

The Children of Men



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF P. D. JAMES

Born in 1920 in Oxford to parents who didn't value women's education, Phyllis Dorothy James left high school at sixteen with dreams of becoming a writer. Marriage, family, and the carnage and disruption of World War 2 derailed James's dreams for a time—she worked as a Red Cross nurse throughout the war and, after its end, was forced to support her family following her husband's debilitating and dangerous struggle with PTSD. After securing a job in hospital administration, James spent her mornings writing before heading to work, and set many of her early novels in hospitals. She began writing detective stories, her devotion to the form and love of the challenge of using the form to “say something true about men and women and their relationships and the society in which they live” spurring her on. She “exorcise[d her] fear” of violence through her chilling mysteries, and her books—the most famous of which include *Innocent Blood*, *The Children of Men*, and *Death Comes to Pemberley*—have sold over ten million copies in the United States alone. In late 2014, she died at 94 years old at her home in Oxford, revered by fans the world over as the “Queen of Crime.” Her work continues to be published posthumously.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The early 1990s, the time when P.D. James was writing *The Children of Men*, was a time of great global change. The geography of Europe was shifting quickly with the reunification of Germany and the dissolution of the USSR into fifteen individual sovereign republics. In the United Kingdom, Margaret Thatcher's controversial politics—a legacy of British nationalism, including her reluctance to integrate economically with Europe—led to calls for her resignation as Prime Minister, which she eventually conceded to in late 1990, while a recession left two million unemployed by the end of the first month of 1991. James wrote *The Children of Men* amidst an environment of tremendous social, political, and economic upheaval. Themes of globalism versus isolationism thus reign over much of the narrative, as do resulting questions of the impact and purpose of history, repetition, societal renewal, and collective action.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

A dystopian, apocalyptic narrative which falls under the larger umbrella of speculative fiction, *The Children of Men* takes cues from novels such as Aldous Huxley's [Brave New World](#) and

Margaret Atwood's [The Handmaid's Tale](#)—novels which imagine a highly undesirable future and which focus largely on issues surrounding the failures of human fertility and procreation. In *The Children of Men*, human fertility is impossible, and no alternative method of creating life has been discovered. Out of deep emotional need, inanimate objects such as dolls and baby animals are ascribed human status and doted upon. In [The Handmaid's Tale](#), the majority of the female population is unable to bear children, resulting in the creation of coterie of Handmaids—women sold into slavery to rich men who impregnate them and force them to bear children to then be raised by the men and their barren wives. In [Brave New World](#), humans are born through artificial wombs and are sorted into highly segregated castes, or classes. The fear of the end of humanity coming about through our own failures, rather than a cataclysmic natural or chemical event or an act of war, imbues these novels with a tinge of humiliation and despair—when our strongest biological imperative is removed from the equation of our lives on Earth, what cultural, social, or scientific systems take over? *The Children of Men* is part of a rich tradition of speculative literature which explores the extremes of this possibility.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *The Children of Men*
- **When Written:** Early 1990s
- **Where Written:** England
- **When Published:** 1992
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Dystopian thriller, speculative fiction
- **Setting:** England in the year 2021
- **Climax:** Theo Faron, an Oxford historian struggling to cope with the impending end of civilization due to mass infertility as well as his cousin's swift and insidious rise to power in the new British government, is called upon to assist an anarchist group called The Five Fishes whose leader's wife, Julian, is the first pregnant woman on Earth in over twenty years.
- **Antagonist:** Xan Lyppiatt
- **Point of View:** Alternating first-person and third-person, switching between Theo's diary entries and a close-third narrator.

EXTRA CREDIT

Page to Screen. *The Children of Men* was adapted into a 2006 film called *Children of Men*, starring Clive Owen and Julianne Moore. Directed by the visionary Alfonso Cuarón (*Y Tu Mama Tambien*, [Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban](#)) the film

rewrote and reinterpreted much of James's novel. Cuarón's fascination with shooting long, unbroken takes and his experimental use of documentary-style camerawork contribute to the film's innovative feel. It was nominated for three Academy Awards: Best Adapted Screenplay, Best Cinematography, and Best Film Editing.



PLOT SUMMARY

It is the first day of January, 2021. The world has been stricken by a mass infertility crisis, now in its twenty-fifth year. Oxford historian Theodore Faron, cousin to Xan Lyppiatt, the dictator and Warden of England, describes the confusion, pain, and chaos the world has endured within the pages of his new **diary**. Humanity has been “demoralized” and “humiliat[ed]” not only by its inability to breed, but by its inability to find a cause or a cure for the infertility crisis. The last child was born in 1995, now known as Year Omega, and the world is “without hope” that another woman will ever become pregnant — the people of the world have sunken into a universal malaise, and a new political order has emerged. The Omegas — the children born in the year 1995 — are a “god”-like, uniformly “beautiful” and “cruel” class of human known to form gangs, paint their faces, and terrorize anyone not of their generation. The State Security Police keeps the authoritarian state's wishes in order, sending convicts to a mysterious penal colony on the Isle of Man. Theo, who has retained his post as a teacher at Oxford, finds himself up against students unable to see the point of studying history, the “least rewarding discipline for a dying species.” Theo reflects on his past — first on his relationship with Xan, who has assumed control over Britain with the help of a small, sycophantic Council. Once, Theo served as Xan's adviser. Journalists reported during this time that the two were “close as brothers,” but Theo claims that even during their shared summers at Xan's family's estate, **Woolcombe**, the two were never so close. Theo then recalls his own father's early death from stomach cancer, which was largely kept from Theo even as his father went in and out of the hospital and steadily declined. At his father's funeral, relatives told Theo he was the “man of the family now,” but Theo, then and now, has never wanted “anyone to look to [him] for protection, for happiness, [or] for love.” Theo was for years plagued by a recurring nightmare in which his father stood at the foot of Theo's bed, pointing at him with the bloody, oozing stump of his arm. The dream began recurring after Theo “killed **Natalie**,” but now his father “never comes.” Theo recounts the death of his daughter Natalie, whom he accidentally ran over with his car while backing out of the driveway when she was only fifteen months old. The horrific incident drove a wedge between Theo and his wife Helena from which they were never able to recover. She has recently left him for a younger man named Rupert Clavering.

Theo attends services at a nearby chapel, where there is a new woman present — Theo recognizes her as an old student. After services, the woman approaches him, and Theo notices that one of her hands is deformed — he notes that this “save[s]” her from the twice-yearly examinations to which all healthy young women are subjected. The two re-introduce themselves, and the woman — whose name is Julian — tells Theo that she has approached him because she and “a small group of friends” want to stop the many wrongs which are occurring in Britain. Her “group” knows that Theo is the Warden's cousin, and hopes to recruit him to bring their grievances before the Council. Theo agrees to meet with her group.

Theo visits his old mentor, Jasper Palmer-Smith. Jasper, since Year Omega, has removed himself to the countryside and built a store of food, firewood, and medicine. When Theo arrives at Jasper's home, he is shocked by how rapidly Jasper seems to be aging. Hilda, Jasper's wife, is even more senile and disheveled. Jasper asks Theo if he can come live with Theo in Oxford — Jasper has begun to feel “isolated” in the countryside. Hilda, Jasper says, has been considering taking part in a Quietus — a mass ritual suicide of the elderly by drowning.

Theo meets with Julian's group at a nearby church and is introduced to Rolf, the group's leader, and Julian's husband; Miriam, a former midwife; Luke, a priest; and Gascoigne, a lorry driver. The group tells Theo that they have not yet taken any action, but have a list of grievances with the state. They want to call for a general election, stop the government run semen-testing program as well as the compulsory gynecological examinations, end the Quietus, and bestow civil rights upon the Sojourners (foreign immigrants treated as indentured servants). Theo confesses that he has “no influence” with the Warden of England and never has. Julian urges Miriam to tell Theo the story of her brother, and she does. After pushing an Omega woman to the ground while stealing her handbag, Miriam's brother was sent to the Isle of Man Penal Colony and subjected to horrific treatment. He escaped to Miriam's house, but after just a few hours the State Security Police tracked him down, took him away, and sent Miriam his ashes. Theo tells the group that there is a lot of mistreatment the country is willing to tolerate “as the price of sound government,” and that the group's goal of changing “human hearts and minds” has no chance of coming to fruition. Rolf accuses Theo of having met with them despite knowing he'll never go to the Council; Theo retorts that before he gives the group a final decision, he wants to see a Quietus. Julian tells him that one will be held nearby in three days. Theo says that he will leave a message for the group after he's witnessed it.

Theo attends the Quietus, where he witnesses old women in white robes preparing to leap into the sea. Among them is Hilda, who has been included in the Quietus apparently against her will. Theo attempts to rescue her, but a soldier supervising the event strikes Hilda on the head, and she crumples into the

water. Theo himself falls into the surf, and is near-drowning when a wave flings him back to shore. Back in Oxford, Theo leaves a note tucked into a wall of the church for Julian's group to find. The note consists of just a single word: YES. He notes, though, that his decision to go see Xan is motivated less by the "horror" of the Quietus itself than his own "humiliation" at having been unable to rescue Hilda.

A driver named Hedges arrives to ferry Theo to London to meet with Xan. On the way into the city, the two see a group of zealots self-flagellating in a park. When Theo asks Hedges whether he believes in God, Hedges tells Theo that he believes mass infertility was God's "final intervention" in the "mess" of humanity. At Xan's offices, Theo finds himself before the full Council. Xan wears the opulent **Coronation Ring** on his hand, and Theo regards it with disdain. Theo expresses his disappointment at not having secured a private meeting with Xan, but Xan insists that the meeting is one of old friends after three years apart. Theo describes the "murder[ous]" Quietus he witnessed, then questions the Council about the Man Penal Colony, the Sojourners, and the compulsory testing of men and women, asking Xan to "do away" with the "degrading" policies "with one signature." Xan tells Theo that his "concern would have more weight if [he] were [still] sitting" with the Council, and dismisses him brusquely. When Theo returns to the car driven by Hedges, Xan emerges from the building and offers to join Theo for a walk in the park. Xan asks Theo whether he's been pressured by someone else to appear before the Council, claiming that Theo could never have thought those issues through himself. Theo claims that he lives in the "real world" and hears the complaints of strangers each day. Xan implores Theo to "tell [his] friends to be sensible." Xan is "not a tyrant, but [he] can't afford to be merciful."

Back in Oxford, Theo meets Julian — who also goes by Jules — at a museum. He tells her that Xan knew "someone" had prompted his visit to London. Theo tells Jules not to "waste [her] life on a futile cause." He also warns her to stay away from Rolf, who is "dragging [her] into danger to satisfy his own ambitions." Jules tells Theo she must stay with the group because it is God's will. She thanks Theo for his efforts and the two part ways. Two weeks later, a pamphlet appears on Theo's doorstep, outlining Julian's group's list of demands from the state. The piece of paper is signed "The Five Fishes." Theo rips the paper into several pieces and flushes them down the toilet, though he wishes for a brief moment "that he could share the passion and the folly" The Five Fishes have. Two members of the State Security Police (SSP) visit Theo. The Chief Inspector George Rawlings and his companion, Sergeant Oliver Cathcart, who is an Omega, question Theo as to whether he knows anything about the "activities of certain people." Bombs have gone off at two recent Quietuses, and the pamphlets have not gone without notice. Theo tells the police that, as the Warden's cousin, he will report directly to the Warden with any threats or

news of sedition. Once the men leave, he considers warning the Fishes, but has no way of contacting them and would be afraid to be surveilled even if there was—there is nothing for him to do, he decides, but wait. Theo runs into Julian at a market, and tells her that he had a visit from the SSP. He implores Julian to stop her involvement with the Fishes. He tells her that if she ever needs him, she should send for him at St. John Street. As soon as they part ways, though, Theo decides to "escape" on a journey around Europe in an attempt to put the events of recent weeks behind him.

Theo returns to Oxford a few months later after a trip which only "deepened his sense of impending disaster." A week after his return, while preparing dinner, there comes a knock at the door—it is Miriam. She informs Theo that Julian has finally sent for him—the police have Gascoigne, and the group is going on the run. Theo grabs his coat and diary while Miriam fills a bag of food, and the two hurry to Theo's car. Miriam tells Theo that Julian is pregnant. Though Theo doesn't believe her, he drives her onward to the group's "fall-back meeting place." The Fishes are gathered there, and Julian approaches Theo to show him her swollen belly. Theo tells the Fishes that they should inform the Warden of Julian's pregnancy and ensure her safety that way, rather than by going on the run. Julian believes she and her child will die if the Warden has anything to do with its birth. Theo agrees to join the group on the lam, though he and Rolf trade insults. Rolf tells Theo that he is gutless, and has only been summoned because his relationship to Xan is "useful." Miriam implores the two to stop arguing. Theo suggests the group travel to Jasper's — he plans to let Jasper use of his home in exchange for the group using Jasper's. Once there, Theo finds Jasper's home unlocked; inside, Jasper's dead body sits in an armchair covered in blood and feces. He has taken his own life. Theo knows that their group cannot stay, so he takes Jasper's revolver, empties it of its one remaining bullet and places the bullet in his pocket while Miriam gathers supplies. They then exchange Theo's car for Jasper's and get back on the road.

The group stops so that Miriam and Luke can take Julian to relieve herself. Rolf tells Theo that once Julian's child is born, he believes the child will be hailed as the "new Adam" and given absolute power. If that happens, he wants to take Theo on as his adviser. Theo tells Rolf that once Xan sees him as a threat, the government will extract what they need from him — his sperm — and dispose of him. A tire blows, and the group is forced to wait by the side of the road until first light. The group spends the following day resting while Rolf repairs the car, and Theo writes in his diary that he feels "happy" and "at peace" in the company of The Five Fishes and that that he "no longer [has] need of" his diary, as he is no longer the "self-regarding, sardonic, solitary man" who composed the majority of its entries. Back on the road, the group encounters a fallen tree trunk and is forced to stop — Theo realizes it is a trap just as a

group of feral, paint-faced Omegas descend on them. While the Omegas dance around the car and begin to break into it, the group plans to join their death dance as a “cover” while Julian runs away. The plan seems to be working, until one Omega makes a move for Julian — Luke cries out for the Omegas to take him instead, and they do. While they rip him apart, the rest of the group takes cover. Once the Omegas leave, their ritual killing complete, Julian insists on retrieving Luke’s body and burying him. Noticing Julian’s tenderness toward Luke, Theo asks Miriam “whose child” she is carrying; Julian admits that the child is Luke’s. Rolf, enraged, steps away from the group, and while Julian hovers over Luke’s corpse, Miriam tells Theo that Julian has begun to fall in love with him, and that Luke, like Julian, was exempt from government testing due to childhood epilepsy. Rolf rejoins the group. At daybreak, Luke’s burial commences, though Rolf makes no move to help Theo, Miriam, and Julian with the rite. Afterward, the four of them lie down together to rest. When they awake in the early evening, they realize that Rolf has abandoned them and taken the car. Theo knows that Rolf will make his way to London, inform Xan of Julian’s pregnancy, and that Xan will then track their group down. Theo plans to go into the nearest village at dark and steal a car, water, and supplies. At nightfall he walks two hours to the nearest village, and selects a house through whose windows he can see an elderly couple watching television. He threatens them with the stolen revolver, and ties them up on them on their bed. They beg for water and visits to the bathroom, and Theo, feeling guilty, obliges them. They tell him that their cleaning woman will arrive in the morning, and Theo tells them that he will leave their television turned up so no one hears them if they scream before then. Theo takes some “disappointing” spoils from their kitchen, then steals their car and, as he drives back for Miriam and Julian, indulges a fantasy in which they find an idyllic deserted cottage and take refuge there for as long as they need to.

When Theo finds Miriam and Julian, Miriam tells him that Julian’s labor has started and that they must find shelter quickly. Theo, without the help of maps, drives through the night to the edge of Wychwood Forest, a place where Theo used to take walks and where, he remembers, there is an abandoned woodshed. The three of them prepare to dump the car in a lake, but hear a radio announcement describing a “group of dissidents” led by “Theodore Faron of Oxford.” As they approach the cottage they hear helicopters overhead, but make it to the woodshed before being spotted. Miriam prepares a makeshift bed for Julian, and Theo builds a fire. Soon, Julian delivers a baby boy, and “the joy is almost too much for [Theo] to bear.” In his excitement, Theo spills a kettle full of water, and Miriam goes out to get supplies, despite the danger of being seen.

After an hour, Miriam still hasn’t returned, and Julian implores Theo to go find her. Though he wants for the two of them to be

together when Xan inevitably arrives, Julian insists. Theo makes his way to a nearby house, and inside finds Miriam’s body, strangled to death. He takes her corpse out of the house and lays it beneath a tree, swearing to avenge her. He returns to the shed; together he and Julian mourn Miriam. Theo feeds Julian, and she worries that the two of them will be separated when Xan arrives; Theo promises her that nothing will pull them apart. Soon, Xan arrives. Theo replaces the last remaining bullet into Jasper’s revolver and goes outside to meet him. Theo confirms that Julian is pregnant, but does not reveal she’s already birthed the child. Xan says that he “doesn’t want to frighten” Julian and has brought “everything she needs.” Theo presses Xan to reveal what he plans to do. Xan tells Theo that if Julian’s child is a boy, that child will be the “father of a new race,” and may even be able to “breed again [with Julian] herself.” Xan announces his intention to marry Julian and ensure she’s looked after, then urges Theo to go inside and convince Julian to go with him. When Theo hesitates, Xan takes aim with his gun and shoots. He misses, but Theo returns fire and shoots Xan through the heart. Theo takes the ring from Xan’s corpse’s finger, and the Council members emerge from the woods. Theo tells them that the child has been born, and brings them into the shed to see Julian and her son. While the Council fawns over the child, Theo laments that a new cycle of life has begun “with jealousy, violence, and murder.” He plans to take Xan’s place “for a time;” there are “evils to be remedied.” Julian questions why Theo has donned the Coronation Ring, and Theo is momentarily irritated, but assures her he will take it off “in time.” Theo reaches out and makes the sign of the cross on Julian’s child’s forehead.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Theodore “Theo” Faron – The novel’s protagonist, Theo Faron is an Oxford historian. When the novel begins, he is reeling from the fallout of personal tragedy, the waning relevance of his profession, and lack of hope for a future as he enters his fiftieth year. Theo’s wife Helena has recently left him—several years ago, just around the time of Year Omega (the last year humans were born on Earth), he accidentally ran over their daughter **Natalie** while backing out of their home’s driveway. The resulting malaise between Theo and his wife along with an inability to actually bring themselves to separate mirrors humanity’s universal ennui and failure to take any real action in the face of no future. Theo begins writing in a **diary** at the start of the novel, and soon becomes obsessed with the task of recording his daily life in an effort to assume some control and order over its seemingly meaningless events. Theo is also cousins with Xan, the self-appointed dictator and Warden of England. Because of this relationship, Theo is approached by Julian, a member of an anarchist group called The Five Fishes,

who hope to get Theo to use his connection to his cousin to air a list of grievances before him and the Council of England. Though initially reluctant to fall in with such a group, Theo eventually agrees, only to come before the Council and realize that no positive change or action will ever occur in their country again. When one of The Five Fishes' members, Gascoigne, is captured by the State Security Police, the remaining members go on the run—and Theo, at Julian's behest, joins them. He slowly develops feelings for Julian, and helps her to deliver her child into the world. Then, while protecting Julian from Xan, who plans to marry her and use her child to cement his own rule, Theo ends up killing Xan. Julian then places Xan's **Coronation Ring** on his own finger, and it is clear that he now intends to take Xan's place as ruler of England. Theo embodies several of the novel's major themes: initially he is mired in fatalism and despair, but also, as a historian in a world no longer concerned with history, represents the struggle between history, memory, and mythology. Throughout the course of his journey, Theo comes to embody themes of renewal, redemption, action, and hope, as well as the push against isolationism and self-concern. And yet, at the end of the novel, after he kills Xan and puts on the Coronation Ring, Theo also embodies the darker side of renewal: that the lust for power is just as intrinsic a part of humanity as any other attribute, and that those who take down the current power are likely not to return power to the people but instead to take it for themselves.

Xan Lyppiatt – Theo's cousin and the self-appointed Warden of England, Xan is a dictatorial man whose childhood tendencies toward "obsessive self-sufficiency" have made him into a cruel, thoughtless leader. Snakelike, shadowy, and incapable of true intimacy or friendship with anyone, Xan rules Britain with the support of his sycophantic Council. He wears an enormously valuable ring—the **Coronation Ring**, "the wedding ring of England," on his finger as a symbol of his unquestioned power. Xan is both vain and shifty, self-obsessed and seemingly without a true inner self to speak of. When he finally learns of Julian's pregnancy, he and the Council hunt her and Theo to their safehouse. Xan plans to marry Julian (whom Theo has come to love), because he knows that by marrying the first woman to give birth in years he will cement his power. At the same time, Xan also describes a plan to perhaps "breed" Julian with her own son in order to create new life on Earth. In the ensuing confrontation, Theo shoots and kills Xan. While Xan is the singular villain of the novel, when Theo puts on the Coronation Ring after killing Xan, it suggests that Xan is also not particularly special, in the sense that his lust for power is something shared by all people, and so that once he falls someone else will just take his role.

