

# **Blindness Study Guide**

## **Blindness by José Saramago**

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# Plot Summary

A man suddenly goes blind for no apparent reason. As a doctor tries to assign an etiology, the condition begins to spread rapidly as if caused by a pathogen. Within days, there are hundreds of newly blind people and within a few months, the entire nation has gone blind. The government responds initially by creating large quarantine areas where infected persons are forcibly held without recourse to medical care or outside assistance. As the disease sweeps the nation, first social services then law enforcement completely fail, leaving the country in a state of chaos as the strong begin to prey upon the weak. Numerous crimes and outrages are perpetrated even as hundreds of thousands begin to starve and die. One small group of blind people coalesces around the leadership of a woman who - apparently uniquely - does not go blind. She cares for her new friends for many days until the disease begins to run its course and the afflicted begin to regain their sight, only to discover a world full of filthiness and destruction.

The novel begins with the apparent first, or index, case of an emerging infectious disease, which causes a form of blindness by causing the infected individual to see only a milky whiteness. The first blind man struggles to get home and then obtain medical assistance. Within hours, all those with whom he has had contact, including the ophthalmologist, are also blind. The doctor contacts the ministry of health and raises the alarm. Within days, the newly blind are forcibly incarcerated in an old mental hospital where they receive no medical care and are completely isolated from the outside world. Over the course of about a week, scores and then hundreds of additional blinded people are incarcerated until the facility is beyond any reasonable capacity. Unbeknownst to the inmates, the disease continues to sweep through the city and then the entire nation until everyone is blind.

One woman, the wife of the ophthalmologist, is apparently immune to the disease and does not go blind. However, in order to accompany her husband into quarantine, she claims to be blind. She witnesses the gradual descent into filth and horror faced by the inmates of the asylum. Armed guards shoot those trying to escape. Sanitary conditions are appalling and food deliveries are uncertain and inadequate. Overcrowding soon leaves many newcomers no recourse but to sleep in hallways full of excrement and refuse, and the dead go unburied for days. The asylum gradually forms a type of loose organization around the six main hospital wards.

Eventually one group of inmates forms a brutal gang and dominates the increasingly erratic food deliveries. They will release the food only for money or valuables until all of the valuable items have been collected and surrendered. The gang then demands that each ward, in turn, send all of the women to the gang for sexual exploitation. After prolonged arguments, the inmates feel compelled to acquiesce and several weeks of brutal gang rapes and sexual murders ensue. Finally, unable to continue, the blind woman retaliates by murdering the leader of the gang and several of the other gang members. Later, another abused woman sacrifices herself by starting a fire that kills the remaining gang members and consumes the entire facility. The inmates then realize they are no longer under guard and the survivors wander away.



Led by the only woman who can see, a small group of survivors walks to the nearby city where they manage a subsistence survival during several days of hardship. Freed from the horrors of the asylum, they come to realize that the entire city is in relatively the same condition. Their uncertain and incredibly negative future begins to overwhelm even the most optimistic. Amidst all of the chaos and horror, however, new relationships develop and old relationships are strengthened. Just as it seems that all is lost, the disease completes its infectious cycle and sight begins to return to the citizens of the beleaguered city and nation.



# Chapter 1

## Chapter 1 Summary

A man suddenly goes blind for no apparent reason. As a doctor tries to assign an etiology, the condition begins to spread rapidly as if caused by a pathogen. Within days, there are hundreds of newly blind people and within a few months, the entire nation has gone blind. The government responds initially by creating large quarantine areas where infected persons are forcibly held without recourse to medical care or outside assistance. As the disease sweeps the nation, first social services then law enforcement completely fail, leaving the country in a state of chaos as the strong begin to prey upon the weak. Numerous crimes and outrages are perpetrated even as hundreds of thousands begin to starve and die. One small group of blind people coalesces around the leadership of a woman who - apparently uniquely - does not go blind. She cares for her new friends for many days until the disease begins to run its course and the afflicted begin to regain their sight, only to discover a world full of filthiness and destruction.

A man, known as "the first man," stops his car at a red light. When the light turns green, the first man does not accelerate but stays in his car gesticulating. A traffic disturbance ensues and other motorists and pedestrians approach the first man who announces he has suddenly gone blind. A brief scene of confusion ensues until another man, known as "the thief," approaches and volunteers to take the first man home.

The thief drives the first man home and accompanies him inside the apartment building as far as the first man's apartment door. The thief offers to sit with the first man, but the first man, suddenly suspicious, declines the offer. The thief opens the first man's apartment door and then, retaining the first man's keys, leaves. The first man enters the apartment and tries to orient himself - he accidentally knocks over a vase that shatters on the floor. He instinctively tries to clean up the glass fragments but quickly cuts open his hand. He crudely bandages the wound, locates a couch, and sits down to wait for his wife to return home.

When the first man's wife arrives, she is angry to see the broken vase on the floor. As she cleans, she notices blood and becomes concerned. She seeks out her husband who informs her he is blind. She thinks he is joking but he assures her he is blind. She quickly tends to his wound, then telephones an ophthalmologist and schedules an emergency appointment. Then she guides her husband to the street and they search for his car until they eventually realize it has been stolen. The man immediately suspects the thief has stolen the automobile.

The first man and his wife make their way to the doctor's office. The doctor, known as "the doctor," sees him immediately, before his other patients who are already waiting. One of the other patients, a prostitute, wears dark glasses. Another patient wears a black eye-patch over one eye. Some of the waiting patients complain about the doctor seeing the first man before them - but the patient with an eye-patch defends the first

man, claiming that as the remaining patients are not blind the first man should receive preferential treatment. After a thorough examination, the doctor announces that the first man's eyes are physically perfect - there is nothing wrong.

## Chapter 1 Analysis

The first chapter introduces the atypical writing style used throughout the novel. Sentences are long and complex, often spanning entire paragraphs or even pages. Punctuation, aside from commas, is sparse. Dialogue is not attributed beyond contextual hints, and is not set apart from other text by quotation marks. Thus, it is often difficult and frequently impossible to determine which character says a given line of dialogue or even, in some cases, if a particular sequence of text is actually dialogue. Although this can be understood as an affected textual representation of the social difficulties experienced by someone who is blind, it should be remembered that all of the author's fiction is presented in a similar style.

Another atypical aspect of the novel is that the principle characters are completely unnamed and, in general, only lightly described. The first chapter introduces several of the novel's main characters, including the first man who goes blind, the thief who steals the first man's car, the doctor who initially inspects the first man's newly blind eyes, the girl with dark glasses, the boy with a squint, and the man with the black eye-patch. These unnamed characters, largely presented as stereotypes, can be seen as representative of a class of person rather than a unique character. Nevertheless, each of them possesses certain unique traits or habits that set them apart as individuals. For example, it is ironic that the man with the black eye-patch is blind - traditionally blind - in one eye, yet still retains half of his normal sight. This allows him to symbolically bridge the two worlds of the novel.

At this point in the novel, the first man is the only blind individual. Unlike typical blindness, however, he sees milky-whiteness instead of blackness. Also unlike typical blindness, the first man's blindness happens immediately and without any warning or symptoms - one moment he sees perfectly and the next moment he is blind. His visit to the doctor's office is perplexing in that the doctor is unable to find any physical reason for the man's blindness.



# Chapter 2

## Chapter 2 Summary

The thief leaves the first man's apartment and steals the first man's automobile. The thief begins a long drive to the garage where the stolen automobile will be processed. The thief becomes nervous and agitated and he concentrates on his driving in an attempt to avoid suspicious behavior. After some time the thief is so nervous he pulls the car to the side of the road and gets out for a brief respite. As he stands on the side of the road near the stolen automobile, the thief suddenly goes blind.

Elsewhere the doctor treats his remaining patients as he considers the first man's inexplicable blindness. That evening the doctor goes home and spends some time consulting the medical literature about blindness but is not able to discover anything similar. The doctor speaks with his wife, known only as "the doctor's wife," about the first man's blindness. Then the couple goes to bed and the doctor's wife quickly falls asleep while the doctor suddenly realizes he has gone blind.

Elsewhere, a young woman who earlier in the day had visited the doctor's office for treatment of conjunctivitis, goes to a hotel and meets a man in the lounge. Next, the young woman, a prostitute, identified as "the girl with dark glasses," accompanies the man to a hotel room where they have sex. In the throes of passion, the girl with dark glasses realizes that she can only see a milky whiteness and she briefly assumes the visual defect to be caused by her sexual ecstasy.

## Chapter 2 Analysis

In Chapter Two several people go blind, including the doctor, the thief, and the girl with dark glasses. Their blindness proceeds exactly like the first man's blindness - one moment their vision is normal and the next moment they can only see a milky whiteness. All of the people who go blind have had contact of some sort with the first man - the thief stole his automobile, the doctor examined his eyes, and the girl with dark glasses who was another of the doctor's patients. Thus, the first man can be identified as the so-called index case in a spreading epidemic. The disease appears to have an incubation time - the time from initial infection to the time of symptomatic expression - of only a few hours and seems also to be incredibly infectious. The girl with dark glasses is also introduced in chapter two, and is another principle character in the novel.





# Chapter 3

## Chapter 3 Summary

A policeman escorts the thief to his home; never realizing the man is a car thief. The thief's wife immediately assumes the thief has been apprehended for some criminal behavior and is nearly relieved when she is informed that her husband has gone blind. Elsewhere, the girl with dark glasses realizes she has gone blind and begins to scream. The man she has just had sex with quickly dresses and flees the disturbance. The hotel staff wishes to avoid further complications and ejects the girl with dark glasses, still improperly dressed, onto the street where a policeman hails a taxi for her. The taxi takes her to her parents' home.

The doctor, meanwhile, tries to sleep but is unable to due to worrying over his own recent blindness. He does not disturb his wife but stays beside her throughout the night and considers his own situation. When she awakens in the morning, he tells her he is blind and they discuss the possible ramifications. The doctor comes to the realization that some type of infectious agent has possibly caused his blindness and he angrily denounces himself for potentially infecting his wife with the disease.

The doctor then places a telephone call to the ministry of health and tries to report a potentially new epidemic. He is ignored by a bored functionary who refuses to take his report seriously. The doctor then calls the hospital association with which he is involved and reports the information to a colleague. Several hours later, the ministry of health contacts the doctor for further information and then informs him that they will send a medical team to pick him up for transportation to a medical facility. The doctor also learns that the ministry of health intends to take his medical files into their possession. The doctor's wife packs his bag and also packs her own bag. When the medical team arrives, they tell the doctor's wife that she may not accompany her husband because they are taking him into quarantine. The doctor's wife immediately announces that she, too, has suddenly gone blind, and is therefore allowed to accompany her husband into the ambulance.

## Chapter 3 Analysis

The doctor dwells on his unfortunate condition throughout the night and eventually concludes that the blindness's origin is best explained as a symptom of an infectious disease. The doctor realizes the disease would be highly contagious and especially fast acting and tries to alert the ministry of health in the unnamed country. Although the ministry of health ignores his reports, the doctor, of course, has far more credibility with his own associates and so within a few hours the ministry of health is brought into action to ascertain the danger and attempt to control the epidemic.



The ministry of health is not portrayed as particularly efficient - instead of taking a doctor's report seriously, a minor functionary dismisses it out of hand. This is certainly not a suitable approach to a potentially new and devastating pathogen. This careless attitude certainly foreshadows future grave repercussions following the ministry of health's inability to perform its function during a crisis.

It is interesting to read the text where the doctor's wife announces her own blindness - unlike the previous characters, she does not actually "go blind"; she simply announces that she has gone blind. This crucial difference heavily foreshadows her actual condition, which becomes apparent in chapter 4.



# Chapter 4

## Chapter 4 Summary

The minister of health and other government officials meet to discuss the public response to what is widely assumed to be an epidemic of a newly emerging infectious disease. The officials are callous and sinister and eventually decide to use an abandoned mental hospital facility to quarantine by force all those suffering from blindness as well as all those who have been potentially exposed to this presumed disease. The minister of health determines that, to save money, the patients will be largely responsible for policing themselves and no actual medical assistance will be rendered during quarantine. The quarantine will last as long as necessary; perhaps the patients will be quarantined for the remainder of their lifespan.

The doctor and the doctor's wife are driven to the mental hospital and told to proceed inside. They are not escorted or assisted in any way. The doctor quickly surmises that his wife is not in fact blind but has lied in order to accompany him. The doctor's wife tells him this is indeed the case but implores him not to send her away as she presumes that at any moment she, too, will become blind. A few minutes later four other blind people arrive - the first man, the thief, the girl in dark glasses, and a young boy, called "the boy with the squint." The girl in dark glasses tries to comfort the boy with the squint who is crying about leaving his mother. After a brief discussion, the doctor discovers the first man, the girl with dark glasses, and the boy with the squint had all been his patients. During this time, the doctor's wife pretends also to be blind.

The several characters locate themselves in a large dormitory-style room and take beds. An announcement comes over the public address system. The announcement consists of fifteen separate concepts. In essence, the patients are told that they must remain completely isolated and any who attempt to leave the hospital will be killed. No assistance of any kind will be offered to the patients - if the hospital catches fire, it will be allowed to burn, patients who die must be buried by the survivors, etc. The patients must police themselves and organize themselves as they see fit. Supplies and food will be delivered once each day and must be distributed as the patients decide. There will be no communication with the outside world. The quarantine will last for an indefinite period.

