

# **Dawn Study Guide**

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# Plot Summary

The novel takes place in Palestine over the course of a night. It is right after World War II, and Palestine is under the British occupation. The central character, Elisha is an eighteen-year-old young man, going on nineteen. This is his story as he traces how he comes to kill a man.

Elisha is a member of the Movement, a Jewish terrorist group, whose purpose is to drive out the English forces from Palestine by any means necessary. Elisha was incarcerated in Auschwitz and then Buchenwald during the war and lost both of his parents in the process. When the Americans freed him, he went to France, which granted him asylum. He was preparing to enroll in Sorbonne to study philosophy when he meets Gad, a member of the Movement, in Paris. Gad came to visit him and talks fervently about realizing the age-old dream of an independent nation for the Jewish people and asks Elisha to join the Movement, which is in need of new recruits like him. Elisha was searching for the meaning of life and the nature of man in light of his experience. To him, Gad seemed like Meshulah, the mysterious messenger of fate. Convinced that Gad showed up at that moment to show him the way, he agreed to join up and moved to Palestine.

Soon after arriving in Palestine, Elisha undergoes intensive terrorist training for six weeks. He is also indoctrinated into the Movement's ideology, which is to get the English out by any means necessary. Elisha goes on a few missions, but it's always in a group. He may have killed someone, but it is not clear because he's never had to face a person and kill point-blank. That's about to change.

The Old Man, the leader of the Movement, is fed up with the British power in Palestine, which just sentenced David ben Moshe to death by hanging. Ben Moshe's sentence makes it the tenth death sentence on a member of the Movement. David ben Moshe was captured about a month earlier during a raid led by Gad. It was a simple mission to procure arms from an English base. The raid goes awry due to a wounded English sentry's courage, and resulted in the death of Dan, another member, and the capture of David. The Old Man declared that from now on, one Englishman will die for every terrorist executed. To drive home his point, he ordered the kidnapping of an Englishman, preferably an officer. The unfortunate victim is Captain John Dawson, who is taken while he is taking a walk alone at night.

The kidnapping turns the spotlight on Palestine, making David ben Moshe's case an international incident. Some, including John Dawson's mother, plead for clemency for David so that John Dawson can be spared, but the British Cabinet refuses, afraid of showing weakness to would-be nationalists in other parts of the Empire. The Movement makes the same stand as the British Cabinet feeling they can't back down or they'll lose credibility, and their future actions will draw only contempt.

Elisha learns that he is the one selected to execute John Dawson. This is his first face-to-face killing. As he waits for dawn, the time the execution will take place, many



thoughts plague him. He struggles with the thought of killing someone, who hasn't done anything to him. He is visited by all the people he has known, who are now dead. One of them even looks like the boy he used to be before the war tore everything apart. He looks for answers from his fellow members, but they only try to comfort him by telling him that it's war.

With only an hour to dawn, Elisha finally goes to meet John Dawson. He is a handsome, distinguished man. When realizing that Elisha is about his own son's age, he expresses pity for this boy, who has to face such choices, which his son never had to experience. Elisha wants to hate the man, but he can't. He doesn't want to kill a man in cold blood and wants to find something in John to hate, but it's hard. John is not craven or evil, just a noble man who is bravely facing his untenable fate. He asks Elisha to give his letter to his son, and Elisha promises to mail it the same day. John wants to tell him a story, but he doesn't get the chance. Elisha shoots him, and Elisha's name is the last word on the dead man's lips.

When the darkness falls away, everything has changed. Darkness always carries a face, and it's of death. Elisha realizes that there's a face in the darkness, and it is his own.



# Chapter 1

## Chapter 1 Summary

It is a hot, autumn evening in Palestine. Elisha is standing near the window looking out at the transparent twilight. A cry of a child is heard. The city seems silent, motionless, unreal, and very far away. Tomorrow, he has to kill a man. Elisha doesn't know anything about him except that he is an Englishman, which makes him Elisha's enemy.

Night brings out a special memory for Elisha, who learned a lesson from an old beggar when Elisha was twelve years old. It was at the beginning of the war, and Elisha's parents were still alive. In an overheated synagogue in his hometown, he meets up a gaunt, shadowy man, who may not be a beggar. Usually uneasy around beggars, who inspire in him mingled feelings of love and fear, Elisha finds this man more unsettling than usual and feels anxious, especially when he ends up being alone with him in the empty synagogue. The man offers to walk him home and asks whether Elisha is ever afraid of the dark. When Elisha answers in the affirmative, the beggar advises him not to be afraid of the dark. Night is purer than day. It makes everything more intense and truer. He also teaches him how to distinguish between day and night. One can do so by looking at a window or into a man's eyes. If one sees a face, then night has succeeded day, for night has a face. Then he bids him good-bye and walks away into the snow. Since then, every evening, Elisha has stood near a window to greet the arrival of night. Every evening, he has never failed to see a face. At first, it was the beggar's face, then others', including his father's after his death. He doesn't know anything about the faces, except that they are dead.

Elisha is doing the same this evening as the twilight fades abruptly. He continues to hear the cry of a child somewhere, and it seems even more plaintive than before. A sharp pain catches his throat, for the face he sees is his own.

An hour earlier, Gad relayed the Old Man's decision to him. The execution will take place at dawn. A month earlier, David ben Moshe, a fighter in the Movement, was wounded during a terrorist attack and captured. A military tribunal sentenced him to death by hanging, the penalty stipulated by martial law. This sentence marks the tenth death sentence the mandatory power in Palestine has imposed on the people of the Movement. The Old Man has had enough. He has declared that from now on, for the hanging of every Jewish fighter, an English mother will mourn the death of her son. To prove his point, he has ordered the taking of a hostage, preferably an army officer. Captain John Dawson is the unlucky victim, who is snatched by the Movement's men while he is out walking alone at night.

The tension escalates rapidly as the English army proclaims a forty-eight-hour curfew and hundreds of suspects are arrested. With tank, machine guns, and barbed-wire barricades erected everywhere, Palestine feels like one huge prison. Still, the Movement is successful at keeping the hostage hidden away from the English army.



The High Commissioner of Palestine announces that the entire population will be held responsible if Captain John Dawson is killed. This brings out fear in everyone, and people begin to whisper the ugly word 'pogrom.'

The Zionist leaders recommend prudence and implore the Old Man not to go too far. The Old Man is determined to execute John Dawson if David ben Moshe is hanged. He believes that they cannot back away now without making the Movement seem weak. He believes the English respect only one thing - violence.

This soon becomes an international incident with major newspapers in London, Paris, and New York headlining the story, and a dozen special correspondents flying into Jerusalem. In London, John Dawson's mother requests pardon for David. The High Commissioner also recommends clemency. However, the Secretary of State for Colonial Affairs is resolute, and so is the majority of the Cabinet. They feel that a pardon will be interpreted as a sign of weakness and may encourage other young idealists in other parts of the British Empire.

Soon, the official Jerusalem radio announces that David ben Moshe will be executed at dawn the next day. He is allowed one farewell visit from his family. The news means that John Dawson will also die. This is when Elisha finds out that he is to be the one to kill Dawson. He feels as if he has just been thrown into a bottomless pit so great is his shock.

## Chapter 1 Analysis

The story unfurls with the depiction of a calm evening in Palestine. One soon realizes that it is during the time of World War II, or soon after, and the nation of Israel is yet to be born. The protagonist, Elisha, seems to still be a young man because he was only twelve when the war broke out.

When the story begins, he is looking out the window as night begins. This is significant because a beggar taught Elisha to distinguish night and day by looking for a face through a window or in the eyes of a man. The night always has a face. This night he sees his own face. Since all the people he saw in the window have been dead, this may signify certain death for him. Perhaps death of a part of his soul because he's just been told that he must kill a man he has never met. One senses that this is the first time he's ever killed a person.

Even though the story is set fifty years ago, it resonates with the current situation in the Middle East. However, the so-called terrorists in this story are the Jewish freedom fighters, called 'The Movement,' instead of Palestinians or Arabs. Instead of Americans, the English are the hated enemy because they occupy Palestine as a part of Great Britain.

The tension is high as both sides have dug in deep and now neither can back down without losing face. The Movement, having declared that they will kill an Englishman for every Jewish fighter executed, now must show that they mean business. Otherwise, the



English will think the Movement is, as usual, big on words but no action. The British has a lot to lose as they need to set an example here; otherwise, they may face even bigger headaches in other parts of their Empire. They need to show toughness to keep the Empire together and instill fear in the would-be freedom fighters in these occupied countries.

The story has two layers. One is the personal struggles of a young man who must do something that goes against his grain. The other is the political circumstances that dictate and influence his action.



# Chapter 2

## Chapter 2 Summary

In Chapter 2, we learn that the narrator's name is Elisha. He's eighteen years old, making it only six years since his encounter with the beggar, but he has experienced much tragedy during that time. The story begins with how Elisha comes to France from Buchenwald. He is freed by Americans but refuses their offer to return him to his native town. With his parents dead and the town under Russian occupation, he does not want to revisit his childhood.