Julian – One of the members of The Five Fishes, Julian is compassionate and driven by a desire for social justice. She wants to secure civil rights for Sojourners (immigrants forced

into a kind of indentured servitude), put an end to the Quietus (which involves putting to death the elderly), and end the compulsory, invasive examinations of healthy young men and women. Because of a deformity in one of her hands, Julian is exempt from the twice-yearly examinations to which all healthy young women are subjected. Later in the novel, Julian is revealed to be pregnant—the first pregnant woman on earth, as far as anyone knows, in twenty-five years. Though married to the ambitious, hotheaded Rolf, the pious priest Luke is the true father of her child. When Theo absconds with The Five Fishes at Julian's behest, the two of them slowly begin to develop feelings for one another. Julian ultimately gives birth to a healthy baby boy, the first birth in a quarter-century. Julian's story arc ties in with the novel's themes of hope and action, redemption and renewal, and global thinking towards a greater good. And yet, the novel ends with her nervously wondering why Theo has put on Xan's Coronation Ring, and so her own story of redemption and renewal of the human race (through this first birth in 25 years) is tainted with the "renewal" of despotic rule suggested by Theo taking over Xan's role as dictator.

Rolf – The leader of The Five Fishes, an engineer in the electricity-supply industry, and Julian's husband, Rolf has a "dark masculinity" about him and an impatient, jealous, and ambitious personality. He does not particularly like or trust Theo, nor does Theo like or trust him. Theo sees Rolf as power-hungry, and believes that Rolf is actually motivated by a desire to usurp Xan's "absolute power for himself" rather than to promote justice, compassion, or moral indignation like the rest of The Five Fishes. Rolf is the one who concocts the plan to find a safehouse for Julian in the wake of Gascoigne's capture by the State Security Police, though he does not remain with The Five Fishes for the entirety of their journey. Once he discovers that Luke is the father of Julian's child, he not only abandons the group but goes to London to turn them in to Xan in hopes of accruing favor for himself. Rolf's actions ultimately show that Theo's assessment of him was accurate—he was motivated not by ideals, but by lust for power.

Miriam – A former midwife and one of the members of The Five Fishes. She treats Theo "as if they were already conspirators" from their very first meeting. Miriam is strong, intrepid, and selfless. Before the novel begins, her brother was brutally imprisoned for petty theft. Her brother eventually escaped and tried to hide in Miriam's house, but was captured and then murdered by the State Security Police. Miriam uses this anecdote to appeal to Theo to bring the Fishes' list of grievances before the Council of England. When the Fishes are forced to go on the run, it is Miriam who comes (at Julian's behest) to bring Theo along with them. Miriam is also the one who reveals to Theo that Julian is pregnant. In this way, Miriam acts as a kind of "midwife" to Julian in the book, helping and protecting her throughout her pregnancy. In fact, Miriam dies

while playing this same role: after Luke's death and Rolf's abandonment, Miriam gives her life attempting to find supplies to help Julian through her labor.

Luke – One of the members of The Five Fishes, a priest, and secretly the father of Julian's unborn child. Pious and even-tempered, Luke yearns for a version of the world that still values compassion, justice, and love. While on the run, he and Julian pray together daily, performing holy sacraments at a makeshift altar. Theo suspects that Rolf allowed Luke into the group despite his lack of "practical skills" due to superstition, and the underlying belief that Luke could function as a "bringer of luck" and a "possessor of mystic powers and ancient charms." Luke is killed during an encounter with a group of feral Omegas, sacrificing himself to save Julian (and her baby). Julian, mourning his death, reveals to the group that Luke was the true father of her child. Luke's status as the father of the child—the first born on Earth in 25 years—implies a religious, or at least moral, foundation to the miracle of the baby's existence, though the book doesn't push much past that faint suggestion.

Gascoigne – One of the members of The Five Fishes, recruited because of his expertise as a long-distance driver. Rolf tasks him with distributing The Five Fishes' pamphlets all across England. Gascoigne is captured by the State Security Police while placing explosives to interrupt a Quietus, prompting Miriam to recruit Theo to drive the remaining Fishes' getaway car—they are afraid that Gascoigne will soon "break" and give the police the Fishes' names.

Helena Faron – Theo's ex-wife, who fell into a deep despair following the accidental death—at Theo's hands—of their fifteen-month-old daughter **Natalie**. She has very recently left Theo for a man named Rupert. She and Rupert dote upon their cat Mathilda and the kittens she is still able to breed, going so far as to hold birthing parties and christenings for them. Helena's way of channeling her desire for children into other things—in her case, cats—is representative of the way many people attempt to cope with the disappearance of children in the world portrayed in the novel. Theo describes Helena as having a "carefully nurtured social respectability"—her father was a highly influential man at Oxford, and her and Theo's marriage was largely one of convenience, born of Theo's desire for the "prestige" that being her father's son-in-law conferred.

Jasper Palmer-Smith – One of Theo's old history teachers who selected Theo as his favorite student during Theo's time as an Oxford undergraduate. Fearing a "total breakdown of order" in the time directly after Year Omega, Jasper moved to the country and has become "obsessive" about safeguarding his property and possessions. He calls upon Theo to visit him early in the novel, and Theo is struck by how rapidly Jasper is aging. At this visit, Jasper tells Theo that he is considering moving back to Oxford, and wants to join Theo in Theo's oversized house. His wife Hilda, he mentions casually, is considering taking part in a Quietus, or a mass ritual suicide by drowning.

Theo doesn't make Jasper "any promises" as to the two of them moving in together, feeling that while he owes a lot to Jasper, he does not owe him the use of his home. After Hilda's death, Theo doesn't hear much from Jasper. When Theo joins The Five Fishes and their group is in need of shelter and supplies, Theo suggests visiting Jasper's house. When they arrive, they find that Jasper has committed suicide in solitude.

Hilda Palmer-Smith – Jasper's wife Hilda, Theo notes, has become senile and disheveled in her old age. He is shocked, however, when he witnesses her as a participant—seemingly against her will—in a Quietus. Theo attempts to rescue her, but she is struck repeatedly by a member of the State Security Police and eventually drowns, and Theo himself is knocked into the treacherous surf while trying to save her. Witnessing Hilda's murder is part of what spurs Theo to action when The Five Fishes ask him to speak with the Council on their behalf—the memory of her death disturbs him deeply. However, the novel makes clear that "the memory of his own humiliation, his body hauled up the beach and dumped as if it were an unwanted carcass," is what truly motivates him—a fact that plays into the novel's depiction of the way that many people pursue moral actions for selfish reasons (and that the selfishness will eventually come out one way or another).

Harriet Marwood – Head of Health, Science, and Recreation on the Council of England. She is the oldest member of the Council, and its "universal grandmother." Theo notes her reassuring nature and her ability to make it "impossible not to believe that all is for the best" during her public addresses. It was her idea that Xan wear the egregious **Coronation Ring**, marking him as the Warden. She believes that "people need their rights of passage," and is a staunch defender of the practice of the Quietus.

Felicia Rankin – Head of Home Affairs on the Council of England. Theo describes her as having made him uneasy during his time on the Council, noting her misshapen, asymmetrical face. A former lawyer, she is curt and has a particular dislike for Theo, telling him that, as a historian, he should continue "living in the past," since it's "where he's most at home. Even when he killed his child [**Natalie**] he was going backwards."

Carl Inglebach – The Minister for Justice and State Security on the Council of England. Regarded as the "brain" of the administration, he is "impervious to public opinion." He believes that "there are things about which nothing can be done and to try and change them is a waste of time." It is Carl who tells Theo that mankind needs to be able to perceive a balance between the past, present, and future in order to survive, and that without hope for a future, "what does [anything] matter?"

Hedges – A driver who ferries Theo to his meeting with Xan and the rest of the Council. Theo starts a conversation with him, which leads to Hedges's resigned musings on the idea of humanity as one of God's "experiments" that went "wrong," and,

further, the idea that God inflicted mass infertility on humanity as an “intervention” because humanity was so obviously damaged and destructive.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Rupert Clavering – Helena Faron’s new partner, a “sensitive” artist and graphic designer who is thirteen years her junior.

Martin Woolvington – Head of Industry and Production on the Council of England. Theo describes him as the member of the council “with whom Xan is most intimate, the one he probably comes closest to calling a friend.” A military man, Martin is a hard worker and a “non-intellectual intelligen[t].”

George Rawlings – A Chief Inspector with the State Security Police who questions Theo about his knowledge of the Five Fishes.

Oliver Cathcart – An Omega State Security Police sergeant who questions Theo about his knowledge of the Five Fishes.



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.



HISTORY, MYTHOLOGY, AND MEMORY

The world of *The Children of Men* is one obsessed with the past. Humans have been stricken by mass infertility, and no one has been born on Earth in twenty-five years. As the world faces the absence of a future and an inability to see beyond the present moment, the past has become either a place of refuge or a no-man’s-land, a place which people are reluctant to consider or return to. One of the members of the Council that governs Great Britain, Carl Inglebach, says that all of the ill and good of human history alike has been done “in the knowledge that [man] has been formed by history, that his life-span is brief [and] insubstantial, but [with the hope] that there will be a future.” In other words, humans need knowledge of their past, present, and future in order to thrive. But with mass fertility having eradicated any hope for the future, the present has been thrown into chaos and the past seems pointless and meaningless. Throughout the novel, P.D. James argues that harmony between the history of the past, the immediacy of the present, and the hope of the future is necessary to sustain not just human decency, but human life.

Theo Faron, the novel’s protagonist and the character whose psyche James most carefully explores, is an Oxford historian. His status as an arbiter, or judge, of the past and as a resource

for concrete, factual information allows him to eventually assume the role of one of the few who can light the way forward. Though Theo has specialized in history and continues to teach it, at the start of the novel enrollment in his classes is “dwindling.” In the face of extinction, humanity has become almost completely disinterested in educating themselves about the past. The world has descended into violence, despair, and uncertainty, and Theo’s students doubt whether the past holds anything of value at all. Theo himself is frustrated with his increasingly less relevant role—he is taunted by a member of the Council which governs Great Britain, who tells him that “historians are happier in the past, so stay there.” Theo, however, is caught between the past and the present; he struggles deeply with feelings of shame, inadequacy, and failure that have grown out of his own dark past, and his revulsion with *himself* mirrors humanity’s overwhelming “humiliation” at being unable to secure a future for *itself*. In this way, P.D. James uses Theo as a synecdoche—or a part that represents a whole—for humanity more broadly. He functions similarly in the way he begins to focus on his *personal* memory as the thing he relies upon to understand both his own past, and how he and his fellow citizens have become trapped in their chaotic, desperate present moment. Theo keeps a **diary** in which he records his own personal history—the facts of his past and present, but also his feelings, his hopes, his secrets, and his great shame. The diary is a symbol of humanity’s collective desire to one day be able to see the present moment as history—a desire which betrays Theo and humanity’s desperate desire to have a future, because only by having a future can the present become history.

“We can experience nothing but the present moment, and to understand this is as close as we can get to eternal life,” Theo says in the novel’s opening pages, and in his diary’s first entry. Though at the start of the novel, humanity seems unable to find comfort or instruction in the past and can no longer muster any hope for a future, James’s insistence that faith in all three are necessary to ensure survival ultimately comes to bear upon the lives of her characters, as they cobble together their shared memories of the past, new mythologies and ideologies, and even begin to form collective hopes for the future.



FATALISM AND DESPAIR VS. ACTION AND HOPE

In the dystopic world of *The Children of Men*, hope—for a future, for contentment, for survival—seems impossible. The “humiliation” of the “ultimate failure” of mass infertility has driven human society to the brink, and new kinds of ennui, cruelty, and cultural malaise have seeped into all aspects of daily life. The journey of the novel is the journey from fatalism and despair toward action spurred by hope. As the text unfolds, even the skeptical, past-obsessed Theo Faron becomes convinced of the possibility of humanity’s

future on Earth. Through this journey, P.D. James demonstrates the ways in which individuals must allow themselves and their actions to be radicalized by their despair rather than succumb to it.

An atmosphere of fatalism and despair permeates the novel from its very first page, when the death of Joseph Ricardo, the last human being to be born on Earth, is announced on the state radio. Theo, writing in his **diary**, goes on to describe the “untended” and “crumbling” buildings, the “darken[ing]” libraries and museums, and the “demoraliz[ing]” inability of humanity to figure out the root cause of mass infertility. The “humiliating” and “insistent” needs of society, even in the face of total extinction, have led a large percentage of the population to suicide; the Quietus, a mass ritual suicide reserved for elderly members of society, represents fatalism and despair at its most desperate. Theo goes on to describe the “transitoriness” of joy and pleasure in this new world, coupled with the disorienting and further demoralizing knowledge that beauty will continue to exist long after humanity has gone extinct. Pleasure is rare now, and constant “bereavement” is universal. The bitterness humanity feels at being unable to connect with beauty, joy, and pleasure—only able to witness cruelty and despair—feeds into the cycle of fatalism, and seems to cement humanity’s general inability to even consider taking action toward preserving beauty, pursuing pleasure, or holding out any kind of hope for the future.

Though Theo and many of those around him have succumbed to this despair and fatalism, the introduction of the anarchist group The Five Fishes slowly reignites the possibility of both action and hope. The Five Fishes are a group of five individuals who know that there are things that are “wrong” happening in Britain, and want to “try to stop them.” The group is composed of five members who never reveal their last names—Julian, Rolf Luke, Miriam, and Gascoigne. They attempt to recruit Theo to approach the Council with a list of their concerns, aware of his once-close connection to Xan Lyppiatt, the Warden of England, as well as Theo’s former role as the Warden’s Adviser. The Five Fishes have a list of grievances and want to make several demands, which include the calling of a general election, full civil rights for indentured Sojourners, the abolition of the Quietus, the end of deportations to the dangerous Isle of Man Penal Colony, and a stop to the “compulsory testing of semen and the examination of young women.” The Five Fishes want the human race to die “as free men and women, as human beings, not as devils.” In other words, though they do not necessarily have hope for a future, they want to take action to make the present as humane and bearable as possible. Theo agrees to help the group, but is unable to convince Xan, in their meeting, of taking any action toward change. In fact, even as he helps The Five Fishes, Theo initially believes that their desire for a just world is misplaced in a world that has no future and thus no reason to strive for justice. Theo, however, longs to

“share the passion” that holds their group together and emboldens it to take action in the face of despair. When he does at last join the group—at the request of Julian, who is revealed to be pregnant—he is indeed swept up in the “passion” The Five Fishes share, and finds himself for the first time in over twenty years feeling “at peace” and “grateful.” He is finally able to escape his despair, filled with hope for a future spurred by action-taking, the news of Julian’s pregnancy, and the realization that change and renewal might actually be possible.

Despite an overwhelmingly fatalistic beginning, the novel eventually turns toward the hope that is contained within action—Theo’s journey toward hope is the journey of the novel, and action in the face of despair is, James argues, the only saving grace to be found in a world mired in discouragement.



APOCALYPSE: REVELATION, RENEWAL, AND REDEMPTION

Though the word “apocalypse” has, in popular imagination, come to symbolize a cataclysmic, world-ending event, its true meaning is “an uncovering,” or “a disclosure of knowledge or revelation.” The word “apocalypse” does not appear once within the text of *The Children of Men* and though there is no one large, cataclysmic revelation, the creeping realization that humanity would be unable to reproduce was, in a sense, the moment of apocalypse, and the revelation that has followed has been chaotic and fatalistic. In this way, the novel is both a post- and pre-apocalyptic narrative; the moment of apocalypse occurs before the novel begins, but the revelation and its fallout are still taking place, and the true moment of final “uncovering”—the end of the human race—will not come to pass for many more years. Apocalyptic or post-apocalyptic narratives do indeed focus more than anything on what is revealed in the wake of a society or a world hitting a point of no return, and *The Children of Men* is no different. By first focusing on the horror, cruelty, and despair that is revealed in the wake of mass infertility, and then on the forces that combat those evils, P.D. James argues that it is only through an “apocalypse,” or a revelation, that true renewal and redemption—of society, of humanity—is possible.

The cruelty, despair, and pain of the human race as they wait for their inevitable end both grows out of and feeds into their lack of hope for renewal or redemption. Because humanity has been unable to determine a cause for its mass infertility, the inevitable question has seeped into society: whether mass infertility was some kind of divine punishment, and whether humanity has been barred from any redemption at all. “Perhaps His experiment went wrong, sir,” wonders a driver ferrying Theo to a meeting with Xan and the Council. “Perhaps He’s just bagged. Seeing the mess, not knowing how to put it right. Perhaps He only had enough power left for one final intervention. So He made it.” The role of the divine in the extinction of humanity seems to be just on the tip of everyone’s

tongue—the fear that redemption is impossible because God has *made* it impossible is perhaps what has contributed to the intolerable cruelty humanity has sunk into in the absence of any real answers. The Bible verse from which the novel takes its title reads: “Lord, thou hast been our refuge: from one generation to another... Thou turnest man to destruction: again thou sayest, Come again, ye children of men. For a thousand years thy sight are but as yesterday: seeing that is past as a watch in the night.” Theo reads this verse aloud while Luke, one of The Five Fishes and the father of Julian’s unborn child, is buried, and its themes of repetition, renewal, and redemption in posterity mirror the ache for renewal that the characters listening—not to mention the country, or the larger world—all feel. Though man will “turn to destruction,” the “refuge” a higher power represents comes from the knowledge that the past, in all its chaos, has been witnessed, and the future is assured.

Though all hope seems lost, an opportunity for redemption—of humanity, of society, of decency—eventually does arrive in the form of Julian’s pregnancy, a miraculous event which is a major uncovering and revelation in and of itself. The birth of Julian’s child signals the opportunity for a future. What that future will look like, neither the characters—nor James herself—seem to know. Whether humanity has slid too far into cruelty and despair to ever be redeemed remains to be seen. However, just the idea that a future might exist, that humanity has the opportunity to be renewed, restored, and given a second chance, turns the traditional apocalyptic (or post-apocalyptic) narrative on its head.

However, the dark side of renewal—and the fear that redemption might not actually be possible — also isn’t far from James’s mind. After the birth of Julian’s child, Theo kills Xan—who had tracked them to the woodshed after learning of Julian’s pregnancy, with plans to marry her and present the child as his own in hopes of consolidating power not just over Britain but perhaps the entire world. After killing Xan, Theo removes Xan’s ornate **Coronation Ring** Xan—the ring being a physical symbol of Xan’s unquestioned, self-ordained power—and places it on his own finger. In imbuing her protagonist—the character who has gone on the most nuanced journey toward redemption—with the seeds of lust for power, James argues that perhaps renewal is not always pure—renewal can also come in the form of reaffirmation of dangerous power structures, the resurgence of an old grudge, or the perpetuation of the same outcome from a different angle. Indeed, Theo himself thinks: “[So] it begins again, with jealousy, with treachery, with violence, with [Xan’s] murder, with this ring on my finger.” Though there is now hope in the world for true redemption in the form of Julian’s child, it has been realized through blood and violence, and now the opportunity for Theo to seize power and continue the cycle of chaos and violence that worked to his cousin’s advantage is present, too. This is a dark kind of “renewal”—a renewal of the

patterns and structures that have become so inescapable in the “post-apocalyptic” world of the novel. Though James doesn’t lean too hard on the implication that Theo will reject redemption in favor of the renewal of chaos and authoritarianism, she does explore the many-faceted meaning of the word renewal, and what finally achieving it will look like for these wearied characters who have known so much despair and grief.

Based on the emergence of ritual mass suicide, debilitating xenophobia, the reinstatement of legalized slavery, and the general despair, chaos, and cruelty that has characterized the world of the novel for the last twenty-five years, it’s difficult to say whether humanity will have learned its lesson, so to speak, and will be able to achieve true redemption, or whether the darkness that has emerged in the face of the apocalypse now runs too deep to eradicate. The outcome, though, hardly matters: James’s argument that apocalypse heralds renewal and redemption (and that true redemption necessitates apocalypse as its predecessor) is a radical one. In many apocalyptic or post-apocalyptic narratives, the “renewal” is never so literal, but in *The Children of Men*, humanity at last seems to get its second chance.



GLOBALISM VS. ISOLATIONISM

Though the action of the novel is set in Great Britain, P.D. James imbues the text with hints of the effect of mass infertility on the world as a whole, and mass infertility’s status as a global issue. Despite the fact that the entire planet suffers from infertility, there is a palpable lack of globally united thinking or action. The British government has become, essentially, a dictatorship operating under the guise of democracy, and is poised on the brink of an even further, sharper descent into total authoritarian rule. The novel is P.D. James’s criticism of a future which has slipped seemingly irreversibly into selfish, nationalistic thinking, the abuse of immigrants, and the inability to cooperate. The novel’s very title, with its implication that all people are children of men, contains James’s argument: humanity must not forget the importance of equality and solidarity, even in the most desperate and frightening of times.