The doctor is initially proposed as a potential leader, but the thief objects, saying that they are all equal. The first man eventually ascertains the identity of the thief and accuses him of stealing the automobile. The thief in turn accuses the first man of stealing his vision and a physical fight erupts which lasts for several minutes. The boy with the squint announces he must use the restroom. The doctor's wife claims to be familiar with the layout of the facility because of previous exploration, and the people join hands behind her so she can lead them to the restroom. During the trip, the thief begins forcibly to fondle the girl with dark glasses' breast and neck and she lashes out and kicks him in the leg, her spike high heel plunging deep into his thigh. The doctor's



wife realizes the wound is very serious because it is bleeding profusely. The doctor's wife leads the doctor and the thief away to a supply room where she bandages the wound and staunches the bleeding. She then leads the entire group to a restroom. The boy with the squint has already urinated in his pants but does not tell anyone. The remaining characters use the restroom and then return to their beds.

## Chapter 4 Analysis

Chapter 4 establishes the mental hospital as the principle setting of much of the novel. The patients, little more than inmates, are distributed into two classes - those who are blind and those who are suspected of being infected. The two groups are parceled into the two wings of the hospital and prohibited from intermingling. The blind are thus left to fend for themselves in strange surroundings. Even finding the restroom or returning to one's selected bed becomes a time-consuming ordeal. This strongly foreshadows the change in lifestyle that accompanies blindness.

The ministry of health's analysis of the situation concludes that an infectious agent capable of rapid transmission causes the blindness. The ministry refers to the disease as "the white sickness." The ministry of health's improbable course of action is essentially to forcibly impound the sick and potentially sick in quarantine without any medical assistance or any organizational guidance. Any patients who try to escape are to be immediately shot, and supplies will be delivered once per day. Further assistance is not to be rendered. In effect, the ministry of health has decided to warehouse those suffering from the disease until they either die or have all recovered. The sick are, therefore, completely isolated and must form rules and society. This task is obviously compounded by the fact that everyone is blind in a new environment.

The doctor's wife, however, is not blind, although she assumes that at any moment she will go blind. She takes caution to ensure that her secret is not given away. For example, when she leads the others to the restroom she deliberately takes a wrong turn and then slowly backtracks, claiming that she is locating the restroom by smell.

The married thief finds himself aroused by the proximity of the young girl with dark glasses, and her perfume intensifies his sexual desire. By chance, he is behind her in the hand-holding line of characters proceeding to the restroom. He begins to caress her neck but she bats away his hand. He then grabs her breast and begins to fondle her, whereupon she justifiably lashes out and deliberately kicks her spike heel toward his groin, although she afterward claims that his advances threw her off balance and the kick was an unintended consequence of her instability. It is interesting to note that the doctor's wife is more aware of the serious nature of the injury than even the thief is. This brief but disturbing scene is symbolic of the types of situations that will shortly arise within the confines of the mental hospital. The thief's disregard for social convention foreshadows his future actions as well as the actions of other characters. The scene also foreshadows the eventual occasional discoveries that the doctor's wife is not really blind as the thief begins to wonder how she is able to accomplish difficult tasks so easily.



# Chapter 5

## Chapter 5 Summary

In the early morning of the next day, the doctor's wife wakes up and considers the situation. She realizes that no assistance will be forthcoming, and considers the thief's attitude of complete freedom. She feels that the blind are like dogs without names. They identify themselves only by smell. The thief groans and she moves to him and inspects his wound. In just a few hours, it has turned black and his bed is soaked in blood, his head feverish. The doctor's wife dreads becoming blind and wonders when it will happen.

Five more blind inmates arrive and fumble for beds. They had previously been in the other wing of the hospital but had been evicted upon losing their site. One of the new blind inmates announces herself as Number Five and it is discovered that she is the first man's wife. The thief continues to groan, the girl with dark glasses apologizes to the thief, and he in turn apologizes to her. The public address system crackles to life and announces the first food delivery. The doctor and his wife go to the front gate to pick up the food. They shout at the armed guards, requesting medicines, but their requests are refused and they threatened with being shot if they do not return to the building. The food is insufficient but eagerly consumed. Then many more inmates arrive from the outside world. The public address system makes the evening announcement of the rules. The announcement is received with confusion, complaints, and fear.

In the evening, the doctor's wife again checks on the thief and finds his condition worsened. The thief tells her he knows she can see but she denies the ability. Later that night when everyone else is asleep, the thief sneaks out of the ward and crawls painfully to the gates. The thief intends to call to the guards and demand medical assistance but upon seeing his pale ghostly face, the young guard raises his rifle and shoots him in the head.

## Chapter 5 Analysis

Chapter 5 takes place on the third day of the novel's primary timeline. More blind people continue to arrive and the conditions begin to rapidly deteriorate. It becomes quickly apparent that overcrowding and food shortages will become commonplace. The sleeping area begins to stink and accumulated filth begins to pose health hazards. Contrary to the suggestion that the people organize themselves and select representatives, the blind seem more inclined simply to exist in their misery. There is much complaining and bickering but a leader does not arise.

The thief's execution demonstrates that something is terribly amiss with the outside world. The soldier who shoots the thief is alone on sentry duty and does not hesitate to kill the blind, obviously sick and helpless, man behind a distant gate. He is apparently



not reprimanded for his actions. Clearly, the outside world is in turmoil when a summary military execution of an imprisoned civilian is simply accepted as normal.

The doctor's wife's introspection about the inmates becoming as dogs is an integral theme of the novel. Later, the inmates will refer to each other as pigs, hyenas, and animals. As the hospital begins to fill with filth and feces, the inmates begin, more and more, to behave as violent brutes and live an animalistic life of eating, defecating, sexual union, and violence. Thus, the doctor's wife's musings foreshadow the future where people cease to be individually significant.



# Chapter 6

## Chapter 6 Summary

The thief is buried in a shallow grave in the yard. A group of internees waits around the front of the hospital for the next food delivery. When it arrives, the soldiers are nervous and as the crowd of blind people surges forward, several soldiers open fire and begin to shoot down blind people. In all, nine internees are killed. The other internees haul away the food and the bodies of the dead and, after eating, bury them. The doctor's wife attracts some attention by her ability to perform complex tasks. Although the girl with dark glasses will never realize it, one of the dead men is the man who she met at the hotel for sex - the man who had abandoned her when she went blind.

That evening the public address system makes the routine announcement of the rules. It is received with fear and numerous arguments start. The latrines grow filthy and all of the toilet paper is used up. Some of the blind people begin to have sex with each other.

## Chapter 6 Analysis

Chapter 6 takes place on the fourth day of the novel's primary timeline. The most significant event related is clearly the mass shooting of the blind inmates. Consider that the inmates are known to be blind and are also physically locked behind iron gates, and yet the soldiers felt so threatened that they opened fire and continued to shoot until several inmates had been executed and the remainder had fled. Clearly, a type of mass hysteria has gripped the outside world, including the soldier. The cause of the white sickness and its mode of transmission are not known. Many of the soldiers apparently feel that a blind person infects a sighted person merely by turning their blind eyes toward them.

The hospital continues to descend into animal-like conditions. The latrines are full of feces and urine and since the toilet paper has been exhausted, most of the inmates walk about stinking of feces. Water is not readily available and the inmates have not bathed. The stench becomes pervasive and horrible. Irrespective of the stench, the inmates who have arrived with their sexual partners begin to copulate without regard to privacy.



# Chapter 7

## Chapter 7 Summary

In the evening, the doctor's wife realizes she has forgotten to wind her watch. The other inmates have long ago stopped winding theirs. The doctor and his wife have sex quietly. In the morning, the girl with dark glasses loudly blames herself for the death of the thief. A blind man wryly recalls the idiom that in the land of the blind the one-eyed man is king. The morning food delivery is received and numerous people steal food and hide in corners to eat more than their share.

Outside the soldiers threaten to shoot any blind people that approach the gates too closely. As the soldiers watch the blind trying to locate food, they compare them to pigs and refer to them as idiots. On the other hand, the blind people feel that the soldiers are doing a good and responsible job given the dire circumstances. In the afternoon, two hundred more blind inmates arrive and are herded into the hospital, which is now filled beyond capacity. The blind people arrive in vans and the soldiers insist that the drivers are now potentially contaminated and force them inside the compound. One driver refuses and is summarily executed. Widespread fighting and bickering accompany the huge influx of new people.

## Chapter 7 Analysis

Chapter 7 takes place on the fifth day of the novel's primary timeline. The doctor's wife realizes that she has forgotten to wind her watch, and thus is unable to tell what time it is. This is interesting in that she is the only character able to tell what time it is anyway - the other characters simply wake up and assume, often incorrectly, that a new day has begun. They likewise perform tasks, such as burying corpses, during the black of night because they mistakenly believe it is during the day.

The chapter also prominently features an atypical narrative device in the use of the plural first-person, or "we," in the narrative structure. Thus, the point of view flickers from the standard third-person omniscient briefly to the bizarre first-person-plural omniscient; the reader becomes complicit with the narrator in watching the terrible and obscene scenes being played out within the mental hospital. Indeed, the irony of the setting continues to become more evident as the blind inmates begin to behave more and more like lunatics - a fact plainly commented upon by the soldiers who watch them stumbling about looking for food that clearly is in front of their faces. The sarcastic inmate's comment about a one-eyed man in the kingdom of the blind is another in a string of colloquialisms that run throughout the novel. In this case, however, it foreshadows the arrival of a truly one-eyed man who will gain some prominence as a type of a moral leader in the chaos of the hospital.





# Chapter 8

## Chapter 8 Summary

One of the new blind people to arrive is the man with the black eye-patch. He has brought with him a small hand-held radio that operates on batteries. By chance, he ends up in the same ward of the hospital as the doctor, the doctor's wife, and the other principle characters of the novel. This ward retains some semblance of cleanliness and order while the other five wards become progressively more filthy and disorganized. The various characters sit around the radio and listen to music and news. When the doctor's wife hears the time announced, she winds and sets her watch. The news also announces that a new government is being formed.

The man with the black eye-patch then recounts his experiences of the past several days, noting that hundreds of cases of blindness have arisen every day. Social chaos has erupted. Bus, automobile, and airplane crashes have occurred with alarming frequency as the vehicle operators are suddenly blinded. Blind people roam the streets begging for help. Many of the internees conclude they are better off being imprisoned than abandoned. They begin to talk and they tell their various going-blind stories, noting the last image seen. One person, described only as an unknown voice, was visiting an art museum and describes several of the paintings that are considered by the other people.

## Chapter 8 Analysis

Chapter 7 takes place on the fifth day of the novel's primary timeline. By this time, the hospital has been filled to capacity. The hospital is divided into two wings, each wing with three wards, and each ward with forty beds. Thus, the hospital's bed count is 240 individuals. There are more than 240 individuals quarantined within the hospital, even considering the ten patients who have been executed by the guards. Several people are reduced to sleeping on the floor within the filthy hallways. Because of the subtle influence of the doctor's wife, the ward containing the principle characters is slightly cleaner and slightly more organized than most of the other wards. Ironically, the doctor's wife is the only character who is able to realize the fact. The stench of excrement, urine, and body odor permeates the facility and continues to grow. The latrines are overloaded and stop functioning and the meager piped water is filthy and disgusting, unfit and insufficient even for bathing.

The man with the black eye-patch was originally introduced in Chapter 1 where he was a patient waiting to be seen by the doctor. He originally had voiced compassion for the first man and had urged the other patients, including the girl with the dark glasses and the boy with the squint, to be considerate and let the blind man be attended to immediately. He had commented that they, still sighted, were the fortunate ones. The man with the black eye-patch is a symbolic character; naturally blind in one eye and

sighted in the other until contracting the white sickness, he somewhat bridges the two worlds. He also possessed a radio, which is the only link to the external world. The other characters instinctively view him as a sort of moral compass and defer to his opinions on several subsequent occasions.

When he first arrives in the ward, the doctor's wife recognizes him because of his unique appearance. By a stratagem, the doctor then claims to have recognized his voice. This is how they are introduced to each other and are able to realize they have a prior relationship. Other characters, including the girl with dark glasses and the first man then realize they, too, have a relationship with the doctor. Thus a type of social network, however tenuous, is established.



# Chapter 9

## Chapter 9 Summary

The halls, rooms, and grounds of the mental hospital become festooned with feces and other filth. The doctor's wife agonizes over her unique status. She first decides to tell the others that she can see and then decides she will not tell them.

Several days pass by and then one group of people forms a sort of gang and dominates the food. When the food arrives, these people, all men and twenty in number, use cudgels and violence to keep the others away from the food. In addition, the leader of the thugs has a handgun and threatens to murder anyone who opposes him. The thugs take all of the food back to their ward and hoard it. After a few hours, they announce that anyone wanting food must buy it. The thugs demand all valuables. After much serious contention and argument, the other inmates collect all of their valuables and surrender them to the thugs who carefully catalog the goods. The doctor takes a bag of watches, rings, and other items to the thugs and notes that one of the thugs is a so-called legitimate blind man - a man blind from birth, not blind from the white sickness. This blind man, called the "Chronicler," uses an anaglyptography machine with which he records Braille records.

## Chapter 9 Analysis

As conditions worsen, one group of thugs organizes around a leader who is physically imposing and also possesses a handgun. Using sticks and metal bars stripped from the beds, these thugs dominate the food and hoard it within their ward. They eject about twenty blind people from the ward so that only the hardened thugs and a single naturally blind man remain in their gang. In the extended sociological analogy of the novel, these thugs symbolize a military *junta* or, perhaps, a totalitarian Fascist regime - they are the new government and they control all of the power and all of the food.

The economic plan envisioned by the thugs is clearly unsustainable - they demand payment for food but of course, items of worth are limited and cannot be reliably obtained or renewed whereas the food is tenuously delivered every day. Therefore, the first payment of valuable items is essentially the only payment possible. Indeed, the other inmates collect more or less all of their belongings and give them over to the thugs as their first and only payment. The thugs then parcel out the food but only give a portion of what the inmates were previously receiving as their fair share. Curiously, the thugs are particularly meticulous in ascertaining the value of each item and careful to note down which ward supplied which item. This is reminiscent of the Nazi regime's meticulous record keeping.