Instead, he opts to go to France, which grants him an asylum. After spending a month in a youth camp in Normandy, he returns to Paris, where he is set up in a furnished room and immerses himself in French lessons. His goal is to enroll in a philosophy course at the Sorbonne. In an atmosphere of detachment, he wants to explore questions such as why he was victimized, where God is to be found, and what makes a man most truly a man.

All this changes when Gad comes knocking at his door. Elisha feels uneasy with Gad's sense of purpose and his knowledge about Elisha, when Elisha knows nothing about this stranger. When Gad offers to give Elisha a future, he sees Gad as a Meshulah, the mysterious messenger of fate in the Hassidic legends. "Who are you?" "I am a messenger." When Gad answers thus to Elisha's terrified question, his premonition is confirmed. He seems to possess power over men, and he remains standing, which reinforces Elisha's initial impression. In Hassidic legends, the messenger is always portrayed standing.

Smoking incessantly, he talks to Elisha nonstop until dawn, which Elisha absorbs with eyes wide open. Gad talks about realizing the age-old Jewish dream of an independent homeland and how the Movement is fighting against the English with only about a hundred men. This is the first time Elisha hears of the Jews not as victims but fighters claiming what is theirs. His parents were not Zionists, and Zion was more a sacred ideal than an actual place or a political slogan to them. When Gad asks him to join the Movement because they need fresh recruits and reinforcements, Elisha accepts.

It is three weeks later, and he is now in Palestine, facing the situation with Captain John Dawson. All around the world, David ben Moshe is treated as a hero. Resistance movements in Europe protest in front of British embassies, and a Jewish delegation is received at the White House where the United States President promises to intercede. To no avail, Gad and Elisha hear that David will be hanged.

It is eight fifteen, and time for Ilana's evening broadcast. She and Gad are in love with each other. With her hypnotic voice, she inspires all the Jewish men, women, and children and is hunted by the English as much as the Old Man. They deem her influence dangerous. Only five people, including Gad and Elisha, know her true identity.





She talks about the two deaths that will occur at dawn. She praises David ben Moshe's death as meaningful; whereas, she speaks of pity for Captain John Dawson, who is a victim. She also speaks to John Dawson's mother. Ilana tells her that the British government is to blame, not the Movement. It is the British Cabinet who is responsible for Captain John Dawson's death.

Elisha's mind is in turmoil as he contemplates what he'll have to do in a few hours. Gad seems indifferent to the idea of a man dying for no reason, but Elisha cannot pretend the same. He feels as if he is killing not just John Dawson but all other Davids and Johns of the world, and that John Dawson's mother can see him in her mind.

Outside, the child finally stops crying.

## Chapter 2 Analysis

We learn here about Elisha's background. Although he doesn't describe in detail his experience at the concentration camp, one senses deep pain as he briefly mentions the loss of his parents during the incarceration. He is rescued by Americans and comes to France to start anew. Only eighteen, he went through experiences that mature him beyond his years. At the same time, he is still young, ready to explore life. Philosophy draws him, because he wants to answer his questions. He cannot reconcile the meaningless cruelty of man and his own helplessness and hopes that philosophy may help to address his turmoil by helping him to study these questions objectively. Under the calm tone, we sense inner rage and frustration. He feels impotent and guilty that he couldn't do anything to defend himself against the injustice that was inflicted on him. He also wants to be freed from his memories and his feeling of guilt by submerging himself in his studies.

Gad's appearance is timely as he shakes Elisha to the core with his unwavering conviction and sense of destiny. He seems like a cold person, not necessarily devoid of feeling or calculating, but hardened by life. He is like a battle-weary soldier. The contrast is described as Gad having a cold, almost cruel mouth, but warm, intelligent eyes. Also, the fact that Gad and Ilana are in love makes Gad more human than the initial impression. Given that all three are friends, Gad cannot be too old, but, from the description, we get the sense that he seems much older and world-weary.

Elisha, being still young and unsure of his life's direction, is taken in by Gad's eloquence and fervent belief in Zionism. Never having thought of Zionism outside of a religious context, Elisha is shaken and overcome to see Jews as aggressive fighters, rather than helpless victims. However, it is clear that Elisha never thought to find himself in the position of executing a man so soon after he arrives in Palestine. To all the battle-hardened men and women, such as Gad and Ilana, this is a part of life as they move toward establishing the nation of Israel, but Elisha feels heavy as he sees himself turning into a killer come morning.

It is also interesting to note the parallels between the rhetoric of the Movement and that of the Muslim extremists. They both believe that the end justifies the means, and they are not responsible for the killings of innocent people. Here, Ilana argues that John Dawson is dying because of the obstinacy of the British government, conveniently excusing the Movement from the blame, even though it will be a member of their organization who will kill the captain.



# Chapter 3

## Chapter 3 Summary

We learn, in this chapter, that it has been several months since Elisha's arrival in Palestine. He has taken part in several raids and sabotage operations. There have been casualties on both sides, but perhaps more on the English side. The fighters have been attacking under the cover of darkness, taking the English by surprise. The Movement's objective is to kill the greatest number of soldiers possible.

The house where Captain John Dawson is held is a two-story building, somewhere between Ramat-Gan and Tel Aviv. On the surface, the house belongs to a professor of language, a convenient disguise for the comings and goings of a large number of young people, who are actually learning various terrorist techniques. John Dawson is kept in the cellar, which is used as a dungeon to hide hostages, prisoners, and comrades who are wanted by the police.

For six weeks, several masked instructors teach these new recruits how to use weaponry such as revolvers, machine guns, and hand grenades. They also learn how to wield daggers, strangle men without noise, and escape virtually any prison. For two hours every day, Gad indoctrinates them with the Movement's ideology. The goal is simple - get the English out by any means necessary, including intimidation, terror, and sudden death. For generations, the Jewish people have suffered quietly, trying to abide by the sixth commandment: *Thou shalt not kill*. However, the atrocities committed by the Nazis against them has taught the lesson that they can only rely on themselves. They will now go out and kill, just like everyone else, to assert their rights to live as men.

One day, a masked man with a soft, timid, romantic voice comes to tell them the eleventh commandment: *Hate your enemy*. He may be the Old Man. He has a way of firing up people, making them tremble with emotion. Elisha remembers the lesson from a grizzled master about the sixth commandment. If you kill, you're taking on yourself the function of God. However, Elisha rationalizes his new resolve by telling himself that it is necessary to take on the role of God to change his people's history.

Elisha remembers his first raid. There are six people, but Gad stayed behind. Their mission is to attack a military convoy on the road between Haifa and Tel Aviv. The mission is successful, and they are complimented by Gad and the Old Man. However, with the adrenaline surge of the day exhausted, Elisha feels sick as he finds himself in the position of the hated SS guards in the Polish ghettos. He remembers how they slaughtered Jews with careless laughter as the Jews, like the men in the convoy this night, ran like frightened rabbits, trying to escape the gunfire. He learns it is not easy to play the part of God.

When Ilana arrives, Elisha and Gad learn that her beautiful broadcast, the words, and even her voice, is a product of the Old Man. She tells them that she saw the Old Man



cry. Elisha envies his ability to cry. The reason is soon clear. In Tel Aviv, people are afraid of mass reprisal, and all the newspapers appeal to the Old Man to call off John Dawson's execution. It is John Dawson's name, not David ben Moshe's, that is on everyone's lips. The Old Man cries, because, in his eyes, the Jews are not yet free from fear and victim mentality.

Gad and David are childhood friends who entered the Movement together. Gad leads the mission that goes awry and ends in David's capture. It is a "soft job"--weapons retrieval. However, a sentry, who is wounded in the scuffle, manages to crawl along the ground with a bullet in his stomach and shoot a tire of the getaway truck. Soon the whole camp is alerted. Gad successfully changes the tire and gets away, but Dan and David are not so lucky. Dan is killed, and David is captured.

## Chapter 3 Analysis

Perhaps Elisha has killed before. However, he's always had the cover of a crowd, which masks his actions. His bullets may have killed someone, but he's never had to look someone in the eye, although one sees how his conscience suffers. It is one thing to talk about taking on God's function and kill to claim one's right. It is another to see oneself as the hand that brings death to others. Elisha sees that he is becoming what he hates the most - the SS officers who killed Jewish people for fun and without any remorse.

The Old Man is seen here as a charismatic figure who inspire the young fighters of the Movement. With soft, timid, romantic voice, he inspires the fighters to hate their enemies, the English, and kill for their rights. He really believes in his cause, but we also see a manipulative, ruthless figure who doesn't hesitate to sacrifice others in the name of the cause. He cries at the reaction in Tel Aviv, not because of remorse but frustration with people's lack of understanding. He believes that the majority of the Jewish people still fear standing up for themselves.

