less to unlearn" is telling. Jennifer abandons her sight, her connection to the physical world, and gives herself over to the paranormal. This introduces the idea that some level of openness, innocence, or infantilism is actually beneficial for the propagation of mystical abilities.*



*Rashaverak implies that Jennifer is actually quite dangerous, being powerful as she is yet still petulant as an infant. This suggests, logically, that in the course of human transcendence, a potentially problematic intermediate stage exists wherein great amounts of power are wielded by beings who lack the maturity to use them responsibly.*



*Once again, the insignificance of humanity is reinforced. This transcendence is a process that has happened to many species before and will happen to many after. Even so, Rashaverak admits that his own race is unable to make this transcendent leap, revealing for the first time that despite their primitive technology and low intelligence, humanity has a fundamental advantage over the Overlords. They will be able to transcend, while the Overlords never will. The Overlords' characterization is developed even further—not only are they not all-powerful, but in a very significant way, they are completely powerless.*



George also understands why the **Overlords** have been watching and protecting Jeffrey. He is a subject of study, something from which the Overlords are learning, and they cannot sacrifice that. When George asks what he and Jean should do with their children, Rashaverak tells them to make the most of the time they have left together, since it will not be much.

## CHAPTER 19

In time, Jeffrey's dreams bleed into his waking life. He stops going to school, and the family stops seeing friends. George and Jean realize that they do not even need to care for the children anymore. Jennifer seems to feed herself, though she never moves, and there is a terrifying aura of untapped power around her. Occasionally, she moves the furniture around in the nursery.

George and Jean love Jeff as well as they can, but they know that he will soon be like Jennifer, entirely beyond their grasp. He too, often seems unaware of anything in the world around him, though he has not yet developed any physical powers like Jennifer has. Even so, his mind is taking in incredible amounts of knowledge that will eventually consume what is left of him as the boy, Jeffrey Greggson.

Though Jeffrey and Jennifer are the first children to turn, the phenomenon spreads quickly, affecting most of the children less than ten years old on Earth. Civilization ends. Without children, humanity has no future. Its spirit is broken. But rather than panic, a terrible numbness overtakes the earth. Its cities fall silent. Karellen makes his last speech.

## CHAPTER 20

Karellen's voice broadcasts from every radio and he announces that he has nearly completed his purpose on Earth, which he has kept hidden until now. Having seen many worlds similar to Earth develop technology and then destroy themselves with it, the **Overlords** had to step in when they did to preserve humanity.

*Rashaverak's advice echoes that given to parents of terminally-ill children. The end is in sight and it is unstoppable.*



*Jeffrey continues to become a transformed being and less George and Jean's child. Since Jennifer is already long gone, much farther into the transition than Jeffrey, George and Jean's parenthood effectively ends while their children are still living with them. The tragedy has struck before their children are physically gone.*



*With the absorption of vast amounts of knowledge, Jeffrey surpasses even the Overlords; he is more powerful, can travel farther, understands the further limits of the universe. In this way, the Overlords, who represent science and rationalism, have been overtaken by a small human child and his capacity to unlock paranormal powers, a clear symbol of mysticism.*



*Seemingly overnight, the utopia of Earth, the bright future that New Athens had envisioned for humanity, ends. It is notable that it is only young children who begin the process of transcendence, implying that such latent power can only be tapped into by those whose minds are still open to the mystical, who have yet to grow skeptical and too beholden to scientific rationalism.*



*The Overlords are effectively caretakers, parents making sure that their children do not play on the highway. The Overlords have spent the last century guiding humanity through its period of childhood.*



Karellen explains that as the scientists were correct about physics, many mystics have also been correct about the powers of the mind. No understanding of the universe is complete without accounting for both. And since humanity was playing with both, it was a threat not only to itself but also to the rest of the galaxy. The **Overlords** were sent to disrupt human development and stall any research into the paranormal, even though it also meant disrupting the development of the arts.