Herself a Briton, James’s decision to set *The Children of Men* in Britain allows her to reckon with several of the unique hallmarks of British—specifically English—culture and customs. The deeply stratified class system which has been a part of Britain’s history for so many centuries still plagues the world of the novel. Xan Lyppiatt—Theo’s cousin, the self-appointed Warden of England, and a landed aristocrat whose childhood home and grand family estate, **Woolcombe**, now serves as a hospice for dying Council members—has benefited since childhood from the luck of his birth into a landed and titled family. He has then continued to grasp for power into his adulthood, going so far as to appoint himself dictator of Great

Britain. Moreover, glimpses of Britain's hallowed, almost sanctified academic world—specifically the world of Oxford—provide a contrast to the chaos of the novel's society. Theo continues in his post as a professor of history, even as the buildings on the campus around him “crumble” and the attendance in each of his lectures steadily “dwind[es].” The structure and order of academia is a kind of refuge, but also an emblem of how disconnected these institutions have always been from the larger society of England. Even at a high point of disparity between the world of the university and the world of the people outside it, Oxford continues to operate as a kind of isolated entity, without much change.

Though James only offers small glimpses of what is going on in the rest of the world, it's plain to see that things are even bleaker elsewhere than they are in Britain. Large-scale human sacrifice is rumored to now be commonplace, and the world has been struck by “ennui universel”—a debilitating global depression which has affected a stunning number of the world's population. Foreign countries with “religion[s] based on ancestor worship [and] the continuance of a family” have experienced a decline as suicides have become rampant.

While global society crumbles, Britain clings to isolationist, xenophobic thought and policy. “Generosity is a virtue for individuals, not governments,” Xan tells Theo when Theo confronts him about the unfair treatment of the indentured immigrants to England, called Sojourners. Even in a world thrown into chaos and despair, “generosity” is still something that even wealthier, more prepared governments are incapable of. Xan's fellow councilmember Martin Woolvington cites the “invading hordes” who came to Britain in the 1990s to “take over and exploit the benefits which had been won over centuries by intelligence, industry, and courage, while perverting and destroying the civilization of which they were so anxious to become a part.” Martin's xenophobic view of the world and the people in it echoes many of Great Britain's real-life political struggles, and James's commentary on politicians who think this way is not at all forgiving.

Rather than come together in search of answers, comfort, or support, the world James has created—perhaps as a cautionary tale—has grown even more disconnected, and the poisonous views that support isolationism and empire are stronger than ever. In the face of a massive crisis which demands the cooperation of the nations of the world, the Britain of James's imagination succumbs to xenophobia and isolationism. Partly a critique of the culture she was raised in and partly an exploration of what humanity might do to the world it inhabits when pushed to the brink, *The Children of Men* paints a picture of a world too mired in despair, self-interest, and tradition to see beyond the borders drawn up by the leaders of the past.



POWER AND AMBITION

In the bleak, futureless world of *The Children of Men*, the desire to use power in order to create form, order, and structure is one that rules, or at the very least tempts, several of James's characters. The sly, “self-obsessed” Xan Lyppiatt has appointed himself the dictator and Warden of England. His cousin Theo Faron struggles to assert authority over his history students at Oxford. Rolf, the leader of the anarchist group The Five Fishes, believes himself to be the “father of a new race” and thus the rightful leader of all of England. As news of Julian's pregnancy comes to light and the balance of the world seems poised on the edge of a great shift, James's characters wrestle each other's convictions, ambitions, and desires for the “intoxication” power provides as they struggle to make sense of the chaos that surrounds them at all turns.

Xan Lyppiatt came to power in the vacuum of both chaos and chronic apathy that followed Year Omega—the last year any human being was born anywhere on earth. Theo describes Xan's grab at power, after a successful stint in the army, as Xan having plucked an “overripe, rotten plum”—the plum being the tired, frightened England mired in “ennui universel,” a malaise which, Theo notes, did not and does not affect Xan at all. Not wanting to call himself the Prime Minister and subject himself to the “weight of tradition and obligation” that title carried—nor, for that matter, to the free and fair elections every five years required of the position—Xan chose to dub himself the Warden of England and assume a dictatorial role over the façade of an otherwise “egalitarian” Great Britain. Xan surrounds himself with male guards, aides, and assistants—he demands an “essentially masculine” loyalty which is “hierarchical, unquestioning, [and] unemotional” in nature. He rejects the old hallmarks of British culture and power structures—he has not had the new King of England crowned, noting the common people's disinterest in and possible “resent[ment]” for “a ceremony which has become meaningless.” Xan does not occupy or work in 10 Downing Street, the traditional home and office of the Prime Minister—he instead chooses to work in the Foreign and Commonwealth building. He wears the **Coronation Ring**, one of the hallowed crown jewels of England, as a symbol of his almost divine right to rule. By rendering himself an iconoclast in the eyes of the people over whom he has assumed total power and control, Xan creates a new paradigm, or model of what a leader of the new world looks and acts like. When Theo asks Xan, during their walk through St. James' Park after Theo's meeting with the council, “why on earth [he would] want the job,” Xan tells Theo that “at first, [he] thought [he'd] enjoy the power, [and] could never bear to watch someone do badly what [he] knew [he] could do well.” Even as his reign has gone on and his enjoyment of the “job” has lessened considerably, Xan feels it's “too late” to change anything, and that no one else around him can do his job

the way he can—plus, he confides in Theo, if nothing else, he’s “never bored.” Through Xan, James argues that the desire for power—and the abuse of it—can be hopelessly banal. Though Theo considers for a time that Xan might be “evil,” Xan’s actions are not the actions of someone who desires to watch his world, or his people, suffer or burn. He appears to be simply following the path of least resistance, and is so set in his ways that it would be completely counter to his apathetic self-absorption to do anything of consequence or value. However, when he learns of Julian’s pregnancy, his desire for even more power is renewed—he tells Theo that he plans to make Julian his wife, and use his connection to her and the child as justification for his continued authority.

Theo Faron seems, at first, to desire order rather than power. As a historian, his way of viewing the world is rooted in his relationship to the past. He knows that Xan’s rule over England is wrong, and runs counter to history’s struggles toward free and fair democracy and equality. Theo, however, is too stuck in the depression and ennui that has followed him since the death of his daughter **Natalie** to take any real action other than leaving the Council. As his journey with The Five Fishes begins, though, Theo is shaken from his inaction and reminded of the strong allure of power. As he observes Rolf’s impatience, ambition, and, ultimately, his transparent desire to ascend to power even if it means shirking the values he and the Fishes claim to hold so dearly, Theo seems to consider the ways in which power seduces and corrupts lamentable but laughable. When Theo kills Xan, however, he gets a taste of power for himself. Though he committed murder in defense of himself and of Julian, the fact of the matter is that Theo has dispatched the single most powerful man in England. Theo, seizing the opportunity to “assert authority and ensure protection,” takes the Coronation Ring from Xan’s finger and places it on his own. He tells himself that he must take power “for a time,” while there are still rights to be wronged and “evils” to be exorcised from the government and from society. He wonders, though, if the “sudden intoxication of power” he feels is “what Xan had [felt] and known every day of his life.” Theo’s childhood as the “poor cousin” to the rich and pampered Xan is possibly a motivator here, but so too is “the sense that everything [is] possible”—Theo has been mired in a dead-end job and an avalanche of personal grief for so long that the unchecked ability to seize power over his circumstances awakens something hungry within him. Theo’s possible surrender to the allure of power might simply represent his relief to find himself living in a world that has a future, and an ambitious desire to make of that future a home in which he, Julian, and her child can live in peace and comfort.

Rolf is the most transparently ambitious character within the novel. Unlike Xan or Theo, who seem to be in touch with their thoughts and feelings about power, Rolf is a torpedo of impatience, desire, and fury. As the leader of The Five Fishes,

he already has a small modicum of power, although he recognizes that it is his pregnant wife, Julian, who has all the power despite her pious, demure nature. This feeling no doubt emasculates him, and drives him even more steadily forward on his quest for power. He reveals to Theo that it’s his goal to present himself to the people of England as “the father of a new race” and watch as they willingly “give” him the faith and power that has been Xan’s for so many years. When Rolf realizes that he is not, in fact, the father of Julian’s child—Luke is—he flies into a rage, and, after some consideration, leaves the group in the dead of night in order to travel to London and use the last remaining thing he has of value to attempt to gain even a sliver of power—information as to Julian, Theo, and Miriam’s whereabouts. Rolf’s blind ambition, Theo posits, comes in part from his youth. Theo accuses Rolf of being “offend[ed]” by the mere fact that Xan “enjoys power, not the way he exercises it”—Theo can tell that Rolf is young enough to have missed out on being an Omega by just a year or two, and the resentment he feels, as well as his lack of regard for the lessons of history, a common problem in the younger generations, cause Rolf to launch into an unchecked grab for whatever power he can manage to acquire, unaware of the folly inherent in such a thoughtless pursuit.

Through the trio of Xan, Theo, and Rolf, James seems to be making a statement about power and its ability to subsume, or overpower, even the most noble of intentions. At various points in the narrative, the “intoxicat[ing]” allure of power clouds the ability of all three men to act with empathy, with good judgement, and with the drive toward a greater good that their society so desperately needs. The corruption that the three men face—and that all three, possibly even Theo, succumb to—represents human society’s larger need for order, and the value order and structure take on in a world with no future to speak of.



SYMBOLS

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



WOOLCOMBE

Xan Lyppiatt’s ancestral home and the place where Theo Faron spent his summer holidays as a child, Woolcombe represents the lifelong imbalance of power between cousins Theo and Xan, and the resulting tensions that haunt their past and present alike. Theo, in the present—having served and resigned from his post as an adviser to Xan, who is now the dictatorial Warden of England—writes in his **diary** that he believes Xan enjoyed having Theo at Woolcombe over the summer because Theo was “wished on him.” Xan, isolated from his family and mostly friendless, wanted the “burden of

parental concern” lifted, and Theo provided him with that out. Theo describes the both of them as having always been “obsessive[ly] self-sufficient,” and this trait has become both a blessing and a curse in the new, futureless world they live in. Xan has consolidated power for himself and surrounded himself with sycophants who have never and will never truly know him. Theo has isolated himself in his large home in Oxford, alone with his thoughts and with the futility of his chosen profession.

Additionally, in the present of the novel, Woolcombe has been converted into “a nursing home for the nominees of the Council”—a place for the once-powerful to live out the end of their days. The symbolism of Woolcombe as a kind of hospice represents the ways in which, despite their futility and irrelevance, some members of society still cling to the systems and institutions of the past. Though the estate has fallen into some disrepair and no longer represents the aristocracy who once occupied it, it is still a place for the upper echelons of society—for those who once sat on the Council which now governs England. Old ways die hard, and even in the frightening, dystopic world of the novel, the institutions that have historically provided shelter and privacy for the upper classes continue to do so.



THEO'S DIARY

At the start of the novel, Theo Faron has just begun keeping a diary—the first page of the book is his first entry. As it is both “the first day of a new year and [his] fiftieth birthday,” Theo believes it is a justified time to begin keeping a record of his thoughts. He says that if he cannot find anything to record, he “shall record the nothing.” However, he does not actually believe that there will be any interest at all in his “record of one man’s last years,” indicating both a compulsion to communicate his story and a revulsion at the thought of displaying any egoism.

The narration of the novel switches between Theo’s diary entries, which are written in the first person, and a third-person narration that offers insights as to the thoughts and feelings that Theo does not record in his diary. Theo Faron comes to think of writing in his diary as a “task”—he is not recording the days of his “over-organized” life for any kind of “pleasure.” The diary is a burden and a liability—it contains Theo’s innermost secrets and thoughts, as well as a record of his activity with The Five Fishes, which becomes increasingly criminal. However, the diary is, for Theo, an “addiction,” and a way to “impose order and purpose on the shapelessness of existence.” Theo’s diary symbolizes his need—and humanity’s similar collective need—to record the events of his present for purposes of preservation for posterity, even at the height of despair over the mass infertility crisis facing the world.

After Theo joins up with the anarchist group The Five Fishes,

he embarks on a road trip with them in hopes of finding shelter for the heavily-pregnant Julian. The Five Fishes are being hunted, and Theo’s car, the Fishes hope, will provide them with a little bit of anonymity and perhaps a head start on the authorities. When Theo and the Fishes become stranded on the side of the road, they take some time to rest, and Theo leans against a tree to write his “last entry,” in which he describes having become deeply “at ease with four strangers, one of whom I am learning to love.” As Theo and the Fishes prepare to depart once more, Theo, describing a kind of “euphoria,” completes his final entry, “no longer hav[ing] need” of the “self-regarding and solitary man” who marked its early pages. Theo’s progression—captured in his diary, and represented by his decision to stop writing in it—from his “obsessive self-sufficien[cy]” to welcome and grateful member of a group of individuals fighting for a cause larger than any one of them symbolizes his—and perhaps P.D. James’s—hope for a world in which isolationism and self-obsession give way to global thinking and collective action for a greater good.



NATALIE

In 1994—over twenty-five years before the start of the book’s narrative, and the year before Year

Omega, the end of fertility—Theo accidentally backed his car over his only daughter, fifteen-month-old Natalie, while leaving the house for work. The “horror and guilt” of such a treacherous but unintended act overcame Theo’s capacity for grief, leaving him mostly numb and disaffected. His wife, Helena, believing that he “cared less” about parenthood, eventually left him, and Theo himself admits in a private **diary** entry that when it comes to Helena’s suspicion that he loved their daughter less, she was right. Theo describes the way in which his killing Natalie also “killed” the attraction and love between him and Helena, again mirroring his descriptions of people’s dwindling capacity for sexual interest and attraction in the wake of Year Omega. Natalie symbolizes the ways in which fertility and reproduction were, in the days before Year Omega, taken for granted. Natalie’s swift death and the horror left in its wake then mirrors humanity’s shame, terror, and guilt over their sudden inability to procreate. Tied in with themes of history, memory, and despair, Natalie’s death is a constant shadow over Theo’s life—though it was an accident, the way it revealed his darkest parts to him and to Helena has shaped both their lives. Theo has isolated himself, while Helena has found a new partner and has lavished her affection upon cats, which are still able to breed and produce “babies.”



THE CORONATION RING

The Coronation Ring, or “the wedding ring of England,” as Theo refers to it, is an ornate and “vulgar” bauble which Xan wears as a symbol of his absolute,

unquestioned power as the Warden of England. Theo, at his meeting with the Council, tells Xan that there was a time when he would not have felt the need to wear the ring at all—but Xan merely deflects, ensuring Theo that he is only remaining in power for the good and stability of the people. When Theo kills Xan at the novel’s end, after Xan attempts to kill Theo himself, Theo removes the ring from Xan’s corpse and dons it himself. He assures himself—and Julian—that he will only wear it “for a time,” while there are still “evils to be remedied.”

However, when Julian questions why Theo chose to put the ring on at all, he feels a marked “irritation” toward her. The ring, then, symbolizes the dark allure of power; its irresistible, gleaming quality, but also the heavy burden of responsibility its bearer takes on. Whether Theo will be able to carry the weight of the ring, no one is sure—but in taking it on, he has renewed the cycle of self-proclaimed power, which kept Xan in control of a chaotic, unjust, and despairing England for so many years.

that shame and stagnancy is a catalyst toward action.

☞ Like a lecherous stud suddenly stricken with impotence, we are humiliated at the very heart of our faith in ourselves. For all our knowledge, our intelligence, our power, we can no longer do what the animals do without thought. No wonder we worship and resent them.

Related Characters: Theodore “Theo” Faron (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 6

Explanation and Analysis

Another, deeper layer of shame which has stricken humanity along with the infertility crisis is the feeling not just of humiliation, but of impotence. With no way forward, and no possibility of creating a future, humanity both begrudges and beatifies animals, which continue to procreate as if nothing has happened. Christenings for newborn pets and “birthing parties” for litters of puppies and kittens have become fashionable, even necessary, ways to stave off the shame, anger, and fear of being unable to create new human life. Theo’s own shadowed past—his accidental killing of his daughter, Natalie—is unknown at this point in the narrative, but once it is revealed, so is the deeper meaning of “impotence” to him in particular. Theo was not grateful for the child he had when he had her, and now, in the wake of her death, Theo feels no desire for human connection, for sexual congress, to keep pets, or for any motion at all toward creating the illusion of a future he does not believe in.

☞ If from infancy you treat children as gods they are liable in adulthood to act as devils.

Related Characters: Theodore “Theo” Faron (speaker)

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 11

Explanation and Analysis

The Omegas—the last generation of humans born on



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Vintage edition of *The Children of Men* published in 2006.

Chapter 1 Quotes

☞ We are outraged and demoralized less by the impending end of our species, less even by our inability to prevent it, than by our failure to discover the cause.

Related Characters: Theodore “Theo” Faron (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 5

Explanation and Analysis

Theo Faron writes in his diary of a “humiliated” world which has descended into a peculiar blend of chaos and ennui in the wake of a mass fertility crisis. Human society, which worshipped Western science and medicine as if it were a “god,” has been completely unable to find any cure, cause, or even a semblance of an answer as to the reason why no human being has been born on planet Earth in over twenty years. The complete failure of humanity to find a way to prevent its own end as that end slowly and gradually creeps closer is a source of both anguish and shame for the entire world. This shame and humiliation colors James’s narrative all the way through. It serves as an excuse for some characters—like Theo and Jasper—to retreat into solitude, while for other characters—like Helena, and the members of the Five Fishes—the desire to do anything it takes to relieve

earth—enjoy a special, revered status. They exist almost in a different class or race. Theo describes them as being strikingly beautiful and handsome, but almost categorically arrogant and even cruel. The ways in which Omegas were treated as gods or saints in the wake of the Year Omega, the year of their births, have transformed them, through a combination of nature and nurture, into disaffected, amoral, and often even destructive or seemingly evil individuals—humanity, in a last-ditch grab at preserving and revering their final generation, has created a literal passel of monsters. Theo, as an arbiter of history, knows that the answers to what not to do, and how not to treat the Omegas, lie in the pages of human history, but there is no one really willing to listen to him.

History, which interprets the past to understand and confront the future is the least rewarding discipline for a dying species.

Related Characters: Theodore “Theo” Faron (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 11

Explanation and Analysis

Theo’s frustration with humanity’s “impotence” extends to the lack of relevance of his own profession. As a professor of history, Theo was once the purveyor of valuable, useful lessons—lessons about the past which would shape both the present and the future. Now, with no hope of a future and with a chaotic, hedonistic view of the present moment, humanity has next to no use for history. Theo feels as if he is speeding toward his own death, mired in solitude and depression, and is unable to even do something useful as he is on his way out. This creates a void in Theo, which will come to be filled throughout the novel by a reluctant but eventually meaningful search for purpose.

Chapter 2 Quotes

I know now, of course, why [Xan] liked having me at Woolcombe. I think I guessed almost from the beginning. He had absolutely no commitment to me, no responsibility for me, not even the commitment of friendship or the responsibility of personal choice. He hadn’t chosen me. I was his cousin, I was wished on him, I was there. I lifted from him, an only child, the burden of parental concern. From his boyhood he couldn’t tolerate questions, curiosity, interference in his life. I sympathized with that; I was very much the same.

Related Characters: Theodore “Theo” Faron (speaker), Xan Lyppiatt

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 16

Explanation and Analysis

Xan and Theo are two very different men, but in many ways they are two sides of the same coin. Both are obsessively self-sufficient, wary of connection, and afraid of taking on any “responsibility” to another person or to the society in which they live. Theo, writing in his diary, struggles here to trace the origins of his and Xan’s relationship to its early days, days during which they were “wished” on one another despite their similar preferences for solitude and distance. In the present, both men have isolated themselves—Theo, divorced and alone, occupies a vast and vacant house in Oxford, whereas Xan, never married and with no children, has situated himself on a pedestal as the dictator of England, where no one can touch, reach, question, or even care for him. The parallel states of solitude Xan and Theo occupy will be tested throughout the course of the novel, and the necessity for the destruction of boundaries and the acceptance of others will ultimately make—or break—each of them.

Chapter 5 Quotes

[Helena] thought I cared less, and she was right. She thought I cared less because I loved less, and she was right about that too. I was glad to be a father. When Helena told me she was pregnant I felt what I presume are the usual emotions of pride, tenderness, and amazement. I did feel affection for my child, although I would have felt more had she been prettier, more affectionate, more responsive, less inclined to whine. I’m glad that no other eyes will read these words. She has been dead for almost twenty-seven years and I still think of her with complaint.

Related Characters: Theodore “Theo” Faron (speaker), Helena Faron

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 29

Explanation and Analysis

One of the greatest sources of Theo's shame is the death of his daughter, Natalie, whom he backed over with his car when she was just fifteen months old. Theo's apathy toward—and even mild dislike of—his only daughter, who was, in retrospect, part of one of the youngest generations left on earth, is a topic about which he is both matter-of-fact and deeply ashamed. The source of Theo's humiliation comes not just from these awful feelings, but from the realization that he wasn't grateful for a child when he had the chance at one—and now, no one on earth has hope for a child or for a new generation. As the source of much of Theo's personal pain, a major reason for his profound solitude, and eventually part of the catalyst for his joining the Five Fishes, Natalie's death continues to shape Theo's life nearly thirty years past its occurrence.

Chapter 6 Quotes

☞☞ The task of writing his journal—and Theo thought of it as a task, not a pleasure—had become part of his over-organized life, a nightly addiction to a weekly routine half imposed by circumstance, half deliberately devised in an attempt to impose order and purpose on the shapelessness of existence.