We also gain better insight into Gad's indifference to the fate of John Dawson and Elisha's dilemma. David is a childhood friend and a comrade-in-arms, who entered the Movement with Gad. He is not just another fighter, but someone personally close to Gad, who doesn't seem to let people in easily. Gad also may feel guilty because he was the leader of the raid that ended in David's capture. He left David to fend for himself while he made the getaway with the stolen arms. He put the cause before friendship.



# Chapter 4

## Chapter 4 Summary

The mood is somber as people think about David ben Moshe. The five of them - Elisha, Ilana, Gad, Joab, and Gideon - are sitting around a table, sipping steaming tea served by Ilana. Then, one by one, each speaks about the time he or she narrowly escaped death.

Joab hides in an insane asylum to flee from a neighbor who is against the Movement. The superintendent is an old school friend. Joab is there for two weeks when the police find him. The superintendent tells the police that Joab is very sick and imagines that he is dead, but they take him into custody anyway. For forty-eight hours, he is interrogated but he never wavers. He refuses to eat or drink and, when they slap his hands and face, he doesn't react. He is taken back to the asylum. Several days later when he leaves the asylum, he realizes that his hair has turned white.

Gideon, the other bodyguard for Ilana and a saintly man, is also arrested and tortured. His beard is pulled, matches are lit under his fingernails, and his face is spat on. However, he doesn't say a word despite the pain, because he feels as if God is watching him. He is finally freed due to lack of evidence. He's alive only because he didn't admit his guilt.

Ilana is saved because of a cold in the head. The English have no description of her. One day, they haul in a whole group of women, and Ilana is included. At the police station, a sound engineer compares each one of their voices to that of the mysterious announcer of the Voice of Freedom. Fortunately, thanks to a heavy cold, she is quickly eliminated while four other women are detained.

Gad owes his life to three Englishmen. It is when he is about Elisha's age. The Old Man ordered the taking of three hostages, all sergeants, and Gad has to kill one of them at dawn. Gad doesn't mind being an executioner but chafes against being a judge. He finally comes up with a solution. He tells the three men to make the choice themselves, otherwise all will be shot. The choice is made, and Gad shoots the unlucky man's neck. Elisha is disconcerted to see the familiar hands and face of his friend speaking so coldly about putting a bullet in the neck of a fellow human being. "What if the sergeants had refused to settle it among themselves?" Elisha asks. "I think I'd have killed myself instead," Gad says in a flat voice. And after a moment of heavy silence he adds, "I tell you I was young and very weak."

Now it's Elisha's turn. He owes his life to a laugh. It is one winter at Buchenwald. Everyone is in rags and people are dying of cold every day. In the morning, everyone has to leave the barracks and wait outside in the snow, sometimes as long as two hours, until they are cleaned. Elisha is so sick that he decides to hide inside instead of dying from exposure. He is discovered and dragged in front of an assistant barracks



leader. Without questioning him, he chokes Elisha with his powerful hands. He doesn't even have the strength to struggle. However, the assistant leader looks at his blood-swollen head and finds the sight so comical that he releases his grip and bursts out laughing. He laughs so long that he forgets his intention to kill.

Then Gideon talks about taking something to eat to John Dawson. Elisha stubbornly insists that he cannot be hungry. A man condemned to die cannot have an appetite. Gad looks astonished, but Ilana looks at him with compassion and Gideon with friendliness. Joab doesn't look at Elisha at all. Then Gideon tells him that John Dawson does not know he will be executed in the morning. Elisha retorts that he knows, nonetheless because his stomach will tell him that he should not be hungry. Then Gideon offers to go down to the cellar and break the news to him. Elisha is grateful.

"Poor boy!" murmurs Ilana. Elisha tells her not to call him that as it brings back the memory of Catherine, a woman in her mid-twenties, who Elisha meets at the youth camp in Normandy. Not knowing French, he pretty much keeps to himself. Catherine seems to know German, so they start exchanging a few words. The camp is at the edge of a wood, and after supper, Elisha takes a walk by himself. One evening, Catherine asks to join him, and he remembers a story when he sees the sky opening up. According to his old master, there are nights when the sky opens up in order to make way for the prayers of unhappy children. On one such night, a little boy whose father is dying asks God to heal his father. God does cure him, but the boy himself is turned into a prayer and carried up into heaven. From that day on, God, from time to time, shows Himself to us in the face of a child. That's why Elisha likes to look at the sky at such moments, hoping to see the child. However, there is nothing and the child is only a story.

"Poor boy!" she exclaims. "Poor boy!" Elisha thinks she's speaking of the boy in the story. Catherine speaks to Elisha about love. She keeps him company on his evening walks. It starts from holding his arm and progresses to kisses. Then on the last evening, they make love. It is the first time for Elisha. When he, despite her protests not to speak, tells her that he loves her, she bursts into sobs and keeps saying, "Poor boy! Your poor boy!" He runs away. He understands. When she first said that, she wasn't thinking of the boy in the story but him. She makes love to him because he has already died and come back to earth, dead. She likes making love with little boys who are about to die. She is drawn to death.

It is fitting that he sees Catherine this night. "Poor boy!" says Ilana in a very quiet voice, her tears flowing.

## Chapter 4 Analysis

Here we get insight into what made these people into the way they are today. All of them, to varying degrees, have had brushes with death. We learn about Joab who pretended to be a comatose asylum patient to escape the police. He comes through the experience with hair turned all white. Gideon, who is a saintly person, joins the



Movement with his father's blessing. His father is a rabbi who believes that sometimes words and prayers are not enough. Gideon goes through horrendous torture for forty-eight hours but doesn't confess, which, ironically saves him, as the police has no evidence.

Gad's death experience is interesting and mirrors what Elisha is going through right now. Gad, too, had to execute a man. He, unlike Elisha, has no qualms about the act but what bothers him is that he also has to be the judge. The Old Man asked Gad to kill one of the three captured English sergeants. His answer is to let the three choose, and he shoots the unlucky chosen in the neck. One can imagine the agony and dilemma these men may have gone through, as they try to choose who will live and who will die. It is akin to the old times when people had to choose a human sacrifice to appease a god. It is chilling that Gad doesn't realize it. He thinks he has done the fair thing. Will Elisha become like Gad after he kills John Dawson?

We learn a little bit more about the hellish life at Buchenwald. Again the description is short and even-toned but serves to vividly conjure up the image of people dying of cold and starvation and desperation, then resignation, is present.

It is interesting to observe Elisha's strong and very stubborn reaction to giving John Dawson food. Gideon tells him that Dawson doesn't yet know of his fate, but Elisha insists that somehow Dawson can feel it. Perhaps Elisha is projecting his own lack of appetite onto Dawson imagining that Dawson feels the same. He is grateful when Gideon offers to break the news to John Dawson because Elisha doesn't want to shoot someone, who doesn't know he's to die until the moment comes. It may feel too much like cold-blooded murder rather than an execution.

We also learn here about Catherine, the woman who teaches young Elisha about love. Elisha is already cynical in his rejection of the legend of the open sky. His years in the concentration camp have done much to shatter his beliefs, but the fact that he still looks at the sky when it opens suggests that he still hopes. Catherine seems to be a damaged woman. We don't know her history, but the fact that she's at the youth camp suggests that she, too, may have been freed from a concentration camp. She seems like a sexually experienced, but psychologically damaged, woman as she seeks out younger men, almost boys, who are about to die. She seeks to be close to death.



# Chapter 5

## Chapter 5 Summary

It is past midnight. The room feels crowded because Elisha sees all these dead people filing into the room. Some, he has known, others he has hated, admired, or forgotten. His parents are there and also the beggar. The grizzled master and the English soldiers of the convoy they ambushed at Gedera are also there; so, too, are people from Buchenwald and Auschwitz, including a boy who looks strangely like Elisha before the war, before the concentration camps. The room feels stuffy with so many people.

Elisha asks his father why all these people are here. His mother, standing beside him, looking very pale, murmurs, "Poor little boy, poor little boy!..." His father looks at him but does not reply. Elisha looks to his old master, the rabbi, but he doesn't say anything, either. Usually, his silence had been reassuring, but now it makes Elisha afraid. His master's eyes are like two globes of fire, two suns that burn his face. Elisha asks his question to everyone present, but no one answers. Finally Elisha comes to the beggar, and the beggar says, quite spontaneously, "This is a night of many faces." Elisha implores the beggar to enlighten him as to the meaning of the looks from all the dead people, their muteness, and their presence. The beggar takes his arm, gently presses it, and tells him to go talk to the boy who looks like Elisha of before.

When Elisha begs the boy for answers, the boy looks astonished. "Don't you know?" he asks. Then he tells him that all these people are here to witness Elisha turning into a murderer at dawn tomorrow. "You are the sum total of all that we have been," he says. "In a way we are the ones to execute John Dawson. Because you can't do it without us. Now, do you see?" Elisha begins to understand. In an absolute act such as killing, not just the person doing the killing, but all those who had part in forming him are equally involved. Elisha is making murderers out of these people through his action.