Karellen continues by revealing that all of the psychic powers he alludes to are beyond the grasp of the **Overlords**—they have evolved in a different direction than humanity, and thus cut themselves off from ever developing such abilities. The Overlords are only the guardians of humanity, and they do this work in service another entity that Karellen calls the **Overmind**, a non-physical consciousness that he believes is continuing to grow and absorb other races into itself.

Humanity is changing and developing, though this will mean the end of Homo Sapiens as they exist now. In the coming years, the **Overmind** will draw all children into itself, and humanity will become two different races. The humans and their civilizations will be doomed to die. Because of this, Karellen must remove the children who will ascend from the rest of humanity, for their own protection. The rest of humanity he will leave to do as it wishes, with the knowledge that, although humanity has lost its children, they have left those children to a better future. Humanity's lost children will transcend the physical world live on for millennia, far outliving even the **Overlords**.

## CHAPTER 21

The colonists of **New Athens** are gathered to watch their children board the **Overlords'** ship and be taken away from them. The children themselves walk silently, some carrying the infants and those who cannot walk on their own. An Overlord ship has landed on the shore and the children are climbing aboard. Jean and George think they see Jeffrey boarding the ship. He turns his head towards them, but they cannot know if there is any recognition left in his eyes. The doors of the ship close.

For what humanity remains, some choose to live out their days and some choose to die. On **New Athens**, Jean wakes one night, grabbing George by the hand. They rise and walk to the nursery and embrace. George realizes that he does love Jean, regretting his indifference toward her. She says goodbye. Beneath the island, the uranium in the volcano reacts, exploding. "And the island rose to meet the dawn."

*That humanity, small and ignorant as it is, could ever pose a threat to the rest of the galaxy speaks to the latent powers that lie untapped in human minds. Letting human beings poke at their dormant psychic capabilities is like letting a child play with a firearm.*



*The Overlords are the epitome of rationalism and demonstrate the capabilities of scientific knowledge and technology to create utopian conditions on Earth. However, this commitment to rationalism and knowledge has diminished their capacity for paranormal experiences and killed the latent ability to transcend the physical world.*



*This is the final stage in human development. The absorption of the children into the Overmind will take the human race to a frontier that not even the Overlords are able to reach. This suggests a different possibility for the advancement of the human race than is normally pictured in science fiction. Rather than humanity reaching into the stars, perhaps they will learn to transcend the physical dimension that the stars are bound to altogether.*



*Now that humanity has been divided into two different races, mixing them could prove deadly. The children loading themselves onto the ship to be taken away evokes images of immigrants or pilgrims, loading onto a ship to travel to a new home, a new destiny, a new future.*



*The formation and operation of New Athens was an act of human assertion, a rejection of the relative passivity that humanity had settled into while living in utopia. Rather than slowly living out their days waiting for time and old age to take them, the colonists decide to meet their death assertively as well and die with the island.*



## CHAPTER 22

Jan Rodricks, aboard another **Overlord** ship, is on his way back to Earth. He stands behind the three Overlord pilots watching their screens and thinks about how he now understands why the Overlords have prohibited humans from entering space. Humanity has a long way to develop before it can be a part of galactic civilization.

An **Overlord** named Vindarten had warned Jan that Earth might be unrecognizable by the time he returns, but Jan does not know what this means. In any case, the Overlords had been good to him. When he had emerged from hiding—discovering that he could breathe their air—and revealed himself, the Overlords did not seem at all bothered by it. They landed, and the pilots wordlessly stood up and left. As the door opened up, red light struck Jan and he saw the home of the Overlords for the first time.

All he could see was a broad plain, and Jan was disappointed. He had expected more, but soon realized that he was only on a moon. He soon boarded another smaller vessel and was taken to their true planet, reaching it within minutes.

Jan spent the first two days in the building they landed in, realizing quickly that none of the **Overlords** knew English and communication was “practically impossible.” However, Vindarten, who spoke bad English but quickly improved, arrived. Vindarten took Jan to meet many Overlord scientists who interviewed him and carried out numerous tests. Since Overlords do not sleep, it took Jan a great while to convince them that sleep was something his body required.