Related Characters: Theodore “Theo” Faron (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 33

Explanation and Analysis

Chapter six is the first point in the narrative in which Theo is not writing in his diary—instead, a third-person narration takes over. This switch allows James to reveal another side of her protagonist. The first-person is the closest point of view, but not always objective, so by telescoping out of Theo's head and describing his behavior and motivations, James further layers and humanizes the solitary Theo. Theo's diary, a major symbol throughout the narrative, is as much a refuge as it is a trap. He feels the need to write in it, but doesn't believe in the longevity or importance of the things he's writing. He is attempting to create some kind of record of his life, but doesn't know who the record is for. Though Theo claims to have no hope for the future, the diary-keeping suggests that he holds one small candle for the dream of posterity. By organizing his thoughts and giving shape and meaning to his days by assigning a

narrative to them, Theo attempts to wrangle just a little bit of control over the chaos and aimlessness of his life.

Chapter 11 Quotes

☞☞ “Perhaps His experiment went spectacularly wrong, sir. Perhaps He's just bagged. Seeing the mess, not knowing how to put it right. Perhaps not wanting to put it right. Perhaps He only had enough power left for one final intervention. So He made it. Whoever He is, whatever He is, I hope He burns in His own hell.”

Related Characters: Hedges (speaker), Theodore “Theo” Faron

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 90-91

Explanation and Analysis

The religious tones throughout the novel are rarely so impassioned and direct as this speech made by Hedges, the driver who ferries Theo to London to meet with Xan about the Five Fishes' grievances against the government. Hedges has replaced George, a driver whom Hedges claims lost his life in an auto accident. Theo, knowing George to have been a careful, skilled driver, does not quite believe this, but is both afraid to ask any further questions and unable to see the point in trying to get an answer. When Theo brings up religion during his and Hedges' commute, Hedges launches into a diatribe against God, speculating that the “experiment” of humanity was so disappointing to God that He struck the world with this slow-approaching, terrible fate of bearing witness to its own decline and demise. Whereas religion has been shown, up to this point in the novel, as a kind of refuge for those who cannot cope with the impending end of the world, here James presents religion as something that has betrayed humanity, and given it an outlet for—if not a cause for—the rage and humiliation it is collectively experiencing.

Chapter 12 Quotes

“You are a historian. You know what evils have been perpetrated through the ages to ensure the survival of nations, sects, religions, even individual families. Whatever man has done for good or ill has been done in the knowledge that he has been formed by history, that this life-span is brief, uncertain, insubstantial, but that there will be a future, for the nation, for the race, for the tribe. That hope has finally gone. Man is diminished if he lives without knowledge of his past; without hope of a future he becomes a beast.”

Related Characters: Carl Inglebach (speaker), Theodore “Theo” Faron

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 98

Explanation and Analysis

When Theo brings the Fishes’ grievances before Xan and the other members of the Council of England, he betrays his past and present apathy. The Council, frustrated with Theo’s many complaints and demands, pushes back against him or attempts to deny or deflect their role in the creation of an indifferent, cruel, and self-centered society. When Carl Inglebach at last speaks up in the meeting, he berates Theo for not being able to recognize and accept the imbalance of past, present, and future that plagues the world—and the hopelessness of correcting that imbalance when there can be no hope for a future and no answer to suffering in the past. It is not even reluctance that the Council feels toward Theo’s demands—it is complete ignorance and indifference. The Council’s only job is to steer humanity toward its end—the chance that people’s quality of life could be improved is not even a remote concern of theirs. Carl’s diatribe against Theo is resigned rather than impassioned, and represents the futility of attempting to remedy a world thrown too far off-balance to ever, perhaps, course-correct.

Chapter 14 Quotes

“Holding up the Cross of Christ before the savages, as the missionaries did in South America. Like them, get yourselves butchered on the beaches? Don’t you read any history? There are only two reasons for that kind of folly. One is that you have a yearning for martyrdom. What is new is that your martyrdom won’t even be commemorated, won’t be noticed. In seventy years it will have no value because there will be no one left on earth to give it value. The second reason is more ignoble and Xan would understand it very well. If you did succeed, what an intoxication of power! The Isle of Man pacified, the redeemed kissing the hands of the living saint who made it all possible. Then you’ll know what the Warden feels, what he enjoys, what he can’t do without. Absolute power in your little kingdom.”

Related Characters: Theodore “Theo” Faron (speaker), Julian

Related Themes:     

Page Number: 108-109

Explanation and Analysis

When Julian wonders aloud to Theo about whether or not she should let herself be captured and sent to the Isle of Man Penal Colony on purpose, in order to institute and effect change to the suffering and cruelty there, Theo lashes out in anger. He feels that she is being a fool—worse than that, she is unknowingly engaging in the same kind of self-justification that his powerful and self-obsessed cousin engages in daily. Though martyrdom is, to Julian—a devout Christian—perhaps a preferable end to dying in vain on a chaotic, animalistic planet, Theo points out the selfishness inherent in martyrdom when there is no future to die for. The point of dying for a cause is to improve that cause for the future, Theo argues. When there is no future, then, a self-sacrificial act becomes a self-indulgent one. Theo accuses Julian of grabbing at the feeling of holding “absolute power,” whether she is doing so knowingly or unknowingly. Theo’s relationship to and feelings about power are complex, and will only grow deeper and more complicated as the novel progresses. For now, though, he believes it to be a debilitating vice, and he tells Julian so very clearly.

Chapter 21 Quotes

☞☞ He went upstairs to fetch his coat, and, mounting one more staircase to the small back room, slipped his diary into the large inner pocket. The action was instinctive; if asked, he would have had difficulty in explaining it even to himself. The diary wasn't particularly incriminating; he had taken care over that. He had no premonition that he was leaving for more than a few hours the life which the diary chronicled and this echoing house enclosed. And even if the journey were the beginning of an odyssey, there were more useful, more valued, more relevant talismans which he could have slipped into his pocket.

Related Characters: Theodore "Theo" Faron (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 143-44

Explanation and Analysis

When Miriam arrives at Theo's house to tell him that Julian has called on him for help—after a promise he made to her months ago to be available to her should she need him—he agrees to drop everything and go to her. While Miriam gathers food and supplies, Theo goes upstairs to fetch his diary. Though he has professed in his own entries to seeing very clearly the futility of keeping a record of his days, there is something about the structure and purpose the diary offers him that makes it irresistible and necessary. Theo can't put his finger on exactly why he grabs the diary on his way out on what might be a great "odyssey," but there is no doubt that it has become a totem and a refuge for him, as well as a symbol of control and hope for the future.

Chapter 31 Quotes

☞☞ "I killed her."

Miriam's voice was firm, loud, almost shouting in [Theo's] ear. "You didn't kill her! If she was going to die of shock it would have happened when you first showed her the gun. You don't know why she died. It was natural causes, it must have been. She was old and she had a weak heart. You told us. It wasn't your fault, Theo, you didn't mean it."

No, he almost groaned, no, I didn't mean it. I didn't mean to be a selfish son, an unloving father, a bad husband. When have I ever meant anything? Christ, what harm couldn't I do if I actually started to mean it!

He said: "The worst is that I enjoyed it. I actually enjoyed it! I enjoyed the excitement, the power, the knowledge that I could do it."

Related Characters: Miriam, Theodore "Theo" Faron (speaker), Helena Faron

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 218

Explanation and Analysis

As the narrative has continued, Theo's relationship to and feelings about power have grown more and more complicated. When he served as Xan's adviser, he witnessed firsthand Xan's "intoxication" with power, and removed himself from the position after a time. Though Theo once had the potential to accrue some professional power as a well-regarded professor at an historic institution, after the Year Omega, his role as a teacher of history grew increasingly irrelevant. Theo clashed with Rolf, the leader of the Five Fishes, over their different views on what it means to obtain and wield power—Theo believed Rolf's desire for power was foolish and dangerous. Now, after having taken an elderly couple "hostage" in order to collect supplies and a car for himself, Miriam, and Julian, Theo himself admits to experiencing the same "intoxication" with power that Xan and Rolf have fallen victim to, and he hates himself for it. He has long rejected the allure of power, but now has succumbed to it. He claims that though he has never "meant" anything harmful in his life, he has still inflicted great pain on others and has wielded unwanted power—power to take Natalie's life, power to destroy Helena's happiness, power to retreat into himself and remove himself from the lives of others. Now Theo realizes the magnitude of he could do when he "means" to do something—and it terrifies him.

Chapter 33 Quotes

☞☞ Carl looked down at the child with his dying eyes. "So it begins again."

Theo thought: It begins again, with jealousy, with treachery, with violence, with murder, with this ring on my finger. He looked down at the great sapphire in its glitter of diamonds, aware of its weight. Placing it on his hand had been a gesture to assert authority and ensure protection. For a time at least he must take Xan's place. There were evils to be remedied; but they must take their turn. He couldn't do everything at once, there had to be priorities. Was that what Xan had found? And was this sudden intoxication of power what Xan had known every day of his life?

Related Characters: Theodore “Theo” Faron, Carl Inglebach (speaker), Xan Lyppiatt

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 240

Explanation and Analysis

The renewal that Theo and the Fishes—and, of course, the world—have all been waiting for has finally arrived in the form of Julian’s child. There is now hope for a future—if one child can be born, surely another birth, or several births, must be possible. However, Carl Inglebach’s reverent proclamation that “it”—human life, the hope for a future, the realignment of society toward goodness and order—has begun again is contrasted by Theo’s bitter thoughts on the bloody origins of this new world. He is confused as to what his own role will be—he is not the child’s father, and is himself still infertile and impotent, but he has dispatched Xan and assumed, for the moment, political authority over the entire country just through virtue of the Coronation Ring. Theo wonders if power will come to control him as it came to control Xan, whether power will even continue to exist as it has for the last fifteen years now that there is hope for a new world, and whether or not he will mourn the “loss” of whatever small shred of power he has just instinctively made a grab for. Unlike Rolf, the leader of the Five Fishes who planned to abandon his goals and beliefs as soon as he acquired the power he so desperately wanted, Theo plans to “remedy” the evils of the world, and to use his power for good. There is a shadow of doubt in his own mind, however, when he considers the failure of Xan’s initial good intentions, and wonders whether he himself will be able to remain loyal to and mindful of his own best intentions for the future of the human race.

“ Julian looked up at him. For the first time she noticed the ring. She said: “That wasn’t made for your finger.” For a second, no more, he felt something close to irritation. It must be for him to decide when he would take it off. He said: “It’s useful for the present. I shall take it off in time.” She seemed for the moment content, and it might have been his imagination that there was a shadow in her eyes.

Related Characters: Theodore “Theo” Faron, Julian (speaker), Xan Lyppiatt

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 241

Explanation and Analysis

Theo has fallen in love with Julian over the course of the novel—even before he knew of her pregnancy he saw her as a beacon of hope, and was fearful of how much she meant to him. Now that she is the mother of a “new race,” Theo has vowed to stay by her side and to protect her from whatever comes. When she questions the Coronation Ring on his finger, however, Theo feels a brush of irritability toward her—perhaps signaling that power is, or has the potential to become, more precious to Theo than love or human life. Though he deflects his irritation and ensures Julian that he will not wear the ring for any length of time, he also feels—or projects onto her his own feelings—that she does not fully trust him. Though the birth of a child, the defeat of Xan, and the hope for a future are all joyful things, there is a “shadow” beneath all of it. The novel ends on a note of hope, but also one of caution. Whether Theo and Julian will have learned the lessons of their fallen friends and enemies, and will be able to help build a new life and a new world together still remains to be seen.



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

Theodore “Theo” Faron, writing in his **diary** on Friday, the first of January, 2021, describes the early-morning pub-brawl death of Joseph Ricardo, the last human being to be born on earth. Theo has heard the news on the State Radio Service in Britain while sitting down to begin the “diary of the last half of his life.” Theo sees Ricardo’s death as “a small additional justification” for starting a diary—it is also the first day of a new year, and Theo’s fiftieth birthday.

Theo has no plan to leave his **diary** behind as a record, believing there could be no possible interest in it. Theo is an Oxford historian who is “divorced, childless, [and] solitary,” and his only “claim to notice” is the fact that he is the cousin of Xan Lyppiatt, the dictator and Warden of England.

“All over the world,” Theo says, different countries are in the process of storing important books, manuscripts, paintings, musical scores, artifacts, and other “testimony for the posterity we can still occasionally convince ourselves may follow us,” or for alien life to encounter if they should ever descend upon earth.

Theo recalls a time two decades ago when the search for the last known birth of a human on earth became a “fierce and acrimonious international contest.” Though the true last human birth, Theo says, could never possibly be recorded accurately, the “winner” was ultimately Joseph Ricardo, born in Buenos Aires on the nineteenth of October, 1995. In the wake of Ricardo’s death, Theo doubts that the world will have the energy to search for and name the new youngest human on earth.

Theo begins his diary on what he sees as a fortuitous day, though a difficult and sad one for a world mourning the death of an individual who had represented the last vestiges of hope for a future. The info about Ricardo also introduces the book’s apocalyptic setting and major conceit—that humanity has become infertile. Theo’s journal-writing is seemingly the first action he’s taken to counteract his own despair in a long while.



Theo, as the text will soon reveal, has a difficult relationship to his own personal history. His role as a historian means that he often lingers in the past, but doesn’t feel that his own life is or will be of any historical value.



The historical preservation of important art and documents in preparation for the slowly-encroaching end of humanity represents the entire world’s descent into fatalism, even as they cling to a scrap of hope that the world as it was will be remembered by somebody.



The “contest” Theo describes is essentially the last time the globe came together in pursuit of a single goal—even though there was bitterness and competition involved. Theo doesn’t believe that a new winner will be declared, representing his perception of humanity’s descent into despair, ennui, and lack of ambition.



Humanity is “outraged and demoralized,” Theo says, more than anything by its failure to discover the root cause of mass infertility. Western science has been a “god” which has now come up short. In the continued absence of any answers, the world soon resigned itself to accepting that mass infertility was not “a malfunction which would [soon] be corrected.” Year 1995 became universally known as Year Omega, and soon the nations of the world stopped cooperating together toward an answer or a cure because “the prize [of finding it first] was too great.” International espionage became commonplace once again, and tensions between nations swelled.

Now, Theo says, there is much “less anxiety” and absolutely no hope where finding an answer or a cure is concerned. Humanity’s collective interest in sex has dwindled steadily, and national government-sponsored pornography shops have sprung up in an attempt to “stimulate flagging appetites.” British society has become obsessed with leisure and pampering.

When the Year Omega arrived, it shocked and terrified the human race; “even frozen sperm” lost its potency and this, in the human imagination, took on “the pall of superstitio[n], witchcraft, divine intervention.” When the generation born in 1995 reached sexual maturity and testing still showed that not one of them was fertile, Theo says, suicide increased on a global scale. Xan was already the Warden at that point, and attempted to discourage the spread of the epidemic by “imposing fines on the surviving nearest relations.” The plan worked, and the suicide rate fell, but a universal ennui—a depression or malaise—gripped the planet.

Theo claims that humanity can now “experience nothing but the present moment,” and that the fleeting nature of joy, beauty, and pleasure has become even more sharply defined because of the lack of any real future. Playgrounds have been demolished, schools have been boarded up, and video and audio recordings of children have become a kind of “drug.”

The children born in the year 1995, Theo explains, are now known as Omegas—they are an “exceptionally beautiful” but also “cruel, arrogant, and violent” race apart who have been treated all their lives as “young gods.” The Omegas often band together in gangs known as Painted Faces, who hide out in the countryside and terrorize travelers. Theo recalls having a group of undergraduate Omegas in his classes. They were “disruptive and bored,” unable to see the point in studying human history any longer.

Theo’s memories of the despair that followed Year Omega still haunt him. The world has fallen into a giant collective slump, so to speak, and is unable to rustle up any semblance of hope that the infertility crisis will ever be reversed. The hope that science represented no longer holds any weight at all, and instead of rallying together or doubling down on a solution, the nations of the world turned on one another and became even more mired in ineffectiveness and failure.



Though humanity clings to hope in small ways, the general atmosphere is one of total despair. Sensuality has taken the place of sexuality, as there is no hope for procreation—just as global society has become self-centered, so has individual identity.



Theo’s observations of the new fears, mythologies, and systems that cropped up in the wake of Year Omega describe a world of panic and terror, which contrasts with the ennui, stagnancy, and flat despair which overtook most of humanity once the reality of the situation set in. Humanity has been sentenced, in a way, to languish in and bear witness to its own decline—action-taking of any kind, toward a cure or toward escape, is discouraged.



The descriptions of humanity’s descent into fatalism paint a picture of a world desperate to both cover up and idealize its past. The simultaneous allure and pain of the past and lack of a future creates an imbalance in the present moment.



The ways in which the Omega generation is separate from the rest of society symbolizes the world’s newfound reverence for any symbol of fertility and childhood, or the hope thereof. The Omegas’ cruelty, disinterest in history and society, and tendency toward violence then represent a kind of action born out of fatalism and directed toward that fatalism, rather than toward hope, change, or renewal.



CHAPTER 2

A few days later, Theo returns to his **diary** to reflect upon his past. He describes the years during which he served as an adviser to his dictatorial cousin Xan, and sat on the Council of England. Journalists at that time described the relationship between the two as one that was “close as brothers,” but Theo insists that this is not true, though the error is unsurprising, as the two did spend every single summer together at Xan’s family’s massive estate, **Woolcombe**.

To this day, Theo says, he is unable to “understand what [he] felt for Xan then.” Each summer Xan welcomed Theo to his home “as if he were receiving back his twin,” though the two were never particularly warm toward one another.

Woolcombe is now a nursing home for former nominees and members of the Council that governs England, as well as those individuals’ family members. Both Theo’s mother and Xan’s mother, who had been sisters, died there themselves. While Theo’s aunt married well, his mother married a “middle-grade civil servant,” and so Xan and Theo’s lives were enormously different.

Xan, Theo observes, never had any friends come to **Woolcombe** over the summer, and anytime Theo asked Xan about school he deflected, other than admitting that he was a troublesome student who enjoyed “confus[ing]” his teachers. Theo thinks that the reason Xan enjoyed having him visit was that, when Theo was around, Xan never had to face down the question of why he had no other friends. Theo’s being around “lifted the burden of parental concern” off of Xan—having Theo around meant Xan’s parents stopped worrying about him and his lack of “real” friends. Theo describes the “obsessive self-sufficiency” he and Xan shared, and muses that this is the reason for Theo’s failed marriage and for Xan’s lack of any intimate relationship.

Theo’s days at **Woolcombe** were marked by sleeping late, breakfasting late, and playing or shooting pistols with blanks. As the boys got older, they drove around picking up girls, which “terrified” Theo. In all their summers together Xan never treated Theo as if he were poor, and allowed him to be alone and read history books if he wanted to. One evening while reading, Theo discovered that a battle had taken place on Woolcombe’s grounds. The two celebrated the soldiers who’d died there on the anniversary of the skirmish by drinking a bottle of stolen claret and firing pistols into the sky. This, Theo says, is one of his happiest memories.

Theo and Xan are two sides of a coin. Theo is wrapped up in the history of humanity as a whole, while Xan is preoccupied with a very narrow sliver of the future—his own. Their ideals are at odds, but in close proximity to one another, just as Theo and Xan have been since childhood.



Theo’s recollection of Xan’s perception of him as his twin continues to highlight the ways in which the two very different men, bound by blood, have always complemented one another.



The competition between Theo and Xan existed before either was even born—their mothers’ differences became theirs to bear, and it was up to Theo and Xan to unite in the face of a resentment which sprang from their mothers’ different ideals and ambitions.



Xan’s self-absorption, a lifelong trait, prevented him from making any real connections as a child and led to his using Theo as a scapegoat in the face of his failed social life. This self-absorption, though, is something Theo himself has struggled with as well. Theo and Xan’s self-obsession both foreshadows and symbolizes the “obsessive self-sufficiency” and lack of empathy or collaboration that has come to categorize the world as a whole.



Theo’s fond—or at least mostly fond—memories of his childhood summers spent with Xan speak to the historical moment in which the boys were not so different. Though Xan has become the dictator of England and Theo has fallen into a pattern of languishing in the past, the two once shared the same ideals, the same family history, and formed together memories, mythologies, and hopes that unfortunately would fall away in the wake of Omega.



CHAPTER 3

Theo reflects on his first-ever holiday at **Woolcombe**. Theo was afraid that he'd be staying in the "servants' quarters," but instead Xan led him to an opulent room adjacent to his own. Even now Theo can remember the room's "every detail." Theo has not returned to Woolcombe since his mother's death eight years ago, though he sometimes indulges a fantasy in which he himself, as an old man, returns there to die in his old room.

Flashing back to that first day in his room at **Woolcombe**, Theo recalls how Xan tried to put him at ease by belittling the size and grandeur of his own home. Theo didn't know then, he says, how deeply Xan loved Woolcombe. Theo often pictures what the world will look like once it is empty of humans, and is not touched by the thought of any of the great cathedrals or palaces standing empty, though he is touched by the thought of an abandoned Woolcombe.

Theo remembers Xan's former generosity with nostalgia. His memories reveal the depth of his connection to his own time at Woolcombe, as well as his tendency to linger in the refuges offered by both history and memory.