# Chapter 10

## Chapter 10 Summary

The man with the black eye-patch withheld his radio from payment to the thugs. He decides, however, to keep the radio as secret as possible so he therefore listens to it only on low volume and in secret. He then spreads the news he gleans by word of mouth and as the news is relayed from person to person, it becomes distorted or exaggerated. One day the news announcer stops mid-sentence and announces he, too, has gone blind. The station then goes off the air and another station cannot be found.

The doctor's wife considers a pair of scissors that she has in her possession. They are long and very sharp and she seems fascinated with their keen edge and sharp points. She hides the scissors by hanging them on a nail high on the wall in plain sight. One day she sneaks through the mental hospital and spies on the thugs. In the hallway, she walks by people having sex amidst the excrement and filth of the floors. She counts twenty thugs barricaded behind stacked beds and notes they have a huge stockpile of food. She thinks how loud a gunshot is and thinks about how quiet being stabbed by scissors would be. She watches one man sit down and relax and focuses on the bulging veins in his neck. She returns to her own ward and bed and wishes that she was also blind so that she would not have to see the horror of the filthy conditions, see the starving and filthy people, and watch others having sex in piles of filth.

## Chapter 10 Analysis

The man with the black eye-patch continues to symbolically straddle the gap between the inside and outside worlds. He worries that his radio's batteries will go dead but in the final ironic instance the radio stations stop broadcasting before the batteries run out of power. Thereafter, his radio becomes insignificant and, in fact, is apparently discarded like so much refuse. The news gleaned is not described in the narrative, though the process of distributing the news is considered. The passage is remarkably challenging from a meta-fictional perspective and should be given careful comparison to a similar passage in Chapter 7. In both instances, the man with the black eye-patch serves as the conduit through which news of the outside world is conveyed to those inside the asylum. Also in both cases, the man's actual words are infamously perverted by the narrator in a deliberately playful yet maddening way such that the news of the outside world becomes literally meaningless; although the reader is told he reports it, his very words are first perverted and finally stripped from him by the narrator. Consider, too, that the narrator's frequent use of the first person plural "we" makes the reader implicit in this narrative act of censorship. This narrative structure is interesting and compelling.

The doctor's wife's obsession with the scissors is simply heavy-handed foreshadowing of imminent violence. She considers how dangerously sharp the scissors are, how quiet they would be if used to murder, and finally stares at the bulging veins in the neck of

one of the thugs. Clearly in the coming days the scissors will be plunged into someone's neck by the doctor's wife. This action seems out of character for the woman who is generally discreet and gentle, and the narrative builds tension by subtly foreshadowing that conditions will imminently become much worse than they already are.



# Chapter 11

## Chapter 11 Summary

The naturally blind man, the Chronicler, considers what he should write in Braille. He thinks of all of the outrages that have been perpetrated upon the people in the hospital by the soldiers at first and lately by the thugs. He wanders through the hospital and overhears the complaints of the many inmates. He knows that influenza is rampaging through them and knows that they lie in filth and excrement. He knows they are starving and without further funds with which to purchase food. He knows that much of the food hoarded by the thugs has spoiled, but rather than distribute it they let it go to waste. He knows that the hospital now contains over three hundred inmates and that some of them have cancer or other life-threatening conditions that ordinarily would receive medical attention. Here, however, there is no medical attention to be had. He knows that the thugs are planning a monstrous departure from humanity and briefly considers separating himself from them. In the end, however, he returns to their safety and their food without writing down anything.

The thugs then announce that the initial payments have been expended and additional money must be surrendered for future food. There is complaining and ineffectual demands and protests but in the end the inmates gather a tiny amount of remaining money and valuable items and hand it over to the thugs. Several more days go by and the thugs then announce that the second payment has been expended. Since there is no more money the thugs, all men, now demand women to service their sexual desires. Inflamed arguments erupt throughout the various wards and continue for several days while the blind people go without food.

In the end, the wards decide to send all of their women, one ward's women every few days, in exchange for food. As the normal boundary of human behavior begins to dissolve, the blind people become more bestial. Eventually they all begin to have sex with whomever they please. The girl with dark glasses generally withholds herself, however, and usually only engages in sex with the man with the black eye-patch. One evening the doctor's wife watches in fascinated horror as her husband quietly sneaks from his bed, walks to the bed of the girl with dark glasses who receives him, and copulates with her. His wife walks to the bedside and watches them have sex. When her husband tries to sneak back to his bed, she puts her hands on him and the girl with dark glasses and comforts them, lightly kissing each of them. The two women share a brief and intimate conversation and the doctor's wife then confides to the girl with dark glasses that she can in fact see.

Soon the thugs demand their sexual partners from the ward where the principle characters live; the ward-by-ward rotation has devolved to them. The women place their hands on other's shoulders and are escorted to the thugs' ward. The leader of the thugs walks along the line, fondling the women, feeling their bodies, and loudly commenting upon their physical attributes. He takes the girl with dark glasses and the doctor's wife



for himself, pronouncing them to be especially attractive; the other five women are then drawn away by the remaining nineteen thugs and a brutal series of gang rapes ensues. After the leader rapes the girl with dark glasses, he hands her over to the other thugs who descend upon her and gang rape her. The leader then forces the doctor's wife to perform oral sex and then she, too, is gang raped throughout the night. Several hours later, the thugs taunt and belittle the women, having already raped them, sexually assaulted them in every conceivable way, and physically beaten them. They then dismiss the women who stagger back to their own ward. On the way, one of the women dies from her severe beating. The doctor's wife finds water and cleans the corpse, cleans the other women, then cleans herself. Then she sends her husband to the thugs to fetch the food that they have earned by serving as objects of torture.

## Chapter 11 Analysis

Chapter 11 is brutal, ugly, and disturbing. The language used is violent, exact, and unrelenting in the portrayal of the vicious gang rape of the women. Throughout the night parties of several men simultaneously rape a single woman in various violent ways and the women are also degraded mentally and physically by beatings, taunting, and numerous other disgusting forced activities. The doctor's wife watches this happen to all of them and once again finds herself wishing that she were blind in order to avoid the repellent imagery. The thugs complete their infamous behavior by forcing the men who have sacrificed their morality, indeed their very humanity, to come begging for the food that the women have been said to have earned. The men are then subjected to disgusting descriptions of sexual torture and rape. It is clear at this point that the inmates are indeed insane. The chapter is obviously disturbing and narrates the most depraved events described in the novel in the same cool, detached voice used throughout the narrative.



# Chapter 12

## Chapter 12 Summary

A few days pass and the thugs send out a small party to the next ward in the rotation, demanding women. They stop by the doctor's wife's ward on the way and hurl insults and denigrating remarks about the women's sexual performance. When they learn that one of the women died from the prolonged sexual assault, they seem amused and note that the remaining women will simply have to work harder on their next rotation.

When the men recover the women from the next ward, they are pleased to discover there are fifteen women. As they drive the women down the hall, the doctor's wife takes the scissors from the wall and silently accompanies the women. At the thugs' ward, the previous scene of rape and debauchery is quickly repeated. The doctor's wife enters the thugs' ward and stands near the leader while he forces a woman to perform fellatio. Just at his moment of climax, as he arches his head backward, the doctor's wife plunges the scissors into his neck, penetrating him through to the spine. A general melee breaks out and the doctor's wife runs through the room slashing and stabbing at the thugs and directing the battered women from the area. She manages to kill several of the men before the Chronicler secures the handgun and begins firing at random down the hallway.

Over the next few days, the thugs barricade themselves in their ward. The other inmates are alarmed because the guards make no further food deliveries. As they begin to starve, they begin to resent whoever killed the leader of the thugs. They think that life was better with the gang rapes and thefts because at least there was food. They seem to blame the leader's murderer for the lack of food. The man with the black eye-patch reasons with them, however, and they are determined to take collective action. Then the power goes out and the lights, perpetually on to this point, go dark.

In the morning, several people, including the doctor, the doctor's wife, the man with the black eye-patch, and the girl with dark glasses, attempt an assault on the thugs' ward to try and forcibly obtain the huge stockpile of food that the thugs have amassed. They are unable to destroy the barricade, however, and two of them are shot and killed. They retreat and collapse and, in utter despair, the doctor's wife publicly announces that she is not blind. None of the others are particularly surprised or concerned. That night a woman retrieves her cigarette lighter and sneaks to the barricade that protects the thugs. It is made mostly of bedding and she sets it on fire. She remains to make sure the fire is successful, and her own body is consumed by the conflagration. The fire spreads rapidly and burns up all of the thugs and their food. Then it spreads throughout the hospital and causes a panic. The patients stampede for the doors and many are trampled to death while others are burned to death. Most fear burning more than they fear being shot by the soldiers. The doctor's wife is amazed to discover upon leaving the building that the soldiers are no longer present - the inmates are in fact free to leave the asylum.





## Chapter 12 Analysis

The doctor's wife takes heroic action to halt the horrific practices employed by the gang of thugs. As foreshadowed, she plunges the sharp scissors into the thugs' leader's throat and kills him nearly instantly. She then kills several other thugs as she helps the blind women to safety. Unfortunately, she has deferred her action until all of the women in the entire hospital have been brutally assaulted by the gang of thugs.

It is interesting to note the psychology of the inmates who are deprived of food. At first, they resent the thugs' monopoly of force and wish they were dis-empowered. Then, when several of the thugs are murdered and the remaining thugs have sequestered themselves in their ward the people are, briefly, again free. At the same time, however, food deliveries from the outside world cease. This is clearly simply an unfortunate circumstance - it is unreasonable to assume that the guards would only deliver the food to the thugs - yet most of the inmates begin to blame their plight upon the woman who killed the thugs' leader. The doctor's wife has remained silent and nobody is sure who killed the man. She considers revealing herself, knowing that they will immediately take her to the thugs to trade for food, but she is restrained by the man with the black eye-patch who seems to have some supernatural sense that allows him to know what she intends to do.

Later another woman, also violated by the thugs, uses her cigarette lighter and her own body to start a conflagration that destroys the thugs and which will shortly destroy the entire hospital. Indeed, the living situation of the characters has become so untenable that many of them, particularly the women, find death an only too-welcome release from abuse.



# Chapter 13

## Chapter 13 Summary

The surviving blind people flee the conflagration and witness the hospital burn then collapse. They drop to the ground and, exhausted, sleep where they fall. In the morning, they wake up and set off in various bands to uncertain destinations. The doctor, the doctor's wife, the first blind man, the first blind man's wife, the girl with dark glasses, the man with the black eye-patch, and the boy with the squint form a group of seven and, led by the doctor's wife, start off into the city intending to return to their various homes.

They quickly discover that the city is in chaos. They learn that the entire city, indeed the entire nation, has succumbed to the blindness and that the doctor's wife is perhaps the only person who can see in the entire land. The city is itself a huge asylum with violent bands roaming the streets searching for food. Excrement and filth are everywhere. One man tells the women that all of the blind roam in bands and search for food. He tells her that one group tried to barricade themselves in a grocery and hoard all of the food, whereupon other people burned the building and killed them all.

The doctor's wife finds a safe building and places her charges inside. She then roams the city in search of food. She locates a supermarket stripped of food but is able to see a hidden stairwell. She descends into blackness, fortuitously finds matches, and discovers she is in a full stockroom. She eats, gathers food, again closes the doors, and returns to her friends. On the way, a blind man tries to grab at her food and instead rips off her clothing. It begins to rain. The doctor's wife walks through the city with bare breasts glistening with rainwater. She locates her friends, all of whom are safe, and they all eat and then sleep. It continues to rain.

## Chapter 13 Analysis

At first, the characters exult in being free from the mental hospital. They witness in grim satisfaction as it burns, knowing that the raping and thieving thugs inside have come to a richly deserved and appropriate end. They quickly realize, however, that the world outside is also blind and is in nearly every respect exactly as the world inside had been. Thus, the mental hospital is allegorical to the world at large; what happened there also happened here.

The scene describing how the doctor's wife finds food is interesting. She uses her sight to find the entrance, which was un-findable for the blind. Then she descends into pitch black where she becomes blind. In the basement stockroom she is disabled by her blindness while above are dozens of hungry people who would not even realize the storeroom was dark because of their actual blindness.

This scene is allegorical of the entire novel - only the sighted person can see to take advantage of blindness; the blind will starve because they cannot see the way into the



darkness. The doctor's wife finds some matches by accident and thereby recovers her sight. The passage describing the unmistakable sound of a box of matches falling to the floor is compelling. The doctor's wife then emerges into the rain naked from the waist up and walks through the city holding plastic bags of food on her outstretched arms in a bizarre narrative mockery of the widespread symbol of liberty as a bare-breasted woman waving a flag. The narrative is quirkily playful when describing how the naked and attractive woman enters the room of men, none of whom look at her until she has clothed herself - thus they look too late to get an eyeful. All of this is comically but nearly idiotically reported, as they are all blind anyway. The narrator and reader, of course, are implicitly aware of the doctor's wife's exposed breasts and are thus complicit in an illicit act of narrative voyeurism. This carefully constructed insinuation of the reader's complicity in distasteful acts is one of the more remarkable aspects of the novel's construction.



# Chapter 14

## Chapter 14 Summary

In the morning, the doctor's wife selects new clothing for all of the characters and they travel further into the city as a group. The blind characters ask questions and the doctor's wife answers them to the best of her ability. She describes the city as vacant and full of filth. The group proceeds to the home of the girl with dark glasses. Her parents are no longer in the building but one gaunt old woman remains. She has survived by eating cabbages and the raw flesh of rabbits that she has harvested from a small garden plot. She tells the girl with dark glasses that her parents were taken away after they went blind. The doctor's wife shares some food with the gaunt old woman and the group then spends the night in the girl with dark glasses' apartment.