Gideon comes back to report that John Dawson is hungry. He told Gideon so himself. Apparently when Gideon told him of his fate, John Dawson smiled and said that he already knew. His stomach told him. Gideon says that John Dawson said that he was hungry, and he had a right to a good last meal. Gad laughs hollowly. "Typical English," he remarks. "The stiff upper lip."

His remark hangs over their heads in midair. Elisha's father gives him a hard glance as if to say *A man is going to die, and he's hungry*. Elisha feels a sudden stab of pain in his stomach. He hasn't eaten all day. Ilana prepares some food for John Dawson. Then everyone looks at one another when she asks who will take the food down to him. The little boy urges Elisha to go. The dead will go with him. Elisha refuses. He doesn't want to see Dawson eat. He wants to remember Dawson as a man who never ate. The boy urges him that he shouldn't refuse a hungry man food. He is alive for the time being and he's hungry. The boy tells him that the dead are hungry. At midnight they leave the graveyard to go to the synagogue. It is not to pray but to eat.





Finally Elisha offers to take the food down to John, but Gad beats him to it. It is slightly past two o'clock. "Is that all?" asks Ilana. "It's a long night, the longest night I've ever lived through." "Yes, it's long," Joab agrees. It also feels very stuffy and hot, this particular night. Ilana takes out a handkerchief and wipes her perspiring forehead. The sun will rise at five o'clock. She asks Elisha whether he is hot. "Yes, I'm hot, Ilana," he answers. "I'm stifling."

Then the conversation between Ilana and Elisha continues. She understands that he doesn't want to see John Dawson, that Elisha is afraid. She sees the externals but not what lies underneath. She doesn't understand Elisha's answers. She tries to comfort him, telling him not to torture himself too much. Soon when the English leave, they can lead a simple, normal life. Elisha will get married and tell his children happy stories. Soon Elisha will have forgotten this night, this room, Ilana, and everything else. Elisha's is reminded of his mother as he listens to Ilana's voice and words. She, too, had a voice so harmonious and pure, even more so. She put him to sleep, until he was nine or ten years old, with lullabies and stories. She told him that there's a goat of gold that would guide and protect him everywhere he goes, even when he grows up and becomes rich. Elisha lost the goat on the way to Buchenwald. Ilana thinks that Elisha speaks of his mother because he suffers but begins to understand when he tells her that it is not he or his mother who suffers. A shadow falls across her face.

She speaks about the war. Although the Movement speaks of a holy war, struggling against the English and fighting for an independent Palestine, these are only words to give meaning to their actions. Their actions, seen objectively, have the odor and color of blood. Some, like Elisha, kill with their hands. Some, like Ilana, kill with their voices. But do they have any other choice? They have a code, and if they deny this, then they cede victory to their enemy, and this they cannot do.

Elisha knows she's right. However, he also knows that there's no difference to killing one versus many. Once one kills, he is a killer. As they wait, Elisha feels the dead sitting behind, passing judgment on him. Their silence is judging his. He wishes to turn around to face them, but the idea fills him with fear. However, he cannot insult them indefinitely by turning his back. He musters courage and turns around to face them. His father seems sorrowful. Elisha implores him not to judge him but let God judge him. Elisha's father doesn't react. The same thing happens with his mother, his old master, Yerachmiel, his childhood friend. Until then, Elisha didn't know that Yerachmiel was dead. Together, they tried for purity of soul, so they could bring the Messiah to earth. It was in the teachings of the Cabala. They knew of the difficulties but were determined to try. Then the war broke out, and each was deported to Germany. They were separated into different camps. None of the dead responds until finally the boy tells him that they are there, not to judge him, but because they go wherever he goes.

Gad finally comes back up. He has watched John Dawson eat. It seems John Dawson wasn't hungry but ate with good appetite. Gad tells them that John told him stories. It is four o'clock. Gad hands Elisha a revolver. It is black and nearly new. Elisha is very reluctant to touch it because it signifies what he is and what he will become. Gad stares at him coldly when he asks whether John Dawson made him laugh. When he repeats



the question, Gad's mask cracks imperceptibly. Gad is successful at controlling his eyes, but his mouth betrays bitterness and anger. Gad says that he's thinking of David.

Elisha offers to go down to see John Dawson. He says it is cowardly to kill a complete stranger. Maybe it is a reason, but Elisha is not sure. When he looks back at the incident, perhaps it is curiosity which motivates him. He has never seen a hostage before. Elisha wants to go alone. Gad is proud, as his commander. The beggar asks whether he wants them along. When Elisha wants to be alone, then, with kind eyes, the beggar says they'll come later. The boy also asks whether Elisha wants his company. The dead will accompany him later. Elisha bids goodbye to the room. Only one more hour to go. He feels as if he were going to his own execution. As he goes down the stairs, his steps slacken and become heavy.

## Chapter 5 Analysis

This is the longest chapter in the book as it delves into the complex emotions of Elisha as he waits for dawn. Why does he see the dead in the room? It seems to be a reflection of Elisha's torn feelings, between duty and his moral values, and his guilt. The fact that he sees a boy, who is Elisha when he was innocent and carefree, suggests that he sees a part of himself dead. Perhaps it is his innocence that died when the war broke out, and he was taken into concentration camps. The boy may be here to witness another part of Elisha die as he takes the first step to becoming a killer.

We learn more about Elisha in this chapter. He was at not just Buchenwald but also at Auschwitz. He was deported to Germany, and, given that his hometown is now occupied by the Russians, we can assume that he must have lived in an Eastern European country, possibly Poland. We learn a bit more about his parents, too. His father must have become a gaunt, emaciated shadow of the man he once was, from the description of his appearance when dead. His mother told him the story about a golden goat that guides and protects him, but Elisha loses it when he goes to the camps. Maybe it's because the goat represents a child's innocence and hope, which are hard to sustain in the hopeless daily torture of the life at a concentration camp.

We also see that others of the Movement are not exactly as indifferent as they seem. Ilana seems to understand that war, no matter how lofty the goal, reduces men to base, mindless acts of violence, and their hands will never again be clean. She also understands that words kill, too, as she implicitly acknowledges her role in rousing passionate young people to join in terrorist activities against the English. Gad seems the most cold, but maybe he's been forced to harden himself. When one is faced with such untenable choices, either one crumbles under the horror and guilt or hardens his heart. Gad seems to have chosen the latter, but we see that he is not completely immune when we see his facade crack a little.

Now is the moment for Elisha to meet John. The man who, knowing that he'll die in a few hours, eats with good appetite. It seems that he's not enjoying his meal or truly hungry. Is it truly the English upper lips as Gad suggests? Or perhaps by eating, one of

the activities enjoyed by the living, he is stubbornly trying to preserve the dignity of living his life as normally as he can until the last moment.



# Chapter 6

## Chapter 6 Summary

Elisha sees John lying on a camp bed, staring up at the ceiling. Ironically, due to an ingenious ventilation system, this windowless room is less stuffy than the open room above. He shows no surprise at seeing Elisha. John scrutinizes him in silence and then asks him for the time. They stare at each other for a long time. "Are you the one?" John asks abruptly. How did he guess? Then John asks him for his name. He thinks Elisha is a musical name. Elisha explains that it is the name of the prophet who was a disciple of Elijah. Elisha restored life to a little boy by lying upon him and breathing into his mouth. John observes that Elisha is doing the opposite from his namesake and smiles. There is no anger or hate in his voice. Dawson then asks Elisha his age and says he's sorry for him. It is clear that John pities Elisha. John has a son Elisha's age, who goes to Cambridge. He is very different from Elisha with none of his anxiety and unhappiness.

As John speaks about his son, Elisha tries unsuccessfully to shut him out. He tries to think of David ben Moshe, but it is hard to picture someone he's never met. Elisha realizes that John is the same as David, both men condemned to die. John gets up and starts to pace the cell. He then asks for a cigarette and a pencil and paper. He wants to write a short note to his son. As he watches John's hands with their slender, aristocratic fingers, he thinks of how Rodin might have liked to sculpt such hands, and his thoughts drift to Stefan, a German resistance fighter he met at Buchenwald, who was tortured by the Nazis and lost his right hand. Stefan was a sculptor. The Nazis were torturing him for the names of his co-conspirators. Finally, the Berlin Chief of the Gestapo, who is also a surgeon, starts cutting off the fingers of his right hand one by one until they are all gone. Five days, five fingers. The Chief has the most beautiful, the most angelic hands that should have belonged to a sensitive, unworldly man.

Elisha's thoughts return to John Dawson. He asks him whether he is an artist, whether he's ever painted or played a musical instrument. When he asks whether he's ever studied medicine, John becomes a bit angry. He hasn't. Elisha comments that John's hands are the those of a surgeon, the kind that can cut off fingers. John is sad to think that Elisha hates him, but it's not true. Elisha wants to, because otherwise he's killing a man for no reason. Elisha wants to impose the image of Stefan's torturer on John. He wants to blame him for the death of David. "I'm sorry for you," John repeats.