In between meetings, Jan caught short looks at the city he was in. Everything depended on flight, he realized, so there would be no way for him to get around. Most of what he saw he did not understand, but he quickly noticed that everything was utilitarian—no decorations, no art, nothing superfluous. The city was also not very large, though Vindarten explained that there were thousands of cities on the planet, each with a particular function. This city’s function was anthropological.

*Jan, the humanistic hero who had formerly chafed at the Overlords’ rule and secrecy, realizes that Karellen is right. Humanity is not ready to see or know about what else exists in the universe. He gives up his humanistic ideals and surrenders to the natural limitations of humanity, which seems almost to be a betrayal of the classic science fiction narrative.*



*The Overlords are characteristically unbothered by Jan’s appearance, even nonchalant, seeming to highlight their extremely rational natures. It begs the question, then, whether the affection that Karellen, the Inspector, and even Rashaverak display are genuine or merely practiced charades that help them communicate with humans.*



*Although it was only a moon, this initial disappointment is reflective of Jan’s reaction to his entire stay on the Overlords’ planet: interesting, but somewhat disappointing, in part because most things he sees are incomprehensible to him.*



*Jan’s initial idea of offering himself as a specimen to the Overlords to take back to their planet for study winds up being somewhat predictive. The Overlords, who value scientific knowledge, mainly use the opportunity to run tests and gather data on Jan. They are less excited to meet a human being than they are interested in the opportunity to study him.*



*The Overlords prize science, knowledge, and technological capability to such a degree that they have no need, as far as Jan can see, for anything that does not offer an actual utility, and thus have no aesthetics or art. Even the organization of their cities is purely for the sake of gathering knowledge. They are the epitome of scientific rationalism. This suggests, then, that on New Athens the Inspector was faking his enjoyment.*



Vindarten eventually took Jan to see a museum, most of which confused him, but which also contained an exhibit of Earth, complete with yellow sunlight, rather than red. He met the curator and spent a number of hours speaking into a recorder while he was asked about all manner of earthly artifacts, most of which he did not recognize, to his own shame. Vindarten took him elsewhere to see the eye of a creature the size of an asteroid and Jan wondered at the possibilities of nature.

One time, he had been taken up to the highest point in the city and, turning around, he had spotted a mountain rising up from beyond the horizon. The mountain began to change, shifting hues and shapes, seeming not even to be made of matter. A massive ring rose out of the mountain, some sort of vortex that flew into the sky and passed overhead. Looking back, the mountain seemed as if it had stretched upward and was now spinning in place. When he tried to take a picture with his camera, Vindarten stopped him, the first and only time he had done so. Jan had a clue, for the first time, that “the **Overlords** had masters too.”

Jan is returning home. Though he had the opportunity to stay with the **Overlords**, Vindarten convinced him it was better to leave quickly and return to his native environment. Because of the relativity of time during space travel, Jan has aged only a few months, but 80 years have passed on Earth since his departure. His dream has been fulfilled.

As the ship nears Earth, Jan sees through the viewing screen that, though it looks the same, there are no lights from the cities and no signs of human activity. He is filled with fear. The ship lands, and as the door opens he sees Karellen, who announces that he has been waiting for Jan.

## CHAPTER 23

With his viewing device, Karellen shows Jan that the children are all gathered onto one continent, endlessly moving together in coordinated patterns. He explains that it is not even safe for the **Overlords** to be among the children anymore, which is fine since the children no longer have need of any sort of help. Karellen explains that the children have merged into one being, and there is no longer any individuality to them, no longer any humanity. Rather than eat, they simply absorb energy from the Earth. As Jan watches, the children instantly absorb all of the plant and animal life, all living organic matter around them, leaving only dead earth.