The doctor's wife feels responsible for the welfare of the other characters and requests that they stay together as a group. She convinces the others who are initially strangely somewhat reluctant. They then proceed further through the city and talk about what the future may hold. One of them comments that the situation of foraging bands without governance is like the origins of humanity. The doctor's wife sees several dogs eating the corpse of a man and is sickened. Later she obtusely wonders what happened to the banks. The man with the black eye-patch goes into a prolonged monologue where he explains a rather thorough history of the collapse of the banking industry following the advent of the white sickness. The group finally arrives at the doctor's wife's neighborhood. She is disappointed to discover that the area, like the rest of the city, is filthy and unkempt.

## Chapter 14 Analysis

The girl with dark glasses felt a strong desire to locate her parents or, at the very least, exchange information with them. However, they are not in the apartment and have left no news on their whereabouts. She despairs; realizing that she cannot even leave them a brief note because they would not be able to find it, much less read it. It becomes readily apparent that the old social relationships are more-or-less permanently disbanded - even if her parents are still alive she will never be able to find them.

The gaunt old woman is the only character in the entire novel that does not enter into some kind of alliance with others. Within the mental hospital, the characters formed loose bands defined by the wards in which they lived. In the city, the blind people rove in loose bands that are fairly well defined even if they are by necessity transiently constituted. This gaunt old woman, however, has remained entirely alone and has never entered into any form of relationship or understanding with any other character. She is described in some detail and has an irascible personality that is off-putting to the other characters. She lives on raw cabbage and the uncooked flesh of rabbits which she gathers from a protected building garden area - the doctor's wife is sickened by the



scene of the gaunt old woman's apartment strewn with rabbit carcasses and strips of raw rabbit flesh.

The man with the black eye-patch's lengthy monologue about the collapse of the banking industry is comical and absurd. He claims to somehow know various intimate details about influential bankers and their last moments, although it is entirely likely that by the time the putative events transpired the man with the black eye-patch was already incarcerated in the mental hospital. This bizarre act of creative narration mirrors closely the entire narrative act of the novel and is pointedly commented upon by the narrator, who claims that some stories are unknowable but nevertheless universally unquestioned, if not true.

The final event of the chapter is also interesting. The doctor's wife has walked through the city for several hours and has seen mile after mile of vacant buildings, roving blind people searching for food, corpses, excrement and filth, and vicious dogs - yet she holds a misplaced hope that for some inexplicable reason her home neighborhood will be relatively clean. She is disappointed to discover that, like everything else, it is filthy. Perhaps nowhere else in the entire novel is the distinction of class more apparent than here in the doctor's wife's apparent belief that somehow her upper-class neighbors have withstood the bestial nature that has consumed the remainder of the city.



# Chapter 15

## Chapter 15 Summary

The characters arrive at the apartment of the doctor and the doctor's wife. They take off their shoes before entering and, once inside the door, they strip naked. The doctor's wife puts all of the shoes and filthy clothing into plastic bags. She then dresses all of the characters in clothing taken from her own closet. The doctor's wife then delivers a lengthy monologue on morality. The characters then eat and drink bottled water, which they find to be a novel luxury, and then go to sleep throughout the apartment. In the early morning, the doctor's wife wakes up to discover a downpour. She puts various buckets on the porch to catch rain and then strips naked and bathes in the rain. She washes the shoes and clothing in the plastic bags then awakens the other women who also strip down and wash each other in the rain. Later, the doctor's wife draws a bath for the man with the black eye-patch.

Later in the day they go foraging for food. On their journey, they stop by the apartment of the first man. The first blind man remembers an earlier trip he had taken through the same streets with the thief and compares that trip to the current trip. At the apartment, they discover a blind writer occupies it. The writer uses a ballpoint pen to write and feels the texts' impression with his fingers to allow himself to align the sentences across the pages. The doctor's wife examines the writer's texts and they talk with him at some length about the nature and process of writing and about the theory of private property.

## Chapter 15 Analysis

The doctor's wife makes some insistence on keeping her apartment clean - she clearly wants to live a different life than the one she has been living. She has the blind characters remove their shoes before entering, which is sensible. She then allows them inside the apartment but subsequently makes them strip naked, feeling that their bodies are cleaner than their clothes. It is noteworthy that their clothes were new only the day before which indicates how miserably filthy the city must be.

The rainstorm brings welcome pure water and the doctor's wife uses the rain to clean dirty clothing and shoes. She then strips naked, bathes, and is later joined by the girl with dark glasses and the first man's wife. The three naked women bathing in the rain are compared to various literary allegories. They bathe themselves and each other on a balcony far over the city in full view of hundreds of thousands of blind people. As in Chapter 13, the narrator and reader are simultaneously aware of the women's exposed bodies and are thus complicit in an illicit act of narrative voyeurism. The scene features sensual nudity and feminine sexuality and contrasts markedly with an earlier scene of the same women assembling for imminent rape where they are described as "a grotesque line-up of foul-smelling women" (p. 159); within the narrative, cleanliness equates to human sensuality while dirtiness equates to bestial sex. This correlates with

the frequent theme that blindness robs one of humanity because blindness also robs one of the ability to remain physically clean.

The rather lengthy scene involving the writer is out of place within the narrative and is somewhat indulgent and incongruous. The writer echoes the novel's theme of questioning narrative authority but is otherwise uninteresting in most respects; although he can write down his thoughts, he is unable to read them. He irresponsibly spends his time writing instead of accompanying his wife and daughter as they forage for food, which adds a humorously cynical touch to the narrative.



# Chapter 16

## Chapter 16 Summary

The doctor and the doctor's wife visit the doctor's old office. They find it completely ransacked and the doctor realizes that the ministry of health has probably seized all of his patient records. He touches his old instruments and realizes they are now completely useless. The doctor and the doctor's wife discuss the nature of the white sickness. They then make their way back home. On the journey, they pass through a large public square where numerous speakers espouse particular and strange viewpoints. The doctor's wife notes that none of the speakers are commenting on the nature of organization and the doctor muses that perhaps organization is discussed in another square.

On the trip home, they pass numerous corpses; it becomes evident that most people are on the brink of starvation. They once again stop by the house of the girl with dark glasses where they discover that the gaunt old woman is dead - she has died on the very steps of the building and holds the keys in her outstretched hand. They bury the gaunt old woman in the garden that supported her life for several months. Other building inhabitants come out on to balconies and sightlessly stare down at the burial party - the doctor's wife shouts to them that the gaunt old woman will rise again. The girl with dark glasses leaves a lock of her own hair hanging from the doorknob of her apartment as a sign to her parents should they ever return.

The characters then return to the doctor's wife's apartment where she reads stories to them. The various characters tell the doctor's wife that they would have all died without her assistance. In the ensuing discussion the characters equate being blind to being dead. The man with the black eye-patch then awkwardly declares his love for the girl with dark glasses. Although she does not reciprocate his feelings of love, she does agree to live with him and be his companion. She then delivers a lengthy monologue of the nature of attraction.

## Chapter 16 Analysis

This chapter contains a large amount of allegorical and theoretical discussion. The speakers in the public square are espousing a variety of bizarre topics but they seem to be gathering large crowds and the strange ideas seem to be gathering some sort of social traction. One of the topics, "voluntary blindness," seems particularly inappropriate. The doctor's wife wonders why the speakers are not trying to organize the other people; in other words, she finds their topics irrelevant. This shows the fundamental distinction between the truly blind and the blind led by the doctor's wife. She still thinks of life in terms of a rational pre-blind state, whereas the public is beginning to concentrate on other things which apparently make sense to them but are unintelligible to the doctor's wife and, by extension, to the narrator and reader.





The gaunt old woman's death is likewise incongruous. After surviving on her own for months, she dies within days once she comes in contact with others. She seemingly dies of starvation and yet the doctor's wife had given her a large amount of food, and when they bury the woman, they find her garden overrun with plants and teeming with rabbits. Apparently, the gaunt old woman is unable to survive with the perception of a new society.



# Chapter 17

## Chapter 17 Summary

The doctor's wife begins to worry and despair. She feels overwhelmed by her self-imposed responsibility and wonders how long she will be able to help her friends. One day she leaves the apartment to go on another foraging trip - she plans to return to the supermarket basement where she first found food. Her husband, the doctor, accompanies her. On her trip, she finds the streets much worse. Conditions continue to deteriorate rapidly. She passes through a public square full of speakers and notes they are discussing topics of organization. She arrives at the supermarket and finds it strangely vacant. She enters the supermarket and finds that it stinks of death and rotting flesh. She walks to the back where the hidden stairs are located and is horrified to discover that the large stairwell is full of rotting corpses. She immediately blames herself, surmising that after opening the doors and discovering food, she caused a mass rush for the storeroom where dozens, perhaps hundreds, have died.

Overwhelmed with grief, the woman staggers out of the supermarket. Assisted by her husband, she walks a few blocks until she sees a church. The two characters enter the church to discover many people are resting there. They sit down on a bench and the doctor's wife faints. When she comes to, she looks up and sees that Jesus on the crucifix has been blindfolded. As she looks around, she sees that all of the statues of saints have been blindfolded and all of the paintings of saints have had a thick white smear painted over their eyes - all of the icons are blinded. She cries out and tells her husband what she has seen. The other people in the church are outraged and then alarmed. They quickly become frightened by the news and nearly as a body they leap to their feet and stampede from the church, killing many. The doctor's wife sadly but opportunistically gathers up most of the abandoned food from the church and returns to her apartment where she again reads to the other characters.

That evening the first man closes his eyes to go to sleep and notices that instead of milky whiteness he sees only blackness. When he opens his eyes he realizes that he can see - the blindness has passed. He is happy and nervous and within minutes he announces that he intends to take his wife and leave the group. They will return to their own home and force the writer to vacate their apartment. They plan to live on their own. Within a few more minutes others, too, begin to regain their sight. Then they hear others calling out excitedly that they, too, can once again see. All over the city, sight begins to return.

## Chapter 17 Analysis

The doctor's wife has reached the conclusion that, although she is willing, she is actually incapable of caring for her friends for the long-term. Her voyage through the city also shows conditions bordering on complete collapse - many corpses litter the streets



and the surviving people are subsisting on rotten pieces of unidentifiable food plucked from the filth and excrement of the streets. The sense of doom is only heightened when the doctor's wife discovers that the supermarket food cache has become a tomb for hundreds of people. She literally collapses from the strain and is able only to stagger to a nearby church with the assistance of her husband the doctor.

The church is filled to overflowing with people seeking refuge. When the doctor's wife regains consciousness, she sees that Jesus Christ on the crucifix has been blindfolded. Other statues are also blindfolded and all of the iconographic paintings have been defaced by having a large white stripe painted over the eyes, except one. The icon of Saint Lucy, the patron saint of the blind whose name means light, shows Saint Lucy presenting her gouged-out eyes on a platter. Ironically, these are the only eyes in the church that have not been painted over. When the doctor's wife communicates this condition to the blind people in the church they panic and stampede from the religious edifice as if God and the saints have forsaken them by refusing to witness their suffering.

Even though Saint Lucy's eyes were gouged out, she is commonly held to have still been able to see - thus the narrative links the doctor's wife to Saint Lucy as both retained their sight through a miracle. Symbolically, the doctor's wife has been presenting her eyes on a platter to those around her who do not have eyes. Interestingly, the virginal Saint Lucy was ordered to be defiled in a brothel but was spared that fate by the power of the Holy Spirit - unfortunately for the doctor's wife, the allegorical relationship was not extended to that particular protection.

Just as society seems unable to continue, just as humans have lost the final vestige of humanity, and just as the doctor's wife despairs of living, the curse of blindness is lifted. It is interesting to consider the likely outcome of the restoration of sight, though such events are not examined in the novel.



# Characters

## The First Man

The novel opens with a man driving home in his car. The man stops at a light and then simply goes blind. He visits an ophthalmologist who can find nothing physically wrong with his eyes. Within hours, the ophthalmologist and the first man's wife are also blind. The first man is then quarantined in an abandoned mental hospital for several weeks where he suffers appalling conditions. He eventually is forced to allow his wife to be gang raped in exchange for food, a decision that he fundamentally rejects but in practice allows.

Of all of the inmates, he appears to be the most troubled by this so-called parasitic behavior. The first man survives the conflagration at the asylum and then returns to the city. He finds his old apartment is now the home of a writer and decides that strictly owning private property is not particularly useful to the blind. He agrees to remain under the care of the doctor's wife until one evening when he realizes, quite suddenly, that he is no longer blind. He thereafter quickly determines to return to his own apartment and evict the current tenant so he may live with his wife. Before he can put his plan into action, however, other characters begin to regain their sight and the novel concludes. The first man appears to be approximately forty years old and is apparently physically average in most respects, though he notes that prior to being blind he had enjoyed unusually good eyesight. The first man is one of seven principle characters in the novel who survive the white sickness.

## The Thief

The thief is apparently a younger man who, from time to time, is capable of generous acts of kindness but is predominantly amoral and self-centered. When the first man goes suddenly blind, the thief offers to take him home. The thief drives the first man's car home, parks it on the street, and then escorts the first man up to his apartment. The thief then offers to sit with the first man until his wife returns home but at this point the first man becomes uneasy and wonders if the thief is trying to take advantage of him and therefore declines the kind offer. The thief then leaves the apartment but, realizing he still has the automobile keys, decides to steal a car from a blind man.

Before the thief can deliver his car to a garage, he also goes blind. The thief is incarcerated in the same ward as the first man and the two characters fight and hurl insults at each other. Later in the day, the thief gropes the girl with dark glasses and she resists his unwelcome advances by kicking him in the groin with her spiked high heel shoes. The wound is deep and serious and within just a few hours becomes infected. Within a day, the thief is feverish and the wound has turned gangrenous. The thief then waits until night, sneaks out of the ward, and approaches the front gates of the asylum intending to demand immediate medical assistance. Before he can voice his demand,



however, he is shot and killed by a nervous guard. The thief is a principle character for the first few chapters of the novel, and he is possibly the first actual casualty of the white sickness.