It is time. Elisha sees a rabbi giving absolution to David. John repeatedly asks Elisha to give his note to his son. Elisha promises him that he'll mail it today. John refuses to be blindfolded. An Englishman dies with his eyes open. He wants to look death in the face. As Elisha raises the pistol, John continues to smile. He wants to tell a funny story. Elisha shoots him before he can start. "Too bad," said the little boy. "I'd like to have heard his story." "Elisha - " His name is the last word on John's lips. When he pronounces his name, John is already dead. His name on a dead man's lips. He sinks very slowly to the ground. The ghosts are leaving the cell, taking John with them.



When Elisha returns upstairs, things are not the same. The ghosts are gone. Joab is no longer yawning, and Gideon is praying for the repose of the dead. Ilana looks at him sadly, and Gad lights a cigarette.

Elisha goes to the window. The night is leaving, and he is afraid. The tattered fragment of darkness has a face. He understands the reason for his fear. The face is his own.

## Chapter 6 Analysis

The inevitable end is realized. We finally get to meet the man of Elisha's inner tortures. It would have been easier for him to pull the trigger if John had been a different kind of man. However, he is neither evil nor cowardly. He is a handsome, noble man who sees in Elisha his son, as they are about the same age. He seems to understand that Elisha didn't have the luxury of growing up normally as his son did and pities him. Elisha does everything possible to hate him, evening trying to impose the cruel Nazi surgeon's beautiful hands on John's hands, but fails. John is too noble a man. He is not about to make Elisha's job easy. When the deed is done, Elisha sees his face in the fading darkness. He sees that with the act, he has killed himself as well. Perhaps not his physical self but his essence, his soul. Maybe he'll become like Gad now, an empty shell of a man driven by hatred and lacking human empathy.



# Characters

## Elisha

Elisha is an eighteen-year-old young man, going on nineteen. He spends several years at Buchenwald before being freed by Americans. They offer to send him back home, but he refuses. He knows it won't be the same with his parents gone, and the Russians now occupying his native town. Instead, Elisha goes to France, where he is offered asylum. He immerses himself in French lessons, so he can major in philosophy at the Sorbonne. All this changes when he meets Gad, joins the Movement and comes to Palestine. He is very thoughtful, contemplating man's actions and his own place in the scheme of things.

## Gad

Gad recruits Elisha into the Movement and brings him to Palestine from Paris. When Elisha first meets Gad, Elisha sees a young, tall, slender man who looks like a detective or an adventurer. His face is tanned and expressive. His hair is unruly, one strand perpetually on his forehead. His mouth is hard, almost cruel, but his eyes are kind, intense, and warmly intelligent. His voice resonates with conviction. He is the one who relays the Old Man's message to Elisha that he is to kill Captain John Dawson. He seems stoic and almost devoid of human emotions, telling Elisha that it is war, and he should not torture himself over killing John Dawson. Gad indoctrinates new recruits into the Movement's ideology.

## The Old Man

The leader of the Movement, he appears in a mask when he addresses a large audience, and his voice is soft, timid, and romantic. The arrest and death sentence imposed on David ben Moshe finally pushes him over the edge as it is the tenth death sentence imposed on the fighters of the Movement. He declares the death of one Englishman for every Jewish fighter and orders the kidnapping of an English officer, who turns out to be Captain John Dawson. Despite pleas from the Zionist leaders for prudence, he is very firm that Captain John Dawson must die if David ben Moshe is executed. He believes that the Movement cannot given in without being perceived as weak, and violence is the only language the English understands. Everyone in Palestine knows that the Movement always keeps its word, and so do the English. It must be kept that way.

## Captain John Dawson

Captain John Dawson is the unlucky person kidnapped by the Movement when the Old Man vows 'eye for an eye' type of reprisal for the death sentence imposed on David ben Moshe. The Old Man declares that for the hanging of every Jewish fighter, an English



mother will mourn the death of her son. To add weight to his words, he orders the taking of a hostage, preferably an army officer. Captain Dawson, out walking alone one night, makes an easy prey for the men of the Movement, who are on the lookout for English officers who walk alone in the night.

He is a handsome man in his forties, with a distinguished air. He is a professional soldier with penetrating eyes, a resolute chin, thin lips, a broad forehead, and slender hands. He is very tall. When he stands up, he has to bend over in order not to bump his head against the ceiling. He has smooth-skinned hands with long, slender, aristocratic fingers.

## David ben Moshe

A fighter in the Movement, he is wounded and captured during a terrorist operation. He is sentenced to death by hanging, which is the penalty stipulated by martial law. His is the tenth death sentence the mandatory power in Palestine has imposed on people. His death sentence spurs the Old Man to announce a new line of action - reprisals. The Old Man issues a warning not to hang David ben Moshe as the Movement will kill an Englishman for the hanging of every Jewish fighter. David is a childhood friend of Gad's, and they entered the Movement together.

## Ilana

The announcer of the news broadcast. She and Gad are in love, and Elisha is a friend to both of them. She is beautiful with delicate features that seem chiseled out of brown marble. She has an expression of heartrending melancholy on her face. Her voice is resonant, grave, vibrant, and mysterious. Every evening at 8:15 p.m., all men, women, and children pause to listen to her message, which always begins with the same eight words: *You are listening to the Voice of Freedom....* She is loved by the Jews of Palestine and is a hunted figure by the English, who see her influence as dangerous as that of the Old Man. She, too, is a part of the Legend. Only about five people know that the announcer is Ilana, including Elisha and Gad.

## Beggar

He teaches Elisha how to distinguish night from day. Elisha meets him when he is twelve years old and his parents are still alive. It is at the beginning of the war. The beggar is a gaunt, shadowy fellow, dressed in shabby black clothes, with a look in his eyes that was not of this world. Elisha ends up being alone with him in a synagogue. As the beggar walks Elisha home, he advises him not to be afraid of the dark. The night is purer than day and makes everything truer and more intense. He then teaches Elisha the art of distinguishing between night and day, for night has a face. Then without waiting for Elisha's answer, he disappears into the snow.



## Catherine

Elisha meets Catherine in 1945, in the youth camp in Normandy. He has just arrived from Buchenwald. She is the only person who seems to know German and occasionally exchanges words with Elisha. She is twenty-six or -seven years old. Small, frail, and almost transparent, with silky blonde, sunlit hair and blue, dreamy eyes, which never cry. Her face is thin but is saved from being bony by the delicacy of the features. She is the first woman Elisha sees from nearby. She is the first woman with whom Elisha makes love. She likes making love with little boys who are going to die.

## Joab

One of Ilana's two bodyguards, he has a young, innocent, tormented face, dark, confused eyes, and hair as white as that of an old man. He wears a perpetually sleepy expression and yawns from one end of the day to the other. He brings the news from Tel Aviv.

## Gideon

He is Ilana's bodyguard, along with Joab. He is called the Saint, because he is one, and he looks like one. He is a husky, inarticulate man some twenty years old, who takes pains to make himself inconspicuous and always mumbles prayers. He wears a bear and side curls and goes nowhere without a prayer book in his pocket.

## Gideon's Father

Gideon's father is a rabbi. He gives Gideon his blessing when he learns of his intent to become a terrorist. He believes that there are times when words and prayers are not enough. The God of grace is also the God of war, and war is not a matter of mere words.

## Meshulah

In the Hassidic tradition, there are stories about this mysterious messenger of fate for whom nothing is impossible. His voice is such as to make a man tremble, for the message it brings is more powerful than either the bearer or the recipient. His every word seems to come from the absolute, the infinite, and its significance is at the same time fearful and fascinating.

## Kalman

The grizzled master of young Elisha's who tells him, "Death is a being without arms or legs or mouth or head; it is all eyes. If you ever meet a creature with eyes everywhere,





you can be sure that it is death." He reveals to Elisha the mysterious universe of the Cabala, where every idea is a story and every story is a spark from eternity.

## **John Dawson's Mother**

She pays a visit to the Colonial Office and requests a pardon for David ben Moshe.

## **Elisha's Father**

Elisha's father is dead when this story opens. He died sometime during the war in a concentration camp, either Auschwitz or Buchenwald. He has large eyes, in which Elisha has often seen the sky open up. When he appears to Elisha after his death, he has an emaciated, unshaven face.

## **Elisha's Mother**

She, too, is already dead, probably dying around the same time Elisha's father dies. Elisha is very fond of his mother. Every evening, until he is nine or ten years old, she puts him to sleep with lullabies or stories. She has an even more harmonious voice than Ilana's. Like the voice of God, it has power to dispel chaos and to impart a vision of the future.

## **John Dawson's Son**

He is about Elisha's age and studies at Cambridge. He is quite opposite from Elisha. He's fair-haired, strong, and healthy. He likes to eat, drink, go to the pictures, laugh, sing, and go out with the girls. He doesn't have Elisha's anxiety and unhappiness.