Woolcombe represented Theo's childhood sense of hope, so the nursing home it has now become has turned it into a place of despair rather than one of revelation and excitement. Theo's attachment to Woolcombe mirrors humanity's attachment to the bygone days of (perceived) tranquility, peace, hope, and happy memories.



CHAPTER 4

It is now nearly the end of January. In a new **diary** entry, Theo reflects upon his childhood with his parents. His mother, he says, had "artistic pretensions," and was a fairly skilled painter. She would recreate vintage prints, frame them, and sell them. Theo helped his mother by frequenting junk shops to buy—or to steal—extra prints.

Theo traces the roots of his "terror of taking responsibility for other people's happiness" to the death of his father in 1983 after a long battle with stomach cancer. While Theo's father was ill, both of his parents attempted to shield him from the truth, only telling Theo that his father was sick and would be going in and out of the hospital. Though Theo's memories of the day his father died are shadowy, he can "recall every hour" the day his father was cremated. Theo's relatives told him that he was "the man of the family now," and even then Theo did not want anyone to "look to him for protection, happiness, [or] love."

Theo wishes he has happier memories of his father—his strongest one is "one of horror." Theo's father, toward the end of his life, cut his finger and the wound became infected, bloody, and full of oozing pus. Theo had nightmares for many months after his father's death, in which his father stood at the foot of Theo's own bed, pointing his bloody stump at Theo. The dream soon stopped coming, but began recurring when Theo "killed **Natalie**." Now, Theo says, his father "never comes" to him anymore.

Theo's preoccupation with his past deepens as he reflects upon his own home life. Theo's mother, too, had a love of the past and old things, and Theo was drawn into her pursuit of renewing and remaking the past.



Theo's "obsessive self-sufficiency" is revealed to be rooted in a terrible loss. The responsibility of attempting to renew his mother's happiness and to provide their devastated family with hope in the face of despair proved too much for Theo, and even as an adult he has never been able to move past that isolation—an isolation which has now become the centerpiece of his own personal mythology.



Theo's horror of mortality is symbolized in his childhood nightmares of his father. The dreams, which began recurring after the death of Theo's daughter Natalie, perhaps symbolize Theo's "self-obsession" and lack of desire to become accountable for anyone else's happiness or well-being.



CHAPTER 5

The following day is the 22nd of January. Theo writes in his **diary** that this “would have been [his] daughter [**Natalie’s**] birthday if [he] hadn’t run her over and killed her in 1994, when she was fifteen months old.” Theo says he cannot recall the “exact circumstances” which led to the accident, but does remember backing the car out of the driveway on his way to class—his wife Helena, he says, had parked it “clumsily”—and feeling a “gentle bump” beneath the left rear wheel as he did.

There was no time for grief, Theo says—he was too overwhelmed by “horror and guilt.” Helena believed that he “cared less, and she was right.” Their marriage fell apart in the wake of **Natalie’s** death, and Theo can admit that while he would never have run over Natalie on purpose, he felt only a mild affection for the child while she lived.

Theo and Helena moved out of the home where the accident had occurred, into a house on St. John Street—the house he still lives in. The two of them took separate rooms, and though they “didn’t stay permanently apart,” their emotional life as well as their sex life was never the same.

Theo describes his house, which is much too big for just him. Helena, he says, has recently left him after having fallen in love with a man named Rupert Clavering, a sensitive graphic designer thirteen years her junior. Theo admits to having had affairs with his history students all throughout his marriage, and notes that Helena was unusually perceptive in recognizing the fact that he continued to sleep with her only “at carefully regulated intervals [so that the affairs would be] driven by more discriminating needs than the relief of sexual deprivation.”

CHAPTER 6

The narrative switches to the third-person, and the narrator describes how, for Theo, writing in a **diary** has become a “task, not a pleasure, devised in an attempt to impose order and purpose” on his own life. Theo continues to teach, though it is now the mature students who make up the bulk of Oxford’s enrollment. Theo eats dinner on campus two nights a week, and each Wednesday attends an evening service in a nearby chapel—to hear the choir only, never to worship.

The horrific death of Theo’s first and only child is describe as hazy and fairly banal. Only one detail—the “gentle bump”—emerges clearly through the fog. Theo’s memories have so far been shown to be sharp, clear, and all-encompassing, so his inability to remember his daughter’s death signals its devastating weight and traumatic fallout.



Natalie’s death—and Theo’s bizarre reaction to it—symbolizes humanity’s confused and equally bizarre reaction to the epidemic of mass infertility. Just as Theo felt only a “mild affection” for his child while she was alive, humanity took for granted its ability to reproduce.



Theo and Helena’s having grown apart further symbolizes the isolationism, fatalism, and various schisms that have cropped up between the nations of the world in the wake of Year Omega.



Theo’s solitude is an outcome of his own making. After isolating his wife emotionally and physically, he now occupies a vast home whose many rooms he has no use for. His entrapment within an empty place symbolic of his failure mirrors humanity’s current state—forced to consider all that has gone wrong, on a planet whose beauty and resources are of little use to a species with no hope or future.



Theo’s life is marked by a surrender to monotonous routine. Even the diary exists solely for the purpose of creating mindless, rote structure in order to cover up the deficiencies and failures plaguing Theo’s adulthood. Theo rejects actually participating in rituals of hope and renewal, content to observe them from afar to satisfy his own preoccupation with history and routine.



On his way to services one late-January day, Theo sees a woman pushing a stroller which holds a doll dressed up as a “pathetic and sinister parody” of a child. While this kind of thing was popular decades ago, Theo hasn’t seen it in quite some time. He watches as a second woman approaches the woman pushing the stroller, rips the doll out of the carriage, “dashe[s]” it against a stone wall, and runs off. Theo continues on to church, and no one else on the street stops to help the woman with the stroller.

Theo notices a new woman at services once they begin. He recognizes her as a former student who was provocative and argumentative in class, but quickly dropped out. When Theo leaves the chapel, he finds the woman waiting for him. She tells him she has something “important” to discuss with him, and Theo agrees. He notices that her left hand is deformed—this, he says, “save[s]” her from the twice-yearly physical examinations which all healthy young women must undergo.

The two re-introduce themselves; the woman’s name is Julian. She tells Theo that she and “a small group of friends,” aware of the wrongs happening in England, hope to right things. Julian knows that Theo is Xan’s cousin and a former Council member, and that two members of her group—Luke, a priest, and Rolf, her husband and the group’s leader—suggested she approach Theo and ask him to meet with them. Julian says that her group hasn’t gotten “started” yet, and might not need to take any action if they determine that “there is a hope of persuading the Warden to act” through Theo.

Theo tells Julian that he has no relationship or influence with Xan any longer, but Julian begs him to meet with her group anyway. Theo can suddenly tell that “it had been her idea to approach him,” not the other members of her group, and he agrees. Julian tells him to meet them on Sunday at a nearby church. Julian does not stick around any longer. She thanks Theo and slips off into the night.

CHAPTER 7

Theo receives a call from Jasper Palmer-Smith, his former history teacher, who’d selected Theo as his “favorite” student in all of Theo’s year at Oxford. Jasper is a “caricature” of an Oxford professor, and has summoned Theo to his house to discuss an “urgent” matter. Since Year Omega, Jasper has retreated to the countryside, where he and his wife Hilda have lived in solitude and begun building a store of food, medicine, and supplies for the end of the world, or the event of a “total breakdown of order”—whichever comes first.

As one of the new “mythologies” of the post-Year Omega world, the ritual of women dressing up dolls as children and parading them around is an act both of hope and despair. The attacker who destroys the doll takes an action rooted in anger and fatalism, symbolizing the tension between those who seek hope and renewal in the post-Omega world and those who reject those things altogether.



Theo’s memory of his former student foreshadows her provocative nature, and the disruptive, iconoclastic quality of her character and very existence—symbolized physically by P.D. James through her distinctively deformed hand.



In the authoritarian society that England has become, Theo knows it is risky to associate with a group of anarchists, or even free thinkers. Julian’s group’s plan to work through Theo appeals to his sense of authority, which has been waning as his lecture attendance and role at Oxford has dwindled steadily in the past several years.



Theo feels sympathy for Julian, and agrees to the small but consequential action of meeting with her group. Julian’s secrecy and efficiency reveal her action-oriented nature, as well as her own ambition.



Here, Theo’s narrative once again serves to contrast the differences between the familiarity, routine, and “caricatures” of the past with the bizarre dystopia of the present. Jasper was once a highly-respected and deeply entrenched Oxford professor, and now lives a reclusive life which is centered around preparation for a future that might never even come.



When Theo arrives at Jasper's, he is shocked to find that Jasper looks as if he is aged "ten years in a little over six weeks." Hilda, too, appears disheveled and senile. After offering Theo a drink, Jasper tells Theo that he is thinking of moving back to Oxford because he feels "isolated" in the countryside. Theo asks what Hilda thinks about moving back to the city. Jasper responds that she is not in a "position to object," and that she has been considering taking part in a Quietus—a mass ritual suicide by drowning, intended for the elderly members of society.

Theo, put off by the idea of Jasper coming to live with him, suggests Jasper and Hilda apply to receive a Sojourner or two. Sojourners are immigrants from foreign countries who do British citizens' "dirty work" in exchange for the opportunity to stay in the country until they reach old age, at which point they are sent back to their countries of origin. Jasper does not like the idea of a foreigner in his house. Theo leaves Jasper and Hilda without making any plans or "promises" to them, feeling that while he owes Jasper "a great deal," he does not owe him that much.

While driving back to Oxford, Theo spots an enormous crowd. He remembers that there is a popular American evangelist in town whose motto, "all you need is love," has made her into a global sensation. People are seeking comfort in new ways of thinking about religion, Theo says, and now find the imagery of the crucifixion to be a "stigma of barbarism."

CHAPTER 8

It is the Sunday of Theo's meeting with Julian and her group, and he heads to the church where the encounter will take place. As he approaches the church, the parish preacher emerges, waving Theo away and loudly telling him that there is no service—instead there is a "christening" scheduled for eleven. Theo insists that he is "just visiting," but the priest describes vagrants who break in and hold Black Masses in the empty church. He nevertheless allows Theo to enter, as long as he promises to be out by eleven.

The revulsion with which human society now views its elderly contrasts to the way many people saw their elders in the past—as revered gatekeepers of wisdom. Jasper and Hilda, feeling completely irrelevant and mired in despair and isolation, consider what action they can possibly take. Jasper wishes to return to the last place he felt relevant and powerful, while Hilda considers giving up and giving in.



The Sojourners are another new class of citizen (or a very old class of citizen: the indentured servant or slave), and are as reviled as the Omegas are worshipped. Theo feels that he "owes" much to Jasper, but his "self-obsession" and lack of desire to take responsibility for anyone's happiness takes precedence over his desire to help an old friend and mentor find renewal, redemption, or just relief.



The new mythologies that have taken over society extend to the realm of religion—though Theo has described the endurance of many Christian religious rituals, there are also many ways in which society has turned its back on some of the symbolism and teachings of Christianity.



Here Theo describes another subversion of a historic religious ritual—churches are now used for alternative, possibly even Satanist, religions, though "christenings" remain intact. People are desperate to find any kind of meaning or hope in this dark world, even turning to the occult for answers.



Julian meets Theo at the front of the church. He follows her inside, where the group is “separated, walking in different [areas] as if forced apart.” Theo can tell which man is Julian’s husband right away. The man comes toward Theo, and the two face each other “like adversaries.” This man, Rolf, is handsome, young enough to have missed being an Omega by just a few years. Rolf explains that the group uses first names only. He introduces himself, as well as Miriam, Luke, and Gascoigne. He explains that Miriam is an ex-midwife and Luke is a priest, but that Theo doesn’t “need to know” what any of their current occupations are.

Miriam introduces herself to Theo and shakes his hand with a “half-humorous colluding glance, as if they were already conspirators.” She is black and, Theo guesses, the oldest of the group. Gascoigne introduces himself next—he is young and stout, with “a child’s face.” Luke smiles at Theo—he seems to be in his forties, has a “pale, sensitive face,” and his “frailty [is] in stark contrast to Rolf’s dark masculinity.”

Theo reiterates to the group that he has “no influence” where Xan is concerned—he tells them that that is part of the reason why he left the Council in the first place. Theo asks the group if they’re a religious one, which Rolf vehemently denies. Miriam explains that while Luke and Julian are Christians, their group only meets in churches because “no one asks any questions.”

Theo asks Rolf why the group doesn’t try to go before the Warden and the Council themselves. Rolf replies that while the government wouldn’t listen to their group, Xan might listen to Theo. Theo asks what the group “would want [him] to say” if he did go before Xan. Rolf begins revealing their group’s list of demands, starting with the calling of a general election. He points out that Xan is a tyrant who has neglected to call an election for fifteen years, and Gascoigne, indignant, adds as further proof of Xan’s tyranny the fact that Xan has co-opted the Grenadiers—a senior guard regiment of the British army—as his private army. Rolf goes on, adding that the Warden should also end the semen-testing program. Luke expresses his desire for the end of “compulsory” gynecological examinations as well as the Quietus. Julian adds that something must be done to ensure rights for Sojourners.

The physically sprawled arrangement of the group the first time Theo sees them will come to symbolize the huge differences in their ambitions and ideals. The group’s secrecy in regards to their names and professions also betrays an unwillingness to trust any outsiders—and perhaps, by extension, one another as well.



Theo can sense the energies of each member of the group right off the bat. He will come to know them all quite well over the course of the novel, but for now it is the contrast between Luke and Rolf that particularly strikes him. The power dynamic between the two of them will affect Theo in ways he can’t yet perceive.



The group has come to Theo because they believe he has a specific, valuable kind of power over Xan. Admitting that he never had that power even when he sat on Xan’s council is a blow to Theo’s ego, but it’s the truth.



The group reveals themselves to be completely dissatisfied with modern society, though, as Theo observes, they are each focused on a different goal or grievance. Together, their desires to see changes in their government reflect a kind of hope that has become rare in the modern life of the novel—the hope that positive change and renewal can redeem what is left of human life on earth. The group is ambitious, yet desirous not (seemingly) of power, but of real social good and true change for the better. At the same time, the group’s demands and goals seem so broad and they have so little power behind them that it seems highly unlikely Xan will be swayed.



Theo tells the group that no one, not even the common people, “care[s]” enough about the issues the group wants to tackle. When Julian explains that part of the group’s goal is to help people to care, Theo retorts that anyone living on a “dying planet” only wants “security and comfort,” and the Warden provides those things. Luke thinks the government should, in addition, offer “compassion, justice, [and] love.” Theo begins to find the group ridiculous, noting their disorganization and lack of a common purpose—they are all indignant about different things and motivated by disparate wants.

Julian implores Miriam to tell Theo about her brother. Miriam describes how her brother was sent to the Isle of Man Penal Colony for robbing an Omega woman and pushing her to the ground. Her brother escaped on a broken dinghy—conditions on the island were so bad that even drowning would have been better than staying. After her brother made it to Miriam’s house and spent the night, a group of Grenadiers and the State Security Police arrived to take him away again—a week later, they sent Miriam her brother’s ashes.

Theo tells the group that their demands are foolish, and will never be met. Julian then asks Theo how he would begin to resist and rebel, if it were him leading their group. Theo tells her that he wouldn’t even attempt to go against the government—history has told him very clearly “what happens to people who do.”

Rolf accuses Theo of having come to meet with the group despite having no intention of helping. Theo tells all of them that he hasn’t yet said he won’t approach Xan, but before he makes a decision, he wants to see a Quietus—he wants to bring Xan more than just hearsay. Julian tells him there is one happening nearby in Southwold in three days. Theo tells her that he will decide whether or not he plans to see the Warden “immediately” after the Quietus is finished, and that he will leave a note for them bearing his decision in a nearby museum. Two weeks from Wednesday, he says, he will plan to meet Julian—alone—in that same museum to inform them of what the Warden has said, if he’s agreed to meet with him.

Theo leaves the church, annoyed to have gotten himself involved but “more affected than he care[s] to admit.” Theo watches as a christening party makes its way toward the church—two kittens are about to be baptized.

The not-good-enough presence of security and comfort—the banal promises of the English government—mirror the ways in which Theo does not want to take responsibility for anyone’s well-being or happiness. When Luke suggests that compassion and love are possible, Theo balks at the idea of helping the group, as he is still deeply set in his apathetic, narcissistic ways, similar to Xan’s regime.



Miriam’s story reveals to Theo, and to the audience, the lengths to which the government will go to preserve its total control over its citizens and enforce the new, harmful rituals which have come to govern English society. Up against such cruelty, justice seems both impossible and more important to fight for than ever.



Theo’s view of history is a pessimistic one—as a history professor, he has learned from stories of failed revolt, repetitious cycles of evil and tyranny, and the perils of ambition both on the part of the oppressed and their oppressors.



Theo considers taking action on behalf of the group, but wants to see for himself whether the injustices they describe are truly as bad as they say. The Quietus, which he has recently heard more about from Hilda, seems to him the proper test of what the government is really up to—the Quietus has been described as a benevolent and redemptive ritual, but this, Theo knows, could be just another government spin or cover-up. Further, the fact that Theo has to actively seek out the injustices the group describes shows how insidious they are in this society, and also his relatively privileged position.



Theo observes the christening party as they cling to ritual and the past, just as he has left a group which looks toward the future and to change.



CHAPTER 9

On the morning of the Quietus, Theo drives to Southwold. He has not been to the town in twenty-seven years, since he went with Helena and **Natalie** when she was under a year old, and he finds it much emptier than it was long ago. He lunches at a pub, observes a group of Sojourners doing roadwork, and decides to have coffee at a nearby inn—when he approaches it, though, he sees that it is closed. The proprietor tells him it is shut for the day out of “respect [for] the Quietus.” Theo parks his car and heads for the pier, where the ritual is to take place.

The elderly women who are the participants in the Quietus begin to arrive in coach buses, and make their way down to the beach to change into long white robes. A decorated band congregates, to play the women off to their deaths. The old women are arranged in a line, and each is given a small bunch of flowers—Theo thinks the women look like “a bevy of disheveled bridesmaids.” The band begins to play, and the women dance and sway to the music—Theo, observing their erratic movements, thinks that they have possibly been drugged.

A small crowd of relatives and friends, as well as some SSP officers, have gathered on the beach. The elderly women wade into the water, attach their legs to weights rigged along the underside of two large boats manned by even more SSP, and wait to be pulled into the ocean and deposited “out of sight of land.” Theo tells himself that he has seen enough, but remembers that he “promised” Julian he would watch the Quietus in its entirety.

There is a “commotion” on the beach—one of the women wading into the water cries and thrashes as she struggles back to the shore. Theo can see that the woman is Hilda Palmer-Smith. Though it’s unclear to Theo whether she’s been forced into the Quietus, by Jasper or by someone else, or whether she’s just changed her mind at the last minute, it’s clear that she needs to be rescued. She is only about twenty yards away from Theo, and he moves to help her, but then one of the soldiers strikes her in the head with his pistol and she falls into the sea. Theo swims out to Hilda, but an officer flings him aside and into the rolling waves.

Southwold, a town which Theo last observed in the “normal” world before Year Omega, is now being shown to the audience through Theo’s disoriented eyes. Everything is different here, from the presence of the Sojourners and the Quietus ritual to the sheer lack of people remaining there.



The inversion—or perversion—of ritual is something that Theo has noted with respect to the woman pushing a doll in a stroller and the congregants preparing to attend an animal christening. The Quietus is another new ritual which takes its cues and structure from old ones—the sacred rituals of marriage and baptism. Surrender to another person or to God has instead become surrender to death.



Theo feels a great despair as he watches the horrific ritual unfold—a perverse baptism in which there is no rebirth. However, now motivated by Julian’s group’s sense of justice and righteousness, he cannot abandon the spectacle before he has seen it all the way through.



Though Theo knew that Hilda Palmer-Smith had been considering taking part in a Quietus, to see her forced to death against her will reveals to Theo that there is, as there is with all of Xan’s government and its sanctioned practices, more going on than meets the eye. Theo is thwarted as he attempts to save her, foreshadowing the difficulty that lies ahead if he chooses to confront Xan and the government.



Theo struggles back to shore—the officer “hadn’t intended him to drown.” Theo is weary, and falls unconscious. When he wakes, night has fallen, and he approaches a nearby bed and breakfast to see if there is a vacancy. The proprietor takes him in and offers him a meal and a room. At breakfast the next morning, Theo apologizes for his appearance, but the proprietor insists that she has been waiting for a guest for months. “The town is dying,” she says. When Theo asks her if she saw the Quietus the day before, the innkeeper answers firmly that there is “none of that kind of thing in Southwold.”

Theo’s encounter with both the officer who flings him into the waves and the innkeeper at the bed and breakfast demonstrate the denial that every level of this town—and, by proxy, larger society—are facing. By denying or shrugging off the reality of what is happening—mass murder of elderly citizens due to deeply entrenched fatalism and lack of ability to conceive of a future—society is slipping further and further away from the tenets which once held it together.



CHAPTER 10

The next morning, back in Oxford, Theo writes the word “YES” on a postcard and folds it, thinking that the word indicates “a commitment to more than his visit to Xan.” He heads to the Cast Museum, where he told Julian’s group he’d leave the note, and he remembers that Xan is the one who introduced him to this place. After walking through the museum, Theo leaves the note at the base of a statue with its edge “just visible to a searching eye.”