*Jan realizes that it may have been foolish to pine after new frontiers, other worlds, and the strange discoveries he may make when he doesn't even understand much of Earth's history sufficiently well. Once again, his characterization essentially turns over on itself. While before, all he dreamed about was seeing new worlds, he is now struck with the realization that he does not even understand his own world well enough to have any business on another.*



*Although Jan does not know about the Overmind at this time, he later realizes that this is what he is seeing. Even so, Jan concludes, as George did and as the reader has been discovering, that the Overlords' power is finite, and that there is a hierarchy within which they sit as well. For all of their power and knowledge, the Overlords are like humanity—subjects of another being.*



*Jan, having seen an alien planet and traveled to another solar system, resigns himself to whatever the rest of his days may hold. This is fortunate, since he is returning to a doomed world. Had he not experienced what he did and let go of his humanistic fervor, he may not be ready to face what has befallen Earth.*



*Although Jan knew that he was leaving behind every person he ever knew, the price he paid seems to be even greater than he bargained for. He could not imagine that, not only would everyone he knew be dead, but the whole human race would be too.*



*Just as Stormgren argued that progress inevitably meant individuals being absorbed into the collective whole, so the children have abandoned their individual selves and become a singular entity. In particular, their egos have been abandoned. The children will no longer be driven by self-interest, suggesting perhaps, that for humanity to ever advance, ever transcend, it will have to face a similar stripping of the self so that it can act in the interest of all.*



Karellen explains that all they have seen on the viewing device happened several years ago, but since then, not much has changed. Now, the children are testing their new powers, playing, causing rivers to flow uphill, changing the shape of the earth, but nothing with an observable purpose. And they have ignored the **Overlords** completely. Karellen explains that the Overlords only remain to observe for as long as it is safe, in the hope that their scientists can gain some understanding.

Jan is sad that this is the inevitable end of humanity, one that no one had foreseen, and yet it seems immensely appropriate. He has seen other worlds and knows that humanity was never ready to enter the cosmos. Evolutionarily, there are only two options: either become like the **Overlords** (powerfully intelligent and independent, yet powerless to move on to something greater), or join the **Overmind** (infinite, undying, every individual absorbed like cells into a single entity, tragic in one sense but transcendent in another). At last, Jan understands the purposes of the Overlords' time on Earth.

Jan had once asked why the **Overmind** should need the **Overlords'** help. Rashaverak explained that, vast as it is, the Overmind has difficulty interacting with races that are so different from it and uses the Overlords as interpreters and guardians, sheltering civilizations until they are ready to merge with the Overmind. Jan asked if the Overlords resent their position, but Rashaverak advised him that, "No one of intelligence resists the inevitable."

Rashaverak also explained to Jan that the memory of the **Overlords**, as the legendary devils, was not actually a memory but a premonition of the future.

Jan is the last man on Earth. The rest of the human race had ended itself either by suicide or suicidal hobbies until there was no one left. Jan keeps company with the **Overlords**, goes for walks, and plays piano.

*With most of old humanity already extinct, the remaining children are nearing the end of their "childhood," the phase that the Overlords were sent to guide them through. Having transcended the physical world, the children are discovering that they have mastery over it, possessing the power to create and destroy, and to even alter the laws of physics.*



*The Overlords, too, seem trapped in their service to the Overmind, whom they dare not disobey. Just as humanity lived under the Overlords and dared not cross them, so too the Overlords live under the Overmind. Jan realizes that merging into the Overmind is better than the eternal servitude of the Overlords, even though he will be left behind to die.*



*It seems that even the Overmind has its limitations and is not all-powerful. The Overlords have resigned themselves to their fate as tools of the Overmind. Their position is tragic, but not something they will fight, just as Jan realizes that humanity's role is tragic, but ultimately inevitable. Jan, the humanistic hero, surrenders himself and his race to the inevitability of fate, subverting the norms of science fiction and offering a pessimistic alternate future for humanity.*



*Rather than a past interaction, as everyone had believed, humanity, in its paranormal capacity, had had a vision of its future rulers who brought about the end of human civilization and wrote the Overlords into its mythology as villains, suggesting that perhaps the source of much of human mythos is actually future interaction with other beings.*



*Jan, in being the first man to travel to the stars, had imagined he might leave a legacy. Now, he makes history as the last human being to ever live, but there will be no one to leave his legacy for. However, now Jan is comfortably resigned to this.*



## CHAPTER 24

Rashaverak gives Jan the news: the time of the **Overlords'** departure is approaching. Jan wakes with a start one night, walks outside, looks at the moon, and realizes that it is not in the same position it has always been, for millennia. The children have rotated it. They are playing, gathering their strength.