## The First Man's Wife

The first man's wife contracts the white sickness from her husband and goes blind shortly after he does. She is then quarantined in an abandoned mental hospital for several weeks where she suffers appalling conditions. She eventually submits to being gang raped and sexually abused by a large gang of inmates in exchange for food that she then shares with her husband and other inmates.

Although she feels this course of action is her only option, she encounters some resistance to the idea from her husband who clearly desires to remain sexually monogamous. The first man's wife survives the conflagration at the asylum and then returns to the city where she finds her old apartment is now the home of a writer. She agrees to remain under the care of the doctor's wife until one evening when her husband, the first man, quite suddenly realizes that he is no longer blind. She then decides to accompany her husband back to their own apartment but before she can put this plan into action, other characters begin to regain their sight and the novel concludes. The first man's wife appears to be approximately forty years old and is apparently physically average in most respects, though she notes that prior to being blind she had enjoyed unusually good eyesight. The first man's wife is one of seven principle characters in the novel who survive the white sickness. Of all the principle characters, she is one of the least defined throughout the narrative.

## The Doctor

The doctor, an ophthalmologist, examines the eyes of the first man and is unable to find any reason for his sudden blindness. Within hours, the doctor is himself blind, along with all of the other patients he has practiced on during the evening. Once the doctor realizes he is probably a victim of contagious disease, he contacts the ministry of health and raises the alarm. He is then quarantined in an abandoned mental hospital for several weeks where he suffers appalling conditions.

Most of the other inmates look to the doctor as an authoritative figure and he does exert some control over them to attempt to maintain good living conditions. For example, he insists that the dead be buried rather than simply flung into the yard. Several inmates comment on the irony of having a blind ophthalmologist as the sole medical practitioner in the mental asylum. Even though the others initially look to him for some guidance, the doctor does not step forward as the leader he could potentially become and eventually suffers the consequences of his reticence. For example, he is forced to allow his wife to be gang raped in exchange for food, a decision that strangely does not particularly disturb him. In fact, before the brutality of the actual event, the doctor apparently finds the idea of it to be somewhat seductive.



Before the rape actually happens, he becomes very sexually active with his wife and then has a sexual tryst with the girl with dark glasses. The doctor survives the conflagration at the asylum and then returns to the city where he remains under the care of his wife. The doctor is approximately fifty-five years old and is apparently physically average in most respects. The doctor is one of seven principle characters in the novel who survive the white sickness.

## The Doctor's Wife

The doctor's wife is the only character in the novel - perhaps the only person in the entire nation - that does not go blind. The narrative does not explain why the doctor's wife retains her eyesight. When she realizes that her husband, the doctor, is about to be quarantined for an unknown period, the doctor's wife announces, falsely, that she too is blind and thus accompanies him to an abandoned mental hospital where she lives for several weeks and suffers through appalling conditions. Many of the other inmates begin to suspect that the doctor's wife can see because she alone is capable of many actions - most as simple as just locating the lavatory. She is very compassionate for others and this tendency often threatens to give away her secret of sight. The doctor's wife's eyesight affects her profoundly and she is unable to come to terms with many of the events she witnesses. In fact, she spends much of the novel wishing that she, too, were blind so she could be like everyone else and escape the horrors of sight in the world of the blind. All around her she sees filth and excrement, pain and suffering, and acts of horrific violence which she is largely unable to remedy or prevent.

She eventually submits to being ganged raped and sexually abused by a large gang of inmates in exchange for food that she then shares with her husband and other inmates. Although she feels this course of action is her only option, afterward she is devastated by the debilitating and dehumanizing acts perpetrated upon her. A few days later, she determines to put an end to the outrageous behavior of the gang. She takes a pair of scissors and plunges them into the neck of the gang's leader - an easy task given her sight - killing him nearly instantly. She then lashes out and kills several other gang members before fleeing the scene of carnage.

The doctor's wife survives the subsequent conflagration at the asylum and then returns to the city where she finds her old apartment and helps comfort several other blind people, including her husband. Just as she is on the verge of a moral collapse, the white sickness passes and others begin to regain their sight. The doctor's wife is approximately fifty years old and is noted as being very physically attractive. The narrative presents her in several scenes as a sensual and sexual woman and the relationship between the doctor's wife and the reader is one of an uneasy voyeur watching a uniquely gifted woman rise to heroic behavior in an untenable world. The doctor's wife is one of seven principle characters in the novel who survive the white sickness and, in many ways can be viewed as the novel's primary protagonist.



## The Girl with Dark Glasses

The girl with dark glasses is a young prostitute who visits the doctor, an ophthalmologist, because she has contracted conjunctivitis. She is one of the first cases of the white sickness and is quarantined in an abandoned mental hospital for several weeks where she suffers appalling conditions. Like the other one hundred and fifty women in the asylum, she eventually submits to being gang-raped and sexually abused by a large gang of inmates in exchange for food that she then shares with the other inmates. Prior to the actual event, the girl with dark glasses has sexual intercourse with the man with the black eye-patch and also with the doctor.

The girl with dark glasses survives the conflagration at the asylum and then returns to the city where she finds her parents' home to be deserted. Although she wishes she could locate her parents, she realizes this is an impossible task and agrees to remain under the care of the doctor's wife. She also finds the man with the black eye-patch comforting and attractive and, when he expresses his love for her, agrees to live with him as if they were married. She then regains her sight as the novel concludes. She is unique in the novel because of her ability to care for strangers under the most trying of circumstances. For example, she takes the squinting child under her care and even though she is starving, she gives him the larger portion. She seems to hold a strong sexual attraction for several of the other characters, notably the doctor's wife - the two women develop a strong, nearly sensual bond. The girl with dark glasses appears to be approximately eighteen years old - she still lives with her parents even though she works as a prostitute - and is apparently physically average in most respects aside from being noted as beautiful and physically very attractive. The girl with dark glasses is one of seven principle characters in the novel who survive the white sickness.

## The Squinting Child

The squinting child contracts the white sickness from the ophthalmologist and is subsequently interned in an abandoned mental hospital for quarantine. His mother, who is suspected of being contaminated by the disease, is quarantined in the same hospital but in a different wing. She apparently perishes before going blind, as the squinting child and his mother are never reunited. The squinting child would probably have also perished except for the care given to him by the girl with dark glasses. The squinting child is probably about seven years old and is physically average in all respects. He is one of seven principle characters in the novel who survive the white sickness and is the least defined of the principle characters.

## The Man with the Black Eye-Patch

The man with the black eye-patch contracts the white sickness from the ophthalmologist and is subsequently interned in an abandoned mental hospital for quarantine. He does not succumb to the sickness as fast as some, however, and therefore enters the ward a few days after the initial characters. When he arrives at the asylum he has a portable





battery-powered radio with which he uses to listen to occasional news broadcasts before all of the radio stations go off the air. The man with the black eye-patch acts as an occasional moral compass to the other characters, providing them with insight and a guiding hand. His age accounts for some of this moral authority, which is symbolized by his missing eye. He straddles the world of the blind and the seeing; while they see whiteness in two eyes, he sees whiteness in one eye and blackness with his missing eye.

Although he philosophically argues against it, he remains largely aloof from the decision to allow all of the hospital's women to be gang raped in exchange for food, probably because as a bachelor he does not have a vested interest in the heated debate. Even so, the girl with dark glasses - arguably the most physically attractive woman presented in the novel - favors him with sexual intercourse before the brutal gang rape takes place. The man with the black eye-patch survives the conflagration at the asylum and then returns to the city. He agrees to remain under the care of the doctor's wife and eventually declares his love for the girl with the dark glasses, sure that she will reject him and cause embarrassment. He is surprised, however, when she agrees to become his wife although she does not return his love. The man with the black eye-patch appears to be approximately sixty years old, is bald, and is missing one eye. The man with the black eye-patch is one of seven principle characters in the novel who survive the white sickness.

## The Soldiers

Soldiers from the armed forces guard the mental hospital used to quarantine the first victims of the white sickness. They are generally young, as would be expected, and they are extremely anxious about being in such close proximity with those they consider diseased. On more than one occasion, the soldiers shoot and kill inmates who appear to be approaching the dividing fence. There are no appreciable repercussions for these executions. One by one, the soldiers go blind, though they are sent to a military hospital for quarantine where one suspects their treatment is somewhat better than the civilians' treatment.

## The Thugs

About twenty of the blind male inmates quarantined in an abandoned mental hospital form a gang of thugs. The thugs are led by a particularly vicious man who smuggles a pistol and about a dozen cartridges into the hospital. The thugs also enlist the assistance of a man who has been blind since birth - he is able to read Braille and has a machine that enables him to write in Braille. At first the thugs simply claim more than their fair-share of space, ejecting about twenty other persons from their common ward. These other people then sleep in hallways or stairwells. The thugs then claim one of the two lavatories as their own personal space which forces the other approximately 280 inmates to use a single lavatory.





After a few weeks, the thugs take possession of all the food deliveries and only parcel out the food shipments to the other inmates if their obscene demands are met. Their first few demands are for money and items of value. Once all of these items have been surrendered, the thugs then demand routine sexual servicing by the female inmates. Over the course of about a week, the thugs brutally gang rape and sexually victimize about one hundred and fifty women, resulting in at least one death. Eventually the doctor's wife uses a pair of scissors to execute the leader and a few of the other thugs, and then another woman starts a fire that consumes the remaining thugs.

## **The Gaunt Old Woman**

The gaunt old woman lives in the same apartment building as the girl with dark glasses. When the white sickness rages through the city the gaunt old woman goes blind but hides in her apartment to avoid forcible relocation and quarantine. She survives by gleaning food - mostly cabbage and raw rabbit flesh - from the apartment building's private garden area. She is a unique character in the novel because she is the only character who does not form some type of alliance with other characters. Instead, she survives on her own for a prolonged period. She eventually apparently starves to death, but the reason for this is unclear, as the garden is not depleted of either cabbage or rabbits.



# Objects/Places

## Blindness

Nearly all of the characters in the novel experience a type of blindness where they are able to see only a milky whiteness. This blindness appears to be caused by a highly contagious disease that spreads very rapidly and has a near-immediate onset. The blindness lasts for several weeks and then goes away within seconds. The disease, referred to as the white sickness, does not appear to have any other physical manifestation.

## The First Man's Car

The first man goes blind while driving his car. He stops for a traffic light and then goes blind. After causing a traffic disturbance, he is finally assisted by the thief who drives him home and escorts him to his apartment. The thief then retains the car keys and steals the blind man's car. He drives the car across town but becomes extremely agitated, fearing he may be apprehended for the theft. He stops the car and steps out with the intention of taking a brief break, but thereupon goes blind himself. The first man and the thief will later argue and fight about the car - the first man claiming the thief to be, in fact, a thief, and the thief claiming that stealing another's car is as nothing compared to stealing another's sight.

## The Doctor's Office

The first man, after going blind, seeks medical attention at the doctor's office. There are several other patients waiting in the doctor's office, including the girl with dark glasses, the squinting boy, and the man with the black eye-patch. Within just a few hours, all of these other patients, the doctor, and the first man's wife will also be blind. Thus, the doctor's office is the site of most of the initial contagion. Later, the ministry of health searches the office and seizes the doctor's medical records. Later still, the doctor and the doctor's wife return to the office and have a philosophical discussion about the nature of blindness, death, and morality.

## The Mental Hospital

Once the disease of blindness begins to rapidly spread, the ministry of health decides to forcibly quarantine those infected or suspected of being infected with the disease. From several possible facilities, the ministry selects an abandoned mental hospital. The hospital has two wings, and each wing has three wards. Each of the six wards is equipped with forty beds, giving a theoretical maximum occupancy of 240 inmates, though the hospital eventually houses over 300 inmates. The hospital has two lavatories, which proves entirely inadequate. The hospital apparently does not have



potable water. The building is located on apparently large grounds surrounded by a metal fence. The mental hospital, often referred to as an asylum, is one of the principle settings of the novel.

## The Thug's Handgun

The leader of the gang of thugs that dominates the mental hospital manages to smuggle a pistol and several cartridges into the facility. He uses the pistol to maintain control over the other thugs and, by extension, all of the inmates. Once he is killed, another man takes the pistol and attempts to use it to become the next leader - an attempt which is largely unsuccessful. The handgun is used several times to shoot and kill various people.

## The Scissors

The doctor's wife possesses a pair of scissors that have very long, pointed shears. She hides the scissors by simply hanging them high up on the wall where the other inmates, who are blind, cannot find them. She later uses the scissors to kill the leader of the gang of thugs by plunging them into his neck at the moment he ejaculates while sexually assaulting a woman, severing his throat through to the spine. His blood and semen then spurt out onto the face of the woman he is sexually assaulting. The scissors can be interpreted as a type of retributive phallus, as they forcibly penetrate the man near his mouth and bring forth a spurt of fluid just as, days earlier, he had forcibly penetrated the doctor's wife's mouth. The scissors melt in the conflagration that burns up the mental hospital and are destroyed.

## Feces

The most common object in the novel is human feces. The characters produce excrement in abundance, even when verging on starvation. As the characters are blind and have no adequate sanitary facilities, the excrement remains where it falls and eventually piles up and fills rooms, hallways, and even grounds. The characters walk through it, sleep in it, and even have sex with it smeared on their bodies, clothes, and bedding. When the characters walk through the city, they find excrement everywhere and note that it runs in rivulets down the streets after it has been softened by rain. The stench of feces fills their noses and only occasionally is overpowered by the stench of rotting corpses.