Theo’s motivation to help the group is the first real action he’s taken. It represents a move toward not just disdain for the way things are around him, but an actual indignation and a desire to see things made right. Already Theo is thinking like a covert conspirator, showing his desire to blend in with the group, despite his previous hesitation.



Now that he has been faced with the reality of several “abominations,” Theo feels he has a duty to see Xan. However, he is motivated less by the horror of the Quietus than by “the memory of his own humiliation, his body hauled up the beach and dumped as if it were an unwanted carcass.”

Theo’s “self-obsession” has not been entirely eradicated—it is still his own humiliation (rather than empathy) that truly spurs him to action.



As Theo leaves the museum, an elderly, sleeping attendant wakes up, and Theo recognizes him as a retired classics professor at Oxford. Theo asks how he’s doing, and the attendant skittishly tells Theo that he is “no trouble to anyone.” Theo wonders what—or whom—the attendant is afraid of. Theo has a horrible vision of the old man as “the last custodian” the museum will ever see, his “frail body mummified or rotting” there forever.

Theo has been unsettled by the horror of the Quietus, and now realizes the burden the elderly face is to prove that they are not in fact a burden to “anyone.” Theo’s vision of the museum attendant is future-oriented, but still rooted in a fear of decay, stagnancy, and lack of hope.



CHAPTER 11

Theo, writing in his **diary**, describes the events of his first time seeing Xan in three years. He had no trouble securing an appointment with Xan, though he had to go through one of Xan’s many aides, all of whom are exclusively male—perhaps, Theo postulates, because “the loyalty Xan demand[s] is essentially masculine: hierarchical, unquestioning, unemotional.”

Xan’s brand of power is one that can only exist in an unquestioning vacuum. Theo knows that Xan has done a lot of work to ensure he is surrounded by people who allow his outsized power to thrive and even grow.



Xan sends a car and a driver to fetch Theo on the day of the appointment. Though Theo is expecting George, who had been his regular driver throughout his time on the council, a new man named Hedges has replaced him. Hedges tells Theo that George was in a car accident, but Theo does not quite believe him; George, Theo thinks to himself, was a “meticulously careful driver.” Theo decides not to ask any more questions, thinking that any further inquiries about George will be both unsatisfying and “unwise.”

Though Theo and Xan did not part on bad terms, Theo knows that Xan views his having left the Council as “inexcusable.” As he and Hedges near London, Theo thinks of his time on the Council, and the men and women who sat on it alongside him. Martin Woolvinton heads Industry and Production, and is the member of the council “closest to a friend” of Xan’s; Harriet Marwood, the oldest member and the “universal grandmother” of the council, is in charge of Health, Science, and Recreation; Felicia Rankin, a distinguished lawyer, leads Home Affairs, which includes Housing and Transport; Carl Inglebach, Minister for Justice and State Security, is the most powerful member of the Council and an “administrative genius” who believes that trying to deny or change the world’s present predicament is “a waste of time.”

The monarchy, Theo says, has largely faded into obscurity since Year Omega. The new King of England, due to be crowned when Theo sat upon the council, still hasn’t been. Xan told Theo that the people of Britain would “resent the expense of a meaningless ceremony.”

Theo and Hedges arrive in London. Theo spots a group of flagellants, zealots who beat themselves with knotted cords. Theo asks Hedges if he believes in God, and Hedges replies that he thinks God, “not knowing how to put right the mess [of humanity],” has stricken the world with mass infertility. Hedges tells Theo that he hopes God “burns in His own hell.” The car has arrived at the building where Theo will be received. Hedges exits the car and opens Theo’s door for him, his face a “cold, immobile mask.”

CHAPTER 12

Xan’s office is not at Ten Downing Street, historically the seat of British government. Instead, he lives and works in what used to be the Foreign and Commonwealth building nearby.

The implication that something dark or nefarious befell George—a man Theo once knew quite well—doesn’t go any further than an implication, because Theo is both afraid to discover the truth and aware of the fact that even if he were able to discover it, nothing could be done about it.



Theo was the one person in Xan’s group of “unquestioning” peers who defected from the Council—and because Theo is Xan’s cousin, he has the privilege of having been able to escape unscathed. The other Council members are different but united in their loyalty to Xan, and in the nature of their resigned attitude toward Xan’s total consolidation of power over the British government. Xan and all of the Council are an interesting mix of fatalistic and ambitious, resulting in a regime that will never relinquish its authority or change for the better.



Though Xan insists that the common people would not welcome “meaningless” ritual, his isolation means he does not see the ways in which they do cling to vestiges of the past, as Theo sees each day.



Hedges’ belief that God has not only abandoned his creations, but has actively intervened in order to snuff them out, provides a dark new perspective on the rampant and deeply ingrained fatalism and struggle for a meaningful mythology that has seemingly affected the entire world.



Xan is doing things as no other leader of Britain has done before. As the opposite of Theo, he ignores history.



A Grenadier shows Theo into Xan's office, where the full Council is assembled. They sit together on one side of the table, opposing Theo, who realizes that the arrangement is a "ploy intended to disconcert him."

Xan has his hands folded on the table. He wears the **Coronation Ring**, the ornate and heavy wedding ring of England, on his left hand. Xan notices Theo eyeing the ring, and insists that it was Harriet's idea he wear it. "The people," he says, "need their baubles." Theo tells Xan that there was once a time when Xan "wouldn't have felt the need to wear it."

Theo sits in the chair designated for him and tells the group that he asked for a "personal" meeting with Xan alone. Xan retorts that since it's been three years since he and Theo last met, or even spoke, he thought Theo "might like to meet [with] old friends." Felicia remarks that Theo is not a friend, but an acquaintance, and that she never understood why Theo spent time on the Council in the first place. Xan once again insists that all gathered in the room are "friends," but Theo hears a threat in his words.

Theo launches into a report on the botched Quietus he witnessed, asking if a "murderous parade [is] what the Council means by security, comfort, [and] pleasure." Felicia is aware that that particular Quietus was "mismanaged" and promises "appropriate action will be taken against those responsible." Harriet chimes in, claiming that "people need their rites of passage," and want to "feel the touch of a human hand" at the ends of their lives. Harriet and Felicia both insist that there are many "safeguards" in place that protect the safety and integrity of those who choose to participate in the Quietus.

Xan asks Theo if he is finished. Theo presses on, asking about the Isle of Man Penal Colony, and whether Xan and the Council are aware of the dire conditions there. Felicia insists that Theo had "no objection" to the establishment of the Colony back when he sat on the Council. Theo replies that he assumed the conditions on the island would be better than what they are. Xan says that "the encouragement of criminals is an indulgence [society can no longer] afford," and asks Theo if he has any more concerns to bring forth.

The Council is arranged to highlight Theo's exclusion. By leaving the Council, he marked himself as an outsider and perhaps even a threat.



The ring, which symbolizes Xan's "unquestionable" power, wasn't on Xan's finger back when Theo sat on the Council. The fact that he wears it now tells Theo that Xan's "need" for power—and for a physical reminder of it for himself and for others—has deepened considerably.



Xan seems to have purposefully drawn the Council into the meeting to throw Theo off, or perhaps to put him on high alert. The Council members are not actually Theo's "friends," despite their shared history as the few members of English society aware of what goes on behind the curtain, so to speak.



The Council's inability—or unwillingness—to acknowledge the horrors of the new systems that have emerged under their regime reveals a desire to keep things going as they are, even in the face of knowledge that harm has come to the citizens they are supposed to be protecting.



Theo's questions and issues with the Council—and with society—are at odds with the apathy he displayed in the past, when he too was a member of the government. The Council members indict and berate him for having "indulgen[t]" thoughts and opinions—opinions which signal the bolstering, motivating effect that Julian's group and the Quietus have had on Theo.



Theo mentions the Sojourners, questioning why they are treated as slaves and why they are sent back to their countries of origin. Martin speaks up, remarking that immigration is just the arrival of “invading hordes” which damage society. Theo notes that “whoever speaks, [their] voice is the voice of Xan. Xan cuts in to say that “generosity is a virtue for individuals, not governments.”

Carl Inglebach finally speaks; he launches into a tirade about the imbalance between humanity’s faith in the past, present, and future. He tells Theo that as a historian, he should know that man is “diminished” without both knowledge of his past and hope for a future, and in this new world humanity lacks both. Carl feels that Britain has been “spared” the catastrophic return to “starvation, civil war, and human sacrifice” that has plagued many other countries since Year Omega. Carl insists that the Sojourners, the Quietus, and the Man Penal Colony are societal goods which have helped people to cope since the world changed.

Theo concedes that the Council has made many achievements but wonders aloud why some “reforms” can’t be made—the Council could make positive change happen so easily. Xan tells Theo that he is asking too much, and that Theo desires the “ends” that the council has achieved but is refusing to acknowledge the necessary “means” to achieve those ends. Xan stands up and exits the room, and the rest of the Council follows behind him. A Grenadier appears at Theo’s side to show him out, and Theo leaves.

CHAPTER 13

Theo goes back out to the car, where Hedges is waiting for him. Xan is “suddenly” at Theo’s side, though, and instructs Hedges to drive to a nearby statue on the other side of the park. He and Theo, he says, will meet him there after a walk through the park.

As they enter the park, Xan tells Theo that it was “unwise” of him to come before the Council—“there’s a limit,” he says, to his ability to “protect” Theo, or the people whom Theo has “been consorting with.”

The Council’s xenophobic worldview is on full display here. Xan speaks of generosity as something governments cannot afford to provide, unfeeling and unthinking as to both the dire conditions the entire world faces and the need for humane, thoughtful treatment of his own citizens.



Carl reveals a central truth about the world of the novel in his speech to Theo. The imbalance between the weight of the past, the present, and the future has doomed society to a moment-bound, “self-obsessed” way of thinking which mirrors Xan’s personal ethos. Unable to see beyond the present moment or the bounds of the self, society has collapsed into a selfish and diminished state—which is far better, Carl says, than the savage catastrophes that have plagued much of the rest of the world.



Whereas Carl believes that diminishment is a preferable tradeoff for humanity’s limited but continued survival, Theo, after his encounter with Julian’s group, wonders why the Council cannot ensure that humanity is both protected and shown compassion. He feels it is little to ask, but it’s obviously too much for Xan to be able to grant, or even consider striving toward.



Xan is able to stealthily control both Theo and Hedges, eager to speak with Theo after having mysteriously created a situation in which Theo was judged and assailed by the other members of the Council.



Xan knows that Theo has to have been influenced by someone—or something—other than himself, but warns Theo not to get in too deep and lose sight of himself.



Theo asks Xan why he would possibly want the job of Warden; Xan replies that he wanted it originally because he thought he'd enjoy the power, and also because he could "never watch someone doing badly" what he knew he could do very well. Xan admits that he hasn't enjoyed the job in a very long time, but that it's "too late" now. The only other person who could do the job, he says, is Carl, but Carl is dying. Xan confesses that he keeps the job because he's never bored.

Xan asks Theo who he's been speaking to about all of the grievances he brought before the council—he knows that Theo didn't come up with all of these ideas on his own. Theo insists that no one "specifically" has "gotten" to him. He tells Xan that as someone who lives in the "real world" he hears complaints and concerns everywhere.

Theo asks Xan to stop the compulsory testing of sperm and to shut down the pornography centers, but Xan deflects Theo's requests. Theo then asks if Xan ever returns to **Woolcombe**. Xan tells Theo that he now thinks of it as a "living mausoleum." He has not been back since his mother's death five years earlier. Xan asks Theo what the two of them would do if they were the last men on earth. Theo imagines they would "salute the darkness, shout out a roll-call [of humanity], and then shoot [them]selves." Xan suggests they recreate their happy summers at Woolcombe, shooting guns off the bridge at sunset.

The two arrive at the statue, where Hedges is waiting. Xan tells Theo to "tell [his] friends, whoever they are, to be sensible [and] prudent." He says he is "not a tyrant," but "can't afford to be merciful." He will do whatever he has to do to ensure order.

CHAPTER 14

Theo returns to the Pitt Rivers museum in Oxford, the designated meeting-place for him and for Julian. While waiting for her to arrive, Theo takes a look through the exhibits, which contain artifacts culled from all over the world. He marvels at the unlikely but undeniable links between different people, different countries, and different eras.

Xan's candid discussion with Theo about the nature of his desire for power and the realities of his leadership paints a picture of him as a rational man able to track his own thoughts and emotions despite his hunger for authority and his need for total control of those around him.



Theo makes a crucial decision to protect Julian's group even in the face of direct questioning from Xan. In fact, he uses his one advantage over Xan as a cover—his defection to the "real world," and his communion with the common people.



Unable to agree on an acceptable course of action for the nation, Theo and Xan retreat into their shared past, and then together imagine a moment in the future in which they are able to reconvene at a place that meant so much to each of them—as equals and friends. The two men clearly have a kind of love for one another, but are too divided by their ideals—and Xan's almost compulsive ambition—to believe that any of their fantasies will ever come to fruition.



Xan, for all the happy reminiscing he's just involved Theo in, is still a threatening entity and a man who is not prepared to allow anything or anyone to threaten his power.



The museum represents the solace Theo finds in the past. As he looks through the exhibits he considers the world's isolationist present moment versus its (relatively) interconnected, symbiotic past.



Julian arrives and, without even greeting Theo, asks if he's met with Xan yet. Theo explains that he saw the Council, then spoke with Xan alone, but has done "no good" for her group's cause, and may even have "done some harm" since Xan knew that Theo's visit was not unprompted. Julian asks whether Xan was amenable to any of the group's demands, and Theo tells her that it seems very unlikely. Julian says that the group will have to continue to "do what they can." Theo protests, explaining that all the group can "do" is get themselves killed or sent to the Isle of Man.

Julian wonders aloud whether a group getting themselves sent to the colony intentionally could change things from the inside, but Theo tells her that the idea is a "folly." He urges her not to "waste her life on a futile cause"—things will be over soon enough. Julian insists that she wants humanity to die "as human beings, not devils," and bids Theo farewell.

Theo, making "one more effort," tells Julian again how poorly equipped the group is—they are all motivated by different things, and have no money, influence, or backing. He warns her of getting sucked into Rolf's grab at ambition. Julian tells Theo that she cannot leave Rolf, and that she is not just with the group because she is with her husband. She says that God wants her to do something, and when Theo mocks that belief, she thanks him for his help and tells him goodbye.

Theo worries that, if Julian is caught, Xan will take action against her. He worries, too, that he has misjudged his "intelligent, charming" cousin, not wanting to believe that Xan is an evil person.

CHAPTER 15

Two weeks later, Theo discovers a pamphlet written by Julian's group that has been dropped through the letter slot along with the rest of his mail. The missive is addressed "to the people of Britain," and it outlines the group's demands of the Warden: the calling of a general election; full civil rights for Sojourners and the ability to remain in Britain at the end of their service; the abolition of the Quietus; no more deportation of convicted offenders to the Isle of Man Penal Colony; and the end of examinations of healthy young men and women as well as the closure of the public porn shops. The letter is signed "The Five Fishes," and there is a small Christian fish on the top of the pamphlet.

Though Julian still retains a sliver of hope for the group's mission, Theo is wary of what will happen to them should they continue to grow and resist. He urges Julian to separate herself from the group, fearing for her safety as well as the rest of the group's well-being. Theo did not take Xan's parting words to him lightly at all.



In the face of the destruction of her hope, Julian swings out wildly at any other possibility for revolution and revolt, though Theo believes she is being foolish and stubborn, and is clinging to a vision of a future that cannot exist.



The implication that Julian has a larger mission—one both intertwined with and somehow separate from the goals of the rest of her and Rolf's group—does not inspire any hope or faith in Theo, but rather causes him to see her as a foolish, self-centered person unable to admit defeat.



Theo must now reckon with the reality of the situation he's embroiled in: there is a true battle between forces of good and evil, just as there is between fatalism and hope for change.



The discovery of the pamphlet sets off a new chain of events, and alerts Theo as to how serious Julian and her group—now publicly naming themselves The Five Fishes—actually are about addressing social and political change. Julian has ignored his advice, and has taken her and her group's desires to the streets and to the people. Their demands are clear, their language is direct, and the Christian imagery of bounty, renewal, and benevolence is inherent in their logo and name (a reference to the Bible, in which Jesus miraculously transformed five fishes and two loaves of bread into a feast for a crowd).



After reading the pamphlet, Theo is floored by the “humanity” of the words, and feels they must have been written by Julian. Nevertheless, he feels that “no good” can come of the pamphlets. He reads it through once more and considers the bind humanity faces: had Year Omega never happened, humankind might be prepared to fight to right these wrongs. However, no one is prepared to stand up against the “evils” of Xan’s regime because there is no hope for a future. Frustrated and “drain[ed] of his sympathy” for the Fishes, Theo takes the pamphlet into the bathroom, rips it up, and flushes it down the toilet.

Theo’s fear of keeping the pamphlet in his possession betrays just how deep his fear of persecution at the hands of the government is, despite Xan’s assurances that Xan will be able to “protect” Theo. He is drained and full of despair, not to mention anxious, and perhaps annoyed or even jealous that Julian has proceeded in her acts of resistance without his help or guidance.



CHAPTER 16

Theo, writing in his **diary**, describes a visit to Helena’s. Mathilda, the cat the two of them once shared, and which now lives with Helena and Rupert, has just had kittens. He speculates on whether or not Helena and Rupert held a “birthing party,” a joyous event punctuated with champagne toasts and a celebratory feast. Theo knows that birthing parties too, though, are “tinged with sadness”—there are regulations regarding the breeding of animals, and now that her cat has had kittens, Helena will be forced to sterilize Mathilda and keep only one female kitten.

Though Theo has largely abandoned the Christian rituals of the past and does not participate in society’s reinvented rituals (like animal christenings or birthing parties), he recognizes the importance of the event in Helena’s life. Theo is continually spurred by his guilt over Natalie’s death and his inability to give Helena any happiness when the two of them were still together.



Theo realizes that it has been one year to the day since Helena left him for Rupert, and believes it is an “appropriate” day to make his first visit to their new home. He wonders what Helena and Rupert’s life together is like: whether they talk about Theo often, and whether they are in the “fortunate minority” of couples who still enjoy their sex lives in the wake of Omega.

Theo is attempting to be selfless by visiting Helena and Rupert, but still retains some of his self-obsession—he cannot stop thinking about how the specter of his and Helena’s relationship might or might not affect Helena’s new partnership with Rupert.



When Theo arrives at Helena and Rupert’s, the two of them are trying to decide which of two kittens to keep. Theo joins Rupert and Helena for a “lavish” tea, and once the three are done eating Rupert retrieves one of The Five Fishes’ pamphlets and shows it to Theo. Rupert says that no one will take the pamphlets “seriously,” though he did wonder, when he called in to register the kittens with the Local Council, whether or not he should report the list of demands.

The fact that Helena and Rupert also received a pamphlet shows Theo that the Five Fishes have cast a wide net in an attempt to reach as many people as possible. Rupert’s instinct to alert the police, like Theo’s fear of keeping the pamphlet in his possession, is a byproduct of living under the surveillance state of an authoritarian regime.



Theo points out the danger of speaking out—the SSP might arrest citizens “for possession of seditious material.” The three of them debate the points of the pamphlet for a moment before Helena becomes frustrated with Theo’s apparent sympathies for the group, and implores Rupert to tear the paper up.

Theo does not reveal anything about his involvement with the Fishes to Helena or Rupert, but the fact that he sympathizes with the points of their pamphlet alone is enough to set Helena on edge. Any resistance in this world is risky.



Theo says goodbye to Mathilda the cat and leaves, content to know that while Helena is happy, he is no longer the one “responsible” for her happiness. He reflects upon a moment during the visit in which Helena and Rupert pulled their hands apart when Theo entered the room. He feels a pang of “envy and regret, not for something lost but for something never achieved.”

Theo's self-centeredness and lack of desire to take responsibility for anyone else is a double-edged sword. It protects him, but it also makes certain feelings and experiences impossible for him, and he is beginning to envy those who can find happiness and true human connection.



CHAPTER 17

In his **diary**, Theo describes a visit from the State Security Police. Two officers—a young sergeant named Oliver Cathcart, an Omega, and an older man named George Rawlings, a Chief Inspector—arrive at Theo’s house and, after a bit of small talk about Victorian history, the Chief Inspector explains to Theo that the Council is “concerned about the activities of certain people.”

The SSP turns to Theo in pursuit of answers and information, placing him on high alert. The Fishes have clearly spread their message to all of Oxford and beyond, though whether the police know that Theo has been involved with them is at this moment unclear.



Theo offers to let the officers search his house, telling them he needs to leave for class in just over half an hour. Rawlings tells Theo that they do not plan to search his house, and then confides that some “small incidents” have upset the Council. Two Quietus have been interrupted—the ramps that the elderly use to descend into the sea were blown up. Also of concern, Rawlings says, are the pamphlets.

The Fishes' actions are becoming more frequent and more serious, and though Theo is in no way linked to their activities, he feels a defensiveness and perhaps a fear of being implicated with a group that could be increasingly described as rebels or even terrorists.