## **Yerachmiel**

Elisha's childhood friend, he is the son of a coachman, with the hands of a laborer and the soul of a saint. Together with Elisha, they are the master's favorite pupils. Every evening, he studies the secrets of the Cabala with Elisha.

## **Stefan**

He is a German Elisha meets at Buchenwald. He was a sculptor before the war, but the Nazis have cut off his right hand by the time Elisha meets him. In Berlin, during the first years after Hitler came to power, Stefan and a few friends organize a resistance. When the Gestapo uncovers its existence shortly after its founding, Stefan is arrested, questioned and subjected to torture.



## **Berlin Chief of the Gestapo**

He is a timid, mild man with a soft-spoken, fatherly manner. He is also the surgeon who cuts off Stefan's right hand. He has the most beautiful, the most angelic hands.

## **Dan**

A fighter who dies in the mission that ends up in the capture of David ben Moshe.

## **The Zionist Leaders**

They recommend prudence in the case of David ben Moshe and implore the Old Man not to go too far, for the sake of the nation. They hear talks of vengeance, of a pogrom, and innocent men and women may have to pay.

## **Secretary of State for Colonial Affairs**

With a grave smile, he assures John Dawson's mother not to worry for the life of her son. He does not think the Jewish people will actually do it. As usual, they will shout and cry and make a big fuss but will never actually kill Captain John Dawson. He personally replies to the recommendation from the High Commissioner with the word from the Cabinet whose members voted no to clemency. He adds his own words. "We should be the laughingstock of the world. And think of the repercussions in the House of Commons. The opposition are waiting for just such a chance to sweep us away." He is very political and calculating in his considerations.

## **The High Commissioner of Palestine**

He is the highest-ranking officer of the British army in Palestine. He announces that the entire population will be held responsible if His Majesty's Captain John Dawson is killed. He is not as optimistic as the Secretary of State for Colonial Affairs. He sends a cable to the Colonial Office, recommending clemency for David ben Moshe. However, his motives are pure as it is done more to dispose worldwide public opinion favorably toward England than concern for the safety of Captain John Dawson.

## **Members of the Cabinet**

The members of the British Cabinet are divided over the issue of David ben Moshe. When the High Commissioner cables his recommendation for clemency, two members approve, but others veto it. They allege the veto is not just for political reasons but also the prestige of the Crown as well. They believe a pardon will be interpreted as a sign of weakness, and it may give ideas to young, self-styled idealists in other parts of the



British Empire. They do not want the world to think that a group of terrorists in Palestine made Great Britain back away.

## **Rescue Committee**

They send Elisha to a youth camp in Normandy after he is liberated from Buchenwald. When he returns from Normandy, they get him a furnished room on the rue de Marois and gives him a grant to cover living expenses and cost of the French lessons.



## Objects/Places

### Acre

This is where David ben Moshe is incarcerated in a prison.

### Auschwitz

This is another concentration camp. It is likely that Elisha and his parents were brought here before they are moved to Buchenwald.

### Buchenwald

The concentration camp where Elisha and his parents are incarcerated.

### Gedera

The paratroopers' camp, which Gad's team attacked, is located near Gedera. This is where Dan is killed and David wounded and captured.

### Haifa

This is the port where Elisha lands when he arrives in Palestine.

### The Holy Land

This is where Israel stands today.

### Jerusalem

This is where the story takes place and the capital of modern-day Israel.

### London

London is the capital of Great Britain. Where Captain John Dawson's mother lives. The Colonial Office is also located in London.



## Lydda

Lydda is a part of Jerusalem.

## The Movement

"The Movement" is a group of Jewish people who are trying to recreate the dream of an independent homeland. There are only about one hundred members, and they use terrorist tactics to reclaim Palestine from the occupying English army.

## Normandy

Normandy is where a youth camp exists for the newly-liberated children and teenagers from concentration camps. Elisha is first sent here after being freed from Buchenwald.

## Palestine

It is during World War II, when Palestine is under occupation of the British Empire.

## Rue de Marois

Elisha lives in a furnished room on this street in Paris when he returns from Normandy.



# Social Sensitivity

Justice and ethics during a military situation serve as the major social concerns of *Dawn*, Elie Wiesel's first novel. Elisha is an eighteen-year-old Holocaust survivor recruited by Gad for a Jewish terrorist organization that fights for Jewish sovereignty in Palestine, years before Israel was created (1948). The British have caught and sentenced to death ten Jewish members of the organization, and they plan to execute the most recent prisoner (the tenth, David ben Moshe) whom they have caught in hope of deterring future Jewish terrorist activities; the group, however, decides to seek revenge this time. They capture their own hostage, an innocent British officer named John Dawson, whom they kidnap as he takes a walk; they hope that they can save their friend ben Moshe by exchanging prisoners; the British refuse to deal with the Jews, stating that such a trade would incite future kidnappings. Actually, the British believe that the Jews do not have the nerve to execute someone. If the Jews cannot convince the British to change their minds and make the exchange, they must assassinate Dawson because if they do not execute him after their demands are not met and after they have promised to, their terrorist organization will lose its credibility. Elisha, a new member of the organization, has been chosen by the leader, known as the Old Man, to perform the execution. During the course of the novel, he must justify his assassination of an innocent man in light of the current political situation and the backdrop of the Holocaust—when he saw innocent people such as his parents murdered by the Nazis.

Another issue is the love and affinity that Jews have for Palestine (Israel). Gad says on several occasions that the English and other groups simply do not have the same feelings or appreciation for the country that Jews have: "Hour after hour Gad spoke to me of the blue nights of Palestine, of their calm and serene beauty.

You walk out in the evening with a woman, you tell her that she is beautiful and you love her, and twenty centuries hear what you are saying. But for the English the night holds no beauty." Gad desires Jewish independence in a free Jewish state, and he is willing to kill and to die to see his dream become a reality. He disdains the foreign forces that occupy land that was meant for the Jews. Similarly, Elisha refused to return to his homeland in eastern Europe after he was liberated from Buchenwald because he could not bear to see the land occupied by the current foreign inhabitants who took over after the Jews left. This love and need for a Jewish homeland is actually autobiographical: When Wiesel wanted to immigrate to Palestine when he was liberated from Buchenwald in 1945, the British prevented him from doing so, causing him to move to France instead.

The social issue of terrorism plays a major role in the novel, even though the author refuses to take sides. Does a political group have the right to kill someone in order to advance its cause? Can murder be justified if it achieves a political gain?

The murder of Dawson could actually save lives because it will make the British think twice before they underestimate the Jewish terrorists and before they decide to take the life of another Jewish fighter such as David ben Moshe. The main characters, with the

exception of Dawson, believe that their cause is holy and that they serve God by seeking revenge.

When Gideon, labeled by his colleagues Gideon the Saint because he is so virtuous and such a devoutly religious Jew, decided to become a terrorist, his father, a rabbi, agreed. The rabbi gave his blessing, saying that sometimes "words and prayers are not enough. The God of grace is also the God of war. And war is not a matter of mere words." The Jews thus fight a holy war because according to the Torah, the land belongs to them.

In addition, the Holocaust has caused many Jews to decide that they need their own sovereign state, a place where Jews could come to be safe from anti-Semitic governments and leaders; the establishment of such a place could perhaps prevent another Holocaust from ever occurring. Therefore, people such as Gad, Iliana, Elisha, and Gideon feel the importance of obtaining the land and forcing the British to leave the area.



## Techniques

Wiesel's novel includes some psychological insight into the mind of a Holocaust survivor. Elisha is haunted by the memories of his family back in eastern Europe. His memories of them, as well as their influences, remain with him as he comes to terms with the fact that he will kill an innocent man. Elisha is afraid to know the man, but he nonetheless feels compelled to learn more about him, perhaps because of all the suffering that he witnessed in Buchenwald. The novelist manifests the protagonist's guilty feelings by making Elisha wonder if the neighbors—the crying baby and the old woman who closes her shutters—know what his duty is and whether they pity Dawson. Elisha's thoughts are clearly untrue—the baby is too young to know what is going on (he cries not for Dawson, but because he is a baby) and the woman has no idea that her neighbors are terrorists. But the thought provides valuable insight into the guilty conscience of a man who is about to kill a man face-to-face for the first time.

Elisha takes Dawson's life at dawn, as night recedes and transforms into day; this fact is important because of the emphasis that Wiesel places on day and night. Wiesel's passages about the beggar who teaches Elisha to discern night from day play a part in this idea. The beggar informs him that night always has a face that one can see. After Elisha kills Dawson, he looks for the face and sees that it is his own. The presence of the beggar indicates Wiesel's use of Hasidic lore.

Wiesel fades back and forth between the present and the past to show how Elisha's life as a Holocaust survivor affects his current situation. Because he has witnessed so much death, he realizes how precious life is; conversely, his experiences at Buchenwald have also desensitized him to death: He has seen so much death that the loss of another life may not matter as much to him as it would to an ordinary person.