It is dangerous for the **Overlords** to remain, Rashaverak tells Jan. The moon is trivial, but the children could begin playing with the sun. The Overlords will leave in a few hours, as soon as they are packed. Jan elects to stay, even as the Earth shakes underfoot. Rashaverak admits that the Overlords were hoping Jan would stay, for they have something he can help them with.

Jan watches as the **Overlord** ship disappears into the vastness of space. They have left him their base and some communications equipment so that he can tell them what he sees as the children unite with the **Overmind**. Jan enters the base and readies himself. Through the great window in front of him he can see a wide expanse of the Earth.

Jan speaks into the microphone, feeling like a radio broadcaster announcing the end of the world. There are a few quakes and then the stars begin to dim. Jan can see a sort of field forming around the globe, and then a great pillar of fire, which he understands to be the children, ready for their ascension, shedding their material forms. Jan realizes that it is very similar to the mountain he saw on Karellen's world. He sees the pillar of fire become like a curtain, similar to the aurora. He can feel his weight decrease as the gravity changes.

The atmosphere seems to be pulling Earth away from itself, drawing its matter into the **Overmind**. The pillar of fire reforms into a funnel. Jan, still narrating for Karellen, can see the Earth dissolving around him, trees and buildings and ground becoming transparent. A light seems to swell from within the ground, and the Earth explodes. The children, now the Overmind, have consumed it.

*In the same way that human children play to learn and grow stronger, the entity of the children who will soon join the Overmind are growing in their capability, strengthening the psychic muscles and their mastery over the physical world. With the powers of the mind unlocked and enough collective energy, it is suggested that complete mastery of the physical universe is possible.*



*Jan's decision to stay represents a distinct change in character. Although Jan could have gone with the Overlords back into the stars, back to the adventure of the unknown, he chooses to accept the fate that has been doled out to humanity and die with his planet. The humanistic hero is submitting to the greater forces around him.*



*Jan has the opportunity to offer the Overlords what they most desire: information. This too, is a decisive shift in character for Jan. Before he left Earth, Jan was resentful of the Overlords. Now, though it will cost him his life, Jan offers them one last parting gift, his final contribution to the universe.*



*As the children leave their material bodies behind, they become raw energy, a pillar of fire. They have now transcended the physical world, and they exist on a different plane as a single, psychic entity, a hopeful vision of a future, liberated humanity. Yet this vision is also destructive as this new humanity consumes the Earth.*



*Like any evolutionary process, the newly transcendent vestiges of humanity leave the rest to die, destroying their habitat and wiping out any trace of what once existed. Though Clarke has cast a compelling alternative vision for humanity's future, it is also incredibly grim.*



Millions of miles away, beyond Pluto, Karellen sits, having just witnessed the end of Earth. His mission is complete, and he is going home. He is sorrowful for the **Overlord** race, for they will never unite with the **Overmind**, never transcend what they already are. Despite their powerful intelligence, they feel like a tribe that lives its entire history on the same dusty patch of ground, unable to experience the majesty of the universe.

A message informs him that they are exiting the solar system. Karellen looks once more at the former-Earth's sun, "saluted the men he had known, whether they had hindered or helped him in his purpose," and leaves.

*Despite their power, intelligence, and nearly god-like depiction throughout the majority of the story, the Overlords look very small by the end. They are intelligent beyond doubt, but trapped and powerless, beholden to the Overmind but never able to become a part of it. As humanity was trapped on Earth, so the Overlords are trapped in their physical, rational realm.*



*Karellen once again seems fond of humanity, despite how petulant and unintelligent they were, as he moves on, his purpose completed.*





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