## Food

All of the characters in the novel focus most of their attention on the quest to gather adequate food. The food is, initially, delivered by the armed guards who patrol the quarantine facility. Even then, food deliveries are erratic and insufficient. The food is eventually dominated by a gang of thugs who parcel it out once their outrageous



demands are met. Then the food deliveries stop altogether. Later, as the characters walk through the city, they observe that nearly everyone is on the verge of starvation. The doctor's wife watches blind people crawling through the streets, plucking pieces of rotting unknown food from amidst the feces and detritus.

## Food Containers

Food is delivered to the quarantine facility in pre-packaged containers that are deemed adequate to provide one meal for ten people. The food containers are apparently fairly heavy and usually are lifted one at a time by a single character. Within the containers, the food is apparently parceled into ten smaller portions. Presumably, then, twenty-eight food containers would be delivered to the mental hospital three times each day - in practice, however, there is never enough food and the containers are delivered in small numbers and only infrequently.

## The Battery-Powered Radio

The man with the black eye-patch smuggles a small handheld radio into the mental hospital. The radio's newscasts and music provides a welcome diversion for the several blind inmates in the same ward. The radio symbolizes the only link between the asylum inmates and the larger world, and is viewed by all the inmates as an inherently valuable object. Once all radio broadcasts cease, however, the radio becomes intrinsically worthless.



# Social Sensitivity

As the traffic light turns green, much to the surprise of drivers and pedestrians, "[the] car at the head of the middle lane has stopped" and does not move ahead.

Portuguese Nobel Prize-winning author, Jose Saramago, starts his astonishing narration with the inexplicable event of a man struck blind while driving home from work one normal day. "[There] must be some mechanical fault, a loose accelerator pedal, a gear lever that has struck," but none of these technical problems are the cause of the car's prolonged halt. The driver inside starts shouting and "to judge by the movement of his mouth he appears to be repeating some words, not one word but three, as turns out to be the case when someone finally manages to open the door, I am blind."

Thus begins the tale of a city where large numbers of people go blind inexplicably.

The city where the action is set functions as a microcosm of human society in general and a prototype of our modern urban spaces in particular. It remains unnamed throughout the narration, providing the writer with an opportunity to explore in detail the warps and woofs that build up this human-made, complicated structure. As one by one, people lose their vision, they find out how vulnerable and inter-dependent they are, in spite of all their society's technological advancement. Among the people who come into contact with the first blind man are the car thief who offers to help the driver reach his house, the driver's wife, the ophthalmologist who examines him, and all the patients at the doctor's office. The group becomes completely dependant on the doctor's wife, who turns out to be the only person in the city miraculously destined to keep her vision. She remains the sole guide and support for her helpless group, and it is mainly through this character that Saramago makes his statement about interdependency between people in society. Although people in this group did not previously know each other, when disaster strikes their community they find out how vulnerable they are in terms of satisfying even basic human needs.

The tragic fact, however, remains that despite her sincere efforts and even her ability to see, "the doctor's wife" cannot save her community. Metaphorically speaking, although some very few enlightened people may live among the ignorant many, their insight would not, in the long run, be effective and practical enough to bring others insight and salvation. In fact, Saramago implies that although we often receive illuminating messages from the insightful, we cannot avoid traveling the difficult route of maturity and wisdom ourselves.

One of the most important social concerns addressed in this work is the inadequacy of individual human response in the face of catastrophe. Human beings, Saramago implies, need to stick together and cooperate. Under difficult circumstances, collaboration and organization may provide the only solutions. Here and in the midst of the anarchy following the epidemic, each person struggles to survive and those who act and proceed as a group have a better chance of survival.



But how exactly is one to increase his/ her chance of survival in the face of catastrophe? Saramago answers the question by suggesting that those who adapt and accept the sad fact that "they are not able to see" can win. Those among the blind who resist and ignore the martial law imposed by the government to contain them within their poor confines perish instantly. In this regard, the doctor's wife—who is paradoxically more than any other person in the city exposed to the filth they are all living in— adapts better than the rest to the horrible circumstances. In accordance with the novelist's exalted view of women when compared to men within the fictional world, women generally display much greater readiness in accepting their blindness and hence, helplessness.

In the end, those who become blind regain their vision in the same inexplicable way. In this scene of recovery, the doctor and his wife are now up in their apartment: "[T]he crowd shouting just three words, I can see, said those who had already recovered their eyesight and those who were just starting to see, I can see, I can see, the story in which people said, I am blind, truly appears to belong to another world." Here and elsewhere, especially when it comes to the question of the survival of the individual in society, the important question of hope becomes central. Although the girl with dark glasses in the novel's last pages says that the doctor's wife "is like a rope that has broken, like a spring that could no longer support the pressure it was constantly subjected to," the group would not have been able to make it without her maintaining hope, encouraging others, and being "like a rope."

The relationship between people in society is yet another source of concern for the writer. Within this structure and under horrific circumstances, the characters in Saramago's novel cope with a wide range of problems and consequently display a wide variety of sentiments; they experience love and hate, friendship and enmity, and generosity and bitter competitiveness. Within this structure, the blind become victims of theft, rape, murder, gang terror, and humiliation, but simultaneously they also reveal lofty human feelings such as love, trust, and mutual respect. In the end, as one by one people start regaining their sight "it occurred to the first blind man to say to his wife that they would be going home the next day, But I am still blind, she replied, It doesn't matter, I'll guide you, only those present who heard it with their own ears could grasp how such simple words could contain such different feelings as protection, pride and authority." By placing his characters in impossible situations, Saramago reveals his broad knowledge of human nature and the ability of mankind to display both generosity and bitterness in reaction to the same stimulus.

Justice, its implementation, and the question of political intervention are among the other important social issues raised by the novelist in *Blindness*. How justified are "the minister" and those in power to exile the afflicted to the mental asylum under dreary circumstances? What makes the question of justice more complicated in this novel is that although the inmates of the asylum are all victims of the indifference of a brutal governing body, they themselves do not believe in justice and cannot, therefore, implement it within their relatively small group. Not long after more groups of visually handicapped citizens arrive at the asylum, blind hoodlums take control and establish a tyranny by distributing unequal portions of food and supplies among the different wards



of the asylum, by robbing others of all their valuables, and by raping their womenfolk. The continuous pleas of the ophthalmologist's wife on the need "to organize" and "not to live entirely like animals," if they "cannot live entirely like human beings" evoke, in this respect, the delicate question of authority and the need for political intervention.

The limits and legitimacy of technological advancement and the sometimes dire consequences of this kind of development, are also among the major social issues explored in the novel. As more and more people turn blind, their fundamental needs stop being addressed since they had all been supplied by intricate networks providing citizens with clean, running water, proper nourishment and clothing, warmth, hygiene, and safe and well controlled roads.

In other words, as society falls apart, people begin to discover how utterly helpless they are within a system they so proudly and scientifically developed. Disease starts to spread and there is not enough space to lodge the diseased. Seen from this perspective, the novel is a futuristic statement about the human condition, and Saramago poses a serious question regarding our preparedness to deal with such problems as overpopulation, hunger, disease, as well as the status of prisoners and refugees, at the dawn of the twenty-first century. The novel also augments the mystical idea that early human beings (nomads), having been closer to nature and uncorrupted by the intricacies of civilization, were less blind and hence more capable of meeting their immediate needs.

"I cannot save anything but what I can do is write about what I think and feel and the anguish of seeing a world that could already have resolved a large portion of its humanitarian problems, but which not only has not solved any, but which, in fact, aggravates many of them." With these words, Saramago is acknowledging both the lack of concern and proper management on the part of the governing bodies of society as well as the existence of selfishness in human nature, which culminate in the tragic state of mankind on earth, despite the relative comfort of a limited minority.



# Techniques

Saramago is well known for his masterful blending of myth, history, and fiction.

When compared to earlier works, however, *Blindness* deals with the historical element at a conspicuously lower level. Regardless, by introducing the abrupt change that takes place in the setting of his novel, Saramago immediately takes his readers to the distant past and refreshes their memories of the plague-ridden cities they are so well-acquainted with through myths and legends.

Although satire is one of Saramago's main devices, *Blindness*, with its highly serious themes, can hardly be categorized as a didactic novel. Unlike most didactic works, *Blindness* poses significantly fundamental questions for which neither characters nor readers can come up with clear-cut answers. These questions are as rudimentary as why the people in the community have to go blind at all, and what the nature of the disease which they referred to as "white blindness" was. One of the merits of the novel is that the implied answers are themselves open to a wide range of interpretations.

This open, perplexing quality of the novel is also present in the ambivalent way Saramago presents his characters. In other words, it is not always easy to tell whether the novelist is being sarcastic or compassionate towards the fates of those fictional characters whose lives he is responsible for.

All this may well have to do with the subject of his works, which is "the possibility of the impossible dreams and illusions."

The story is undoubtedly a dark, grim portrayal aimed to reflect the harsh realities of our everyday lives. The graphic scenes, the detached tone, and most important of all, the subject matter build up a gloomy account which sometimes requires patience and extra time from the reader.

Yet, despite the gloomy atmosphere and the harsh scenes drawn, there is no malice or sharp cynicism involved in the overall picture the novelist creates. The novel is almost unanimously considered a satire directed at human folly as well as at the shortcomings of our modern society. However, at no point in the narration is the reader able to hear the voice of an "indifferent" narrator outraged at humanity, which is characteristic of the works of the same genre. Instead, behind all the sad and difficult scenes, one can detect the concerned, thoughtful, and frequently shocked face of a writer whose apprehensive voice keeps urging human beings to come to their senses and "to see" what frightening extremes they have reached in the course of the history of human civilization.

The reader's expectations remain mostly unfulfilled when dealing with *Blindness*.

The writer opens up his story abruptly with the unexplained event of man struck blind and how his blindness spreads to the entire city. The puzzle remains unresolved and the



reader has to live on with innumerable unanswered questions. *Blindness* is the story of humanity under siege, narrated in an unconventional language that deviates from the standard rules of storytelling as well.

Constant shifts of tense and subject gliding all the time between first and third person, long sentences and paragraphs with minimal punctuation flowing over pages, embedded dialogue, unquoted and un-attributed, and unmarked chapters all add up to the blind quality of the novel. In other words, to define and write about a structureless society, such as the one described by Saramago in *Blindness*, requires the absence of structure and the best way to impart the collapse of the community would be to withdraw from the structured uses of language and narration. The prose, though concise, does not create any semantic difficulty and the words remain simple and unpretentious.

All these techniques adopted by Saramago in his work, function as de-familiarizing devices to make his readers more aware of their lives. Language and narrative technique in this way become the most effective tools to de-automatize our random perception of life and to make us look at ourselves and our surroundings with a higher degree of sensitivity and motivation.

# Themes

## Themes

Blindness is a serious book written by a serious novelist who has always taken his job seriously. The novel's rich texture lends itself to study the work thematically from several perspectives.

Blindness can be considered a critique of social norms in our modern world. In this respect, it also points out the shortcomings of technology as well as the inadequacy of human knowledge when it comes to the simple question of addressing mankind's basic needs. As already discussed in the previous section, this novel discusses fundamental problems in life such as hunger and disease—this is ironic because Saramago examines a civilization with complicated networks developed over centuries, yet one that is incapable of meeting the most basic needs when disaster strikes. In fact, the horrifying mental asylum in which the blind have to live is a replica of our present-day prisons. The horror mainly arises, however, from the fact that eventually, when blindness—figuratively, ignorance—becomes widespread, there is no distinction between the blind, gloomy world of the inmates and that of ordinary people outside.

The novel can also be seen as a political commentary on the futility of the goals of different political parties and regimes throughout ages, and their practical indifference towards the fate of the people whose lives they claim to be concerned about. The quarantine of the blind is no doubt reminiscent of the death camps the writer is so familiar with. Saramago's memories of fascist brutality can, indeed, be clearly traced in the struggles of the blind inmates within the mental asylum.

From a philosophical standpoint, the novelist deals with the concept of ignorance and its dangerously contagious nature among human beings. In order to impart to his readers the seriousness of the epidemic, the author reveals how an ophthalmologist— whose job is to cure visual impairments— himself falls victim to the contagious disease. What Saramago is also metaphorically suggesting is that, in the long run, even the few enlightened people who are capable of diagnosing social diseases are capable of ignoring others' needs. What is worse, they may also, reluctantly and fully aware of the dire consequences, act just as reprehensibly as the unenlightened. Saramago constantly reexamines issues of ignorance and wisdom throughout the narration. The disease is, in this way, an allegory for "not being able to see." Saramago himself states that he wrote Blindness "to remind everyone who reads it that, when we debase life, we pervert our reason, that the dignity of human beings is abused everyday by those in power, that the universal lie has replaced multiple truths, that man loses his self-respect when he loses respect for his fellow man."

Man's primary problem then, based on Saramago's own words, is that he cannot see the "truth."—"This Blindness isn't real blindness, it's a blindness of rationality.



We're rational beings but we don't behave rationally. If we did, there'd be no starvation in the world." It is the amplification of this philosophy that we read in the concluding pages of the novel: "Do you want me to tell you what I think, Yes, do, I don't think we did go blind, I think we are blind, Blind but seeing, Blind people who can see, but do not see." It is also interesting to note that the blindness that spreads through this community is referred to in the story as "white evil," mainly to distinguish it from the usual kind of blindness. Those who are physically and literally blind know that they cannot see, and report that the dominant color of their world is black. "White blindness" is hence adopted to describe the malady, to distinguish those who are unaware of the fact that they cannot see from those who are blind and acknowledge it.

The sad, tragic conviction that our novelist seems to have reached is that partial truth, knowledge, and wisdom can be ours only at the high price of suffering. Metaphorically speaking, it is only by going through all the horrifying stages of blindness that people finally become capable of seeing. But is this really the price mankind has to pay in order to be enlightened? And why could there not be an easier solution to the dilemma?