One significant flashback involves Catherine, a Holocaust survivor whom Elisha encounters shortly after his liberation from Buchenwald. She notices that he has become a loner who enjoys walks.

She starts to join him and becomes obsessed with him, especially after he tells her the story about the nights when the sky would open so that the prayers of unhappy children could be heard by God.

A boy whose father is dying prays to God that his parent's life will be saved; instead, the boy becomes a prayer and is carried to heaven. Eventually, Catherine seduces him. As they undress in order to make love, he realizes that she does not love him; rather, she pities him because she understands that Elisha is the boy who was carried to heaven, that he died and has come back to earth. She wants to have sex with Elisha because she is fascinated with males who were going to die soon or were obsessed with death. This story, which Wiesel masterfully tells in the form of a flashback, provides valuable insight into Elisha's character and connotes the protagonist's feelings about death and how it relates to the unenviable task of murder that awaits him.





In regard to the decision to kill Dawson, Wiesel presents the Jewish terrorists in a largely, but not exclusively, benign light. On her radio broadcast, Iliana defends the organization's capture of, and impending killing of, John Dawson. She blames the British and apparently seems sincere and rational. The other Jews in the novel are killers, yet they seem like virtuous and caring people. Gideon, in fact, is labeled a saint by the other characters. Although they kill Dawson, they have consciences and feel guilty about the action. Wiesel does not defend nor condone the murder, yet he presents the ideas from the Jewish terrorists' perspective. However, by characterizing the British captain as a benevolent and virtuous family man, Wiesel demonstrates the other side of the issue. The Jews hurt innocent people, just as during the Holocaust many innocent people suffered.

Dawson points out the contradictions in Elisha's decision to kill him, and when he asks Elisha why he must kill, Elisha cannot answer the question. When Dawson dies, his last word is his killer's name. By creating a virtuous victim, one whose last request is to write a farewell note to his son, Wiesel complicates the ethical situation and calls into question the actions of the Jews.



# Themes

## Themes

One important theme in *Dawn* is that of retribution after the Holocaust. During the Holocaust, Vilna ghetto partisan Abba Kovner complained that instead of fighting back against the Nazis, the Jews meekly went like sheep to the slaughter.

Wiesel's novel portrays a different attitude of the Jews—an eye-for-an-eye philosophy. *Dawn* manifests that after the end of World War II, Jews became more aggressive in fighting for their rights and their lives. But the novel does not necessarily try to justify Elisha's actions. In fact, while Elisha contemplates the morality of his impending action against Dawson, he admits, "I did not know the man. To my eyes he had no face; he did not even exist, for I knew nothing about him. I did not know whether he scratched his nose when he ate, whether he talked or kept quiet when he was making love, whether he gloried in his hate, whether he betrayed his wife or his God or his own future. All I knew was that he was an Englishman and my enemy. The two terms were synonymous."

The stereotype that Jews are meek, derived from the Holocaust, is the major reason why the British do not believe that the Jews will carry out their threat to execute John Dawson.

Gad, who recruited Elisha after the latter's liberation from Buchenwald, believes firmly that fighting back with terrorist actions against their enemies, coupled with the possession of a Jewish homeland, is necessary for Jews to survive and prosper. Gad tells Elisha and other new members of the organization that "It's cruel—inhuman, if you like. But we have no other choice. For generations we've wanted to be better, more pure in heart than those who persecuted us.

You've all seen the result: Hitler and the extermination camps in Germany. We've had enough of trying to be more just than those who claim to speak in the name of justice."

A related theme is that of the ethics of killing. Although Elisha has killed people before, this is the first time that he has known and talked with his victim, the first time that he has seen the person's face. Clearly, this distinction makes it harder for Elisha to take the life of the British captain. To add to this dilemma, Wiesel characterizes Dawson as a good man, a devoted father who has not hurt anyone and who has much to lose by dying. Such a characterization creates pathos for the British soldier and detracts from the sympathy afforded to Elisha.

Thus, Wiesel complicates the plot by allowing the reader to consider Elisha a cold-blooded killer who takes the life of an innocent and worthy man, thus depriving a young boy of his father. The plot is complicated further by the revelation that although Elisha is



killing Dawson in retribution for the death of ben Moshe, Elisha has never even met ben Moshe.

In *Dawn*, Wiesel implies that the killing may derive in part from Elisha's desensitization to death, which has resulted from his horrific experiences during the Holocaust. Although the action occurs years after the Holocaust and appears to be a post-Shoah novel, the characters cannot escape the atrocities they experienced years before. Wiesel indicates that for many survivors, the Holocaust never ends until they die. Elisha remarks that although he has never met David ben Moshe, he understands Gad's (ben Moshe's friend's) pain: "I understood his bitterness; indeed I envied it. He was losing a friend, and it hurt. But when you lose a friend every day it doesn't hurt so much. And I'd lost plenty of friends in my time; sometimes I thought of myself as a living graveyard." Thus, a major theme in Wiesel's book is the long-lasting ramifications of the Holocaust, how the incessant murders the survivors witnessed caused them to be hardened to death and accept it too easily. Consequently, although Elisha finds it problematic to kill an innocent man, he can do it more easily because of all the death he has witnessed during his internment at Buchenwald.

The novel begs the questions: Can one justify Elisha's action and does the action make him a political hero or merely a murderer who kills an innocent man? The reader must wrestle with the related issues of killing and terrorism for a political cause. Elisha realizes the sin inherent in his killing of Dawson because he usurps the role of God—the one who has the right to decide when people should die.

Thus, when Elisha takes the life of the British captain, he also kills part of himself because of the sin.

## Politics and Impact on Individual Actions

Wiesel's *Dawn* is set in Palestine right after World War II. It is a volatile time with the Jewish people, many of whom suffered the Nazi persecution, coming into Palestine. Tired of accepting persecution in silence, they now want to make into reality the age-old dream of an independent nation. This brings them into direct clash with the English forces, which occupy Palestine as a part of the British Empire. Some, especially the idealists and young people, join the Movement, which engages in terrorist tactics to drive out the English by any means necessary.

As the Movement engages in various terrorist tactics, the English begin to retaliate by executing captured members of the Movement. When the sentence of death by hanging is passed down to David ben Moshe, the tenth such person to be captured, the Old Man, the leader of the Movement, orders the death of one Englishman for every member executed. To show their seriousness, they kidnap Captain John Dawson.

Elisha, the young man who joins the Movement out of idealism, is jolted into the realities of war when Gad, his friend and senior member of the organization, tells him the order from the Old Man. He is to be the one to kill Captain John Dawson if David ben Moshe



is executed as planned. Elisha has never killed anyone before, at least, not knowingly. John Dawson, aside from being English, has done nothing to Elisha or his family, nor is he a bad man. Actually he is a noble, distinguished man and devoted father. However, Elisha has no choice but to obey the order. Commitments have been made on both sides on an international scale, and neither the Movement nor the British government can back down. Elisha is merely the tool to carry out the deed.

## Deceptive Appearances

Many of the characters are not as they first appear. The Old Man, the man who leads the Movement and has such hold on its members, seems like a soft-spoken, timid, romantic man. Gad, who first appears so much older than Elisha's eighteen years and seems cruel and indifferent, shows his softer side when he interacts with Ilana, the woman he loves. Ilana, who is so beautiful and delicate, manipulates people through her voice. When she is broadcasting her program, it is her voice that seduces and inspires the Jewish people of Israel. The beggar turns out to be a wise man, who teaches the young Elisha about the night and how to distinguish night from day. Gideon, one of Ilana's bodyguards, is a saintly man but who willingly joined the Movement to fight against the English. Moreover, his father is a rabbi, who goes against Talmudic teachings and encourages his son to join the Movement, telling him that sometimes words and prayers are not enough. We also learn of a Gestapo chief, who was a surgeon in his life before the war. He appears as a timid, soft-spoken man with a fatherly manner. However, with his beautiful hands, he performs monstrous deeds, including cutting off Stefan's fingers one by one. This ensures that Stefan is never able to sculpt again.

## Physical Death and Spiritual Death

In this story, the only main character who dies is John Dawson. However, he seems to be the most alive person of them all. The people of the Movement, through their personal tortures and pains, have experienced varying degrees of death of self. Elisha, whose mother tells him of a golden goat that will protect and guide him, loses it shortly after he enters the concentration camp. This signals loss of hope. As Elisha waits for dawn and his mission to kill Dawson, Elisha sees a little boy, who resembles Elisha before the war and everything else happened. The little boy is among the dead, who visit him and keep him company as he waits. The innocent, carefree part of Elisha is already dead. The process is complete when he shoots John Dawson and becomes a killer. The face that one sees in the dark is that of the dead. As the dark recedes, Elisha sees his own face in the dark.