Rawlings shows Theo one of the pamphlets and asks if he has seen them before; Theo admits to having read one when it was pushed through his mail slot. When Rawlings asks if Theo knows of anyone else who has received one, Theo denies it. Rawlings asks why Theo didn’t report the pamphlet. Theo counters that he treated it as junk mail. He asks what “precisely” is disturbing the council, since a “few bored malcontents” hardly pose a “real opposition to the Warden of England.” Rawlings tells Theo that it is the business of the SSP to ensure that there isn’t.

Theo is now fishing for information, straddling the tenuous line of lying to the authorities while attempting to convince them that he is neutral, completely innocent, and deserving of what they know about the dissidents. The SSP's threatening answer, an admission of the fact that their priority is quelling any discontent or opposition, reveals the regime's intensifying oppression as well as its mounting fear.



Theo tells the officers that, since he is Xan’s cousin, any information he acquires regarding a potential threat against Xan’s seat of power will be relayed directly to Xan by Theo himself. The officers, satisfied with Theo’s answer and his allegiance to his powerful cousin, leave.

Once again, Theo's connection to Xan comes into play—this time, as a proof of innocence and show of authority. Theo wants the officer to think that someone so close to Xan could not possibly be plotting against him.



CHAPTER 18

Theo puts his diary away and reflects a bit more on the SSP officers' visit. He had found Rawlings and Cathcart "unfrightening," but wonders now whether his lack of fear was justified. It begins to rain, and Theo becomes depressed and worried. He reminds himself that the officers are not after him. They are looking for Julian and the rest of the Fishes. Though the Council—and the SSP—suspect that Theo knows something, they do not yet have any proof. However, Theo wonders how much the officers know about him that they have not yet revealed.

Theo feels a combination of fear, guilt, loneliness, and a "renewed irritation" at having ever gotten involved with the Fishes. He reminds himself that he did warn Julian and the group, after his visit with Xan, that the Council would soon be onto them, and wonders how he might be able to warn them further about the SSP's investigation. Trapped in a web of indecision and fear, Theo decides that the only thing he can do for now is wait.

CHAPTER 19

In his **diary**, Theo describes having seen Julian at the market earlier that morning. As she exited, he followed her, and asked to speak to her; she suggested they talk back in the market, a noisier and "safer" place. Once back inside, Theo told Julian about the SSP's visit, and implored her to either get the group to stop, or to distance herself from them. Julian told Theo to leave, explaining that it would be best if the two of them didn't see each other any more. Theo told Julian to send for him in St. John Street if she ever needed him, and left the market.

Now, Theo laments never having known "what it is to love," yet says that "fifty is not an age to invite the turbulence of love." Theo plans to "escape," taking a trip around the world to see the "great" things that still remain and to attempt to put the events of the last several months out of his head. He feels regretful that if Julian comes to call on him, "she will find [his] house empty."

Despite his close connection to Xan and his attempt to spin that connection as a proof of his innocence, Theo, as a former Council member, knows that there is always more going on than meets the eye when it comes to Xan's regime. As the fear and fatalism set in, Theo becomes obsessed with going over every possible way the authorities could catch him in a lie.



Expanding beyond the boundaries of worrying only about himself and his own well-being, Theo begins to consider how he might be able to warn Julian in order to keep her and the group safe from detection and imprisonment. However, he is too afraid to reveal his connection to them to take any real risk on their behalf.



Theo, having at last found Julian again, attempts to warn her about the hunt for the Fishes. But Julian's allegiance to her group and their ideals keeps her from seeing the truth and care behind his words. Theo, as a last-ditch attempt to somehow ensure Julian's safety, makes a move toward responsibility for her—a move whose resulting events he can't yet foresee.



Theo has begun to have feelings for Julian, but, having never behaved in a way which accepts responsibility for another person's safety or happiness, retreats into self-obsession and escapism in the face of his fears. He does not want to let Julian down, but he is so overwhelmed that he feels he has to leave.



CHAPTER 20

Theo left for his trip in March. It is now the last day of September, and he has finally returned from his travels. He reads through the **diary** entries he recorded during his trip, though he wrote of his travels “joylessly [and] meticulously.” Unable to enjoy his time away and feeling that he left “the part of him from which he most needed to escape in Oxford,” he returned, but now finds the atmosphere “anxious, fretful, almost intimidating.”

Theo calls Helena, and asks her whether anything has been happening in Oxford over the summer. She tells him nothing has, though there are “rumor[s]” of dissidents blowing up piers in an attempt to stop the Quietus. Theo asks if anyone knows who the dissidents are. Helena tells him she doesn’t think so.

Theo has the nightmare in which his father is standing at the end of his bed. This time, though, it is Luke pointing at him, and Theo is not in bed but in a car. Rolf pounds on the windows of the car and screams “You’ve killed Julian!” over and over.

Theo feels uneasy for days after the dream, and is afraid that he is being surveilled, though he has received no communication from Xan or the Council. Theo is afraid Julian has been captured by the police, and longs to find a way to get in touch with her. He visits a couple of old churches, looking for The Five Fishes, but cannot find them, and his sense of “impending disaster” only grows.

CHAPTER 21

One night while preparing dinner, Theo hears a knock at the door. He looks out the window and sees Miriam. He allows her in, and she immediately tells him that the police have captured Gascoigne, and the Fishes are going on the run. Julian needs Theo, Miriam says, and tells him that the group is waiting at a nearby chapel. They are in need of Theo’s car, and must get away before Gascoigne “breaks” and gives any information to the police.

Theo tells Miriam to get together a bag of food and supplies. He runs upstairs and collects his coat and his **diary**. He knows that leaving behind signs of having left in a hurry might incriminate him if the police should come looking for him, but he feels such an “anxiety to get to Julian” that his own safety is of minor concern.

Theo embarked on his selfish journey through Europe in order to escape the overwhelming fear, anxiety, and sense of impotence brought on by his desire to help Julian but his inability to act. Upon his return, nothing has improved—things are exactly as they were for Theo when he left.



The one positive is that the Fishes have not yet been located or really discovered by the government. Theo is relieved to at least find that there have not been any expressly negative developments in his absence.



Theo cannot escape the feelings of guilt he has over abandoning Julian.



Theo’s guilt, depression, and paranoia reach a fever pitch. Just as he felt helpless and impotent back in March, his feelings of lack of control and fear of the future are creating an atmosphere of stress and anxiety.



The promise Theo made to Julian has finally come to fruition—she needs him, and she has called upon him for help. Though Gascoigne has not intentionally betrayed the group, Miriam seems to have no doubt that the powerful, nefarious authorities will eventually “break” him down with some kind of torture.



Theo is finally putting something—or at least someone—else before himself. Though leaving signs of a hasty exit is foolish, he seems to know that a major event is about to take place and that attempting to cover his own tracks is useless.



Theo and Miriam get into Theo's car and drive away. Theo asks Miriam how and when Gascoigne was captured. He was taken, she says, while placing explosives at the site of a Quietus. When Gascoigne did not call the group with a report of a successful mission, they knew he'd been taken.

Theo tells Miriam that the Fishes have only lasted so long because Xan "wanted" them to—the presence of an "internal threat", Theo says, is something that all tyrants need to "buttress authority." Theo presses Miriam to tell him the group's code names, but when she reveals them, Theo mocks her and the group for having chosen silly names. Miriam grows frustrated with Theo's sarcasm and mockery and suggests they ride in silence.

A few minutes later, Miriam tells Theo that Julian is pregnant. Theo feels "irritation" and "disgust" at the fact that both Julian and Miriam are "self-deceiving" enough to believe that pregnancy is possible. He tells Miriam that he doesn't believe her, though he knows she and Julian must truly believe the pregnancy is real.

As Theo and Miriam approach the church in a village called Swinbrook, Theo remembers having visited it with Xan during their first year at Oxford. Miriam explains that this church is a "fall-back" meeting place, kept secret specifically for use in the event of one of the Fishes' capture. Theo recalls having walked here many years ago with Xan, as Xan was about to join the army, where he would become the youngest colonel in 150 years. On their walk, Xan predicted Theo's boring life unspooling almost exactly as, Theo realizes, it actually did.

The rest of the Fishes are waiting inside the chapel. Julian approaches Theo and right away lifts her shirt to reveal her swollen belly. He kneels before her and presses his ear against her stomach and at last believes that her pregnancy is true.

Theo suggests that the Fishes contact Xan, and tell him of the pregnancy. Xan will, Theo knows, make sure that Julian is safe, whereas if she goes on the run she risks her own life and the life of her unborn child. Julian tells Theo that she does not want to give her baby over to the state. She knows that if Xan is present for her child's birth, he will be present "always."

Theo has confirmation now that the "dissidents" Helena spoke of were the Five Fishes—so it seems slightly miraculous that they have just now been found out.



Theo knows that the Fishes' ability to fly under the radar was just another machination of the authoritarian regime, and that Xan's behavior mirrors the behavior of other tyrants throughout history who have engineered the political atmosphere to make themselves appear savior-like.



Just as Theo has disdain for animal christenings and those who push dolls around in strollers, he believes that Julian's pregnancy is just another foolish, self-deluding coping mechanism born out of despair and sadness.



Though Theo knows that his cousin is possibly evil, or at the very least exceptionally power-hungry and desperate, he can't help but retreat into their shared memories in the face of conflict. Xan has always had a kind of power over Theo, and the uncanny way in which Theo's life unfolded according to Xan's predictions for him speaks to the reality of that power.



Julian, however impossibly, has now become the world's hope for renewal and redemption. Theo is moved by the truth of her pregnancy—it seems like a real miracle.



Theo wants Julian to have comfort and security, the things that the government allegedly provides. However, Julian knows the truth of the regime—her judgment is not clouded, as Theo's is, by his personal memories of Xan.



Miriam and Rolf both agree that Julian should have the baby on her own, away from the Council's clutches. Theo insists that the group is being ridiculous, and the child belongs not to any one or two people but to mankind. Luke counters that the child "belongs to God."

Theo asks the group what their plan is. Rolf states that they want to find an empty cottage or shelter somewhere remote where Julian can carry her baby to term. Theo tells the group that their plan is "futile"—Gascoigne will soon talk, and everything will be ruined. Luke tells Theo that the rest of them never told Gascoigne about the pregnancy "for his own protection." Nevertheless, they all need to get away, and soon. Luke asks to use Theo's car, and insists that they can continue talking while they travel. Julian begs Theo to join them, and Theo reluctantly agrees.

CHAPTER 22

As Theo and the Fishes leave the church, Theo considers getting away, calling Xan, and "putting an end" to the "frail" group's twisted "adventure." But realizing that he has already been "responsible for the death of one child" (**Natalie**), Theo decides to stay with the group and acquiesce to Julian's desire to have her baby in private. At the car, after one last attempt to change Julian's mind, Theo agrees to drive. Rolf reminds Theo that he is only with the group "because [being] the Warden's cousin might be useful." Theo and Rolf begin to quarrel, but Miriam begs them to put aside their differences for the sake of the mission.

Rolf instructs Theo to drive over the border and into Wales. He outlines a plan to drive by night, sleep by day, and change cars if possible. The SSP will soon be looking for Theo's car. Theo tells Rolf that Jasper's house is nearby. There, they might be able to switch cars and will certainly find some more food and supplies.

At Jasper's house, Theo finds that the gate is open. He and Miriam enter the house together, where they find that Jasper is dead, having shot himself in the head. A note nearby explains that there is one bullet left in the revolver. Theo instructs Miriam to gather linens from upstairs while he raids Jasper's stores of food. Once Miriam is gone, Theo takes the revolver from Jasper's grip, removes the last bullet, and places both the gun and the bullet inside his coat pocket.

Theo believes the group is not cohesive enough to successfully keep the baby from Xan's clutches. Moreover, his humanist view of the baby's role is in conflict with Luke and Julian's religious one.



Theo, reluctant to join the Fishes when they first came to him for help, is now faced with the choice of truly joining their group and surrendering to their mission—which now has the added layer of perhaps being the saviors of all of humanity. Theo is still hesitant and skeptical, but recognizes that the stakes are too high now to outright refuse to help the Fishes find safety, however improbable their fantasy of an idyllic refuge might be.



Theo, though he hates to accept responsibility for the well-being of anyone other than himself, feels that he owes Julian his allegiance. His attempts to change Julian's mind and convince her to have the child under the watchful eye of the government fail, but he acquiesces to Julian's desire to have the child on her own terms out of a desire to lessen and perhaps even eradicate his own guilt and suffering over the death of his daughter.



Rolf believes himself to be in control of the mission, but it is Theo who has a suggestion for a place to seek both supplies and shelter, putting a wrinkle in Rolf's authority and sense of command.



Jasper's death is a fatalistic act which feels like a bad omen for the group as they start out on their journey. Theo appears to have taken the gun to help ensure his own protection, though he is supposed to be gathering supplies that will aid and protect the group as a whole. Theo does not yet feel entirely trustful of the Fishes.



While Theo takes supplies from Jasper's larder, he feels a twinge of sadness over Jasper's death. He meets Miriam upstairs—she has taken medical supplies from the bathroom, and enough linens to provide Julian with a comfortable birthing bed. Miriam tells Theo not to let Rolf or Julian know that he has a gun. Once outside, Theo and Miriam lock up the house, and the group switches from Theo's car to Jasper's. On the way out, Theo locks the gate and tosses the key over.

The death of Theo's mentor affects him, though he doesn't have time to mourn. Jasper represented one of Theo's ties to his love of history and to his old life—now Theo has one less thing tying him to the way things were. As he hurtles toward surrender to the unknown future, he does it with a totem of the past—Jasper's gun—at his side for protection.



CHAPTER 23

Theo has to pull the car over several times so that Miriam can help Julian into the woods to relieve herself. On one of the stops, the group all gets out to stretch their legs. Rolf confronts Theo, and tells him that their "expedition" cannot have "two leaders." Rolf insists that Theo was never part of the group. Theo counters that Julian has specially requested his presence, and that the two are "stuck" with one another. Rolf tells Theo that he wants to drive, and Theo points out how ridiculous it is that Rolf, soon to be "hailed as the father of [a] new race," is concerned with not being behind the wheel.

The power struggle between Rolf and Theo is born of Rolf's jealousy of Theo. The fact that his wife has developed an attachment to and a need for Theo riles Rolf, who takes out his hurt and anger in the form of a grab for power. Theo points out how banal and futile Rolf's desire to wrest power by taking control of the car is, given the enormous importance of their mission and the precious burden they're guarding.



Rolf offers to let Theo serve as his personal adviser when Rolf, as the father of the first child born in over twenty years, inevitably takes the power to rule from Xan. Theo points out that Rolf will just be replacing one dictator with another one. Theo asks what Rolf plans to do with the power once he's taken it from Xan. Rolf insists that the people will "give" him the power, and then reveals that he doesn't actually care about any of the Fishes' demands of the government and does not plan to enact any change once he is in charge.

Theo believes that Rolf has a foolish view of power—how it is attained, how it is maintained, and how it functions both as a tool and as a destructive force. The revelation that Rolf does not actually care about the ideals that his wife and the rest of the Fishes so desperately believe in paints him as a purely ambitious man—and thus a dangerous one.



Theo restrains himself from lashing out and telling Rolf that once Xan sees Rolf as a threat, the government will extract his sperm to get what they "need" from him and then quickly dispose of him. Luke, Miriam, and Julian return to the car, and Theo allows Rolf to take the wheel.

Though Rolf claims he will soon have unimaginable power, it is actually Theo who holds the advantage—he knows how power really works, and is aware that Rolf will have a tenuous grasp of true power at best.



CHAPTER 24

Rolf drives quickly and recklessly, and soon punctures a tire. The group gets the car off of the road. Theo knows there is a spare tire in the trunk. Rolf, Julian, and Theo drive the car a little further up the road, to a place where they can seek cover, while the rest of the group walks behind. Theo and Rolf attempt to change the tire, but their flashlight goes out. Theo suggests the group eat and make themselves comfortable while they wait for morning.

Rolf, impatient and ambitious, drives in a way that reflects his personality directly and results in strife and hardship for the group. This foreshadows the ways in which Rolf will continue to create tension and difficulty, while Theo will rise to the role of a practical problem-solver.



CHAPTER 25

In the morning, Theo is the last to wake. He has, to his surprise, slept soundly on the ground. Tea is brewing, and Julian and Luke are off in the woods praying. Rolf asks Theo what he believes in. Theo tells him he believes nothing. Rolf admits to having had a religious upbringing, but says he has since rejected religion and believes that the Warden of England (Xan) is the only devil.

Theo is “uneasy” about Luke and Julian having left the group—he feels everyone needs to stay together. He goes off to find them, but they are barely fifty yards from the car, praying at a makeshift altar. Theo returns to the car, and tells Rolf that Luke and Julian appear to be nearly done. Theo wonders about the relationship between Rolf and Luke. He feels that Rolf is “indulging” Julian by allowing her a “personal chaplain” even though Luke has no practical skills to offer the Fishes. However, Theo thinks, it’s possible that Rolf has retained a “vestige of superstition” from his childhood, and maybe believes that Luke is a “bringer of luck” or even a “miracle-worker.”

This passage highlights the ways in which modern religion—Christianity especially—has really devolved into more of a series of superstitions. Rolf sees the “devil” as a real entity, but one which the Bible or Christian tradition never could have predicted. At the same time, note that Rolf sees the Warden of England as the devil, while also wanting to become the ruler of England himself.



Opposite to how Rolf has inverted Christianity into his own kind of personal mythology, Luke and Julian continue in the ritualistic aspect of the faith. Theo is disdainful of Luke and Julian, but wonders whether Luke—who seemingly has no other useful skills—is actually the most important member of the Fishes. Just as evil has been mythologized, so too has goodness—Luke represents that “miracul[ous]” goodness and the power of faith.



CHAPTER 26

Writing in his **diary**, Theo describes the lovely, restful day he has spent with the Fishes. He has “never felt so much at ease with other human beings,” and recounts the group’s hours spent dozing, talking, and playing games with sticks and stones. Even the hot-tempered Rolf is behaving.

As night falls, the group prepares to set out again—Rolf has repaired the tire. Theo writes that he has “no need” of his **diary** any longer, as he is not the “self-regarding, sardonic, solitary” man who began writing it. He reveals that during the afternoon, Miriam found a second flashlight hidden in the backseat, but Theo is grateful that the group didn’t find it the night before, because that gave them a day together to bond.

Despite his wariness to join the group, Theo has found contentment, spiritual renewal, and real happiness in their presence—things which he had begun to believe were no longer possible for him to feel.



Theo has undergone a major change, transformed by his encounter with the Fishes and their hopeful view of the world and humanity. He is able to see a divide between the person he was and the person he longs to be, and feels he has nothing left to exorcise—he has become someone he is proud to be.



CHAPTER 27

While driving through the countryside at night, the Fishes’ car comes upon a large fallen tree trunk. As they attempt to maneuver the car around it, Theo realizes with horror that it is a “deliberate obstruction,” and the Fishes have fallen into a trap. A group of feral Omegas with painted faces descends upon the group and begins to perform a ritual dance around the car, beating the sides and the roof of it with bats and truncheons.

The illusion of safety and comfort that Theo just experienced with the Fishes falls away, as the reality of the world they actually live in sets in once again. The Omegas, with their bizarre and violent ritual, represent a mythology and an order whose origins and purpose are destructive but unclear—much like the regime which governs Britain.



Theo knows that these groups routinely kill one sacrificial victim, and that there is no chance of reasoning with them, even if they appeal to the Omega's humanity by pointing out Julian's pregnancy. Theo tells Rolf that when the Omegas inevitably crack up the car and force the group out, Rolf must take Julian and run for the trees. The rest of the group, Theo says, will join the Omegas' dance as cover, and to stall them.

The Omegas break through the windshield, and Theo and the rest of the group join their dance. When one of the Omegas reaches for Julian, Rolf grabs her and they make a run for it. They must climb over a low wall, and one of the Omegas catches up to them as they do and grabs Julian's clothes. Luke emerges from the crowd, screaming "Take me," and the Omegas turn on him. The Omegas beat Luke to death while Theo and Miriam, too, run away.

On the other side of the wall, the four remaining Fishes watch while the Omegas, done with Luke, light the Fishes' car on fire—sending all of their gathered supplies up in smoke.

While the Omegas are distracted with the car, Theo and Rolf go for Luke's body, which has been battered and torn beyond recognition. They bring it back to the forest, and Julian falls over Luke's corpse. Rolf then asks Miriam whose child Julian is carrying, and when she does not answer, he becomes angry. Julian then tells him that the child is Luke's. Rolf runs off in a fit of rage. Theo asks Miriam if she knew that Luke was the child's true father, and she says that she did. Luke was never tested by the government; he had mild epilepsy as a child. Both he and Julian were "rejects" of the system, and their fertility was never discovered.

Theo and Miriam admire Julian's unusual calmness, which Miriam attributes to her faith in God, and they wonder whether Rolf too will be able to calm himself. Miriam goes off to attend to Rolf, while Theo approaches Julian and asks her if she ever loved either Rolf or Luke. Julian tells him that she doesn't believe she did.

Rolf returns to the group, and tells them that they must bury Luke at first light. The group hunkers down beneath another fallen tree, but Theo cannot sleep. He can smell the drying blood on Luke's coat, which Julian now wears.

The group must work together to save Julian, their most precious asset. Theo's willingness to put her safety before his own is another demonstration of the enormous personal growth he has experienced (and also the increasing depth of his feelings for her).