Human nature and what characterizes it has always been a crucial point of reference for Saramago. Blindness explores our "blind" nature and how even being physically blind and handicapped does not help human beings realize how misdirected their lives are and how futile their search for happiness in life is. As such, the story deals with blindness on two levels: people's physical blindness, and their mental incapacity in terms of realizing the ultimate meaning of their lives.

Once left by themselves, the blind in the mental asylum start revealing acts of both utter bestiality and generosity. The story does not restrict itself to graphically shocking scenes of theft, gang terror, rape, and murder. As the narration proceeds and as pictured in both the beautifully constructed concluding scenes of the novel and the touching ones in the middle, it is ultimately love and only love that brings the people together. In one scene, after they have been abused by the blind hoodlums, the blind women are on their way back to their dreary ward: [deaf,] blind, silent, tottering on their feet, with barely enough will-power not to let go of the hand of the woman in front, the hand, not the shoulder, as when they had come, certainly not one of them would have known what to reply if they had been asked, Why are you holding hands as you go, it simply came about, there are gestures for which we cannot always find an easy explanation, sometimes not even a difficult one can be found.

It is precisely these simple acts of kindness that in their inexplicable way, one more tune, will help redeem the human experience.

As the reader witnesses the gradual meltdown of society, Saramago takes the opportunity to comment on certain fixed values within the social system despite the continuous changes people have undergone.

For example, via the doctor's wife, the only functional person in her group and among all the rest in general, Saramago reveals how the dynamics of relationships, including the husband-wife relationship, change.



Yet, despite all the suffering and all the terrible scenes of filth and corruption she has become exposed to, the doctor's wife is capable of offering unconditional love and support to the members of her group, displaying the values of friendship, trust, and kindness.

## Blindness

The core theme of the novel is the extended allegory of blindness. With one exception, all of the characters in the novel are blind. Some of them, such as the Chronicler of the gang of thugs, are naturally blind. Some of them, such as the old man with the black eye-patch, are partially naturally blind. Most of them, such as the first man and the thief, are blind due to a disease known as the white sickness, which causes them to see only a milky whiteness. The physical effect of the epidemic of blindness starts on the opening pages of the novel and then apparently spontaneously resolves during the last scenes of the novel after infecting everyone in the entire nation except a single character. The course of the disease appears to be about two months and its rate of contagion is one hundred percent.

All aspects of the narrative construction and plot development are subordinated to the consideration of blindness and sight, and it is by any standard the single dominant theme in the novel. Blindness is considered from a medical perspective when the doctor examines the first man's eyes and can find no physical deficiency. The ministry of health takes charge of the situation and, assuming the blindness is caused by an emerging pathogen, enforces strict quarantines that ultimately fail to contain the disease. Blindness is considered from a social perspective as the characters begin to behave differently once they believe no one can perceive their actions. Blindness is considered from a humorous perspective as characters stumble around and bump into each other. For example, the guards view the blind inmates' walking as comical and indicative of idiocy. Blindness is also considered from the political perspective as a new society and form of harsh governance are established within the confines of the mental hospital. The multi-faceted consideration of blindness from so many angles is one of the most interesting aspects of the narrative.

## Narrative Authority

One recurring theme throughout the novel is that of narrative authority. The narrator is presented as reliable and credible and yet the identity of the narrator is not only not established but is confounded by the frequent use of the first-person plural "we" within the narrative construction. Furthermore, the narrator openly questions the authenticity of narration on several events and the narrator denounces some scenes as unknowable even as they are related. These self-references make it apparent that the narrator considers the narrative act to be subject to some amount of fictive invention while generally stating the truth.



For example, on one occasion the man with the black eye-patch delivers a lengthy monologue that purports to be a history of the failure of the banking industry. This monologue is partially interspersed with narrative content that also relates to the failure of the industry. The narrator states that one particular banking executive was trapped in an elevator and remains there entombed in steel; yet the narrative then mentions that as there were no witnesses to the event its truthfulness cannot be established - this from the omniscient narrator relating the facts to begin with. The narrator and other characters then chide the man with the black eye-patch for providing statements of fact that are patently unknowable. Yet, the failure of the banking industry as related is taken essentially as fact by the characters, the narrator, and by extension, the reader.

When one also considers that the entire premise of the novel is fictional - indeed the novel itself is a form of fiction - it becomes apparent that the author has constructed a playful and carefully crafted story that examines its own significance even as it presents characters that moralize and contemplate the very nature of humanity.

## Nature of Being Human

With the possible exception of the dog of tears, all of the characters in the novel are ostensibly human. They are firmly established as typical human beings who go to work, develop relationships, live in apartments, have sex, tell stories, and enjoy each others company. They live in a city which is largely unexceptional, in a country that appears normal in most respects, and have goals and desires which are rather commonplace. However, all of this exists before the white sickness infects them all and causes them to go blind.

Society initially responds by treating the blind as an undesirable element. The blind are rounded up and forcibly quarantined without recourse to medical care or any outside assistance. Those who dare approach the fence, or even make a tentative motion toward the fence, are shot down and these executions are easily accepted by the outside world. The guards refer to the blind people as dogs and animals.

The blind themselves also act less and less human as the novel progresses. At first they begin to copulate in common wards since no one can see them - other inmates refer to the sexual partners as pigs or animals. Later they begin to engage in licentious behavior by taking multiple sexual partners. They begin to live in filth, sleep in their own excrement, steal food from the weak, and eat like animals. Later still the blind collectively decide that widespread gang rape, sexual abuse, and even murder are preferable to resistance through collective action and members of the gang of thugs, described as hyenas, descend on women three and four at a time to jostle for access to her sexual organs.

The humanity of the characters is largely confined to the doctor's wife, the only sighted person in the mental hospital to see the filth and uncivil behavior of the others. She frequently wishes that she were also blind so that she would not have to witness the atrocities of the blind world. She is one of the only characters to take decisive action to



routinely help others. The burden of her self-imposed responsibility begins to gradually overwhelm her until at the close of the novel her willpower nears collapse. Just as the final vestiges of human behavior are on the verge of slipping away, the epidemic comes to an end and sight returns. Presumably, sight will bring with it a renewed sense of decency and a resurgence of good human nature over bestial impulses.

# Style

## Point of View

The novel is written from a complex point of view that can perhaps best be described as the often-transparent fusion between the atypical first person, plural, and the traditional third-person points of view. The narrator is completely omniscient and frequently reveals the inner thoughts and feelings of characters as well as providing frequent and heavy foreshadowing of significant developments. The novel's atypical point of view joins numerous other bizarre or atypical aspects of construction and assists to make the novel a unique reading experience.

For the most part the novel reads as a traditional third-person, omniscient, narrative - but there are numerous subtle intrusions of a different narrative style. For example, in one scene three women on an apartment balcony bathe naked in the rain during daylight hours - consider the passage "[M]y God, how the rain is pouring down on them, how it trickles between their breasts, how it lingers and disappears into the darkness of the pubis, how it finally drenches and flows over the thighs, perhaps we have judged them wrongly, or perhaps we are unable to see this the most beautiful and glorious thing that has happened in the history of the city. . ." (Chap. 15, p. 251). One of the women blithely comments that their bodies are visible only to God, but this is actually inaccurate on several accounts. First, one of the women is not in fact blind and thus she can see all of their naked bodies. Second, the women who are blind touch and feel each other's bodies to discern their shape and thereafter claim to be able to see without eyes. Finally, the narrator, and by implication the reader, see them and consider their nude bodies and apparently exhibitionist behavior as sensual. The subtle intrusion of the pronoun "we" happens on several occasions throughout the text and successfully draws the reader into an uncomfortable act of voyeurism.

## Setting

The novel features two principle settings - an unnamed city in an unnamed country, and a mental hospital used to quarantine blind individuals. The novel begins and ends in the city but the middle portion, from Chapters 4 through 12, occur nearly entirely within the mental hospital.

The city is presented as intentionally nameless, as are all of the characters. A modern city, it sprawls over at least several miles of area and features numerous high-rise apartment buildings and banks. Large supermarkets and doctor's offices are apparently common, as are hotels. Prostitution and crime are present before the epidemic of blindness. Indeed, the novel opens with an automobile theft, a prostitute's tryst, and several visits to an ophthalmologist's office. At least one apartment building has a private garden when the tenants grow vegetables and rabbits. The city apparently has at least one radio station that broadcasts the news and music. The city is part of an





unnamed country with a well-established military and, at the very least, a ministry of health. Because officials within the ministry of health appear to be intimately familiar with certain business ventures within the city, it is probably that the city is the capital city of the country. Over the course of the novel the city descends into chaos and fills with garbage and feces as crowds of blind people rove the streets searching for anything edible.

The city also has an abandoned mental hospital that lies on the outskirts of the urban area. The asylum's grounds are apparently fairly large and are ringed with a strong fence. The asylum is composed of a single large building which has two wings joined at a central area that also contains the main - and possibly only - entrance. Each wing has three wards and each ward has forty beds. It can be assumed that the hospital was intended to have a maximum capacity of 240 inmates. The hospital has two lavatories that prove wholly inadequate to the needs of the many internees. The hospital does not appear to have any common areas or treatment facilities and the little water that does come through the decrepit plumbing is not only non-potable but is also deemed too filthy even for bathing. The novel makes liberal use of several "madmen running the madhouse" colloquialisms which, unfortunately, are in this case quite literally true.

## Language and Meaning

Though the novel has been translated into several languages, the English-language translation version is solely considered in this summary. The novel was translated from the Portuguese by Giovanni Pontiero, who died before completing his revision of the translation. Margaret Jull Costa thereafter made final revisions.

The language of the novel is complex and rich and is simultaneously engaging and difficult. Sentences are often extremely lengthy and can span paragraphs and even entire pages. Punctuation is not used entirely consistently; for example, mid-sentence capitalization is often used to denote what would typically be considered a new sentence. This unusual style of conjunction allows seemingly disparate sentences, frequently dialogue, to be juxtaposed and thereby elucidate subtle meaning.

It is worth noting that the language used is often offensive and may be deemed nearly unreadable and inappropriate for some audiences. This is particularly true throughout Chapters 11 and 12 where scenes of gang rape are represented in detail. Consider, for example, the rape of the doctor's wife: "Either you suck me, or your ward won't see another crumb of bread, go back there and tell them that if they have nothing to eat it's because you refused to suck me . . . [t]he doctor's wife leaned forward, with the tips of two fingers on her right hand she held and raised the man's sticky penis . . . [s]he moved her head forward, opened her mouth, closed it, closed her eyes in order not to see and began sucking (Chap. 11, p. 162)." Later in the same chapter, another woman dies from the sexual beating she received during an extended gang rape. This brutal language depicting obscene acts contrasts with other sections of the novel that present extended allegories which are quite lyrically beautiful, and the precise use of language is one of the most enjoyable aspects of the text.





## Structure

The 293-page novel is divided into seventeen unnumbered chapters of roughly equal length. Each chapter is presented in chronological order and the events within each chapter are largely presented in the order in which they occur - thus, the novel's primary timeline is fairly simple and easily intelligible. For the first several days of the novel's primary timeline, the day-by-day secession is fairly well defined but the novel quickly loses firm coherency about the passage of days as the various characters go blind. Eventually the characters find themselves in quarantine without any definitive way to know precisely how long they have been there. Even the doctor's wife who can see is uncertain of the exact date because the lights in the facility are kept always on and furthermore she initially forgets to wind her watch and then trades it for food. The narrative plays with the unknown passage of time by noting that various inmates sleep longer than others but all of them assume that when they wake a new day has begun. External cues are not helpful either - even the daily announcement that is seemingly so dependable is noted as being unreliable because for unknown reasons it does not play on some days. Whether this is truly a failure to play on random days or because the characters wrongly assume a new day has begun is not a resolvable problem within the book. At least one inmate is noted as keeping a string with one knot tied for each day, but again the narrative discredits this method by noting that some of the knots were overlapping.

A second notable structural element is the atypical lack of punctuation, particularly quotation marks, and the atypical formatting. It is thus often difficult or impossible to tell if a given sentence is intended as dialogue or authorial comment. Even when the text is manifestly dialogue, it is frequently difficult or impossible to attribute the dialogue to a specific character. This allows the novel to take on a dreamy, stream-of-conscious tone without sacrificing narrative exactness or a fairly strict chronological presentation of events.