Gad, the man who recruits Elisha into the Movement, already seems dead inside when we first meet him. Except for his love for Ilana, he doesn't betray much human emotion. He dismisses Elisha's conflicted feelings by telling him that it's war. He seems like a hardened shell of a man. The only thing that keeps him going is the purpose of the Movement, to drive out the English from Palestine. Joab, Gideon, Ilana, the Old Man -

to a lesser degree, their detachment and weariness come from having survived near-death brushes with their enemies. They survived but not intact.



# Style

## Point of View

Wiesel's *Dawn* is told in the first person, from the point of view of Elisha. Through Elisha's eyes, readers experience the conflict between the Jewish people and the ruling English forces in Palestine, circa World War II, and its toll on individuals. From the first chapter, readers learn of the dilemma that drives Elisha, that is, he has to execute a man. As Elisha remembers his life before the Movement, the readers get a glimpse of the horrors of concentration camps and its effect on the Holocaust survivors. Elisha does not go into much detail about his experiences and speaks evenly, but readers can clearly feel his loss and his pain. Readers also learn of interesting Jewish legends as Elisha struggles to internalize and accept the untenable role thrust onto him. Here, readers learn how Elisha's Cabala teachings influence his thoughts, and the old superstitions magnify his own anxiety and fear.

Elisha is a well-drawn character, who seems more mature than his eighteen years. Toward the end of the story, readers glimpse briefly that perhaps Elisha is recounting this story when he is much older, and that may explain the maturity of his voice. With age, he can look back at this sad chapter of his life with some objectivity.

## Setting

*Dawn* was originally published in 1960. The action mainly takes place in Palestine, just after World War II. It is an unsettling time, not unlike the Middle East of today. Many of the Jewish people, after being freed from concentration camps, have come to Palestine. Tired of being victims, they have decided to fight back and reclaim the land for their own, realizing the age-old dream of independent nation. However, the land is currently under English rule, and the British government does not want to let go because it may incite idealists in other parts of their empire. The more radical people of the Jewish population form the Movement, led by the Old Man, to use terrorist tactics to drive out the English from the land. When this cumulates in the kidnapping of John Dawson, the entire country is awash in mounting tension, and all Palestine feels like one giant prison.

## Language and Meaning

The language is straightforward. Given that the book was originally written in English, it is possible that some of the nuances in French may have been lost in translation. The words are somber, and the tone is grave all throughout the book.



## Structure

*Dawn* is divided into six chapters. Chapter one sets up the context of the situation facing Elisha. Readers also learn about the significance of darkness from his reflection of the meeting with a wise beggar. Chapter two reveals more about Elisha, including his name, and how he comes both to meet Gad and to Palestine to join the Movement. Chapter three recounts the training Elisha goes through as a new recruit, his indoctrination into the ideology of the organization, and his missions. Chapter four reveals insight into the key members of the Movement as each recounts how he or she escaped death and capture. Through Elisha's eyes, readers see how these near brushes with death affected these individuals. Chapter five shows intensifying inner struggles of Elisha, as he sees and interacts with all the dead people he has known. In chapter six, Elisha, and readers, through him, finally get to meet John Dawson. From Elisha's brief observations, readers learn a lot about Dawson's character. Finally, Elisha kills Dawson. Readers find Elisha seeing himself in the dark, circling back to the lesson from chapter one: one sees the dead in the dark.



## Quotes

"You mustn't be afraid of the night. Night is purer than day; it is better for thinking and loving and dreaming. At night everything is more intense, more true. The echo of words that have been spoken during the day takes on a new and deeper meaning. The tragedy of man is that he doesn't know how to distinguish between day and night. He says things at night that should only be said by day." Chapter 1, pg. 4

"I'm going to teach you the art of distinguishing between day and night. Always look at a window, and failing that look into the eyes of a man. If you see a face, any face, then you can be sure that night has succeeded day. For, believe me, night has a face." Chapter 1, pg. 4

"This is war. Don't torture yourself." Chapter 1, pg. 10.

"Death is a being without arms or legs or mouth or head; it is all eyes. If you ever meet a creature with eyes everywhere, you can be sure that it is death." Chapter 2, p. 22

"The condemned man's traditional last meal is a joke. A joke in the worst possible taste, an insult to the corpse that he is about to be. What does a man care if he dies with an empty stomach?" Chapter 4, p. 44

"War is like night. It covers everything." Chapter 5, p. 68



## Key Questions

One manner in which to approach group discussion is to focus on time. The novel frequently returns to the past, such as Elisha's childhood, his internment in Buchenwald, and the recent capture of David ben Moshe. Dawn also relates to the current political situation in the Middle East, where terrorist activities still occur on a regular basis, but the Jews are often the victims, not the perpetrators, of terrorist acts. Discussion may involve a correlation between the genocide of six million Jews and the killing of John Dawson. One may wish to talk about the movement of the Jewish people in the twentieth century from Holocaust victims and survivors to terrorists whose murderous actions are motivated by the desire for an independent state to the current situation in which Israel is an established country that seeks peace—with guarantees of self-preservation—with its Arab neighbors. Guilt and conscience are also worthy topics of discussion. Does Elisha handle his guilt well? Does he effectively come to terms with the action or will it haunt him for the rest of his life?

1. Is Elisha's killing of Dawson justified?

2. The narrator calls Gideon a saint.

Can anyone involved in terrorist activities be saintly, even if his cause is just?

3. What is the importance of the role of Catherine, the woman whom Elisha encounters after his liberation from Buchenwald?

4. What role does the past play in Elisha's life? You may want to consider the memories of the people who have formulated his personality.

5. How has the Holocaust affected Elisha's current situation?

6. How do you think Wiesel feels about the terrorist activities committed by the Jews? As a man of peace and a subsequent Nobel Peace Prize Winner, does he justify their killings? What perspective do you see in the novel?

7. How does Wiesel's portrayal of John Dawson affect the novel? How would Dawn be different if Dawson had not been a father or such a good man?

8. Each of the Jews in the novel tells a story about his or her reprieve from death. Each barely survived a situation that could easily have resulted in his or her death. What significance do these stories have in Wiesel's novel?

9. Relate the political situation in Dawn to the contemporary politically volatile situation in the Middle East. What similarities and differences do you discern?

10. Although members of the same terrorist organization, Gad and Elisha are quite different in regard to their personalities. What do these distinctions signify?

With which philosophy (Gad's or Elisha's) are you most sympathetic?



## Topics for Discussion

Discuss whether the end justifies the means.

Discuss the parallels of this story with today's situation in the Middle East.

What do you do when your personal beliefs conflict with the goals of your organization?

Was there a way to avoid the killing of John Dawson and David ben Moshe? What could each side have done differently?

Discuss the teachings and traditions of Cabala.

Discuss the Movement. How long was the group in existence? How much political influence did they wield in Palestine at the time?

Discuss Captain John Dawson's behavior in his last moments. Why did he request a last meal when he wasn't hungry?

## Literary Precedents

One possible source for Wiesel's novel is Frank O'Connor's short story "Guests of the Nation" (1931). In this work, an innocent soldier is being punished by the Irish. The ethics of killing an innocent victim play a role in both works; furthermore, in Wiesel's and O'Connor's stories, the innocent soldier is British. The confrontations between the British and Irish in O'Connor's work resemble the similar dispute between the British and Jews in Wiesel's novel. Other similar literary precedents include Brendan Behan's *The Hostage* (1959), which is based on O'Connor's story, and Albert Camus's short story entitled "The Guest" (1957). These works share one thing in common: The executioner/keeper becomes friends with the hostage. It makes it considerably more difficult to harm or imprison the hostage after the adversaries become friends. Elisha realizes this truth when he converses with, and consequently sympathizes with, Captain John Dawson.

## Related Titles

Wiesel has remarked that all of his books derive, in part, from his autobiography, *Night* (1958). Both *Night* and *Dawn* deal with the issue of Jews fighting back against their oppressors. In *Night*, Wiesel mentions that he was tempted to beat up a gypsy kapo who violently struck his father merely because the father had asked politely to use the bathroom; Wiesel's father, being newly interned in the concentration camp, did not realize the decorum (or lack of same) of his new surroundings, and his son yearned to protect him by fighting back. *Dawn*, which occurs after the Holocaust, shows a different side of Jewish retaliation because they no longer felt powerless. *Dawn* demonstrates that Jews realize the necessity of revenge and retaliation, that is, of course, if the characters such as Gad, Iana, and Elisha speak for the author.

Thus, *Night* and *Dawn* portray Jewish self-defense before and after World War II, respectively.

The Jewish terrorist theme also appears in Wiesel's novel *The Forgotten* (1992; see separate entry), in which Elhanan feels compelled to participate in partisan activities against the enemy. Although the action in *Dawn* occurs after the Holocaust and the partisans in *The Forgotten* perform their terrorist actions during the war, both novels deal with Jews who fight back with violence against their oppressors. In both novels, Wiesel confronts the concomitant issue of vengeance: When Jews fight back, they must be careful that they do not overcompensate by hurting innocent people. When a group employs violence to fight against the violence of others, the group must make sure that they do not turn out to be as evil as the people against whom they are fighting.



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