Though Theo's plan to preserve Julian's safety above everyone else's works, it has devastating consequences. Luke's willingness to sacrifice himself makes him into a Christ-figure and martyr for the group's cause, deepening their responsibility to ensuring its success.



The Fishes lose everything they have saved up in support of their mission to protect Julian. At the moment, things seem hopeless.



The revelation that Luke is the father of Julian's child highlights several things: the failure of the government to institute programs that actually further the search for a cure for or a break in mass infertility; one reason for Julian's attachment to religion and Luke's rituals; and the fault lines and distrust which Theo sensed rippling through the group from his very first meeting with them. Luke's role as a kind of miraculous Christ-figure then makes Julian seem more like a "Virgin Mary" character, bearing a divine child to save a broken world.



Both Julian and Theo have been unable to love, or to find solace in romantic companionship. They bond in this moment over the gap that they seem to share, raising the question of whether they will find redemption through each other.



The remaining Fishes attempt to rest, but they are haunted by both the physical and emotional presence of the devastating loss of one of their own.



CHAPTER 28

At daylight, Rolf, having left the group to explore their surroundings, announces that they cannot stay where they are for long—there is no real shelter, as the woods are not very large. Miriam and Theo bury Luke at the edge of the little forest, and Julian places his prayer shawl into the ditch with his body. Rolf makes no move to help the three of them.

Julian asks Theo to say the Burial Service, and hands him Luke's Bible. Theo speaks an abbreviated version of the service, reading from a passage which describes God as an "everlasting refuge" who "turn[s] man to destruction" again and again, but still continues to create his "children."

Once the service is over, Rolf announces that he is going to get some rest. Tonight, he says, the group will find another car and get moving again. Theo, Miriam, and Julian pick wild blackberries from a hedge and eat them, then the four of them lie down together to sleep.

Rolf's refusal to help bury Luke reveals both his despair and his self-centeredness. His ego has been bruised deeply by Julian's betrayal, but even in the face of the death of a friend and comrade Rolf is unable to overcome his own pride for the sake of his wife or their group.



Julian's attachment to ritual is something that Theo no longer finds ridiculous. He even takes comfort in delivering verses which speak of the eternal love of God and the continuous renewal and redemption of humanity.



Rolf is the only one who did not help bury Luke, and the only one who does not eat the blackberries. This symbolizes his status as an outsider, and foreshadows his impending abandonment of the group.



CHAPTER 29

It is early evening when Theo wakes up. Julian stands over him, and tells him that Rolf has left the group for good. Theo insists that Rolf won't betray them, but Julian points out that he has no reason not to—she betrayed Rolf herself. Theo then decides that Rolf will likely go straight to Xan to deliver the news of Julian's pregnancy in person. Theo is momentarily "physically weakened" by despair, but then feels a "renewal of hope." He tells Miriam and Julian that their original plan holds even in the face of Rolf's betrayal. They will find a refuge deep in the woods and attempt to keep themselves safe from Xan's clutches. Theo plans to walk to the nearest village to find a car as soon as night falls.

Julian's personal betrayal of Rolf has now become the catalyst for Rolf's vengeful betrayal of not just the group, but all the ideals it has held so dearly since its inception. The added layer of danger—the revelation of Julian's pregnancy to a desperate and evil regime—causes the group to cycle through despair and horror, and then a renewed sense of purpose, defiance, and determination to safeguard the precious new life for which they are all responsible. This is a big and redemptive change for Theo especially.



CHAPTER 30

Theo sets off for the nearest village as soon as it is dark. It takes him two hours to get to a little town, where he cases several houses for one with a car. He spots an elderly couple watching television through a window, and rings their doorbell. The man and woman answer the door together, and Theo tells them that he is a member of the Local Council. They let him in, and Theo pulls Jasper's gun on them. He promises not to harm them as long as they do what he says. He tells them that he needs help, and asks for them to point him to food, drink, and their car.

Theo, not just motivated but actually desperate to continue on his new path with the group, begins to commit what he sees as a necessary evil. His own desire ranks before the well-being of this random couple he has chosen to burglarize, symbolizing the ways in which even good intentions can easily dissolve into a destructive abuse of power.



The couple gathers supplies for Theo, who then forces them to lie down on their bed. He ties them up, but when they beg for water and use of the bathroom, Theo gives them some. They tell him that their housekeeper will arrive early in the morning, and Theo tells them that he won't gag them, but will leave the television on loud so that even if they scream, no one will hear. Theo leaves the couple tied up, and goes downstairs to finish taking what he can.

Theo takes the couple's car from their garage, and heads back for Miriam and Julian. He wonders fretfully where the three of them should go, and how they might be able to outrun Xan and his forces. Theo fantasizes about finding a deserted cottage near a spring, where he, Julian, and Miriam can hide out for as long as they need. He convinces himself that soon children will be born elsewhere in the world, and that Xan will have no need to take Julian's child away.

CHAPTER 31

Theo finds his way back to Miriam and Julian when he recognizes the blood-spattered road where Luke was killed. He offers them the meager supplies he was able to steal from the elderly couple, and Miriam and Julian, both parched, share the coffee Theo stole. Miriam tells Theo that Julian has gone into labor, and that there is no way to predict how long it will be before the baby is born.

Theo is suddenly full of "certainty and hope," and decides that the three of them will go to Wychwood Forest—it is near to Oxford, but Theo thinks that it is an unlikely enough spot to buy them more time. He knows that there is a woodshed there where the three of them can take shelter. He instructs Miriam and Julian to get in the car, and begins driving quickly back the way they came.

Though there are no maps, Theo is able to navigate with the help of the stars and the occasional signpost. Julian's labor slows down, introducing the fear that the labor is a false alarm, and that the three of them will have to outrun Xan for days or weeks more. By morning, Julian's contractions have resumed.

Miriam prepares a bit of food for the three of them, allowing Julian to eat more than herself and Theo combined. Theo reaches the edge of the forest, and Miriam and Julian decide to get out and walk a little ways as the terrain grows rough. A deer and her fawn crash through the bushes, narrowly missing the front of the car.

Theo's guilt about tying up this elderly couple is in direct competition with his need to secure Julian and her child's safety. Theo's attempts to make the couple comfortable even as he brutalizes and burglarizes them demonstrate the intertwined nature of power and responsibility, which Theo clumsily wields.



Theo's fantasies of idyllic comfort and safety from the clutches of the government, as well as the renewal and spread of new life on earth, are rendered as both hopelessly idealistic and tantalizingly possibly for the first time in twenty-five years.



Julian going into labor layers what's left of the Fishes' journey with a new sheen of urgency. There is no time for any delay, despair, or uncertainty—the future of the new world begins now.



Theo's idyllic "fantasy" of a place where the three of them can be safe becomes a reality in the form of Theo's memory of Wychwood. He must return to his past to begin his future, and visit a place of isolation to begin the renewal of the world.



The fear and despair that the group cycles through as they worry over whether or not their vision of comfort and safety will indeed become achievable threatens to derail their goals, but luckily they are able to escape from it.



The symbolism of a mother deer with her baby fawn reflects Julian's imminent motherhood. As the group retreats into nature, they near the pure center of life's renewal.



As they move into the heart of the forest, Julian and Miriam get back into the car. Miriam spots a house, but Theo thinks that it is “too obvious.” Soon they come upon a lake, and all three get out to wash themselves. Theo wonders if they should dump the car in the lake, as it is nearly out of gas.

The refreshing waters of the lake can be seen as a sign of the group's retreat into purity as they prepare for an almost holy event. It's also a repository for the trappings of the past and the things earned through greed and ill means.



Before they dump the car, Theo wants to listen to the news. On the radio, there is an announcement that “a small group of dissidents, one man and two women, are traveling in a stolen blue car.” The announcement identifies Theo by name, and states that he is wanted for murder—the elderly woman Theo bound up with her husband has died in the night. Theo switches off the radio, unable to bear his guilt. Miriam deduces that Rolf has reached Xan, but states that their group’s “one comfort” is that he has no way of knowing that Julian is already in labor.

Though things begin to seem dire, and the weight of the charges against Theo and the arrival of Xan and his henchmen presses in, Miriam finds a bit of comfort for all of them in the power of their last secret: that Julian's child is on its way into the world already, and will hopefully be born free of the clutches of any corruption.



Theo, enraged and overwhelmed by his own guilt, berates himself for having actually “enjoyed” threatening the elderly couple on some level, and having found the mission exciting. He lashes out at Julian and Miriam, asking “how many lives will [the] child cost before [it's even] born, and to what purpose.” He predicts a hellish life for the child, and while Julian acknowledges his point of view, she admits that she “can't think of [her child] without joy.”

Theo knows that the power he wielded over the elderly couple, despite his attempts to counterbalance it and make them comfortable, was abusive. Theo, recognizing his own corruption, wonders whether hope in the child's future is completely futile in the face of the corruption of the whole world.



Miriam tells Theo to get a hold of himself. He suggests they dump the car right away. Theo puts the car in gear, and he and Miriam shove it into the lake, where it sinks. Theo takes his **diary** from his pocket and throws that into the lake as well.

Theo, who had already emotionally abandoned his diary, now physically sheds the version of himself who lived within its pages.



Theo asks Miriam and Julian if either of them continue to think of Luke. Julian responds that there will be a time to mourn. Theo suggests they head for the woodshed. They hear a helicopter overhead, and Theo realizes that once Xan knew about the stolen car, he could have easily determined a searchable radius and begun his hunt. Theo hopes that there will be enough time for the child to be born before Xan or his people arrive.

Even in nature, the group is threatened by the advance of the tyrannical forces that seek to interrupt the miracle of nature and life that is about to occur. Still, the group holds on to their hope, and retains faith in the purpose and promise that Julian and her child have come to represent.



Julian points out a beautiful tree covered in berries, and Theo feels suddenly as if the forest has “transformed” from a place of darkness and fear into a kind of “sanctuary.” At that moment, an elated Miriam spots the woodshed.

Julian's presence, as usual, contributes to the melting away of Theo's self-centeredness and his emerging openness to the possibilities of finding lasting happiness and true redemption.



CHAPTER 32

Theo, Miriam, and Julian enter the shed. It is larger than Theo remembered it, but less private, and Theo worries that if Xan comes looking for them in Wychwood they will be found quickly. Theo and Miriam decide to put off lighting a fire, since smoke could give away their cover. Miriam constructs a makeshift bed for Julian and helps her lie down, then tells Theo to “take a walk”—she will not need his help for some time.

Theo sits outside and enjoys a moment of peace, though he keeps his ears open for the sound of any approaching sirens or helicopters. He comprehends, “for the first time,” Julian’s need to give birth in private. He thinks deeply about the role God has in Julian’s life, and decides that the “gulf” between the two of them might be bridged by love. Theo admits that what he feels for Julian is both “mysterious” and “irrational,” but knows deep down that he would give his life for hers.

From inside the shed, Theo hears “a sharp cry”—he runs back in, asking what he can do to help, and Julian tells him to build the fire so that it will be ready to light. Theo builds a fire pit, feeling a childlike pride at having contributed something, and soon Miriam calls for Theo to hold Julian’s hand.

The late stages of Julian’s labor begin, and Miriam instructs Theo to kneel behind Julian and support her while she pushes. Theo is “both participant and spectator” in the event, and wishes with “anguish and envy” that it was his child being brought into the world. Soon, the child is born: it’s a boy. Miriam hands the baby to Julian and her exultant joy is “almost too much for [Theo]” to bear.

Miriam instructs Theo to heat the kettle so that Julian can have a warm drink, but as Theo prepares to light the fire he knocks the kettle full of water over in his excitement, leaving them with nothing to drink. Miriam comforts Theo as he starts to chastise himself, and she offers to go out and get more supplies. Theo insists Miriam stay behind and offers to go in her place, but Miriam tells him that Julian wants Theo with her most now. She instructs him to try and get the baby to latch to Julian’s breast, and prepares to go. Theo thanks Miriam and embraces her. When he releases her she runs into the woods.

Theo, seized with hope and desire to ensure Julian’s safety, is perhaps a little too anxious. Miriam helps to soothe his nerves by suggesting he take some time for himself. Theo, once “self-obsessed,” now can hardly even conceive of putting himself first, signaling that he has undergone a major change.



The love Theo feels for Julian is total and unselfish—he has finally allowed himself to be open to the burden of shouldering someone else’s happiness, comfort, and safety, and finds that despite the differences between them there is only the desire to more completely bridge those differences.



Theo is desperate and proud to help in any way he can, revealing the unselfish and outwardly-oriented nature he has developed over the course of the events of the novel.



Theo retains a little bit of selfishness, though, in the face of the actual realization of the event he’s waited for so long: the birth of Julian’s child. As “spectator,” he is neither the father of the child nor Julian’s lover, and is firmly on the outside. This causes a twinge of jealousy within Theo, despite his joy and awe.



Miriam leaves Julian and Theo despite knowing the dangers that await her out in the woods. Her faith in Theo’s abilities to care for Julian and her child, though, reveal that the change in Theo is readily apparent to others, and that he has been truly redeemed by his love and compassion for Julian.



CHAPTER 33

The baby nurses, and Theo lies with Julian on the soiled birthing sheet. Despite the stench, Theo has “never known such peace.” After a while, Julian asks how long it has been since Miriam left. Theo checks his watch and realizes that it’s been more than an hour. Julian implores Theo to go out and find her—she promises Theo that she and her child will be all right, and the way she looks at her son nearly “unman[s]” Theo. He doesn’t want to leave Julian—he wants to be with her and the child when Xan inevitably arrives—but Julian insists.

Theo runs through the woods, knowing that if Miriam has been captured by the SSP there is nothing he can do to help her. When Theo reaches the nearby house where Miriam went to find supplies, he finds her inside—“[strangled] and dumped into a large wicker chair.” Horrified, Theo plans to leave right away with the “meager gleanings” Miriam gathered before she was murdered, but knows that he cannot leave her in such a state. Theo loosens the cord from Miriam’s neck, lifts her body, and brings her outside, where he rests her beneath a tree. He takes the supplies and runs back to the woods.

Theo knows that Xan and the police are nearby, and that more than likely they are watching him. He knows too, though, that Xan is not expecting Julian to have given birth yet. He wonders if Xan had Miriam killed in a show of strength, as a way to bully Theo and Julian into silence about the child’s true parentage. He thinks that Xan may kill both Julian and Theo and claim the child as his own.

Theo returns to the shed and finds Julian and the child resting peacefully. Julian understands that Miriam must be dead, and begins to weep. Theo urges Julian to “remember the baby,” and gives her food and water. Julian worries that the authorities will try to separate her from Theo. Theo assures her that “nothing and no one” will ever separate them. He strokes her bad hand and the two sit in silence until Julian says she’s heard something. She thinks that Xan has arrived.

Theo places Jasper’s last remaining bullet into the revolver and exits the shed. Xan is standing outside, alone. Theo can see that he is wearing a holster beneath his sweater. The **Coronation Ring** “glitter[s]” on Xan’s left hand. Xan asks Theo if the rumors are true, and Theo confirms them. Xan lets out a “gasp of relief,” then tells Theo that though he does not want to frighten Julian, he has brought “everything she needs” to have the child in “comfort and safety.” It’s clear that he does not know the child has been born yet.

Finally, Theo has found “peace” in being a custodian of the happiness and well-being of another person. This symbolizes a redemptive moment of renewal for Theo, as well as a turn toward real hope for both him and Julian, not to mention the human race. At the same time, Theo realizes that Julian’s love for her child dwarfs her love for him—he is “unman[ned]” by the child’s power over Julian.



Theo, on some level, knows what has happened to Miriam before he even discovers her body—the totality of Xan’s power is so vast that Miriam could not even make a short journey without falling victim to his regime’s clutches. Theo’s decision to dignify Miriam’s death, as the rest of the Fishes did for Luke, represents a moment of growth away from and out of isolation, solitude, and lack of responsibility for others.



Theo, for the moment, has a little bit of power over Xan with the knowledge that Julian’s child has been born. However, once Xan arrives and discovers the child, he will have the authority and ability to consolidate even more power than ever before.



The loss of Miriam and the despair it brings binds Theo and Julian even closer together, but the threat of the outside world’s intrusion looms closer than ever. Julian and Theo must confront the power and quasi-mythological status that Julian’s child has given them before they are able to share in its joy alone for any length of time.



Xan and Theo’s confrontation is marked by a mutual display of power and ambition. Both men want to possess Julian, but for very different reasons. Theo loves her deeply and truly, and she represents to him hope and redemption. Xan sees Julian as a vessel for even greater power, and desires her comfort and safety not out of compassion but utility.



Theo accuses Xan of murdering every member of The Five Fishes, and Xan admits to it. He tells Theo that he does not want to or plan to kill him—in fact, he says that he needs Theo. Theo asks Xan to tell him what he plans to do once he gets a hold of the baby. Xan replies that the child, if born a boy, will be “the father of a new race,” and may even be able to “breed again [with Julian] herself.” He tells Theo that he will most likely marry Julian, and ensure she is looked after and cared for. He tells Theo that Theo will have “anything [he] want[s],” and can even rejoin the Council. Theo refuses.

Xan implores Theo to remember their happy times at **Woolcombe**, and tells Theo that he has no desire to kill him. Theo tells Xan he will “have to” if he wants to get to the child, and reaches for his gun. Xan attempts to call Theo out as bluffing, and warns him not to “romanticize” Julian—she is a “whore,” Xan says.

Xan reaches for his gun and fires at Theo, but misses. Theo fires and shoots Xan right through the heart. Theo walks over to Xan’s dead body, and reaches down and takes the **Coronation Ring** off of Xan’s finger. The Council members emerge from the woods, along with six Grenadiers. Theo holds up the ring and “deliberately” places it on his finger, announcing his power to the Council. He informs them that the child has been born, and they ask to see him. Theo tells them he must secure Julian’s consent first, and goes back into the shed.

Julian is grateful to see Theo alive. The two embrace, and Theo tells her that Xan is dead and the Council has arrived. He asks if she will show the child to them. She agrees, but asks Theo what will happen next. Theo realizes that she is terrified. He promises to never leave her.

Theo invites the Council members in and orders the Grenadiers to take Xan’s body away. Once inside, Harriet and Felicia approach Julian and the child. Harriet reaches out a finger, and the baby grasps it. Carl, moved, proclaims: “So it begins again.”

Theo spurns Xan’s offer of more power and authority, revealing his true devotion to Julian and the dissipation of the “self-obsessi[ve]” tendencies that have adversely affected every relationship he’s ever known. Xan’s view of Julian as an object for “breeding” and a symbol of renewal rather than as a whole person with wants and needs reveals his inhumanity and inability to reject or overcome his self-obsession.



Even as he attempts to win Theo over by appealing to his soft spot for shared history and personal memory, Xan is unable to hide his disdain for and cruelty toward Julian—this, Theo cannot abide.



Theo has just murdered the most powerful man in England, and no doubt one of the most powerful people on the planet. Theo retrieves Xan’s ring and dons it as a symbol of his triumph over Xan, and the unassailable truth of his new power. Theo now wields the power of the ring, the power of his victory over Xan, and, in many ways, the power of Julian’s child. This is a triumphant moment, but also an ominous one—will Theo just become another Xan, absolutely corrupted by absolute power?



Theo’s faith in the future is renewed, and he is redeemed by his promise to Julian—to stay by her side, and to claim responsibility for her and her happiness.



The Council’s ecstatic meeting with Julian and her child reveals their collectively restored hope—a deep human hope that extends even beyond the limits of politics and power. Carl’s proclamation that humanity has “begun again” carries both hope and caution.



"It begins again," Theo thinks, "with jealousy, with treachery, with violence, with this ring on my finger." He considers the **Coronation Ring**, and how he donned it as "a gesture to assert authority and ensure protection." He wonders if he needs to wear the ring. He realizes that all of Xan's "power [is] within his grasp" with or without it. He believes that he must take Xan's place "for a time" in order to remedy the ills of society. He wonders if the intoxication he feels is the same intoxication Xan felt, and perhaps is the reason Xan was unwilling to relinquish his power.

Theo asks the Council to leave him and Julian alone. After the Council members leave the shed, Julian notices Theo wearing the **ring**, and tells him it "wasn't made for [his] finger." Theo feels a twinge of "irritation," and tells Julian that the ring is "useful" for the moment. Seemingly content with Theo's answer, Julian asks him to christen the baby. Theo places a fresh towel beneath Julian's legs, and makes the sign of the cross on the baby's forehead "with a thumb wet with his own tears and [Julian's] blood."

Despite the joyful moment, Theo is both fearful and irritated by the way in which humanity has "begun again." His fascination with the ring—and with the promise of limitless power and enormous responsibility it carries—betrays the ambition he has perhaps felt all along, but has been unable to confront or accept.



The book ends on a note of both hope and fatalism. Theo has conquered the evil that he and the Fishes wanted to eradicate, at least as represented in one tyrannical man, and Julian's child has been safely born. Now that Theo has such a great deal of power, though, it remains to be seen whether he will use that opportunity for good, or fall into the repetitious pattern of self-obsession and disregard for others that plagued Xan's rule. The novel then ends with another image of Christian symbolism (the sign of the cross) reimagined for a dark modern world.





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