## Quotes

"The amber light came on. Two of the cars ahead accelerated before the red light appeared. At the pedestrian crossing the sign of a green man lit up. The people who were waiting began to cross the road, stepping on the white stripes painted on the black surface of the asphalt, there is nothing less like a zebra, however, that is what it is called. The motorists kept an impatient foot on the clutch, leaving their cars at the ready, advancing, retreating like nervous horses that can sense the whiplash about to be inflicted. The pedestrians have just finished crossing but the sign allowing the cars to go will be delayed for some seconds, some people maintain that this delay, while apparently so insignificant, has only to be multiplied by the thousands of traffic lights that exist in the city and by the successive changes of their three colours to produce one of the most serious causes of traffic jams or bottlenecks, to use the more current term." (p. 1)

"The girl with the dark glasses was also accompanied to her parents' house by a policeman, but the piquancy of the circumstances in which blindness had manifested itself in her case, a naked woman screaming in a hotel and alarming the other guests, while the man who was with her tried to escape, pulling on his trousers in haste, somehow mitigated the obvious drama of the situation. Overcome with embarrassment, a feeling entirely compatible, for all the mutterings of hypocritical prudes and the would-be virtuous, with the mercenary rituals of love to which she dedicated herself, after the piercing shrieks she let out on realising that her loss of vision was not some new and unforeseen consequence of pleasure, the blind girl hardly dared to weep and lament her fate when unceremoniously, without giving her time to dress properly, and almost by force, she was evicted from the hotel. In a tone of voice that would have been sarcastic had it not been simply ill-mannered, the policeman wanted to know, after asking her where she lived, if she had the money for the taxi, in these cases, the State doesn't pay, he warned her, a procedure which, let us note in passing, is not without a certain logic, insofar as these women belong to that considerable number who pay no taxes on their immoral earnings. She gave an affirmative nod, but, being blind, just imagine, she thought the policeman might not have noticed her gesture and she murmured, Yes, I have the money, and then under her breath, added, If only I didn't, words that might strike us as being odd, but which, if we consider the circumvolutions of the human mind, where no short or direct routes exist, these same words end up by being absolutely clear, what she meant to say was that she had been punished because of her disreputable conduct, for her immorality, and this was the outcome. She had told her mother she would not be home for dinner, and in the end she was home early, even before her father." (p. 25)

"Nor is it surprising that they should try as far as possible to stay close together, there are many affinities here, some already known, others that are about to be revealed, for example, it was the pharmacist's assistant who sold eye-drops to the girl with dark glasses, this was the taxi-driver who took the first blind man to the doctor, this fellow who has identified himself as being a policeman found the blind thief weeping like a lost child, and as for the hotel maid she was the first person to enter the room when the girl



with dark glasses had a screaming fit. It is nevertheless certain that not all of these affinities will become explicit and known, either because of a lack of opportunity, or because no one so much as imagined that they could possibly exist, or because of a simple question of sensibility and tact. The hotel maid would never dream that the woman she saw naked is here, we know that the pharmacist's assistant served other customers wearing dark glasses who came to purchase eye-drops, no one would be imprudent enough to denounce to the policeman the presence of someone who stole a car, the taxi-driver would swear that during the last few days he had no blind man as a passenger." (p. 55)

"The two soldiers forming the escort, who were waiting outside, reacted admirably in the face of danger. Mastering, God alone knows how and why, their legitimate fear, they advanced to the threshold of the door and emptied their magazines. The blind internees fell one on top of the other, and, as they fell, their bodies were still being riddled with bullets which was a sheer waste of ammunition, it all happened to incredibly slowly, one body, then another, it seemed they would never stop falling, as you sometimes see in films and on television. If we are still in an age when a soldier has to account for the bullets fired, they will swear on the flag that they acted in legitimate defence of their unarmed comrades who were on a humanitarian mission and suddenly found themselves threatened and outnumbered by a group of blind internees. In a mad rush they retreated to the gate, covered by the rifles which the soldiers on patrol were pointing unsteadily between the railings as if the blind internees who had survived, were about to make a retaliatory attack." (p. 76)

"A number of the new arrivals had already entered the hallway, but two hundred persons cannot be expected to sort themselves out all that easily, moreover blind and without a guide, this painful situation being made even worse by the fact that we are in an old building and badly designed at that, it is not enough for a sergeant who knows only about military affairs to say, there are three wards on each side, you have to know what it's like inside, doorways so narrow that they look more like bottlenecks, corridors as crazy as the other inmates of the asylum, opening for no clear reason and closing who knows where, and no one is every likely to find out. Instinctively, the vanguard of blind internees had divided into two columns, moving on both sides along the walls in search of a door they might enter, a safe method, undoubtedly, assuming there are no items of furniture blocking the way." (pp. 99-100)

"From this point onwards, apart from a few inevitable comments, the story of the old man with the black eyepatch will no longer be followed to the letter, being replaced by a reorganised version of his discourse, re-evaluated in the light of a correct and more appropriate vocabulary. The reason for this previously unforeseen change is the rather formal controlled language, used by the narrator, which almost disqualifies him as a complementary reporter, however important he may be, because without him we would have no way of knowing what happened in the outside world, as a complementary reporter, as we were saying, of these extraordinary events, when as we know the description of any facts can only gain with the rigour and suitability of the terms used." (pp. 108-109)



"This is really the crux of the matter. Each time those sent to fetch the food return to their ward with the meager rations they have been given there is an outburst of angry protest. There is always someone who proposes collective action, a mass demonstration, using the forceful argument about the cumulative strength of their numbers, confirmed time and time again and sublimated in the dialectic affirmation that determined wills, in general merely capable of being added one to the other, are also very capable in certain circumstances of multiplying among themselves ad infinitum." (p. 146)

"The girl with dark glasses got in behind the doctor's wife, then came the hotel maid, the girl from the surgery, the wife of the first blind man, the woman no one knows and, finally, the blind woman suffering from insomnia, a grotesque line-up of foul-smelling women, their clothes filthy and in tatters, it seems impossible that the animal drive for sex should be so powerful, to the point of blinding a man's sense of smell, the most delicate of the senses, there are even some theologians who affirm, although not in these exact words, that the worst thing about trying to live a reasonable lie in hell is getting used to the dreadful stench down there." (p. 159)

"Somewhat less appropriate was the blast that came from the loudspeaker, recently it had spoken on certain days, on others not at all, but always at the same time, as had been promised, clearly there was a timer in the transmitter which at the precise moment started up the recorded tape, the reason why it should have broken down from time to time we are never likely to know, these are matters for the outside world, it is in any case serious enough, insofar as it muddled up the calendar, the so-called counting of the days, which some blind men, natural obsessives, or lovers of order, which is a moderate form of obsession, had tried scrupulously to follow by making little knots in a piece of string, this was done by those who did not trust their memory, as if they were writing a diary." (p. 177)

"Someone had grabbed the last rag that had barely covered her from the waist up, she was now going around with her breasts exposed and glistening, a refined expression, with the water from heaven, this was not liberty leading the people, the bags, fortunately full, are too heavy for her to carry them aloft like a flag." (p. 209)

"There being no witnesses, and if there were there is no evidence that they were summoned to the post-mortems to tell us what happened, it is understandable that someone should ask how it was possible to know that these things happened so and not in some other manner, the reply to be given is that all stories are like those about the creation of the universe, no one was there, no one witnessed everything, yet everyone knows what happened." (p. 237)

"They were proclaiming the end of the world, redemption through penitence, the visions of the seventh day, the advent of the angel, cosmic collisions, the death of the sun, the tribal spirit, the sap of the mandrake, tiger ointment, the virtue of the sign, the discipline of the wind, the perfume of the moon, the revindication of darkness, the power of exorcism, the sign of the heel, the crucifixion of the rose, the purity of the lymph, the blood of the black cat, the sleep of the shadow, the rising of the seas, the logic of



anthropophagy, painless castration, divine tattoos, voluntary blindness, convex thoughts, or concave, or horizontal or vertical, or sloping, or concentrated, or dispersed, or fleeting, the weakening of the vocal cords, the death of the word, Here nobody is speaking of organisation, said the doctor's wife, Perhaps organisation is in another square, he replied." (p. 267)

"She raised her head to the slender pillars, to the high vaults, to confirm the security and stability of her blood circulation, she said, I am feeling fine, but at that very moment she thought she had gone mad or that the lifting of the vertigo had given her hallucinations, it could not be true what her eyes revealed, that man nailed to the cross with a white bandage covering his eyes, and next to him a woman, her heart pierced by seven swords and her eyes also covered with a white bandage, and it was not only that man and that woman who were in that condition, all the images in the church had their eyes covered, statues with a white cloth tied around the head, paintings with a thick brushstroke of white pain, and there was a woman teaching her daughter how to read and both had their eyes covered, and a man with an open book on which a little child was sitting, and both had their eyes covered, and another man, his body spiked with arrows, and he had his eyes covered, and a woman with a lit lamp, and she had her eyes covered, and a man with wounds on his hands and feet and his chest, and he had his eyes covered, and another man with a lion, and both had their eyes covered, and another man with a lamb, and both had their eyes covered, and another man with an eagle, and both had their eyes covered, and another man with a spear standing over a fallen man with horns and cloven feet, and both had their eyes covered, and another man carrying a set of scales, and he had his eyes covered, and an old bald man holding a white lily, and he had his eyes covered, and another man leaning on an unsheathed sword, and he had his eyes covered, and a woman with a dove, and both had their eyes covered, and a man with two ravens, and all three had their eyes covered, there was only one woman who did not have her eyes covered, because she carried her gouged-out eyes on a silver tray." (pp. 283-284)



## Key Questions

Blindness, as a multi-dimensional novel, is rich in philosophical, social, and political implications. The following questions are intended to help readers better grasp the varied layers of the work: 1. What do you think are the main reasons for the novelist's adoption of the "stream of consciousness" technique in *Blindness*?

2. How justified would it be to say that Saramago's concern for humanity can be detected even in the harsh scenes he portrays in his novel? Support your answer with evidence from within the story.

3. How does Saramago bring out the best and worst characteristics of human nature within the same text? How successful has he been in this respect?

4. Why do you think Saramago avoids ending his novel with a clear message?

How would you suggest he could have concluded his story, had he not wanted to leave it open-ended?

5. Comment on the use of satire and irony in the work and compare their application here with that in other satirical works.

6. Why do you think characters are referred to, in this novel, mainly by their eye-sight problems? What significance/ relation does this kind of characterization have to the theme(s) of the story?

7. What are the main philosophical issues raised in the novel? What are the major political and social issues?

8. How does the dynamic of marriage change in *Blindness*? Why do you think Saramago wanted his main character—the doctor's wife—to be both physically and morally stronger than others, including her husband?

9. Comment on the experience of suffering as a channel through which all the characters in this novel must pass.

10. How does Saramago bring together the issues of crime, justice, and suffering in his work?



## Topics for Discussion

Do you think the white sickness is really caused by a highly contagious disease? What other possible explanations might there be for the blindness experienced by nearly all of the characters in the novel?

Did the ministry of health act in good faith when it established a forcible quarantine of those afflicted, or suspected of being contaminated, with the white sickness?

Consider life inside the mental hospital. What aspect of that existence would you find the most troubling?

Upon several occasions, the inmates of the mental hospital considered using collective action to better their circumstances. Yet, they never effectively organized. At what points in the narrative do you think that collective action could have made a significant difference?

If you were a woman in the mental facility, would you have consented to be raped in exchange for food? If you were a man in the mental facility, would you have allowed the women to be raped in exchange for food?

In the days after agreeing to be raped in exchange for food, but before submitting to actually being mass raped, many of the women and nearly all of the men are overcome by an increased sexual appetite. Many of the characters engage in frequent sex with multiple partners. Why do you think the blind people became so intensely aroused and so sexually permissive?

Was life inside the mental hospital, just prior to the conflagration, better or worse than life outside of the hospital?

Is the white sickness simply a disease? Alternatively, does the narrative propose that the blindness is actually an allegory? What conditions in modern life are similar to the blindness?

The narrative frequently suggests that being blind robs one of humanity and turns one into an animal. In your opinion, is this an accurate analysis of being blind?

The narrative introduces a dog, the "dog of tears," as a companion to the doctor's wife. What role does the dog of tears play during the narrative conclusion? How is the dog's behavior more "human" than the behavior of, for example, the doctor?



## Literary Precedents

As discussed, *Blindness* is a modern version of mythological stories dealing with mankind's limited and deplorable situation on earth, and thus any work emphasizing this theme can well be considered its literary precedent. In an analytical account of the history of poetry and fiction, Saramago himself is on record as saying: [T]he literary genre we refer to as the novel, having moved in one direction as far as it can go, like an imaginary pendulum, is now swinging back the way it came, perhaps repeating all those moments already experienced before returning to rudimentary verse, where it will recommence its familiar journey, leaping several centuries or millennia ahead into the future.

With these words, our novelist hints at the universality of all human experience as recorded in literature. And thus he remarks: So far our route is clear; it began one day with a loud cry in the shade of a tree or inside a cave, in an encampment of nomads under the stars, in a public square or in the marketplace, then someone began to write and thereafter someone wrote about what had just been written, forever repeating, forever modifying, and so on and so forth, arranging the words in silence for a reading that was carried out in silence.

However, as in the continuation of the same discussion, Saramago points out that "exact repetition" is impossible, and each time the pendulum swings back it leaves behind some traces which distinguish different works of art from one another. And it is exactly the creative additions and omissions Saramago applies to the universal themes that make his work so unique.

*Blindness* is particularly reminiscent of works such as Albert Camus's *The Plague* and William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*. Further, as a satirical work, it also brings to mind works of such great writers as Jonathan Swift and Samuel Beckett. However, in his sincere compassion and concern for humanity, Saramago definitely lacks the hard-edged irony and the sarcasm present in the works of other notable satirists.





## Related Titles

Saramago has produced more than thirty works, including poems, essays, plays, and novels. In almost all of these one finds a serious author attempting to come to terms with the illusory reality and encouraging others to join him in this task. His lofty goal and sincere attempts have won him many awards including the Premio Cidade de Lisboa 1980, Premio PEN Club Portugues 1983 and 1984, Premio da Critica da Associacao Portuguesa 1986, Grande Premio de Romance e Novela 1991, Premio Vida Literaria 1993, and the Premio Camoes 1995.

*Blindness*, which won the 1998 Nobel Prize for Literature, thematically bears significant links to the writer's previous works.

The poems published in *O Ano de 1993* ("The Year 1993," 1975) take as their subject matter the same concept of the plageridden cities as a backdrop for social collapse. The two works, however, are different in that the epidemic and its horrible consequences in *Blindness* come nowhere close to the horror presented in the poems.

Nonetheless, they are explicitly linked by the symbolic downfall of purifying rain over the cities as the requisite for restoring social order, which concludes both works.

Saramago's major success came with his 1977 novel, *Manual of Painting and Calligraphy: A Novel*. This book, sometimes considered autobiographical, bears certain links to *Blindness* in dealing with more general issues such as love and the relation of individual and society.



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